



**SHRIVER
CENTER**

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Remarks of Walter Mosley**

Religiosity in essence is the belief in a supreme power. Over the centuries and across the vast terrain of our planet there have been many gods and other beings worshipped and adored. These beings, and the moral systems that have grown up around them, have influenced how many of us, and most of our ancestors, have organized ourselves, our ethics, our laws, our ways of life.

All types of representatives of the Divine in its many permutations have stood before us as examples, as paragons of righteousness and of retribution. From the giant lizards of the Australian Aborigine to Moses to Buddha to Jesus Christ we have had our divinities and their attendant Laws.

Religion originates from a perceived superior force that guides and organizes our lives and subsequently our beliefs, our faith and our willingness to accept mortality in the face of that which at least seems to be immortal.

In the past our religious belief systems explained the inexplicable: the sun rising; arid seasons that should be filled with rain; the death of loved ones.

Religiosity claims everyone and assigns titles of good and evil to its believers and its non-believers alike. Belief in these often invisible forces gives us a way to communicate with the Divine and to calculate our innocence and our guilt.

We worship these powers. Our art, our labor, our children are offered up in their names.

I think that it might be accurate to call the religious feeling in the human heart a kind of Instinct; a prescient knowledge, a readiness to believe in something that cannot be dominated, formed, or known in its entirety. Human beings have faith in that which looms so large that we are made aware our infinitesimal place in the great scheme of things.

This feeling, this instinct is an essential part of being human. We, at least most of us, could no more expel our notion of the soul than we could successfully deny our sexual drives or our survival instincts. Fate, faith, God, and the immortal soul in one way or another have filled the minds of almost all humans at almost every important moment of our short existence. The concept of good and evil is deeply ingrained into each and every one of us.

It is true that my good might be your evil. It might be that America's good is Iran's evil. But the concepts are the same.

The trouble is that though there are constant, even immutable forms in the history of the human heart we are also a restless, greatly adaptive, and a self-reflexive life-form. We are continually examining our world and changing it only to find that we are in the end ourselves transformed.



A farmer discovers in the Nile valley many of thousands of years ago that she can regularize the harvest. Within the next hundred years the population grows exponentially. Everything changes. Nothing is as it was. The past becomes a golden age while the present is uncertain, straining at the seams.

Henry Ford widely distributes the internal combustion engine and now we have a hole in the ozone layer the size of the North American continent.

Global warming is not a threat it is a disaster.

As the ways of life change and make demands upon our systems of organization, our beliefs also change. But not necessarily quickly enough or rationally enough to avoid the disasters we conjure.

Often, in order to deal with the vast changes brought about by our quixotic transformations, we begin to see the world through new eyes. Our philosophers both great and small spend their days trying to understand where we are going. Our lawmakers redefine our rights, our freedoms, and even the very structure of our government. What was once acceptable becomes a crime. What was once evil becomes a badge of righteousness.

George Hegel, one of the West's most important thinkers, used his vast intelligence to rethink the very existence of the Deity. God, Mr. Hegel said, was the idea of perfection that was realizing itself through history; that through dialectical progress the material world, heralded by mankind, would achieve the reality of God by struggling toward the final goal of perfection.

This notion explained, to many thinkers' satisfaction, how the face of God had taken so many forms throughout known history. It took into account the restless changes in the human heart and even to some degree technological advance within the notion of the Spirit. Our struggle and our changes were the ever-growing articulation of Spirit through history. We were ourselves were hammering out the metaphysical world through our physical and intellectual conflicts.

Less than a century later Karl Marx comes around, with a pronounced atheistic flare, taking the Spirit out of Hegel and replacing it with historical materialism. There was a perfection coming out of the dialectical struggle of history but for Marx it was a social perfection guided by the infrastructural forces of economics: Capitalism.

Marx is interesting because he represents a general family of thought generally anchored in the twentieth century that I like to call the School of Suspicion. Freud with his unproveable and yet incontestable theory of the unconscious, Darwin with the wonderfully insidious notion of evolution, Einstein and his refutation of Newton, and Marx who tells us that we are formed by our economic relationships and that we cannot by dint of will alone make ourselves into something different.

These notions are all miraculous. They inform us that while we think we understand the world, we are really the pawns of systems that are meta-human if not metaphysical.



Science and philosophy come together to open a window to places that we cannot go; or at least to places where we have to redefine ourselves in order to accept the vast changes that they imply.

I know some of you might be wondering what any of this has to do with poverty. Believe me – I'm trying to get there. But first I had to at least state how our world changes while our beliefs and our perceptions lag behind. We free the slaves but deny their rights. We make profit from tobacco but turn a blind eye to cancer. We blame our president when a whole nation went to war¹

We ask *what poverty* never managing to look in the mirror or in our own hearts.

I began this talk with the notion of religiosity because I believe that Capitalism is the primary religion of America. Capitalism defines good and evil, saint and sinner, the powerful and the powerless, the halls of white justice and the prison rolls of color. Capitalism elects the president, wages war where natural resources abound, buys public opinion, and creates and then crushes the dreams of our masses.

Don't get me wrong here I'm not coming from a Marxist, communist, or even a socialist standpoint. What I'm talking about is a country, because of a complex internationally contentious century, that has confused the humanist ideal of democracy with the venal reality of Capitalism.

There are many Deities in the Olympus of Capital but the highest of these, the most powerful is Profit. In the scriptures of Capitalism Profit must be maintained no matter the cost in natural resources, human life, or even our precious Constitution.

Profit likes dictators and low wages, slaves that maintain their own chains and bread and circus. Profit likes democrats and republicans alike as long as they go along with the program set forth by vicious international competition.

Contradictorily, Profit is also a helpless victim of the fluctuations of Capital. You cannot be a good Capitalist and still be worried about the well-being of your employees and fellow citizens. If things are good and money is plentiful then everyone gets a little something but if things are bad, if Profit is down then there has to be unemployment and inflation or depression.

Business has hard and fast rules based on competition and no matter how much our business leaders, the high priests of Capitalism, feel for our suffering millions their hands are bound with chains of gold. They are also constrained by the scriptures, the balance sheets of business.

This is not news of course. I'm not the first one to say that the machinations of capitalism cannot afford to have humanitarian interests when the chips are down. People

¹ While giving this speech I felt comfortable in making this statement because there was to be a question and answer period. But because the printed word allows no such opportunity let me elaborate a bit in this footnote.

Part of the argument of this piece is that we have to look into ourselves to answer the problems we encounter. Blaming someone else (even if that someone bears a great part of the guilt) might well exonerate us when we too share the blame.



cannot buy cars and so the factory closes. Who will look after the unemployed? That's not the concern of our capitalistic deities; they must rebuild their infrastructure while we survive as well as we can.

No one really questions these truths. We all know that if there's no money in the bank then there will be no paycheck. If business is bad then everyone suffers. And the ones who suffer the most are those that are already on the bottom.

We, most of us, accept these realities. We accept poverty, want, disease, ignorance and illiteracy, crime, and the suffering of the weak, aged, and infirmed as potential outcomes of our economic system (a system which many of us confuse with our political system).

No one says that the prison rolls are unacceptable. If a child does not get an education it's their parents' fault or the child's fault. If a man is lazy then that is why he doesn't have a pot; didn't anyone tell him the tale of Grasshopper and the Ant? If you are sick and don't have insurance what can you expect? If you are poor and the bill collector is at the door there's nothing we can do.

Most of us here agree with at least a few of these sentiments. We're Americans after all. We make myths out of men and women who pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The Carnegies, Rockefellers, Kennedy's, Capones, and Bushes. These men and women are saints in the religion of capitalism. They fill out the rosters of our past presidents and the Senate.

And the poor accept these leaders not because of their love of democracy but because of their shame at their own poverty. Because just as wealth defines saintliness in the Capitalist religion poverty is a sin. If you cannot afford your life in America then you are a failure. You are not worthy of marriage or fine society, freedom or a seat at the table.

This is why our young men and women are signing their lives away to go off to the corrupt and unjust war we are waging on the Middle East. They're poor and ashamed. They, a great many of them, cannot afford college or a home, a family or whatever electronics are being touted on the so-called youth oriented media. They aren't sports stars or rappers, they aren't movie stars or even employable at the level of a living wage. They throw their lives away because they know that in the religion of America they are damned.

And it is true. They are flotsam in our culture. But it isn't only them. We herd our elderly (the men and women who built this nation) into pens of senility. 19,000 children die each day in this world from bad water. Over seven million have died in Congo in the last decade; Congo where they mine the elements to run our cell phones. We've been the cause of the deaths of more Iraqis than Saddam Hussein; us, the liberators.

And through it all the saints and the sinners in our system of morality believe that America is right and just. Poverty, though detestable, is also acceptable. The deaths of innocents from Cuba to Iraq are just so much collateral damage. Our ghettos, slums, and prisons; our illiterate, mentally disabled, and diseased; our soldiers, children, and goods assembled by slaves in foreign lands are all part and parcel of the American, the Capitalist religion.



So, you ask, what is to be done? How can we address the false consciousness of Americans? How can we stem the growing malignancy of poverty?

I think that the title of this evening is the answer. What poverty? These two words are the crosshairs on the dilemma we face. Because you see most Americans, being unconscious members of the Church of Capitalism, want to deny their sins. I am not a poor man, they once said. But as the church has retooled its definition of sin to include the working classes most of us have redefined our litanies saying *I am middle classed*; right up there next to the high priests and saints of Capital. They aren't of course. If you are in the middle class and lose your job you fall back on your portfolio and your life can stay the same for a year or more before you absolutely have to get another job. If you're working class however you have to get a job in two weeks or your kids are off to junior college and it's fast food and Wal-Mart for the duration.

Most of America is either poor or living so close to poverty that it stalks them. But you must remember poverty is a sin in this nation and so the people who could make a difference, who could demand the changes necessary, deny their own situation. Instead of empathy many of them have contempt. Instead of stirring the pot they fall into predictable conservative hierarchies created and maintained by the rich and the lackeys of the rich.

The true middle class also has disdain for the so-called lower classes. Sometimes they hide their condescension in charities knowing full well that charity alone will never end poverty. Only true self-interest and self-reflection will open our eyes to the infernal system that we stoke with every billable hour and every tax dollar.

Because, you see, the poverty is in us. We are deficient in vision, in idealism, and in true demystified democracy. Every woman, child, and man deserves a living wage, a home, their health, and a nation that honors them for their being a member of our potentially great society.

This knowledge, as depressing and oppressing as it is, is also a potential harbinger for hope. Poverty is not the fault of the poor nor is it an unavoidable destiny. We, the poor and working classes, have built this nation and it, along with all of its fabulous wealth, belongs to us. From the Atlantic to the Pacific we, the workers, are the ones who should hold sway. And every vault, every clinic, every drop of sweat fallen upon American soil is our democratic birthright.

The rich don't own anything that we haven't built. The government means nothing that we don't endorse. These are the secrets which need to be made public. There may be charities to help with income and profession, there maybe those that lend a helping hand. But the helpers and the help are equals in this country, in this nation. There are no hierarchies of class in a democracy. There is only freedom and the debt owed to the millions upon millions who have labored to make us great.

The greatest service that could be given to poor and working women and men is the knowledge that they, that we, all deserve the best that America has to offer and if there are those who try to diminish us because of our bankbooks or our education this is a



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crime against our Constitution. We carry this nation on our backs and everything it has done is our property and our solemn responsibility.

A man can be rich but only a nation can be wealthy. And if any person of any age suffers from poverty then our whole country is to shame.

Thank you.