

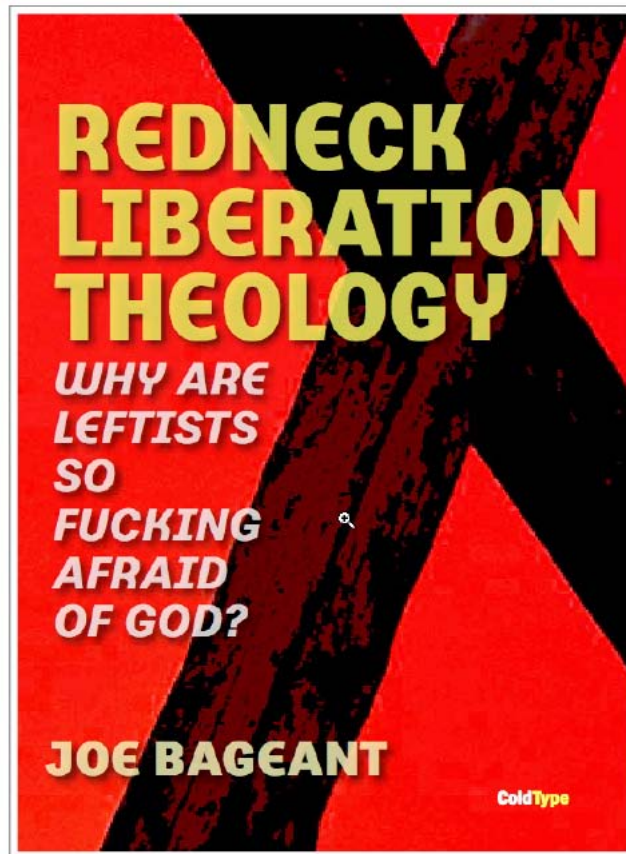


# **REDNECK LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

***WHY ARE  
LEFTISTS  
SO  
FUCKING  
AFRAID  
OF GOD?***

**JOE BAGEANT**

**ColdType**



**Joe Bageant** is the author of the forthcoming book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown on working class America, to be released in June, 2007.

A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class may be found at [www.joebageant.com](http://www.joebageant.com).

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## JOE BAGEANT: REDNECK LIBERATION THEOLOGY



ix or seven years ago I wrote my first essays about how America's fundamentalist churches had gone batshit crazy, were casting demons out of car engine blocks and making covert plans to exchange the Constitution for the Book of Revelation. Those few readers I had at the time, mostly in urban liberal strongholds, tended to think, "Well, these hayseeds out there in the hinterlands are scary fuckers, but Joe overstates the case a bit. The god whacks can never put together the kind of political power he's describing." The political landscape has changed since then, and there are now more books and documentary films sounding the alarm than you can shake a stick at. Which warms the gin soaked cockles of my heart (whatever the hell heart cockles are.) It even looks as if the mighty Pinhead himself stands a chance of being impeached. Which will make about as much difference as when Clinton was impeached. Zilch. The financial mobsters will still continue tunneling their way under the national treasury. American "progressives" will continue to catalogue empire's crimes across the blogosphere, preaching to the already converted, and the worst elements of fundamentalist leadership will still be licking pencils and crafting legislation that will allow public stoning of queers and street buskers.

But in looking back, I realize I've used a very broad brush in painting American fundamentalism...over simplified some complex things, because painting any big picture of a big nation must necessarily be rendered with the largest brushes in the artists' bundle.

Yet, broad strokes or not, America is an extremely religious nation, especially for an alleged member of "The First World," with all the implications of social progress the term implies – or once did. And we will remain a religious place for a long while yet. So when it comes to social change, a religious country is what we have to work with. Not a socialist nation, not a particularly moral nation, and certainly not a spiritually liberated nation, but a religious one that seems especially prone to fervid kitschy expression (hell, what in America isn't kitsch?) such as being "born again in the blood" or "raptured up" or mega-churches that resemble Wal-Mart stores, but with lousy parking arrangements.

Nonetheless, even as half of the voting public has come to gag at the term "born

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again," millions are genuinely "born again" in the spirit – that same spirit that so many educated American leftists who talk of world liberation deny exists. It's OK for Latin Americans to practice fundamental Catholic Christianity with great devotion (brown peoples are suckers for that superstitious stuff) but white American fundamentalists, well, that's another matter. As the left sees it, what they need is a good public stoning.

The implication among the thinking classes is that, collectively as a people, we are above such archaic "superstition" as religious fundamentalism, although they are willing to allow that modern American fundamentalism may indeed resemble Hitler's nationalized Christianity that so appealed to the Germanity of a homogenic bunch of 1930s fundamentalist Lutherans with a prejudice against the most obvious minority available, the Jews. We are probably far too diverse for that, no matter what the holocaust industry says. Let me say I am not a Jewish media conspiracy freak. I simply believe that some groups have come to excel in certain American endeavors, and some have come to excel in others, owing to dint of history, culture and circumstance.

When it comes to excelling in certain endeavors, my own people, the Scots Irish, excel at killing dark skinned peoples on distant shores and being intractable lovers of the surliest forms of freedom, plus worshipping a fundamentalist God that means real business. We all have our talents and liabilities. In any case, we mean-spirited seed of John Calvin, who produced George W. Bush of Kennebunkport, Texas, not to mention nearly every stump jumping redneck demagogue preacher and politician in American history, should at least get credit for producing Mark Twain and Robert Mitchum. Bill Clinton and Jane Fonda too, though both are starting to smell a little too gamey to claim of late.

We're all Americans, some of whom attempt to think and some of whom refuse to, which in either case leads to its own prejudices, depending upon the socio-political pressures of the times. It appears now that among thinking Americans the last acceptable prejudice is anti-Christian fundamentalism – along with anti-redneckism, (but we 'necks could give a shit and have even become defiantly proud of the label. Question: How many NASCAR Jesus born again American flag stickers can fit on the bumper of classic "I don't have the money to restore it yet" Ford Galaxy? Answer: twenty one, if you overlap them at the edges. I'm not shitting you here. That's an actual count. The result of redneck exploration of spatial relationships.

### **Choices in learning: Starbucks or Sing Sing?**

Joke as I may though, I have witnessed men and women be quite convincingly born again, shed old selves and become different and better human beings for the rest of their lives. The most recent was a one-eyed ex-con crack dealer named Jerry who studied nutritional science in prison, then upon release lived with his mom while

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he worked as a dishwasher and fry cook to accumulate money so he could go to Africa and save babies from malnutrition. Now if a man like Jerry, who is a Charismatic Holiness Pentecostal – which is about as fundamentalist as you can get – can be that born again, moved to genuine ecstatic and absolute belief in the promise of liberation through the elimination of human suffering, (which, by the way, is a fundamental Buddhist principle) then others can also be born again into on-the-ground liberation of the kind we lefties claim to admire, the kind that is shaping a new Latin America.

Jerry has done just that. He says "My liberation came while I was in solitary lock-up, after raping a white dude so I could stay protected by my gang." Today I called the bar-restaurant where he washed dishes. The manager said he'd left the country, but didn't know where to. Jerry is proof that any man may arrive at inner liberation by his own solitary path, but most are led to it, and all arrive along one of humanity's many roads of human suffering, both material and inner, that instill inner peace and compassion.

Upon surface observation these days, it is difficult to believe that not all American fundamentalist Christians are lacking in the compassion their leadership only mimics on the television screen. Yet millions of them donate billions toward what they are told provides health care and sustenance to the world's indigenous peoples, but which is used to sponsor religious demagoguery in unseen corners of the world. This is not to say there aren't plenty of fundamentalists solely interested in conversion of vulnerable Second and Third World strangers, plenty of "churchy folks" who cannot get enough of video footage of their sponsored missionary's ministry unto the Hottentotts or "Keechee" Indians of Latin America. "Look at'em eat with their fingers, Janet, and they let them little babies run around with their ding dongs hanging out."

In the world's big picture, however – the unedited version we are never allowed to see in American media – most American fundamentalists are being screwed blue by the same global economic pillage as, say, the Quiche Indians of Guatemala. Working class American fundamentalists suffer extractive capitalism's vampirism the same as the Third World, but by a more incremental yet nonetheless relentless process. A scam is a scam and while you may blame the victims for ignorance, you cannot blame them for trust and good will toward men.

Now hold onto your drawers and get this. Some working class fundamentalists are beginning to get a sense of what even the most educated of Americans seem congenitally blind to – the inevitable brutality of capitalism's march through history – mainly because it is marching in their direction this time, creating bankruptcy, lost homes, credit meltdowns, and job insecurity for the hardest working, most obedient and faithful people in America – the traditional working class. Just like their brothers in the Third World, the economic "cures" they are subjected to always turn out to

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be worse than the sickness. Some now notice that when unemployment rises, so does the stock market, and when real wages drop the "economy" soars, according to the news reports. All sorts of folks are beginning to disabuse themselves of the notion that the American economy and the American people are the same thing. As in: "I work like hell, get paid and I buy stuff and I pay taxes. Ain't that the fucking economy?" Or as one very dedicated local blue collar fundamentalist put it a while back when I was writing my book, "The big guys have always had it all over the little feller, but it's gettin' entawrly out of hand. Sooner or later somethin's gotta be done to give a workin man a chance again. This ain't what Our Lord intended."

### **Even Catholics get the blues**

Now if we can get past the damned "Catholic thing" that is so lodged in American heads regarding liberation theology, and overcome modern science's poo-pooing of theology and all things spiritual, we can see a distinct linkage of liberation and theology, and the need for it in America. If devout Catholic villagers in Ecuador, Venezuela, Lima, Bolivia and Oaxaca can rise up, as they indeed are, then so can Christians in a Christian nation. Maybe not in droves – hell, even Catholics didn't pull that off – but it's not only probable, but eventually inevitable, as ecological and economic collapse accelerate around us. The fundie End Times stuff can only be stretched so far before it snaps and hard core reality slaps fundamentalist Christians across the chops. Such catastrophe is just as visible from the First Baptist Church as it is from the Greens headquarters here in Virginia (where you might be surprised to know that we have conservative "Christian Greens," in favor of auditing the Pentagon, a light rail system and balancing the budget.)

Reckoning will come though, and it will come like it always does for the human race, too late, and long after the princes of the earth have absconded with the goods. For Americans it will come when the secret militias in this country start cracking open their basement arms caches, and exercise those skills learned in Iraq, Afghanistan and along the perimeter of the Empire's last desperate efforts on behalf of the richest of the rich. By then however, it will be too late for a thin network of firepower and explosives to do much except add its members to the official terrorist list, along side scores of Muslim cab drivers and halal meat vendors.

### **Good news for working mooks**

The good news is that genuine human liberation for ordinary humanity can come much sooner than catastrophe. And in coming it will require real leaders, born of and among the lost and wasted lifetimes of toil – not from the political theorists, nor the meaninglessly educated hothouse plants from the managing classes. Working class

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liberation leaders are beginning to evolve from the sons and daughters of Baptist truck drivers or 55-year old Wal-Mart greeters with varicose veins and no health insurance. I get emails from them and I find them in corners of American politics such as West Virginia's emerging but understandably as yet disoriented Mountain Party. Liberation's future leadership is out there right now, stocking the shelves of the supermarkets tonight, buffing the floors of the nation's universities and banks, checking on the calf-cow pairs in the late season snows of Montana, and likely as not they are gun owning, non-drinking Christians doing solitary jobs with lots of time to think. And they experience things like loneliness, modern alienation, and an inner emptiness within that now quaint concept called the soul. Which drives so many of them to the last place that even addresses the souls of people such as themselves – fundamentalist churches.

### **Cheer up dammit! It's only the end of the world.**

If we want to practice or actualize liberation, we gotta do it on liberation's own turf – the soul of man. Which is rooted in this earth and nowhere else. Morality and justice is an organic thing, not a legal, or political or philosophical one. The reptilian brain takeover of America is not the entire movie, just the most savage scene near the end of our national production of a secular techno-illusion. For fully sentient Americans, entertaining electronic diversion and the illusion of material abundance cannot relieve the unbearable pressures of life in a techno-secular nation, one divorced from the organic morality and spirituality that comes with contact with the natural world.

Busting through the delusional veil of any imperial state culture always spells acceptance of more tough news for its clueless citizenry. In our case it means reconnection with the earth, and embracing the suffering and eventual death it provides every living thing as a matter of physics and cosmic order. That's where it begins and ends. Everything in between, the NGOs, the Internet, the theologians, and all the political theories in the world are just the signal static, the self-enforced interference between ourselves and the only worthwhile goals left in a doomed Empire – and all empires eventually meet their doom – humility, compassion and reconnection with the spirit.

After all, it is not the coursing energy of the human spirit that is doomed. It never has been and never will be so long as a single newborn baby still squalls out "I AM!" immediately upon its delivery, even into this most recent issuance of "the world" we have allowed to happen in the name of reason, progress, science, democracy – feel free to pick your own pious scientific, political or religious excuse. It does not matter. The animating forces of the universe seem unmoved by the collision of planets and

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implosions of supernova, much less the outbreak of a temporarily virulent virus called man on a speck of cosmic dust we call earth.

As it happens, today is "Earth Day," that media trivialized and co-opted celebration of our bio-planet. Earth Day 2007 would have passed unnoticed in my household but for our local newspaper's announcement that "The Winchester Host Lions Club will create an American flag of blooms," and that six other organizations will be planting red, white, and blue flowers in the park, "As part of the statewide celebration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown." Mother Earth is evidently associated in the local mind with an English joint stock company exporting a gaggle of armed English farmers and Polish woodcutters to a malaria ridden Virginia swamp, with the idea of turning a profit from their miserable toil and deaths. By the time Thomas Jefferson was born they had managed to turn hundreds of thousands of acres into a burned out wasteland of soil erosion (both Washington and Jefferson's biggest agricultural problem) and eliminate several native species, including some human ones.

Exactly one month prior to this Earth Day 2007, I was standing in the coral sand of a tiny atoll in the middle of the Caribbean Ocean at night amid several other vanishing species. Less than a hundred feet at its longest point, its sands were scattered here and there with the bleached skeletons of ancient lobster traps and sea turtle shells, and etched by the tracks and tailings of turtles, small birds, and all sorts of strange crawlies from the tide pool. Swarms of translucent little crabs with huge black and white target-like eyes on stems coming out of their heads scurried furtively, avoiding the cormorants and other kinds of birds hugging the atoll against the same sturdy winds that once carried disease and guns into the new world and Spanish gold away from it. During the day the sun on that sand was blinding. But at night there was just that wind and absolute blackness with millions of stars and the cries of birds.

Seldom have I ever felt the presence of the earth's spirit and the terrible beauty of creation so strongly, where the world flourishes and struggles and dies right before your eyes. Thousands of colorful worms go by in the shallow water, winking on and off and schools of tropical fish are plainly visible right at the water's edge, their fate hanging with the frigate birds suspended overhead.

And while standing there – frankly, taking a nocturnal piss – the wind rose and grew stronger. And as I closed my eyes against the billowing coral sand, that wind blew away all the flesh from my bones. Then blew away the very bones themselves. And what I was left with the core of selfness, just the awareness of awareness...that center of humanness that exists in pure duration before any thought or word is even formed, the unarticulated stuff that exists in the womb of woman and in that great frothing amniotic soup of the mother of us all – the sea. It was just me and the over-

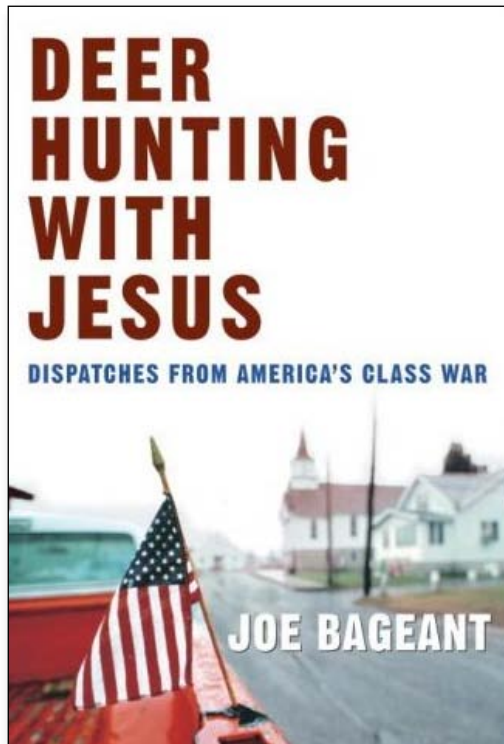


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arching black canopy of the world, as if god's own infinite bowl of stars itself had been overturned, dumping them upon my fallible and pitifully meaningless outer self – the one presently engaged in pompous scribbling about the liberation of man, yet unable to save a single one of those tiny crabs or glowing sea worms in the tide pools from their own destinies, from their return to the sea via the gullet of a vanishing petrel.

Western civilization began by smashing the faces of beasts with stones, determined to "conquer the wilderness," hammering at both matter and mind on the anvil of the millenniums until finally, we pulled down mountains and made atoms scream in tortured orbits. Now the day of deliverance comes, casting our shadows in merciless hydrogen light, illuminating not only our latest war crimes, but also crimes of trade and finance and greed during what has come to pass for peace, when our darkest commercial cannibalism feasts upon the naked wondrous bodies of the innocents. And now destruction dances in infinite rooms, singing in dark chords for the brute who smashed open the celestial clock, hungry to eat the ticking heart of god.

For all that the study of history could have taught an amnesiac America about the fall of empires and civilizations, it is doubtful it can prepare anyone for what is fast coming upon us, because it has never happened before and by definition can only happen once. Though the Wiccan priestess, the fundamentalist preacher, the rabbi, and environmental biologist call it by different names – as if renaming an apocalypse made much difference – we need a liberated theology, epistemology, or ontology (again, that obsession with naming things rather than doing things.) Something to liberate "the within" of we who find ourselves traveling together amid gathering darkness toward the long promised kingdom of sanity and justice. That kingdom which rests at the end of no mortal road, but was always within us. Just like Jesus and Buddha and the Pentecostal preachers of my childhood said it was.



Order Joe Bageant's book

## **DEER HUNTING WITH JESUS** **Dispatches From America's Class War**

"Many friends and readers will notice that the title has changed to *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches From America's Class War*. The original title was *Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck: Dispatches From America's Class War*. Contrary to what one might suspect, the name change had not as much to do with the word "fuck" as it did the fact that a book was recently released with a very similar title. Then too, when I started putting the title "Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck" on the web, it kicked off some merchandising by small scale entrepreneurs of ball caps, tee-shirts, etc. bearing the four words. Which is no problem with me – I like to see the little guy printing tee-shirts make a buck" – JOE BAGEANT

Pre-order now from [www.amazon.com/Deer-Hunting-Jesus-Dispatches-Americas/dp/030733936X/ref=pd\\_sxp\\_f\\_pt/104-7289464-5668749?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Deer-Hunting-Jesus-Dispatches-Americas/dp/030733936X/ref=pd_sxp_f_pt/104-7289464-5668749?ie=UTF8)

The book will be released in June, 2007

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