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1984 as a Religious Critique

Lindsay Dowty

Despite having written six fiction novels, three long works of reportage, and innumerable published essays, letters, and reviews, George Orwell is best known for authoring his two fictitious political critiques, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Because of the popularity of these two novels, he is almost exclusively taught in the education realm as a dystopian fiction writer. Consequently, Orwell has become synonymous with totalitarian regimes and oppressive governments. Even in modern politics, 68 years after the initial publication of his final book *1984*, the adjective “Orwellian” is thrown around to describe presidential administrations or foreign nations. However, while this style of writing has made him famous, Orwell’s criticism of other social factors has all but been forgotten – especially his distaste for Catholicism.

Though he was raised in the Anglican faith, by the end of his lifetime Orwell identified closer with atheism and turned a critical eye towards organized Christianity. John Rodden, once a professor at the University of Virginia and the University of Texas, has written a variety of material about George Orwell. In his piece “Orwell on Religion: The Catholic and Jewish Questions,” he recounts how Orwell told a fellow Etonian classmate that he was a subscriber to the Catholic press so that he may “see what the enemy is up to” (Rodden 44). In his essay “Such, Such Were the Joys,” Orwell thinks reflexively about his time in primary school, stating, “till the age of about fourteen I believed in God, and believed that the accounts given of him were true. But I was well aware that I did not love him. On the contrary, I hated him, just as I hated Jesus...” (Orwell 1323). It would be fair to say part of Orwell’s hatred for the Church stemmed from his miserable time at St. Cyprian’s primary school as a child. However, it is generally agreed upon that Orwell’s scorn towards Christianity solidified during the Spanish Civil War, about which *Homage to Catalonia* was written. At the time, the Catholic Church was collaborating with the fascist governments of Italy and Spain due to its vehement opposition to socialism and democratic ideology. As an advocate for democratic socialism and a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, Orwell began to view the Church as its own authoritarian regime (Hill 274 – 275). In the same way, he believed those worshipping the Church were succumbing to a fad of “power worshipping” – or, idolizing those with power opposed to the morals and ethics of the institution wielding that power (Rodden 47). In this way, it would be appropriate for Orwell to label the Catholic Church as an “enemy” to socialism.

Moreover, Orwell’s aversion to Catholicism is closely tied to his political opinions. As he saw it, religion and socialism could not coexist, especially at a time when the Catholic Church was supporting fascism. Subtle hints at this opinion appear in his allegory *Animal Farm* with his character Moses, the raven that preaches the entry methods to Sugarcandy Mountain. In this case, Orwell is using Sugarcandy Mountain as a symbol of the concept of Heaven. Most notably, the character has a biblical name, after the Moses that was given the Ten Commandments. He also, however, acts to portray Orwell’s notion of the Church as something used to keep control over the working class. After a leave of absence from the farm, Moses returns. He is described as “unchanged, still did no work, and talked in the same strain as ever about Sugarcandy Mountain” (Orwell 70). He goes on to describe Sugarcandy Mountain as “that happy country where we poor animals shall rest forever from our labors!” (Orwell 70). Here, Orwell makes the symbolic assertion that the Church is used as a means to give morale to the working class. What better way to keep the laborers from rioting than allowing them to believe their tribulations will end after

they die and they shall be rewarded for their hard work? The tie with politics appears when Orwell addresses the attitudes of the pigs towards Moses. The pigs “declared contemptuously that his stories about Sugarcandy Mountain were lies, and yet they allowed him to remain on the farm, not working, with an allowance of a gill of beer a day” (Orwell 70). Orwell confronts the idea that fascist governments dispel religion to keep the people from unifying together behind it, yet they humor the Church as a means of giving the lower class a reason to stay in the lower class. In *Animal Farm*, Orwell makes minor allusions to his take on religion in the bigger scheme of a totalitarian society, much like he does in his following novel, *1984*.

Orwell turned Part III of *1984* into a violent, if not extreme, rendition of a Catholic Confession. In sum, Winston is forced to admit to crimes he did not commit to a member of the Party, O’Brien. In this situation, O’Brien acts as a priest and Winston takes the role of a member of the congregation. The purpose of Winston’s confession is to acquit him of the crimes he committed against the Party so he may be executed as a law abiding follower of the Party. The situation is reminiscent of the Catholic practice of being absolved from sins before death, so a person dies as a member of the faith and will be accepted into Heaven. Patricia Hill describes this as “a process similar to the traditional sacramental experience of penance: confession, mortification, penitence, and restoration of faith to community” (274-275). In fact, Orwell’s intent was almost given away in O’Brien’s discussion of the Party’s power during Winston’s interrogation. While Winston is strapped into the chair, O’Brien says to him, “we are the priests of power...God is power” (Orwell 339). These two small sentences confirm the religious undertones of the third section of the novel. O’Brien’s blatant references to religion, the ambiguous existence of Big Brother, and the religious allegory throughout Orwell’s depiction of Oceania is evidence to suggest Winston is living in a world controlled by an extremist Christian theology. In particular, this government resembles the Catholic Church, with the Party directly corresponding to the Church and the religion being Ingsoc.

Orwell’s *1984* is as much about an oppressive government as it is about losing faith within a theocracy. Winston’s continual questioning of Big Brother’s existence and his need for validation through others points to a plot in which a man struggles to come to terms with his disbelief in God. Winston is perpetually on the search for some inclination from coworkers or friends that they do not truly believe in the Party, as well. For instance, during the initial Two Minutes Hate, Winston searches for validation of his disgust by canvassing the room until his eyes land upon O’Brien. At the time, Winston was convinced “an unmistakable message had passed” between himself and O’Brien. He believed O’Brien was conveying a sense of understanding and agreement towards Winston’s “contempt, ... hatred, ...disgust” towards the Party (Orwell 103). In fact, one of the most influential aspects of Winston’s relationship with his girlfriend Julia was the fact the two of them held disdain for and questioned the Party. Julia even states her first attraction to Winston occurred once she “knew [he was] against *them*” (Orwell 203). It was this realization that Julia was not faithful to the Party that made Winston fall in love with her and overturn his initial inclination to murder her for being a perfect Party member. Finding those who believe in the same principles as oneself is a key unifier in a religion and Orwell uses this human quality of belonging as an element to construct the theocracy of Ingsoc.

Beginning with the actual structure of Orwell’s fictional world and government, there are religious elements tied to the Party. In a larger sense, there are three supercontinents within the realm of *1984*. Similarly, there are three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Each of these countries are constantly at war with each other, just as the theological battle for the truth continues to persist in modernity. Additionally, the ministries themselves are symbols of

theological rule. As best put by Patricia Hill in her piece “Religion and Myth in Orwell’s 1984,” the Ministry of Love, “invites comparison with the Inquisition; and the Inquisition’s later counterpart, the Holy Office, is parodied in the Ministry of Truth” (274). Further still, the Ministry of Truth is described as a pyramidal building, coinciding with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity (Orwell 91). This concept is further demonstrated by the ideals the Party preaches to the general public. For instance, in regard to human sexuality, sex is an action that is only supposed to occur in order for the survival of the species. As Winston’s wife Katharine believed, it is a “duty to the Party” in order to produce a child. There should be no pleasure associated with the action. Additionally, the only people allowed to partake in sexual activity are married couples (Orwell 150). This principle of celibacy is reminiscent of what Hill describes as, “the Church’s Augustinian puritanism” or the Church’s belief in only having sex after marriage for the purpose of producing new citizens (274). In the realm of *1984* this moral obsession with sexual abstinence is also reflected in the Party’s creation of the Anti-Sex League and is further still perpetuated by the Junior Anti-Sex League, which makes children the target of their teaching. This practice is reminiscent of the Catholic tradition of Sunday School or Confraternity of Christian Doctrine.

The way the citizens of Oceania react to the Party is also indicative of a theocracy. For instance, the existence of Hate Week and the Two Minutes Hate are comparable to the Catholic Holy Week (the week prior to Easter Sunday) and mass. In both of these rituals, the objective is to solidify and unite behind a person’s belief in the Party’s Leader, the primordial God figure within the novel, Big Brother. In fact, during the first Two Minutes Hate within the novel, Winston witnesses a woman whisper “My Savior!” before “...she extended her arms toward the screen. Then she buried her face in her hands. It was apparent that she was uttering a prayer” (Orwell 102). Clearly, Orwell was hinting at the idea that Big Brother is worshipped within the society in the same way God is amongst the followers of the Catholic Church. This is exemplified in O’Brien’s response to Winston’s confession of hatred towards Big Brother. O’Brien responds, “You hate him. Good. Then the time has come for you to take the last step. You must love Big Brother. It is not enough to obey him; you must love him” (Orwell 356). Citizens of Oceania are expected to devote themselves fully to Big Brother.

Likewise, the recurring propaganda phrase endorsed by the Party, “Big Brother is Watching You” is also an allusion to Big Brother as God. The idea that God is constantly watching or looking down upon the Earth is a popular means of control the Church exercises over its followers. The Party also utilizes this technique in the form of Big Brother in hopes of changing the behavior of the people by reinforcing the idea they are always being watched. During the Two Minutes Hate, the image of Big Brother is always present. At these events, he is projected at the front of the room much in the same way Catholic crosses depict Jesus at the head of the main altar. Similarly, most Catholic churches also have stone carved images of Jesus or stained-glass windows recounting his Biblical story. Orwell intended to portray Big Brother in a manner that would compare him to the most important figures in Christianity.

One of the key ways in which he does this is presenting Big Brother as an ambiguous figure. While there are posters of Big Brother plastered all around Oceania, his existence as a physical person is unclear. Winston himself is unsure of Big Brother’s reality. In accordance with this interpretation, the story of Winston could be recounted as a story of a man who has lost faith in his religion and that religion’s attempt to save him. When prompted by O’Brien, Winston asks his question directly – “Does Big Brother exist?” To which O’Brien responds, “Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party” (Orwell 334). Of course,

this answer is insufficient in deciding a definite yes or no in response to Winston's question. The surrounding doubt encompassing Big Brother is parallel to the perpetual debate regarding the existence of God. Just as practicing Christians follow their religion based on a principle of "faith," the citizens of Oceania follow Big Brother blindly based upon their "faith" in the Party. Those who do not fully and convincingly devote themselves to the Party are convicted of "Thought Crime," the Oceanic equivalent of theocratic heresy. Once convicted, those individuals are sentenced to torture and re-education in Room 101. As already established, the Catholic Inquisition and regular practice of confession is the likely inspiration for this aspect of the novel. In fact, Winston himself calls O'Brien an "inquisitor" before O'Brien begins his questioning (Orwell 320).

The existence of Room 101 acts loosely as an allegory for Heaven and Hell, with Winston's cell acting as a liminal space resembling Purgatory. One of Winston's descriptors of being in the Ministry of Love was his inability to determine which floor of the building he was on; "He moved himself mentally from place to place, and tried to determine by the feeling of his body whether he was perched high in the air or buried deep underground" (Orwell 307). It is common in religion to view Heaven as a place above one's head, within the sky, just as Hell is a location that is typically associated with dark, underground places. The uncertainty Winston feels within his cell reflects the same uncertainty associated with purgatory as a space between the two where an individual waits for judgement. Further still, Purgatory is a Catholic construction in which the dead undergo a process of purification before being admitted to Heaven. This is also O'Brien's mission in torturing Winston in Room 101, to purify his mind and make him acceptable for reintegration into Oceania's society before his inevitable death. Because of his eventual reintegration to society, a reader can infer Oceania is, in the eyes of the Party, a type of Heaven.

Room 101 itself is an embodiment of Hell. While Orwell does not necessarily adhere to the fire and brimstone depiction of Hell, he does adopt a version more similar to that of Dante in his poem "Inferno." There are circles in Dante's vision of Hell, just as there are multiple elements to Winston's torture in Room 101. First, there is the physical pain O'Brien inflicts upon him by way of physical beatings. Winston describes the beatings as follows: "Sometimes it was fists, sometimes it was truncheons, sometimes it was steel rods, sometimes it was boots" (Orwell 317). However, while Winston is clearly suffering, O'Brien worsens his torture in a manner similar to Dante traveling through the multiple circles of Hell. Next, O'Brien uses a machine to inflict a different type of pain. This, Winston says, is the feeling of "his body...being wrenched out of shape, the joints...being slowly torn apart" (Orwell 321). Yet, Winston's final and worst circle of Room 101 is what O'Brien describes as, "The worst thing in the world...In your case...the worst thing in the world happens to be rats" (Orwell 357). It is then Winston is immersed in Hell as O'Brien forces the cage of rats towards him.

A common counterargument to this interpretation of *1984* surrounds the Party's strict no tolerance policy for religion, common in totalitarian regimes. It is, after all, indisputable that the Party does not endorse any specific religion and has made concerted efforts to destroy remnants of religious architecture. However, while looking at the picture of St. Clements, Mr. Charrington informs Winston "There's a lot of [churches] left, really...though they've been put to other uses" (Orwell 179). Just as the churches in Oceania have been converted to other spaces, the people of London have been converted to believe in Ingsoc. Orwell strategically eliminates all other religions from Oceania in order to hint at the fact that Ingsoc is everyone's religion. In other words, he draws a parallel to the Ten Commandments. The very first commandment is conceding

the existence of only one God and denouncing the existence of any others. In this way, the Party can maintain the faith of its people and punish those who stray.

There is also further evidence of religious allegory in the names of specific characters. For instance, Emmanuel Goldstein has two names indicative of religion. Firstly, Emmanuel is a Hebrew name translating to “God is with us.” Secondly, Goldstein ends in a stereotypically Jewish suffix – “stein.” Within *1984*, Goldstein acts as the enemy of the Party. There are a few different options as to which figure Goldstein could represent. Firstly, due to his distinctly Jewish name and his ambiguous backstory, he may be an allusion to Jesus. Jesus spread his teachings (similar to the book “Goldstein” published) and eventually gained a following. In this way, John Haldane proposes there is a “parallel to the position of early Christianity in Roman Palestine” (Haldane 265). Yet, this theory falls apart as Jesus is a key individual in all forms of Christianity. However, the idea that most closely follows the plotline is the notion of Goldstein as a symbol of the Devil. Patricia Hill summarizes this theory by explaining how the public was “conditioned into a zealous worship of Big Brother against the anti-Christ Goldstein...” (Hill 276). Just as Lucifer was cast out of Heaven for not loving mankind, Goldstein was cast out of Oceania for defying the Party. Likewise, whenever the Party switches the enemy in their perpetual war, to explain the initial shift, the false statements and posters are blamed on Goldstein. For instance, during Hate Week, the Party announced halfway through the celebration that Oceania’s war was truly with Eastasia and not Eurasia. Immediately, the posters with the wrong faces and incorrect banners were explained by the notion that “the agents of Goldstein had been at work!” (Orwell 257).

It is in this instance that George Orwell closely ties together the religious allegory with the already well-established interpretation of *1984* as an oppressive totalitarian government. In a 1941 British Broadcasting Company newscast, Orwell is quoted on his opinion of totalitarianism and religion as follows:

...In medieval Europe the Church dictated what you should believe, but at least it allowed you to retain the same beliefs from birth to death....

Now with totalitarianism, exactly the opposite is true. The peculiarity of the totalitarian state is that though it controls thought, it does not fix it. It sets up unquestionable dogmas, and it alters them from day to day. (Haldane 265)

Orwell comes back to this assertion during his depiction of Hate Week. Hate Week is the prime example of the people of Oceania blindly following the will of the Party despite its inconsistencies. By setting up the totalitarian government as a theocracy, Orwell illustrates how the most oppressive fascist government emerges when there is no consistent reality. Essentially, Orwell uses this moment to portray the future of a country in which a Christian theocracy takes hold, which ultimately results in a totalitarian regime. It serves as a foreboding warning that theocratic governments will ultimately turn fascist.

George Orwell’s tale of *1984* is often interpreted as a political cautionary tale. Principles such as double think seem increasingly pertinent with contemporary issues concerning “fake news,” amongst other “Orwellian” dystopian happenings like a constant state of war. However, while there is no denying the connection of Orwell’s technology and philosophy to that of modernity’s (such as the telescreens and national surveillance), there is also strong evidence in support of *1984* as an allegory for a Christian theocracy. Orwell’s long-time distaste for organized religion, in particular that of the Catholic Church, finally resulted in a published work surrounding it. After all, by this point in his career, Orwell had published social criticisms of everything from dirty postcards to fascism. It would be foolish to think Orwell went his entire

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literary career without writing a piece on religion. *1984* is the novel in which George Orwell predicts the outcome of a totalitarian Christian theocratic government.

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