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Philosophy of Religion

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Final Essay: Prompt #2

The frequency with which religious practices possess a textual foundation means that reading, examining, and interpreting texts is paramount within religious studies. This is especially true in the case of normative rules and metaphysical claims postulated by religious texts. By drawing upon several diverse accounts of religious responses to suffering, I will first contend that the creation and interpretation of religious texts in regards to supporting or proscribing human behavior betrays the power of social contingencies in shaping religious truths. I will also contend that the inception and development of religious ideas on the order of the universe likewise betray the power of social and historical contingencies in determining religion. As a result, I will conclude that no religion can claim to possess authentic, absolute truth.

The “Golden Rule” provides us a perfect example of the role of social contingencies in determining behavior and, by extension, how we understand texts. “Do unto others as you have them do unto you” – or some other variation – provides no context or standards for social behavior. It would be a mistake to say that the Golden Rule *necessitates* a certain behavior. Rather, applying the Golden Rule to a given set of social contingencies results in the perceived necessity of a certain behavior. For example, it is quite possible that the Golden Rule could be used to both defend and denounce human sacrifice. If a population believes that tossing a virgin into an active volcano is the only way to propitiate their volcano deity, then it is quite conceivable that both the person being tossed and the person doing the tossing would accept a role reversal, for the need to satisfy their deity’s wrath supersedes all things. Likewise, a society

in which there is no volcano deity could employ the Golden Rule to denounce such behavior on the grounds that nobody actually wants to be tossed into a volcano.

The role of social contexts in determining the outcome of the Golden Rule can also be seen in how people perceive the use of the Golden Rule in texts. Avalos remarks that the Golden Rule is mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew (96). The abolitionist may wish to argue against slavery by quoting the New Testament's use of the Golden Rule, but this would be mistakenly using the Bible to explain the abolitionist's application of the Golden Rule to their own social existence. The appearance of the Golden Rule in Biblical texts does not mean that the ethical principles produced by the Golden Rule in relation to one's unique social context are somehow grounded in Biblical texts. Its presence merely means that any given population has the Golden Rule at their disposal to justify a wide range of – and often contradictory – behaviors. The takeaway point here, however, is that the reading of a text often results in the reader transplanting their socially conditioned beliefs into the text.

Avalos notes that British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson – hailed by Ralph Waldo Emerson as the founder of abolitionism (242) – employed the Biblical Golden Rule as part of his argument against slavery (244). However, Avalos also notes that Clarkson's abolitionist arguments were more often humanitarian than Biblical (245). Still, Clarkson wrote “[slavery] is contrary to reason, justice, nature, the principles of law and government, the whole doctrine, in short, of natural religion, and the revealed voice of God” (245). The humanitarian appeal is still grounded in religious terms. Indeed, the socially constructed principles of reason, justice, and law specific to Clarkson's social world are allegedly “revealed” by the Christian deity. Thus, Clarkson's preference for humanitarianism as a means to address the suffering of slavery still betrays his commitment to explain contingent social phenomena in metaphysical terms.

The twofold function of religious texts, then, is for the reader to either inject his/her socially contingent beliefs into the text or to use the text as an explanation of his/her socially contingent beliefs. The former is the fictionalization of fiction, while the latter is the fictionalization of contemporary social reality. Given this understanding of religious texts, it is not surprising that unchanging texts have inspired radically divergent claims of moral support and divergent explanations for social phenomena throughout history.

A strikingly relevant example of this can be seen between contemporary scholars Stephen Haynes and Richard Hove, who both strongly diverge on the meaning of Galatians 3: 24-28 as it relates to the abolition of slavery. Verse 28– “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” – is read by Haynes to mean that slavery is incompatible with Christianity, while it is read by Hove to mean that true followers of Christ relegate their other social identities behind their Christian identity (108-9). The stark difference between these interpretations – one of abolitionism and one of identity crisis – demonstrate that minor differences in interpretation can have profound differences in textually-justified behavior.

What can we say, then, about the authorial intent of the text? Clarkson argued that the lack of condemnation for slavery in the New Testament can be explained by the need for self-preservation by early Christians. As his argument goes, condemning such a prevalent institution or – even worse – calling for slaves to break their shackles would have caused widespread social disruption (244). But what makes this interpretation more valid than others? As we all agree that slavery was a normalized social institution at the time of historical Jesus, would it not be simpler to argue that authors of the New Testament believed slavery to be as normal as the non-Christians surrounding them? The argument that fear of social disruption necessitated an

obfuscation of the true social agenda behind Christianity is rendered unnecessarily complicated when a simpler explanation – one of normal socialization – presents itself. Still, the fear of injecting contemporary social norms into the text is always present. We need not take a stance on the original meaning of the text, however, if we acknowledge the possibility that modern Biblical scholarship is – as Avalos argues – woefully ignorant in determining the original intent of the author (30). The debate over Galatians 3: 24-28 is further complicated, if not rendered meaningless, when we appreciate the near impossibility of accessing the subjective mind of the author.

Within the Sikh religious tradition, authors such as Nikky Singh offer a counterintuitive position on the problematic nature of textual interpretation. Much of the literature that informs Sikh tradition is poetic in nature, literature that “[is] geared more toward expressing the sentiments and convictions of their contemporaries than providing us with historically accurate details” (Singh, xv-xvi). Singh embraces the limited historical value of religious texts and concerns herself with “the responses, beliefs, and attitudes of the people to the basic event, which is deeply etched in Sikh minds and hearts” in her attempt to change the Sikh traditions to empower equality amongst the sexes (xvi). This textual scholarship not only begins with the assumption that the meaning of texts is arbitrary, but that we should utilize the texts in order to further contemporary social agenda.

It is possible that Biblical abolitionists – and their problematic readings of the Bible – would find themselves in good company with Singh’s approach to the Sikh texts. Avalos notes that reinterpretation, even in the face of complete contradiction with authorial intent, has been favorably argued by Biblical scholars. He writes: “[Jon] Levenson clearly wants to establish the legitimacy . . . wherein readers, especially in the form of faith communities, can generate a sense

that was not intended by the original author . . . even when it might contradict what an original author meant” (Avalos, 31). If we take Levenson and Singh seriously, then part of the function of religious texts and religious traditions is to provide answers to future, unforeseeable problems through the act of reinterpretation.

The collection of stories, memories, rituals, ideas, and beliefs that form social traditions are quite ubiquitous in any given population. Their function as a means to address suffering and other social dilemmas is also readily apparent. The similarity between Singh and Levenson (and others like them) is that they treat religion and religious texts as part of a larger religious “tradition.” Religious practice is thus immediately reduced to part of the social tradition, one of many facets within a population. How can a religion claim absolute truth or a text claim sacral permanence when its actual function is to have meaning arbitrarily derived by its different readers throughout time? While it is understandable that religious texts function this way, it is difficult to reconcile this function if the religion posits absolute claims about the nature of humanity and the universe. It is exceptionally disquieting to know that while Biblical abolitionists unintentionally approached religious texts in such a way, Singh consciously and intentionally embraces this watered down method of studying religion for the purpose of achieving social goals.

Again, it is perfectly understandable that participants in a given society wish to reinvent the meaning of their society’s traditions in order to enact change. The problem lies with taking this same approach to religious texts, for such an endeavor willfully makes religion malleable rather than static. But if the malleability of religion and religious texts is ubiquitous throughout history, does religion even has the possibility of achieving any absolute qualities? At this point, Singh and Levenson are not villains for wishing to manipulate religious traditions; rather, they

are the most recent crop of scholars that have finally matured to the realization that religion is inherently subject to social forces. Even if the primary intent of a religious tradition is not to provide the means for future adherents to address their suffering, the inevitability of this process prevents the religion from claiming absolute truth values.

The construction of a metaphysical, philosophical, and/or theological worldview must make some presumption about the truth quality of its claims. For worldviews dictated by a text, the inevitable power of social contingencies in determining the meaning of that text means that the worldview is constructed on rotten foundations. Indeed, if we extrapolate the power of social contingencies to the very inception of a religious tradition, then how can any religion claim that its beginnings were pure?

Even if we imagine a world where an intelligent, supernatural being provided true insight into the nature of reality to a human population through textual means, such a text would still be subject to the power of social contingencies. Some might argue that such a supernatural being would be intelligent enough to create the text (or command its transcription) in a way that would prevent this from happening. Even if this was possible, the fact that no textually constructed religion has been able to preempt the work of social contingencies means that no intelligent, supernatural being has revealed the truth to its people without this safeguard in place. Either all of the textually-based religions lack inherent truth value, or the supernatural being that caused the creation of a religious text lacked the intelligence and foresight to work around the inevitable forces of social construction.

Thus, we have been able to establish several important revelations on the nature of religious practice and religious texts. The transplantation of contemporary social norms into texts and the justification of current social norms through texts are natural and explainable social

phenomenon. Irreconcilable problems arise, however, when one considers that such forces contradict the sacral and absolute claims posited by those texts. Thus, the continued existence of religious traditions – insofar as they have adapted to changing social conditions – is proof that they are devoid of any sacred or absolute qualities.

Debates over the religious authorization or condemnation of contingent social behavior are regular occurrences because social behavior is – by definition – constantly evolving due to changing circumstances. Thus, religious claims regarding behavior are immediately subject to contestation by diverse readings the text. What of the broader, more substantial claims posited by religions? Are there not some assertions made by religions that transcend social construction? If Christian readings of slavery already produce a wide body of criticism regarding the truth-value of religion, how do the foundational claims of religions – such as the existence and definitions of a deity – fit into this criticism?

Regardless of the origins of religious claims about the universe, there will be times when these foundational claims come into contestation by virtue of the unfolding of history. For example, our previous hypothetical population that practiced human sacrifice as a means to propitiate a volcano deity not only provides us a means to criticize the notion of absolute ethics, but it also provides a working example of a religious claim on the workings of the universe. The behavior of that population is framed by the position that volcanic activity is subject to human propitiation. What happens when the volcano erupts regardless of the sacrifices performed by that population? Will the shaman be tossed into the volcano for lying? Or will the shaman criticize the population for its lack of faith and the need for more sincerely devoted sacrificial victims?

In either case, we can see that the evolution of religious thought is not only subject to reinterpretation due to changing social norms, but also to self-reevaluation due to the fundamental contradictions between religious claims about the world and the actual workings of the world. A sobering example of this problem for religious truth-value can be found in the real-world example reconciling Jewish theology with the Holocaust. While our examination thus far has investigated the relationship between contingent social norms and the religious sanction of social behavior, I will further contend that the broader metaphysical claims of religious traditions are still bound to real physical and social phenomena.

Our earlier examination of the social production of religious texts remains relevant here. If the content of religious texts that sanctions and condemns social behavior is subject to the norms governing the author, why should the content of texts that posits claims about universe be immune from the same criticism? It is certainly less self-evident that metaphysical positions are tied to social reality than behavioral positions. Metaphysics and theology, however, are still part of the realm of human thought and are thus subject to broader conditions that produce such modes of thinking.

Sociologist Peter Berger provides insight into this process that will help illustrate the broader point: “There is good reason for thinking that the production of non-material culture has always gone hand in hand with man’s activity of physically modifying his environment . . . Society is constituted and maintained by acting human beings. It has no being, no reality, apart from this activity” (6-7). Like Berger, I favor an explanation of the physical and mental world of human populations to be a dialectical process between humanity and the natural world. Although Berger concedes greater agency to human thought as a self-legitimizing actor in the world than I do, the principle of thought being bound to material circumstances still provides insight into the

origin of religious claims regarding the structure of the universe. From the outset, the authoring of a religious text (or the formation of any religious notion) is grounded in humanity's interaction with the material world. For example, our hypothetical population that practices human sacrifice to its volcano deity would not hold such beliefs if they did not physically inhabit space near an active volcano.

For the sake of argument, let us consider the possibility that the origin of religious notions regarding the universe were authentic (i.e., not tied to humanity's relationship to the material world). Imagine, for example, that the foundational prophets of Judaism did, in fact, spread divinely revealed truths about the universe. This requires a substantial leap of faith (irony certainly intended), for it necessitates the acceptance of a cosmic intelligence that produced the entire universe and elected for a bronze-age nomadic population on planet Earth to be its chosen recipient of the Truth.

For the traditional practitioner of Judaism, these metaphysical claims are part and parcel of his/her approach to the universe. Like the religious sanction of social behavior, the metaphysical claims of any given religion intrinsically presume a status of absolute truth. As history unfolds, how do these absolute truths hold up? If the metaphysics of a religion were authentic in their origin and their explanation of the universe, we would not expect to find difficulties or contradictions in history. The Holocaust, however, has provoked a torrent of explanations, justifications, and existential crises for the Jewish people; how could a loving God allow the supposedly chosen people to suffer in the death camps when he has – according to the Bible – intervened to prevent suffering?

Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovitz argued that the Holocaust is not a phenomenologically unique experience for the Jewish people, for the absence of God is part of

God's nature (467). For Berkovitz, the absolutely good nature of God means that God is unable to pursue good, for he is good (469). Similarly, free will and the ability to choose good or evil are intrinsic aspects of human nature that God cannot violate, for to do so would render us no longer human (469). God's absence, his *hester panin* (hiding of the face), does not occur because "God's self-hiding is not a reaction to human behavior," but because his absence is the only way that allows for humanity to achieve goodness.

Interestingly, Berkovitz embraces the notion that history flagrantly violates the Jewish notion that God loves and cares for his followers. He writes: "[E]ven though the Jewish people were fully aware of the conflict between history and teaching . . . they organized their own existence in history on the proposition that 'the Eternal is nigh unto all of them that call Him, to all the call upon Him in truth' " (466-7). His explanation of this thought process is that Jewish theology is built upon the promise that God is the redeemer, and that his goodness – if not yet present – will become present in the world at some point in the future.

We can see, then, that some religions – like Judaism – are cognizant of the contradictions between what the religion claims will be and what actually happens in the world. There is something suspicious, however, that the theology of Judaism includes the proviso that God's love of the Jewish people (and of his creation) are a promise of benevolence *in the future* rather than *in the present*. It is almost as if the authors of Jewish texts and later interpretations of those texts consciously realized that the existence of suffering in the present would nullify the possibility of an all-powerful and loving God unless that God was written in such a way as to avoid the problem of evil. If this is the case, then mankind creates authors God in response to the presence of suffering. Even if it were true that God authentically existed and behaved in this

way, it would still mean that God's existence is defined by the relationship of non-interaction with the world. Berkovitz' God is still tied to the world with the promise of future interaction.

Though Berkovitz is hardly exhaustive of the Jewish theological responses to the Holocaust, his perspective offers a framework of *theological* thinking that is shared throughout the school of theology. Namely, certain things in the world – such as a people or an historical event – have a particular “essence” to them that helps define mankind's relationship with the divine. Theologian Arthur Cohen, for example, uses the word “caesura” to describe distinct and definitive moments in Jewish history – such as the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem or the Holocaust – that called for a reexamination of Jewish identity and an appropriate behavioral response for the continuance of Judaism (567).

It is one thing to acknowledge that particular historical events have a powerful meaning to individuals or groups. It is another to explain this collective feeling as a metaphysical or mystical experience that defines a cosmic relationship. The unfolding of history is the summation of definite and explainable phenomena, but the invocation of metaphysics or theology to explain history invites a host of problems. First, what is this “essence” to events or to people that theologians speak of? Secondly, how can we parse between what is divinely accorded and what is mundane in the progress of history? If we take the power of social norms into consideration as we did in our earlier analysis, it seems more likely to me that the reading of God (or any religion notion) into history says more about the reader than it does the actual history.

Theologian Richard Rubenstein offers a strongly divergent account of the Holocaust that takes these problems seriously. He writes:

Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama . . . The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job. To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a

meaningful expression of God's purposes. The idea is imply too obscene for me to accept (415-6).

This conclusion provides the rare acknowledgement that the occurrence of human suffering is something that metaphysics has no business addressing. The fact that religious thought evolves in response to significant moments of suffering strongly suggests that the true nature of religion is beholden the real movements of history. Religious responses to suffering lack the pretense of authenticity because they are – by definition – trying to fit the real phenomena of the world into the preconceived “box” that the religion offers from the beginning.

Recall that the problem with religious sanctions and proscriptions of social behavior are intrinsically flawed because the authorship of such rules is necessarily tied to the contingent social norms governing the author. Likewise, the reading and application of textually based rules regarding behavior underscore the lack of truth for religion because such readings and interpretations are also defined by the norms that govern the reader. In a parallel fashion, the position of religious metaphysical claims is intrinsically flawed at the outset due to the constraints of material life in determining the mode of thought for the author. Likewise, the continual reaction of religious thinking to actual events in the world reveals the inability of religion to proclaim a worldview that is not in some way contradicted by the actual development of history. As such, we can conclude that the content of religious claims has no bearing on its ability to reveal the lack of truth-value for religion, for the original promulgation and the later application of a behavioral or metaphysical worldview necessarily betrays the power of contingent social norms and historical events in shaping religious thought.

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