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A Quest for Meaning: Religious Adaptation in the Face of Death

On the morning of November 1, 1755—on All Saint’s Day— a massive earthquake rocked the city of Lisbon. The disaster ignited raging fires and caused a powerful tsunami, ultimately decimating the city and ending tens of thousands of lives. Given the magnitude of the suffering on such a sacred day, the event sparked many philosophical questions and dislodged previously widespread theological contentment. Some saw the calamity as a manifestation of divine judgement, but many had much deeper worries regarding the consistency of a benevolent deity with such (seemingly) senseless slaughter. They saw the wrecked churches and the undamaged red-light district, and struggled for ways to reconcile this reality with their previous conceptions of the world. The fallout of the earthquake heavily influenced the European Enlightenment, and inspired considerable theorizing on this topic of theodicy— the attempt to vindicate an all-good deity alongside the existence of evil. While they hardly knew it at the time, these attempts to provide a compelling theodicy were actually indicative of a much more fundamental activity: the process of world-building. Humans must make sense of the world even as it continuously changes— an absolutely necessary and ceaseless human task. The citizens of Lisbon, being human, were as bound to this exercise as any other; even as they passionately defended their theologies, little did they understand that they were in fact modifying previous or constructing entirely new worlds in place of the earlier structures the Great Earthquake of Lisbon tore to the ground. In fact, religion by its very nature is an example of world-building. Met with the reality of suffering, evil, and—most importantly—our own mortality, humans actively and passively provide compelling and comforting accounts that resist the world’s ever-threatening chaos and enable them to live meaningful lives despite of it. Using the framework presented by Peter L. Berger in his book *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, a critical analysis of the Judeo-Christian Death Awareness Movement, Buddhism, and the cult of Santa Muerte reveals how all three continue to adapt in their own way to changing realities in order to preserve order and imbue all things with meaning— even death.

Before examining specific theologies and world views, it’s necessary to understand the theory of religion Berger presents which will become the foundation of our analysis. Berger maintains that “every society is an enterprise of world-building”, a notion at the very center of his argument (Berger 3). In fact, the rest of his argument follows (by way of reasonable inference) from this fundamental claim. To support the claim, he posits that society is a human creation, and that any impression of the contrary is mistaken. By this, he doesn’t suggest that society can’t affect individual people, but solely that society isn’t a preexisting fact of the world— it is a product of the way humanity behaves. In this way, society is dialectic in that it cannot exist separate of man and yet creates man from its influence. Berger then goes on to say that “the condition of the human organism is… characterized by a built-in instability. Man does not have a relationship to the world. He must ongoingly establish a relationship with it” (Berger 5). Berger thinks that this is an unavoidable consequence of human biology; it is not extraneous. He doesn’t give a biological or psychological account of this statement, and yet hopefully it won’t be too painful to accept. Imprecisely and tacitly, Berger seems to be appealing to an aspect of humanity’s higher intelligence. It certainly doesn’t seem implausible to think that the same capacity that allows man to conceive notions of justice or liberty would result in man perceiving a world more complex and in need of explanation than the one seen by other animals. And yet, this larger meaning seems to have no obvious natural basis; consequently, man must form this meaning himself. This process is what Berger refers to as world-building.

With this established, Berger goes on to say that the “socially constructed world is, above all, an ordering of experience. A meaningful order, or nomos, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals” (Berger 19). The nomos, as he puts it, is the product of world-building. The nomos is no more or less than man’s sensible image of the world. As humans are social creatures, nomos as well must be created collectively and, as a consequence, an interruption in the ongoing conversation which maintains the nomos results in a collapse into anomy. Anomy occurs when “the fundamental order in terms of which the individual can ‘make sense’ of his life and recognize his own identity will be in process of disintegration” (Berger 22). Anomy, being the opposite of nomos, is chaos and terror. Berger, quite elegantly, describes nomos as “an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle” (Berger 23). Put in this way, the practicality of a nomos becomes obvious, and yet Berger makes quite clear that nomos can’t simply be adopted for pragmatic reasons. An effective nomos must entail that the world is humanly meaningful by its very nature, not due to any human effort or perception. By creating an intrinsically meaningful cosmos, the nomos acquires a “taken-for-granted” quality which makes it all the more difficult to dislodge. After all, something that’s taken-for-granted is generally unquestioned and unscrutinized, characteristics which make world-views remarkably robust. Historically, the most effective way of achieving this cosmization, this taken-for-granted quality, is religion. As Berger explains: “Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant” (Berger 28). Therefore, the remarkable utility of religion goes to great lengths to explain its universality and importance.

This said, religion is certainly not untouchable— something that should have been made clear by the repercussions of the Great Earthquake of Lisbon. Berger asserts that “all socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious” and, as a consequence, they must provide legitimization that “serves to explain and justify the social order” (Berger 29). Of course, this in no way undermines the usefulness of religion. On the contrary, this merely provides us a more compelling explanation for the efficacy of religion: that “religion has been the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation…. because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality” (Berger 32). Still, religion is nonetheless faced with external threats to its plausibility and in response is occasionally forced to provide world-maintaining legitimizations. One of the most extreme threats to religion is what the earthquake at Lisbon brought roaring to the surface: the existence of suffering, evil, and death in the world. This proves especially problematic for theistic religions that feature a benevolent god, such as the Abrahamic religions. This worry is often called “the problem of evil”: how can suffering, evil, and death coexist with a God that is supposedly all powerful, knowing, and good? This question is an ancient one, but events such as the black plague, the earthquake at Lisbon, or any other particularly costly event often reminds us and requires the various theologies to offer compelling theodicies. If they don’t, they risk forfeiting the nomos they worked so hard to maintain. Using this framework we’ve just established— keeping in mind especially the concepts of nomos, anomy, and legitimization—we’ll now examine a few modern religions and their attempts to offer theodicies and legitimate the world view they provide.

To begin, let us look at the Death Awareness Movement, specifically the version advocated for by Nancy Bregman in her book *Beyond Silence and Denial: Death and Dying Reconsidered*. While her book looks at the problem of death from a more inclusive Judeo-Christian perspective, Bregman personally has Christian sympathies. Nonetheless, she promotes an outlook on death which emphasizes its natural aspect in a way she thinks many within the church have lost sight of. Regardless, she thinks the current peripherality of her perspective isn’t grounds to dismiss it. She says that “the very absence of certain past motifs lets in the possibility of others. This is how a tradition is remapped, this is how a landscape of faith is revisioned” (Bregman 39). If you notice, her phrasing is actually fascinatingly similar to some of that used by Berger. The “remapping” and “revisioning” of theology is quite reminiscent of Berger’s discussions of adapting a nomos to accommodate changing realities. But what changing realities might Bregman be responding to? Perhaps she agrees with Berger, who argues that the Christian theodicy has recently lost some of its appeal in the way it “depends upon the profoundly masochistic shift from the question about the justice of God to that about the sinfulness of man” (Berger 78). This may very well be possible, as she says in her book that “the theological meaning of Jesus’ death as punishment and payment for sin so controlled [theologians] thinking that when they spoke of Jesus’ weeping, they could only relate it back to our repentance…. This scene subverts dualistic, Platonic views of the person… [because] Jesus as whole embodied person is so fully engaged in his prayer for reprieve” (Bregman 40). Both Bregman and Berger seem unsettled by the emphasis on the sin of man, but Bregman actively attempts to dethrone the conception that the earthly— non-ethereal— self isn’t worth valuing and weeping for.

Instead, Bregman provides a theodicy not by dismissing human suffering as insignificant but by emphasizing that death itself is natural. She argues that “death is a part of life” and therefore “that death, like birth, belongs in our picture of human beings” (Bregman 44). She goes on to say that “death denied is more fearful, more power and destructive, than death as ‘natural’…. By forgetting or denying that death is natural, we have made it worse” (Bregman 48). She says that this perception of death as “wild” and “unnatural” likely has many sources. She suggests that it may stem from the unnatural nature of Jesus’s death, or the general modern demonization of death, but more importantly she insists that fear of death is incredibly common among modern christians. This she sees as a failing of Christianity, which is why she provides an alternative view of death as natural. In Berger’s terms, Bregman is quite plainly revisioning Christianity so that it remains legitimate even as many Christians recoil from death. Importantly, however, her ideal of a natural death leaves room for grieving and bereavement by acknowledging that life on earth has value. During a speech she gave at Drake University, she phrased it like this: “Death isn’t final, but it’s absolutely real.” Even so, in many ways her advocation of the Death Awareness Movement is also a response to the modern reality of overmedicalization, where even devout christians cling to life via medical treatments “hoping for a miracle”. This follows from Christianity’s tendency to discount human worries as insignificant, but “when death is a natural event, there is still enough space for ultimacy, for beauty and harmony, for a peace that goes beyond more rational understanding….” Many people, Bregman insists, consider heaven’s “anagogic imagination… too constricted to meet the challenges of serious attention to death as the death awareness movement provides” (Bregman 159). In the end, Bregman’s advocacy for the death awareness movement can be seen as a response to orthodox Christianity’s failure to provide legitimation.

In contrast to Christianity and the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism has a much different outlook on death and as a result provides its own unique theodicy. Karma Tsomo discusses the Buddhist view on death, and their subsequent implications for bioethics, in her book *Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Buddhism, Bioethics, and Death.* She remarks early on that “according to the Buddha, reflection on death and impermanence is the key means to awakening from the slumber of ignorance, gaining insight into ‘things as they are,’ and achieving liberation from the wheel of birth and death” (Tsomo 17). Based on the teachings of the Buddha (“The Enlightened One”), Buddhism teaches that all living creatures are caught in a cycle of living and dying called samsara, and that only by understanding the illusionary nature of the self and shedding one’s karmic tethers can one break free and achieve enlightenment. The buddhist ethic hinges on the karmic law of cause and effect, which Tsomo explains is “portrayed as an inexorable law, such that one inevitably experiences the results of one’s actions” (Tsomo 130). This law implies that the cause of all human suffering is their desire, ignorance, and craving. This philosophy, Berger contends, integrates all anomy into a “thoroughly rational, all-embracing interpretation of the universe” within which it follows “that the individual has no-one to blame of his misfortunes except himself— and, conversely, he may ascribe his good fortune to nothing but his own merits” (Berger 65). At its heart, Buddhism is a religion that is able to provide a remarkably persuasive theodicy that allows suffering and death into a perfectly ordered universe.

Despite Buddhism’s laudable ability to neatly account for suffering and death, by no means does this entail it’s free from the world’s evolving realities and, being socially constructed, Buddhism must adapt and provide legitimations like any other. Buddhism had to provide this legitimation very early on, not long after its genesis, when many started to critique the elitist nature of its core Theravada (translates to “School of the Elders”) teachings. In the beginning, Theravada practitioners focused on the personal attainment of Nirvana—enlightenment— through meditation and understanding the Eightfold Noble Path. These teachings, however, didn’t connect to the impoverished and afflicted who didn’t have the time or willpower to constantly meditate. As a response, a second school of thought fractured from the first called Mahayana (literally “The Great Vehicle”). Instead of emphasizing personal enlightenment, the goal of Mahayana practitioners is becoming a Bodhisattva. Tsomo describes a Bodhisattva as a “practitioner who successfully attains the state of a fully enlightened Buddha” and “is no longer subject to birth and death”. As a result, the individual is “liberated from cyclic existence… [but] intentionally take rebirth in samsara to benefit sentient beings” (Tsomo 29). Essentially, Bodhissatvas remain in samsara to help others reach enlightenment as well. By changing the ideal from personal enlightenment to the enlightenment of all sentient beings, Buddhism became more inclusive. Theravada remained, but steadily lost popularity and now over half of all Buddhist practitioners subscribe to the Mahayana school of thought. Just like how Nancy Bregman perceived a failure of orthodox Christianity and reconsidered its previous teachings, Buddhist practitioners saw a shortcoming of popular Buddhism and created a new offshoot to meet their concerns.

While this comparison can certainly be made, the break between Theravada and Mahayana is much, much older and more drastic than the modern advocacy of the Death Awareness Movement. Even today, however, Buddhist teachings are being reinterpreted in much the same way Bregman reinterpreted Christianity to meet many of the same modern dilemmas. The effectiveness of modern medicine has allowed individuals to extend their lives much longer than they could have in the past, and this presents problems for Buddhism as much as it does for Christianity. Tsomo says that “the great mystery of death has engaged the human imagination since the beginning of time, but never before have human beings exerted as much control over their own dying as now” (Tsomo 209). These changing sands become especially important as Tsomo points out that “time and time again, the Buddha modified the original formulation of a precept to reflect a different set of circumstances” (Tsomo 210). Therefore, much of the work Tsomo does in her book is reapply the core Buddhist ethical principles of non harm and compassion to modern medical practices. This must be done to keep Buddhism relevant to and consistent with the most recent medicinal understandings, and shows the Buddha’s wisdom when he recognized that his teachings would have to be fluid and evolve as time passed.

Finally, let us examine the cult of Santa Muerte. Santa Muerte is a skeletal folk saint venerated primarily in Mexico and worshipped for her miraculous ability to heal, deliver, and punish for her faithful. Most obviously, one of the fascinating aspects of the saint is her skeletal form and her nature as a personification of death. Her figure can be explained by understanding the ways in which views of death differ in Mexico compared to the United States. Carlos Alberto Sanchez sheds some light on this topic in his essay *Death and the Colonial Difference: An Analysis of the Mexican Idea*. Whereas death in the U.S. is seen as something in the future that doesn’t impact or influence the individual in everyday life, Mexican culture developed a different idea of death, one which saw death as something pervasive and omnipresent. Under this view, life isn’t something to be sensationalized or over-appreciated, as it can come to a close at any moment. Correspondingly, death cannot be either, for the conception of life as meaningless entails the end of that life is also meaningless. Likewise, Sanchez argues that this distinct difference between American and Mexican views on death developed due to “the violence and destruction initiated by colonialism and maintained by the coloniality of difference” (Sanchez 183). Given this culture, it only makes sense that the popular saint would be an image of death; by personifying death and rendering it sacred— something worthy of worship— the end of life becomes not something to be frightened of, but instead revered. This function of Santa Muerte, in its own way, is a Mexican attempt to provide a theodicy in the face of absolutely ubiquitous evil.

In his book *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, The Skeleton Saint*, R. Andrew Chestnut explores Santa Muerte in all her complexity. He, like Sanchez, recognizes Mexico’s unique relationship with death and says that “for most devotees [Santa Muerte] is neither grim or satanic. Instead, she is a saint who is as familiar to Mexicans as death itself” (Chesnut 54). Rather than focus on the colonial history of the country, however, he looks to more recent causes to explain the extreme levels of violence and suffering in Mexico that account for Mexican’s proximity with death. He denounces America’s and Mexican President Calderon’s drug war which has lead to “thirty-four thousand Mexicans dying in the first four years of [Calderon’s] six year term” (Chesnut 101). Given this level of death, he notes that “for Mexican drug dealers and police officers, the real possibility of violent death on a daily basis leads to a heightened awareness of their own demise. Who better to watch over those whose lives are constantly on the line than she who has the power to both preserve and extinguish life?” (Chesnut 102-103). In other words, the terrible reality of Mexicans’ lives make Santa Muerte the perfect saint for their needs. Chesnut argues Mexican devotion to Santa Muerte is more than anything else a pragmatic decision and that “they are chiefly concerned with the folk saint’s miraculous powers” (Chesnut 27). Not only does the skeleton saint offer protection for those who constantly have their lives under threat, but in the midst of a economic recession many people pray to her in the hope of a monetary miracle, and the poor caught in the dysfunctional vortex of the Mexican legal system often feel they need the assistance of a supernatural power.

While the pragmatic side of Santa Muerte may be extremely important to understanding her popularity, there is another essential aspect that might be easy to overlook: her unqualified inclusiveness. Many of those who worship Santa Muerte also identify with the Catholic church, and yet the Catholic church vehemently opposes the skeleton saint— partly because of her infamous reputation for being the saint of drug dealers and murderers. This perception is certainly sensationalist and overly simplistic, and yet there’s some truth to it. Chesnut admits that “many traffickers of heroin, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamines offer black candles to Saint Death in soliciting both protection from and harm for business rivals and drug enforcement agents” (Chesnut 98). But truly this illustrates the appeal of Santa Muerte: orthodox Catholicism would leave no room for such people among their ranks. A faith which establishes strict moral codes and expects them to always be followed simply isn’t compatible with the realities of a tumultuous life. The constant threat of death often demands a more intuitive, pragmatic ethical framework: an eye for an eye, kill or be killed. This mirrors the pragmatism that was discussed in the last paragraph, but what’s most important is that Santa Muerte allows for the demands of this reality where Catholicism does not. Dr. Eduardo Gonzalez Velazquez from the University of Guadalajara came to Drake University and talked about this very thing. Based off of his actual experiences of the cult and conversations with practitioners, he described how many people think that they have more freedom worshipping Santa Muerte than they do in the Catholic religion. For example, Santa Muerte priests are allowed to get married and even promote contraceptive methods. Additionally, the cult of Santa Muerte embraces abortions when they are induced by rape, and resist the myth of the virginity. The cult even permits transsexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and transvestitism. All of these things are common realities in Mexico and yet the Catholic church simply hasn’t caught up; in the church’s eyes, these things are abhorrent aberrations. Therefore, it’s no wonder that people turn to the skeleton saint to find acceptance where its lacking in the Catholic church, leading to the rapid and unrelenting growth of the cult of Santa Muerte.

By examining these three very different methods of cosmization—attempts to create a fundamental nomos—the precariousness of each socially constructed world has become certain. The Death Awareness Movement, Buddhism, and the cult of Santa Muerte can all be seen as responding to modern realities and changing understandings of suffering and death. The specific ways in which they do so vary drastically, but there exists an absolute necessity that they do adapt and manage to provide plausible legitimations. If they fail to do so, the religions’ popularity will falter, eventually plummet, and other, more legitimate, ones will take their place. The rise of Mahayana Buddhism and even the cult of Santa Muerte itself are clear instances of how this has happened in the past. Interestingly, however, it should also be noted that these attempts at cosmization do not always have to be theistic in nature. Religion has, as previously stated, been historically the most effective instrument of cosmization but Berger contends that “particularly in modern times there have been thoroughly secular attempts at cosmization, among which modern science is by far the most important” (Berger 27). As our understanding of the natural world becomes ever more complex and sophisticated, the necessity of a sacred nomos is thrown into question. Could our advanced understanding of the natural world be perhaps an even better instrument at cosmization than religion? It’s impossible to say. Some may think it is and some may think it isn’t, but regardless of the different routes we choose it’s clear we all share the same destination. As humans, we all enter this world with a yearning desire to find meaning within it, and doing so becomes one of our most important activities. The unparalleled importance of the nomos we create can make us think its immutable, and that different ways of looking at the world are self-evidently wrong or even dangerous, but this is not the case. Ultimately, we all must make sense of the world the best way we see fit, and diversity in our methods should only demonstrate the diversity of our situations and thinking. This diversity should not merely be tolerated but celebrated as a testament to our remarkable human ingenuity and our shared quest for meaning within a universe far larger than ourselves.

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