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Philosophy of Religion Paper 1

Finding Reinterpretation as Religious Responses to Suffering

Suffering is a part of everyone's life. It is a fact that reaches across all ethnicities, races and religions. At first glance, the way each religion suggests its followers respond seems very different, but perhaps religious responses to suffering are more similar than what they appear. The Lakota traditions, Sikhism, Islam, and Judaism all use some form of reinterpretation to respond to suffering. By teasing out and finding these similarities in religions, we can find some tentative meanings, values and truths of religious responses to suffering.

The lines for what is a religion and what crosses the line from religion to way of life can be very blurred. Many times religion is so tied to someone or a society that it becomes their way of life. This may be best exemplified in the Lakota traditions. As Powers et al. explain, "Lakota traditions can be characterized as a system of spirituality that is fully integrated into a rhythm of life that includes all aspects and patterns of the universe," (5295). For this reason, some argue that Lakota is not a religion, but a life style. However, it seems to be the goal of most religions to become a part of everything a person does, and completely integrated with peoples' lives, much like the Lakota traditions are explained. In many religions, followers are asked to live by their holy book, or have rules that must be incorporated into daily life, such as what to eat and when to pray. Religion is supposed to permeate all of its followers' thoughts in order to guide them in the proper direction, or at least this is the goal. There is not much difference between this and the way the Lakota traditions fill all aspects of their lives. Because of this, Lakota is considered a religion here.

One of the most devastating events for the Lakota people was the massacre at Wounded Knee. About 300 men, women and children Lakota were killed when a misunderstanding caused more than 500 United States soldiers to open fire (Pesantubbee). The bodies were left to freeze in a blizzard before soldiers came back to bury them in a mass grave. The Lakota were already struggling to keep their land and ways of life. This massacre only intensified this struggle as the Lakota people were not able to practice their burial rituals. Many Lakota recalled that they knew more dead than alive.

Instead of allowing this incident to further damage their traditions, the Lakota chose to use this as an inspiration. “The Lakota, in particular, invoke memories of Spotted Elk and his band to inspire native people to continue to struggle against cultural loss,” (Pesantubbee). The Lakota decided to create a new tradition by retracing the path of those who died at Wounded Knee in the Wounded Knee Memorial Ride. This Ride was a way for the Lakota people to remember their times of suffering, but also to use the massacre as motivation to overcome adversity and continue their culture. “The Lakota have also resisted oppression and recovered cultural integrity by reinscribing the meaning of the spirit dancers’ flight across the land,” (Pesantubbee). At first, Wounded Knee was a somber place where so much suffering had happened. The Memorial Ride became something to help the Lakota people grieve for their losses, but also grow from the experience. In a sense, this Memorial Ride was a way for the Lakota to reclaim and reinterpret what occurred at Wounded Knee. It is a religious response to suffering in that it allowed the people to come to a new understanding and a way to heal from the event.

There is a similar reinterpretation, or “re-memorization,” in the Sikh religion also. The Khalsa is a “pivotal event in the psyche and imagination of the Sikhs,” (Singh, xi). Sikhs are

initiated into the Khalsa order, where they become pure, and are considered “ready to fully live up to the high expectations of Guru Gobind Singh” (Sikhs.org). This in itself is supposed to be a religious response to suffering because it eliminates the caste system and the oppression that accompanied it (Singh, xi). However, as Nikky Singh notes, “the event has been recorded only by men, with the result that its total value is far from recovered, and in fact, the imbalanced memory has imposed a heavy burden on the life of half of the Sikh community,” (Singh, xi). Since many women are left out of the “memory” of the Khalsa, the Sikh community is missing a part of the whole memory, and the women begin to feel disconnected from this important tradition in their religion.

In order to respond to this form of suffering, Nikky Singh reinterprets the start of the Khalsa. She does this by relating the various events of the Khalsa to childbirth. As Eckles writes, “Nikky is able to replace suffering with empowerment” through her feminist reinterpretation. To add women into the establishment of the Khalsa, Nikky describes it as “the birth” which occurred in “three parts; the delivery, the nutritious drink, and bonding them together,” (Plonka, 3). Another one of the ways this is accomplished is by reminding Sikh women that the long hair and comb that Sikhs are told to wear in the Five K’s, a symbol of the Khalsa, are both considered feminine (Plonka, 5). By doing this, Singh is able to retell the beginning of the Khalsa in a way that women can relate to and also provides them with an important role in the process.

This is a religious response to suffering in that it utilizes the traditions of the religion, and adds something to them to relieve the suffering. Nikky Singh’s re-memorization takes away some of the pain Sikh women may feel as a result of being left out of the original telling of the Khalsa. Through this retelling, women are given an important role and a way to relate to the establishment of the Khalsa.

Islam uses a different form of reinterpretation as a religious response to suffering. Instead of creating a new tradition to re-inscribe how an event is remembered, like the Lakota, or re-memorizing a sacred story to ease the pains of inequality, like the Sikh women, Islam redefines what suffering means. Instead of viewing suffering as something bad, Muslims see it as a test from Allah, and a way to prove themselves to him.

Bowker writes, “the Quran emphasizes, as a characteristic of God, omnipotence as much as love,” (101). This means that while God is love, he also has control over everything, including evil and suffering. It is stated numerous times in the Quran that God is in control of everything to emphasize this idea (Bowker, 101). Since God is in control of suffering, it is believed that there is a reason for it. As XX, a Muslim student at Drake, stated, “We believe that it is all in God’s hands; that he has a reason for the suffering. It is a test to see how we will use our religion and our faith to respond properly.” The idea of suffering being redefined as a test is echoed in Bowker’s work. He writes, “that suffering is a trial or test,” (Bowker, 109).

This is a religious response to suffering in that the religion gives an alternative way to view suffering, which relieves some of the pain while suffering. Redefining suffering as a test and assuring the followers that “God has things under control” gives Muslims a sense of security and comfort. This is also a way to keep followers of Islam close to their religion and God while going through difficult times in life. Like Nikky Singh’s re-memorization of the Khalsa and the Wounded Knee Memorial Rides’ re-inscription of the land, redefining suffering as a test is a way to reinterpret and respond to suffering through religion.

More modern forms of reinterpretation within religions are visible as well, especially in Judaism. The Holocaust was an unbelievable, devastating event that cost the lives of millions of Jewish people, all targeted because of their religious beliefs. This traumatic event that was

carried out against “God’s people” caused many Jewish people to reassess their religion. This is evident in Katz’s work as he examines multiple forms of explanations for the Holocaust, all of which can be seen as an attempt to reinterpret the Jewish religion to “fit” with current events.

In Katz’s book, the answers and explanations of the Holocaust come in a variety of forms, from keeping the answers grounded in the Bible to attempting to almost recreate the understanding of God. The first explanation has to do with the binding of Isaac. Just as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son to show his love and devotion to God, so to were the Jewish people asked to lay down their lives as a sign of unwavering faith in God. Katz writes, “Their deaths are not due to sin or to any imperfection on their part, nor are they the consequence of any violation of the covenant. Rather, they are the climactic evidence of the Jews’ unwavering devotion to the faith of their fathers,” (Katz 356). In another explanation, the idea is that the Jewish people are the “suffering servants” of the world. As God’s chosen people, the Jewish people must suffer with and for their God. The Holocaust is a way in which the Jewish people suffer with their God, and uphold their part of being God’s chosen people. Another, less Biblically grounded explanation is called “a redefinition of God.” In this understanding, God is no longer viewed as the “traditional God” we first saw him to be. As Katz explains,

“...Cohen would pose the contrary ‘dipolar’ thesis that ‘what is taken as God’s speech is really always man’s hearing, that God is not the strategist of our particularities or of our historical condition, but rather the mystery of our futurity, always our posse, never our acts.’ This means that, ‘if we begin to see God less as an interfeerer whose insertion is welcome... and more as the immensity whose reality is our prefiguration... we shall have won a sense of God...’” (Katz 363).

In this reinterpretation, the understanding of God and how He acts is reorganized and re-understood. These are only three of the twelve different explanations that Katz gives his readers.

The fact that there are so many different views on how Judaism’s beliefs are understood in light of the Holocaust is a testament to the idea that religions use reinterpretation. We are not

given one form of reinterpretation within one religion, but multiple reinterpretations and alternative understandings of the Holocaust. The fact that there are so many different approaches demonstrates the idea that there is no one single way to interpret religious texts, events and beliefs; if there were, we would only find one common way of understanding the Holocaust, and we most definitely do not see just one way of reinterpreting.

However, there is an important note to be made here that is very evident in Katz's explanation and evaluation of each of the Jewish responses (or understandings) to suffering within the Holocaust, and it is that there are correct and incorrect ways to reinterpret. There are certain interpretations that simply do not make sense with the core beliefs of the religion. This is where the "philosophy" part of philosophy of religion comes in to play; there are various ways to interpret and reinterpret new events, traditional writings and various other aspects of religions, but these interpretations and reinterpretations only work if they conform to the basic principles of a religion. In a sense, there are some interpretations and reinterpretations that are "more correct" than others.

This idea, that many religions may use reinterpretation as a religious response to suffering, is an interesting contrast to what Avalos argued in his book. Perhaps Avalos had it wrong, and reinterpretation is actually an important part of religions, as Katz noted in his discussion, and as we see it occur not only in Sikhism, Lakota traditions, Islam, and Judaism, but also through various interpretations of the Bible, and possibly other religions as well. It almost seems to be a necessary part of religions. Being flexible and able to be reinvented seems to aid religions, and keep them alive. With changing times and new insights, religions would have to be adaptable in order to be maintained. It also seems that each religion is able to change the meaning of suffering in order to make it almost justifiable or bearable. When suffering occurs, it

appears that most religions find some way to reinterpret it. Islam, Lakota traditions, Sikhism, and Judaism all used their religions to change how the suffering was perceived by their followers, from re-memorizing a story to re-inscribing the events in a certain land to redefining suffering as a test. This is very possibly a meaning of religions; they are methods to deal with suffering by giving new meaning and understandings to situations of suffering. This is something Berger notes in his description of the purpose of religions, as well. To Berger, religions are utilized to create order, and prevent chaos by giving meaning to events.

“To be sure, what the religious man is ‘careful’ about is above all the dangerous power inherent in the manifestations of the sacred themselves. But behind this danger is the other, much more horrible one, namely that one may lose all connection with the sacred and be swallowed up by chaos. All the nomic constructions, as we have seen, are designed to keep this terror at bay,” (Berger 2009:27).

By providing order as Berger puts it, religions are giving meaning to situations, and thus allowing the followers to have an understanding of the situations. When these meanings and understandings are challenged, a reinterpretation or new understanding may come out of the religion to alleviate the suffering.

The value in these religious responses to suffering is that they give hope; they are the bright spots at the end of the tunnel, whether one actually reaches the light or not. For the Lakota, it is a hope for the continuation of their culture, and for Sikh women, it is a hope for more inclusion and equality. For Islam, it is the hope that God is taking care of everyone, and for Judaism, the hope is that there is a reason behind the Holocaust even if that reason is unclear, or comes in various forms as it is and does now. This is also something Avalos is missing. Reinterpretation may not be the “most accurate” way to understand or explain a religion, but it none the less helps people through the hard times. Hope may mean more and be more beneficial to people than “the hard facts.” Why is it wrong to reinterpret things when the reinterpretation

has value in that it assists people and gives them a reason or purpose to keep moving forward?

Although, as noted above, there are “more correct” ways to reinterpret within religions based on their own sacred beliefs and truths.

A tentative truth that can be drawn from this is that many--most or maybe even all--religions have used reinterpretation at some point. In many ways, religions do give different meaning to many aspects of life, like suffering. Religions give a new perspective and thus a new understanding of situations by re-memorizing, re-inscribing and redefining all sorts of aspects of life. Even Berger, a sociologist, leaves room and gives an explanation for the reinterpretations religions have. He discusses how humans use religion to create their own social reality, give order to chaos, and supplement answers for the unanswerable. He writes, “However, additional legitimations are invariably necessary in any society,” (Berger 2009:30). Berger explains that socialization, the process of learning culture including religion, is not a perfect process, so societies and generations naturally make changes to their religions. There are also times when new events arise, and cause a need for the religion to reorganize and reinterpret. It is the chaotic and chance occurrences that create the need for new interpretations of our religions. In this manner, Berger creates an understanding of why religions need reinterpretation in order for the religion to continue on. In his class discussion, even Katz agreed, stating that reinterpretation was necessary for religions to continue on. Perhaps this is something that can be discovered by examining different religions developments throughout the years.

Just as suffering comes in various forms, so do the religious responses to it. For the Lakota people, suffering was alleviated by creating a new tradition and finding inspiration within the suffering. For Sikh women, suffering was removed through a new telling of a tradition and by becoming an important part of the story. For Islam, suffering is reinterpreted and redefined as

a test from Allah, and therefore no longer viewed as suffering typically is viewed. The three have very different origins of suffering, but the manner that the religions dealt with the suffering is somewhat similar. They all involve a reinterpretation or a different way of looking at the suffering to help ease the pain suffering causes. By examining these similarities, some of the possible meanings, truths and values of religions become visible. Religions do not have all of the answers or even the “right” answers, but through reinterpretations, religions give us a new perspective and understanding of the world, which can be just as beneficial as the “right” answers.

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