

Of Nietzsche, Feuerbach, and Dark Nights of the Soul



Few people have ever written as penetrating a critique of faith and religion as have Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Feuerbach. "God is dead," Nietzsche declared, "and we are his murderers!" And we murder God, he contends, in subtle ways to which we are entirely blind.

In a vast over-simplification, their critique might read as follows: Faith and religion are, in the end, human projections. We believe in God because we need to, pure and simple. We create God to serve our own needs. We need to believe in God because without a belief in God we cannot deal with the pain, brokenness, inadequacy, and limits within our own lives. We lack the vision and the courage to live without a god; thus the opium of faith and religion. God and religion are drugs we create for ourselves to get us through the pain of life and give us hope for something beyond.

But this accusation is not their major challenge. More challenging is their assertion that we create God because we need to rationalize our choices by putting them under a divine cloak. God isn't just the

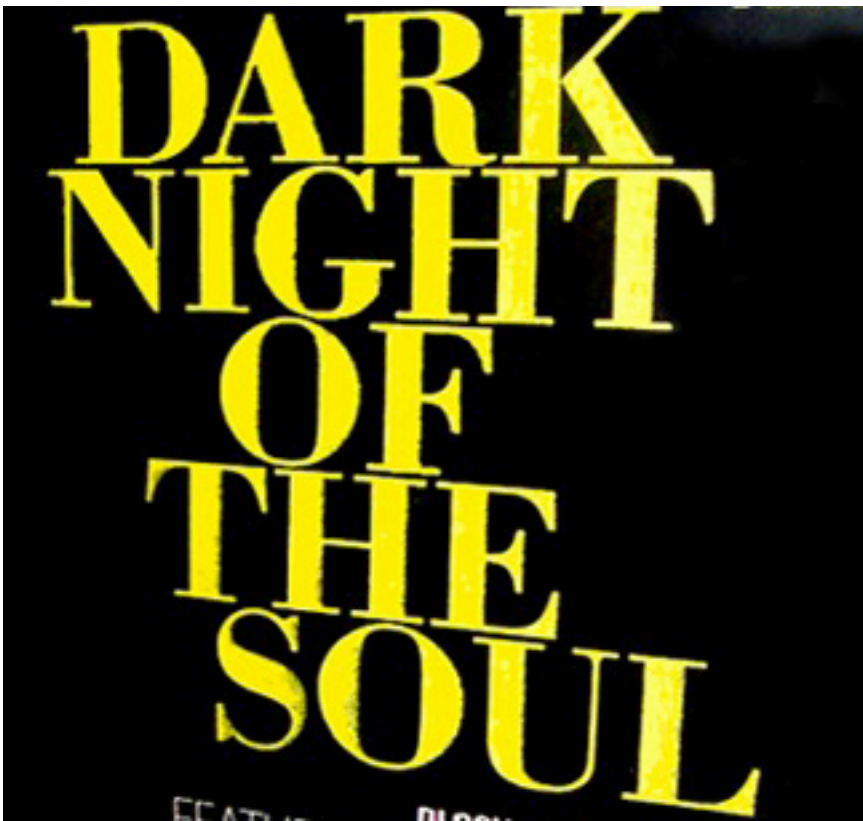
great opium we ingest to numb our pains and disappointments, God is especially the great rationalization, the great justification, the great sacred permission we need in order to serve ourselves and still be under the illusion that we are serving a higher, sacred cause.

It doesn't take much looking around to see why they say this. Everywhere, it seems, we are manipulating faith and religion for our own benefit. Someone once quipped that God made us in his own image and likeness and we have never stopped returning the favor. Faith and religion rarely work purely. Invariably some human element is very evident within them.

One only has to look at the role religion has played in history to see overwhelming evidence for this. Today, for example, we see every form of violence being justified in God's name, most evident of course in extremist Islam, but hardly limited to that. And we see the same thing everywhere within our private histories. All of us tend to somehow manage to have God on our own terms, in ways mostly advantageous to us, and in ways that let us rationalize our decisions and have God and religion give their stamp of approval.

So what's to be said about all of this? John of the Cross, I suspect, would say that Nietzsche and Feuerbach are 98% correct. Most of the time, we are manipulating God and religion to suit our own needs. But ... and this makes all the difference ... Nietzsche and Feuerbach are 2% wrong and, in that 2%, God can find the space to flow purely into our lives and religion can find the space to mediate God's presence and truth in purity.

Admittedly, human nature being what it is, we are forever unconsciously trying to fit God to our own needs. We don't easily or naturally let God put a rope around us and take us where we would rather not go. We want God, religion, and truth, but on our own terms. Church-wise, we have the same proclivity. Churches too find it hard to let God put a rope around them and take them to places where they would rather not go. However at a certain time God puts an end to that by plunging us, individually and sometimes as whole church communities, into what the mystics call a "dark night of a soul". What is this?



What happens in a "dark night of the soul" is that both our imaginations and our hearts are emptied and dried of all meaningful thoughts and feelings about God. We are driven to our knees in helplessness and find ourselves in a state where all our efforts to capture God in our imaginations and in our feelings are futile. Try as we might, all of our former thoughts, feelings, and securities about God, even our feelings about God's very existence, are now empty and dry and no longer able to serve us. We are left, at the level of thought and affectivity, feeling like an atheist or an agnostic.

But, as Jurgens Moltmann puts it, our faith begins at the exact point where atheists think it must end, in the taste of nothingness, in emptiness, in darkness, and in the complete powerless to imagine God's existence or affectively sense God's presence. In that emptiness and powerless, God can finally begin to flow into our lives purely, untainted, unaffected by our own needs, expectations, and imaginative constructs. Our very emptiness, dryness, and imaginative and affective impotence are what render us incapable of manipulating God. We are too weak to taint the inflow of God into our lives. Real faith and real religion begin there.

When we are completely down-and-out in terms of our own faith and religious securities, God can finally begin to mold us in his image and likeness and flow into our lives pure and untainted.

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