

Saint Liuba Appears in the Piazza San Pietro

If there were two gods, each would be called necessary. Now, a being is called necessary in one of the following senses:

Either the necessity of its existence is essential to it. But such necessity cannot belong to anyone else.

Or there may be a cause for the necessity of its existence. So the essence of the necessary being will be the effect of a cause, which demanded the necessity of its existence. But by the necessary being we do not mean any thing whose existence is connected with a cause in any manner.

Tahfut al-Falsifa, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* – 11th century

... Of actions done by man those alone are properly called "human," which are proper to man as man. Now man differs from irrational animals in this, that he is master of his actions. Wherefore those actions alone are properly called human, of which man is master. Now man is master of his actions through his reason and will; whence, too, the free-will is defined as "the faculty and will of reason." Therefore those actions are properly called human which proceed from a deliberate will. And if any other actions are found in man, they can be called actions "of a man," but not properly "human" actions, since they are not proper to man as man. Now it is clear that whatever actions proceed from a power, are caused by that power in accordance with the nature of its object. But the object of the will is the end and the good. Therefore all human actions must be for an end.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, – 12th century

Today, it is almost impossible to imagine that a Christian theologian would cite a theologian of Islam, unless to brutally denounce him. How more surprising is it that St. Thomas, the founder and bedrock of Papacy theology, would hold al-Falsifa in the highest regard? Even more surprising in today's shallow waters is that both St. Thomas and al-Falsifa shared the same rationalistic roots. Both were as committed to the pagan Aristotle as they were opposed to his polytheistic paganism. Both argued for reason in the cause of faith. Faith was possible, they reasoned, only through the distillations of Aristotelian logic. Both insisted on "proof" that God existed. Rational proof, not revealed, Biblical truth. They reasoned that faith was possible only through reason. What could be more at odds with today's right wing fundamentalism of Christianity and Islam? (Not to mention the right wing fundamentalism of Jewish Zionism?) Judaism's secularism and spiritualism is fundamental to both, however, and both rely on it. Hence, it is far from clear that al-Falsifa's dilemma, "If there were two gods..."

has been negatively or affirmatively solved. Religion in today's climate seems to be as polytheistic as ever it was.

Hegel, the philosopher *par excellence* of western dominance to whom we should give little credence, nonetheless taught rightly that the past is deeply embedded in the present. This means that even our shallow time has great historic depths if we chose to look for them. George W. Bush re-initiated the Middle Ages with his onerous phrases – the war of civilization, and, empires of evil. On the other hand, the post-Enlightenment era we inhabit, that has followed after the utter failure of scientific rationalism demonstrated clearly by the mid-20th century World Wars, and that ushered in our age of militarism, has also ushered in a renewed desire for faith in something other than bankrupt capitalist secularism. This renewed desire is the problem of THIS time. Yet, it is NOT a demonstration of the failure of secularism. *Au contraire*.

To what “end”, then, human actions? Both al-Falsifa and St. Thomas argued that the “end,” in the sense of purpose, was “god.” To what end, then, human purpose, human actions? The “end” of human life is devotion to god because this end, god, is causeless, though necessary because causeless. God was conceived as the cause of all causality. The first argued for Allah, the second for God. Two gods. It becomes immediately clear when reading their arguments for faith that both gods are equally proved to exist because the limits of reason are clearly demonstrated in each case, and, faith becomes a necessity. Reason is indeed all-powerful in the human sphere, where causality does in fact determine all things. But since causality cannot determine itself, it must be un-caused, or caused by something itself uncaused. This un-causality can only be explained by some trans-causal cause. What is it that has created causality? Because human reason cannot comprehend this question, it confronts something other than itself, something greater than its human limits can understand, that must lie beyond “properly human action.” Humanity is forced to confront its own ultimate limit. The consequence of recognizing this very limit constitutes its greatest knowledge – that it cannot know in rational terms that which lies beyond causality. In this recognition, the pre-Enlightenment subject recognizes his anthropological limit – where his great rational human limit ends, his faith must begin. This “cannot know”, based on the certitude of causality, is faith. Faith is the necessary ‘end’ and the rational consequence of reason. Both St. Thomas and al-Falsifa ‘proved’ this, in theological terms. Since al-Falsifa and St. Thomas do not disprove each other, their non-exclusive monotheisms, therefore, must prove polytheism. So must be our conclusions from reading them comparatively. Both Allah and Yahweh must exist. Or, neither can exist. Today, with the rise of religious militancy, with the violence perpetrated in the names of God, Allah, and Yahweh across the planet, the ‘proof’ that this paradox is far from resolved is daily revealed. And therefore, the ‘state,’ as fragile and corrupt as it may be, gains renewed currency because its mandate is to mediate religious extremism.

This train of thought brings us directly to Piazza San Pietro, to the center of power of the Catholic Church, to the symbolic and actual site in which the Middle Ages is still very present, even as it is wrapped in Bernini's vast Baroque, architectural arms. As one walks through the square surrounded by Bernini's masterpiece, past the Roman obelisk, one walks into the Renaissance Basilica that now stands over Constantine's original 4th century church and therefore into the early Christian past. St. Peter's Square is a palimpsest of conflict, condensing in its layers a 1000 years of conflict and struggle that made Christianity one of the world's dominant religions. It is often forgotten that after Constantine recognized Christianity in 300 C. E., it wasn't until 800 C. E. when Pipin the Short gave the entire Po Valley to the Pope, that the church became a powerful worldly force. Pipin's gift came with a price; in exchange for this enormous land grant, he required that his son, Charlemagne, be crowned as the first Holy Roman Emperor, forging for the first time a theocracy that has come to be called Caesaropapacy, an alliance between secular and religious power. Centuries of conflict ensued in which Kings and Popes sometimes easily collaborated, sometimes fought ferociously in opposition. The city of Rome was, over centuries, redesigned so that its boulevards all led away from the pagan Roman Fora, and instead to St. Peter's, making this "mother church" the de facto center of the city. These boulevards and the immensity of the square served the Church well; Pope after Pope created a series of Saint's Days and religious events that transformed the Julian calendar into the Gregorian calendar to mark time for the Vatican's purposes. Throughout the year, extravagant, ritualistic, parades wound through the city to draw its inhabitant's attention away from the Fora's populist civic culture, and focused them instead on the otherworldly power of the Christian God. By these means, the pagan cults were slowly replaced by with the worldview of monotheism. At least superficially. One has only to scratch beneath the surface to reveal that even the Pope's official title, Pontifex Maximus, derives from the office of "High Priest" of the Roman period. And even the doctrine of the Trinity may be interpreted as a form of polytheism.

The Vatican today remains a theocratic microstate in the image of Caesaropapacy in the very heart of the Italian capital. It is Catholic Christianity's sovereign state, replete with all the vestiges of power: legal autonomy, it's own laws, religious 'ministers,' police force, and surveillance. The Pope is a head of state analogous to any other head of state, with full capability to operate on the world's stage with this difference; his power is vested in God and not in the people's secular will. It is this very difference that gives him his specifically secular power, since heads of secular states need his religious power to further their secular causes with their religious populations. Condoms, for example, or, no condoms.

And it was into this peculiar world, this peculiar religious state, that on 9 May 2009, Liuba walked with deliberate slowness and great courage dressed as a Nun to perform *The Finger and the Moon*, a work of minimal but potent pageantry that invoked the doctrinal debates of al-Falsifa and St. Thomas, and called up the profound depths of the past in our religious present. By all appearances a Nun,

she came to this place of pilgrimage to spread an orange cloth in the Piazza, to set a compass down in order to face east toward Mecca, and perform the prayer ritual of Islam. Given the religious zealotry of our moment, the risk she took cannot be underestimated; and it is not overreaching to imagine that the potential was real that she walked into a lion's den of persecution. What would have been the consequence of her act if she had attempted this on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, or indeed, in the square of the Great Mosque in Mecca?

Lest it be thought that Liuba acted callously and merely to provoke violence with a naïve impunity, while risking a double blasphemy and a pointless martyrdom, it is crucial to know that she trained with an Imam to learn how to pray properly as Muslim's pray. *Finger and the Moon* was performed with great care and accuracy, with sincere devotion and is a genuine and groundbreaking work of religious art. But given its symbolic location in Piazza San Pietro, it must also be interpreted as a form of civil disobedience meant to raise questions about religious conflict, violence, power and the role of the state. It raises questions about the power of symbolic and direct action that in her work mirror the difficult conundrums of personal faith and political commitment that are wrapped up in such pressing issues of separation of church and state, the legislation of morality, the mechanical inhumanity of secular politics grounded in neoliberal financial capital where 'value' has no other meaning than economic value. Liuba brings powerfully to bear ideas of free speech, the relation of public speech and to private responsibility, in a nexus where appearance and reality are elided, where the expected and the unexpected collide, where the Other is forced to confront the Other, where, ultimately, difference resists all resolution into sameness, and the paradox of al-Falsifa's two gods are bound together like two north or south poles of a magnet. We might imagine the effect causing the compass to lose its bearings. How might we navigate through a religious center so radically displaced?

And lest it be thought that Liuba's performance was only a private act, it is equally important to know that her embodiment of religious paradox, of her manifestation of an irresolvable aporia of faith, was captured by dual cameras and streamed live over the internet to a plurality of sites. Like most works of religious art, hers was a widely public one based on the power of witnessing, significantly bridging the physical world with the virtual world, the world of unsuspecting random pilgrims in St. Peter's Square with the expectant home and gallery audiences gathered to participate in the performance. The real-time and real-space of the event has been transubstantiated as a database not limited by time and space, commensurate with global capital, aesthetically mirroring the cosmology required to maintain the religious world view, just as the two camera points of view maintain on a formal level the impossibility of resolving the Christian and Muslim faiths. *Finger and the Moon* suggests a kind of hierology of displacement, of the aporia between the real and the apparent that is the very condition of religious faith. It puts faith where it is best suited – in suspension between 'worlds,' whether these worlds are actual or imagined.

Liuba's performative act goes still further. If a nun of uncertain order, a nun who is clearly 'out of order,' is a figure of religious aporia, she must lie beyond "properly human action" that is strictly policed by religious doctrine, where humanity is forced to confront its own limits. But because a nun is also a woman, Liuba displaces the masculinism at the heart of the hieratic by challenging the very dogma that it is the priestly role to certify through the setting of definitive limits, including those of gender. Thus, *Finger and the Moon* is also a powerful challenge to the patriarchy of Christianity and Islam. St. Liuba's patron saint is the 16th century St. Teresa de Ávila, the Carmelite nun of Jewish origins who at the age of seven ran away with her older brother to experience martyrdom among the Moors. In her book, *El Castillo Interior*, a clear reference to the 13th century Sufi doctrine of Abu-I-Hassan ash-Shadhili, she analogized the journey of faith by comparing the contemplative soul to a castle with seven successive interior courts that symbolized the seven heavens. Surely, whatever one thinks about religious faith, and this writer is an atheist, Liuba's entry into Piazza San Pietro must be understood as a journey into at least the first of these seven courts, where religion and politics, the public and the private, the syncretic constitution of religion, and therefore of faith, are inseparable.

If Liuba has other patron saints, they would be Fellini and Gertrude Stein. St. Teresa plays an enormous part in the latter's monumental *Four Saints in Three Acts*, where she is given the ecstatic role that Bernini immortalizes in his sculptural homage to her in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. For Stein, she is a figure able to bridge feminine and masculine power, erotics, and language, in a powerful assembly of poetic imagery. Fellini is an evocative figure here because of his trenchant filmic treatments of the rife contradictions between religion, sexuality, politics and the everyday life of Italians. But it also a useful context in which to understand Liuba's filmic, character-driven performances. Many of her works would easily fit into one of his films because of how they use absurdity as social critique to confront the contradictions between individualism and public norms. Liuba's work is deeply Italian, while also able to challenge the absurdities at the root of our globalizing culture, with a ruthlessness equal to that of Fellini. *Finger and the Moon* is a remarkable work of syncretic aesthetics. That St. Teresa, Bernini, Stein, and Fellini impossibly find a disjunctive synthesis in her performances speaks volumes for the uniqueness and power of her courageous work.

Such necessity cannot belong to anyone else but St. Liuba.