

POSTMODERN RELIGION IN AMERICA AND NOTHINGNESS

EXISTENTIALISM ON THE “SPIRITUAL, BUT NOT RELIGIOUS”

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Advised by Prof. Farhang Erfani

University Honors in Philosophy

May 6, 2009

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We have grown up on this planet, trapped, in a certain sense, on it, not knowing of the existence of anything else beyond our immediate surroundings, having to figure the world out for ourselves. What a courageous and difficult enterprise, building, generation after generation, on what has been learned in the past; questioning the conventional wisdom; being willing, sometimes at great personal risk, to challenge the prevailing wisdom and gradually, slowly emerging from this torment, a well-based, in many senses predicative, quantitative, understanding of the nature of the world around us. Not, by any means, understanding every aspect of that world but gradually, through successive approximations, understanding more and more. We face a difficult and uncertain future, and it seems to me it requires all of those talents that have been honed by our evolution and our history, if we are to survive.

~ Carl Sagan¹

INTRODUCTION

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville lays out what he sees as the theoretical relationship between religion and a secular democracy and then goes on to make a number of predictions about the path on which religion in America is going to evolve. He claims that in an enlightened and secular democracy dogmatic ideas such as the ones present in institutional religion are unable to survive. The equality that necessarily exists between men in genuine democracies serves as a death knell for dogmatism because if all men are equal, it is impossible for one individual or for a group of individuals to tell others what is the right way to practice religion, or even, what religion and spirituality are. Each individual is given the right to define these terms for themselves.

¹ Sagan, Carl. *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search for God*. Edited by Ann Druyan. New York: Penguin, 2006. 218-219.

According to Tocqueville, because individuals are able to define religion and spirituality on their own, religion will slowly retreat out of the public sphere and lose many of its external characteristics. This must happen because if religion insists on retaining its dogmatic characteristics, it will not survive. Tocqueville writes,

In times of enlightenment and equality, the human mind consents to receive dogmatic beliefs only with difficulty and feels the need of them keenly only in the case of religions.... religions ought to keep themselves discreetly within the bounds that are proper to them and not seek to leave them, for in wishing to extend their power further than religious matters, they risk no longer being believed in any matter.²

This prediction raises a number of red flags for believers in religion, however. For dogmatic religions the manner in which their faith is practiced is not negotiable. Sacraments, cultural traditions, and other practices have been around for centuries and are just as important to their religion as faith itself. Additionally, the practices of religions are not something that are allowed to be affected by something like democracy. From the institutional religious perspective, religion is what affects things like democracy, not the other way around. There are many essential parts of religion that cannot be sacrificed.

Tocqueville understands these worries, but nonetheless sees the coming situation as inevitable. He predicts a gloomy picture for organized religion saying

I do not imagine that it is possible to maintain a religion without external practices; but on the other hand, I think that in the centuries we are entering, it would be particularly dangerous to multiply them beyond measure; that one must rather restrict them, and that one ought to retain only what is absolutely necessary for the perpetuation of the dogma itself, which is the substance of religions, whereas worship is the only form.³

With spirituality as the only remnant of institutional religion surviving and public practice being thrown out the window, Tocqueville saw individualism as a threatening force looming on the

² Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Edited by Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. 419.

³ Ibid. 421-422.

horizon. Institutional religion was, as Tocqueville referred to it, the most important political institution the Americans had.

In 1985 a group of theologians and sociologists, led by Robert Bellah, investigated the worries about individualization that Tocqueville had expressed in *Democracy in America*. Their results were alarming and indicated that Tocqueville was largely correct, particularly about the relationship between religion and individualization. Many of the Americans that they interviewed no longer felt attached to any form of organized religion, though they still felt spiritual. They famously coined the term “Sheilaism” after a woman said that was what her religion was, naming it after herself, since she was the only person it was important for and did not need anyone else to be meaningful.⁴ Though this is an extreme case, it is not an outlier. The worrisome part about their survey was that they found this individualism was causing the culture of American community to be breaking down. Individuals, because all of their spiritual needs were taken care of individually, were giving up being part of the communities they used to depend on. They also saw this individualistic perspective as causing a lack of concern for the community they used to be part of and thus causing it to deteriorate. The authors cite Tocqueville specifically in this regard writing, “The ‘main business’ of religion, Tocqueville said, ‘Is to purify, control, and restrain that excessive and exclusive taste for well-being’ so common among Americans.”⁵

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* saw these new individualistic notions as so destructive that they were compelled to say individual commitment in America needed to be entirely rethought:

⁴ Bellah, Robert N. and Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart*. 2008 ed. Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 2008. 235.

⁵ Ibid. 223.

The notion of a transition to a new level of social integration, a newly vital social ecology, may also be resisted as absurdly utopian, as a project to create a perfect society. But the transformation of which we speak is both necessary and modest. Without it, indeed, there may be very little future to think of at all.⁶

Since *Habits of the Heart*, it doesn't seem that any sort of social change has been made. In fact, it seems that Americans are only becoming more individualistic, especially in regards to religion. In the spring of 2008 The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released their Religious Landscape survey. This survey revealed a number of different aspects of religious life that revealed data that showed individualism on the rise.

Specifically in regard to religious identification, the statistics revealed that 25% of Americans are not affiliated with a religion, while only 4% identify as atheist or agnostic.⁷ This leaves roughly 1 out of every 5 Americans claiming to believe in some form of metaphysical spirituality or faith, but not the kind that organized religion represents. This group of people is an extremely fast growing group. The Pew Survey states that, "People moving into the unaffiliated category outnumber those moving out of the unaffiliated group by more than a three-to-one margin."⁸ What I want to do in this paper is to investigate what exactly does such a large group of individuals who believe spirituality and faith, but not religion, mean for American culture? As *Habits of the Heart* claimed, nothing good.

The idea of moving beyond traditional religion is not a new idea in theology or philosophy, as it was in Tocqueville's time. Some Christian thinkers have spearheaded a postmodern religious movement and advocated moving beyond the confines of ordinary religion and towards ideas of the "God above God" or "religion without religion." In these arguments aspects of life such as community, morality, and hope are said to be strengthened as the old,

⁶ Ibid. 286.

⁷ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey", February 2008. 5.

⁸ Ibid. 10.

unhealthy barriers of religion are broken down. These arguments, however, struggle in establishing a tenable ontology. With the dismissal of a figure like the God of the Old Testament and replacing him with little more than the ideas of fate, destiny, or nature, the foundation for things like community, morality, and hope crumbles, as Tocqueville predicted.

Ultimately, I want to argue that the 20% of Americans who are “spiritual, but not religious” need to take notice of the 4% of Americans who have shed all of the remnants of religion and are only recently developing ontologies and humanisms which support a new way forward for developing community, morality and hope. Both the “spiritual, but not religious” and the existentialists, the two modes of thought that I will discuss in this paper, are largely individualistic theories. A theory cannot stop at the individual however, as I will argue the “spiritual, but not religious” have and existentialism has not. If there are to be such things as morality and hope the individual must be shown through community why avoiding narcissism and egocentrism is beneficial not only to the communities around them, but also to themselves. If progress is to be had in any arena, the community must be provided for. In a world with no fixed essences and no fixed meanings, an existentialist notion I will explain later, the community is the only thing an individual has for support and must be strengthened if we all are to grow and to create a future we want to be part of.

The “spiritual, but not religious” have taken it upon themselves to break away from the universal dogmas that are necessarily present in every organized religion, but for some reason or another, they cannot seem to shake the ideas which stem from religion; ideas such as destiny, fate, prayer, and that they live in a universe that is looking out for them in such a way that it will make sure everything turns out “ok.” In order to have a truly coherent set of beliefs that encourage an authentic approach to the world where one can contribute to genuine social and

political progress they need to go one step further. God died almost two centuries ago and, for those who have acknowledged this, as I will argue the “spiritual, but not religious” have, it is time for many of the ideas that went along with God to die as well, rather than redistributing them abstractly out into the universe.

In order to do this I want to make use of the philosophy of existential phenomenology. Existentialism has historically ignored the postmodern movement, yet it holds the very tools to show why Tocqueville’s worries were warranted and how to avoid the destruction of the future of American community. The thinkers that I will use to make this claim are Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Ronald Aronson. Before doing this, however, I will elaborate more fully on what exactly postmodern religion is and why it is a destructive force. To do this I will highlight the radio personality Krista Tippett and the philosopher/theologian John D. Caupito.

TIPPETT

Krista Tippett is a radio show host whose program on NPR is ever increasing in popularity. Tippett’s radio show and recent book are both entitled “Speaking of Faith” and in both of these projects she seeks to show why religion is an important topic and how to discuss it in a constructive manner. Part of why she feels that religion is an important topic to talk about is because she maintains that existential questions are not only inescapable and that every human being has to answer them, but that faith is necessary for their answers. Answering these questions, according to Tippett, is necessarily a transcendental endeavor. She writes that secular theories, without a spiritual aspect,

don’t begin to tell us how to order our astonishments, what matters in a life, what matters in a death, how to love, how we can be of service to each other. These are the kinds of questions religion arose to address and religious traditions are keepers of conversations cross generations

about them.... And nothing could be more unrealistic—or more dangerous—than the prescription that reasonable people should abandon religion.⁹

Tippett's approach to answering these questions, aside from eliminating atheistic theories¹⁰, is very broad and open. She argues that no religion owns the answers to these questions and advocates against one universal truth. What she wants is great communication to take place between the faiths of the world so that they may learn from one another. Through this greater understanding she believes that a path towards peace and understanding will be created.

Tippett writes, "There is a profound difference between hearing someone say this is *the* truth, and hearing someone say this is *my* truth."¹¹ She continues on saying:

From [narrative theology] I inherited the notion that everyone has relevant observations to make about the nature of God and ultimate things—that the raw material of our lives is stuff of which we construct our sensibility of meaning and purpose in this life, of how the divine intersects or interacts with our lives, of what it means to be human.¹²

With this inclusive approach, Tippett attempts to prevent any of the dogmas that are present in organized religion from entering into the realm of what she views as proper faith. She reminds individuals that what we can be certain of is not institutional religion, which will never have facts to support itself, but rather that we can only be certain that we have faith. Through dialogue, Tippett hopes that the faith of individuals will evolve to become more encompassing as they become more aware of the way lives are lived in other cultures and the way that faith affects other peoples lives. Everyone has life experiences that have shaped the way we view the

⁹ Tippett, Krista. *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters--and How to Talk About It*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007. 9.

¹⁰ Tippett, Krista. "Beyond the Atheism-Religion Divide." From *Speaking of Faith*, edited by Krista Tippett, 10/18/07. United States: American Public Media, 2007. During this episode of her weekly show, Tippett says that the reason that she won't have any representatives of the "New Atheists" (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens) on her show is because they feel as though they have the answers, that they *know*, and that she is not interested in talking to anyone who *knows* anything about the spiritual experience.

¹¹ *Speaking of Faith*. 127.

¹² *Ibid*. 127

structure of the universe and have faith in it, and sharing these experiences can only be to the benefit of everyone's faith.

But what is it that Tippet is saying that all adequate approaches to the word, all of those who are "spiritual, but not religious" have faith in? For Tippet it is that goodness will prevail and that our lives are part of some greater picture that ensures that goodness. Spirituality is an idea of solitude and destiny that allows one to cope with an imperfect world. She writes, "if I've learned anything [in my study of religion], it is that goodness prevails not in the *absence* of reason to despair, but *in spite* of them.... The spiritual geniuses of the ages and of the everyday don't let despair have the last word"¹³ and that if there is anything to be spiritual about in the world "it is happening in the thick of reality, not replacing the world we know, not banishing death, but defying its terror as the last world."¹⁴

It is clear at this point how far removed Tippet is from the dogmatism of orthodox religion. Tippet's approach clearly shows that she has accepted the death of a figure like the God of the Old Testament, but retained the ideas that went along with it. It is no longer Yahweh that is looking out for the chosen people, but the cosmos ensuring a teleos for all human beings. The idea of religion has become so abstract that it really cannot be called religion anymore; it is rather just spirituality. Still, there is a metaphysical order which Tippet recognizes and even though there is no specific figure to worship, she argues that it still must be appreciated in one form or another. She advocates, in addition to conversing with people of other faiths, to look at religious tradition and see what answers that is able to provide. Even though Tippet is no longer religious in the traditional sense, she wants to look at what has been done in the past to appreciate spirituality. She lists sacred texts as a primary source of this tradition:

¹³ Ibid. 179.

¹⁴ Ibid. 108.

It is true of the entire Bible—and perhaps of any sacred text for its believers—that if you sit with these bare-bones stories, pick over them, retell them, they begin to grow—take on nuance and possibility—before your eyes. One layer of meaning is lifted and another reveals itself. You sense that the text would respond to every conceivable question. In other words, if I stick with these texts—if I wrestle with them and insist on a blessing—a blessing will come. The only limitation is my time, my powers of imagine concentration and my capacity to listen to the interpretation of others.¹⁵

She does not approach these texts as literal truth however, consistent with her view that there is not one universal truth. She approaches them more as a works of literature, asking questions of them such as what do these stories tell me about humanity and its relationship with the external world. This is why the communication between different faiths is important for Tippet. She is advocating for a kind of spiritual hermeneutics, which will allow for humanity as a whole to come up with some revolutionary ways to deal with the problems of the world we live in, as it is able to draw from the collective knowledge of religions it has produced.

One of Tippet's more articulated claims is that religions and spirituality, as they go through this process of hermeneutics and through time, will mature and they will leave behind violence, hatred, and bigotry; that give enough time and enough understanding, the problems associated with religion in the world will just go away.¹⁶ Tippet also advocates for the use and the importance of prayer. She says that there are “places of randomness, openings in fixed processes, that might have implications for something like prayer”¹⁷ and that having this spiritual notion of the world to which prayer applies is necessary to have a full understanding the problems of the world and to obtain the capabilities to solve them. She quotes the German

¹⁵ Ibid. 57.

¹⁶ Ibid. 140. Tippet uses the history of Islam as the example of this process. She views Islam as still a relatively young religion whose origin is in violence and is trying to find its way in the world. This process is necessarily violent, as Islam's religious “truth” has not yet been established. Too many different groups feel extremely strongly about different issues, strongly enough to kill over aspect that they consider to be essential to religion. She says this parallels Christianity in that hundreds of years ago (the Crusades) was violent as well, but is less so today, as it has matured.. She claims that, given time, Islam will on the whole leave extremism and violence behind as well.

¹⁷ Ibid. 79.

theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said we need “magical pictures”¹⁸ alongside modern technical processes and understanding if we are to become wise.

Underlying all of this is the notion that there is a cosmic purpose that humanity is part of and that without this cosmic purpose life would have no meaning; that there would be no incentive or basis for mankind to do any better.¹⁹ In other words, spirituality and prayer are the last hopes for mankind; there is no source outside of spirituality that could solve any of the problems the world faces. It is this notion that is the problem with Tippet’s spirituality and the structure of spiritual but not religious as a whole. Not only are prayer and spirituality not the last hope, they are a destructive influence on American culture as the “spiritual, but not religious” use them, which will hopefully become more clear.

CAPUTO

While Tippet’s approach certainly represents the “spiritual, but not religious” well as a popular movement, it is not an academically rigorous approach, which is part of its appeal to the listeners of her show and part of the reason why the position needs to be criticized. Tippet’s study certainly does not exhaust the position of the “spiritual, but not religious” entirely, however. Philosophers and theologians have developed a theory of postmodern religion (what they would call “spiritual, but not religious”) that more appropriately outlines the approach I am so concerned about. The contemporary philosopher John D. Caputo has spearheaded this movement.

Initially, Caputo argues for a conception of spirituality that is much like Tippet’s. He also argues for religion to abandon claiming that they have a monopoly on truth, saying “Unlike

¹⁸ Ibid. 59.

¹⁹ Ibid. 198.

a scientific theory, there is not a reason on earth (or in heaven) why many different religious narratives cannot *all* be true”²⁰ and that to embrace a true return to an honest spirituality called religion is to embrace a return to “virtue, not a body with an institutional headquarters in Nashville or the Vatican, so that true religion [means] the virtue of being genuinely or truly religious, of genuinely or truly loving God, not The One True Religion, Ours-versus-yours.”²¹

In order to back up this claim, Caputo attempts to establish an ontology that makes this return to virtue necessary. Caputo argues that the postmodern religious approach is fundamentally anti-essentialist. Anti-essentialist in this sense meaning that without the dogmatic structure of orthodox religion guiding one’s views, spirituality can be manifested in any space one finds it. This is why Caputo calls what he is doing *radical*. Caputo sees religion as a whole, and Christianity in particular, as created after the fact. For example, it was hundreds of years after Christ’s death that Christianity was officially organized. Stemming from this, doctrine can never claim to be absolute. At most it can be best guess. Caputo sees what he calls “Devilish Hermeneutics,”²² the constant questioning of religion, its history, its past, and its future, as the only legitimate way to approach spirituality and religion, accepting that no one will ever be right. To interpret doctrine as if certain parts of it were absolute and unable to be questions is what he calls “Holy Hermeneutics.”²³ Devilish hermeneutics is a personal process where one has to raise their own questions. One no longer needs or should be provided with an institution, such as the Catholic Church, to interpret sacredness such as deities and practices. In this way, Caputo

²⁰ Caputo, John D. *On Religion*. Edited by Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney, Thinking in Action. New York, NY: Routledge, 2001. 110

²¹ Ibid. 112.

²² Caputo, John D. *More Radical Hermeneutics*. Edited by John Sallis, Studies in Continental Thought. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. 187.

²³ Ibid. 187.

changes the spiritual question. It is no longer the question of does God exist and how do I worship that God, but in the vein of St. Augustine, “what do I love when I love my God?”²⁴

This again changes what exactly one is worshiping and what worship actually is. It changes differently than in Tippet, however. Whereas Tippet simply transfers the worship from God out to the cosmos, Caputo argues that spirituality is whatever one loves and devotes themselves to. Caputo also is much more honest about the authenticity of orthodox religion. As opposed to Tippet, who would only through tears admit that the God of the Abrahamic faiths is actually dead and thus is why she talks about spirituality the way she does, Caputo embraces that God has died and talks about what to do with spirituality after the fact. Caputo says that in modernity:

God is brought before the court, like a defendant with his hat in his hand, and required to give an account of himself, to show His ontological papers, if He expects to win the court’s approval. In such a world, from Anselm’s point of view, God is already dead, even if you conclude that the proof is valid, because whatever you think you have proven or disproven is not the God he experiences in prayer and liturgy but a philosophical idol.²⁵

Caputo’s God is very different from Anselm’s. It cannot be an idol because an idol would necessarily be an essentialist figure. God is no longer this set figure, but a question and the response to that question. Caputo elaborates on this point:

God is a question, not an answer, the most radical thought we can entertain, that exposes the questionability of all the other answers we think we have, exposing the fragility of the raft, the revisability of the determinate structures within which the various religions conduct their business, forcing them to ask themselves again and again, “what do I love when I love my God?”²⁶

This is not a question that organized religion can answer for individuals. Christianity can say that the son of God as saved us through his death and all that is needed from Christians is repentance, Judaism can lay down 613 rules for an adherent to follow if they truly love God, and Islam can demand that those who submit to Allah follow five specific pillars, but all of this

²⁴ *On Religion*. 117.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 46.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 117.

comes in the form of an absolute truth that only provides answers which human beings are necessarily estranged from, which is why God died in the first place. Postmodern religion wants to leave this behind and simply try to figure out what one loves in the name of God. Caputo further clarifies that “we should distinguish the rational element in religion, which is its universal ethical content, from the superstitions, supernatural dogmas, and cultic practices which vary from one religion to another.”²⁷ In other words, postmodern religion is the idea that however we act towards our fellow human beings because of the awe we feel at the universe is religious ethics and when we follow those ethics we are loving God.

At this point, Caputo’s argument could take strides toward being a secular theory where one calls whatever meaning they give their lives “God” and the only criticism atheism would have with it is semantics and how to direct one’s “God” in a society where one is surrounded by other individuals with “Gods” of their own. With the clear acceptance of God’s death, the answer one gives to the question “What do I love when I love my God?” could be said to be the same exact thing as the answer a humanist gives when he asks “What about humanity causes me to act the way I do?” This is not where Caputo’s theory goes however. Instead, he takes a decidedly spiritual path, a path that no humanist theory, by definition, can take.

This spiritual path is one that insists the transcendence of one’s self and of what one experiences. This is why Caputo needs the spirituality of postmodern religion and not just philosophy. He writes, “I have not given up on philosophy, but I take philosophy to be a phenomenological, not a metaphysical or speculative enterprise, that is, I steer its nose close to the earth of concrete description.”²⁸ Postmodern religion, God as a human action and not a being, serves another purpose: “The name of God is the name of the impossible, and the love of

²⁷ Ibid. 48.

²⁸ Ibid. 57.

God transports us beyond ourselves and the constraints imposed upon the world by what the *Aufklärer* called “reason” and Kant called the conditions of possibility, transporting us toward the impossible.”²⁹

As Caputo’s God allows for the transcendence of one’s position towards the impossible it can never be compared to the driving force behind a humanist. The God of Caputo has many of the characteristics of Tippet’s God as a cosmic force ensuring goodness as long as one believes in that goodness and he uses suffering to illustrate this point, as so many others do in the debate between spirituality and secularism. Caputo writes, “If anyone is indeed ‘privileged’ by God, it is the underprivileged, because with God the last are first. The name of God is the name of the One who takes a stand with those who suffer, who expresses a divine solidarity with suffering, the One who says *no* to suffering, to unjust or unwarranted suffering.”³⁰

The problem that Caputo has at this point, and one that I will dwell on more when I will analyze Caputo’s reading of Nietzsche, is that there is no way to connect the answer to “What do I love when I love my God?” to the section I have just quoted above. Even if one responds to Caputo’s question with “I love helping the underprivileged when I love my God” it does not offer any sort of guidance on how to deal with suffering or why one has an obligation to ease the suffering of individuals around us; it is merely a fetish. The lack of any sort of structure is brought along necessarily with Caputo’s metaphysics and the transcendence of a situation. The subtitle to Caputo’s book *More Radical Hermeneutics* is “On Not Knowing Who We Are.” This is an idea that comes up repeatedly in Caputo’s thought. Because there is so much that we as human’s cannot explain, because there is so much that we can’t understand, and because there is so much going on in the world that appears to be out of our control, one has to admit, he argues,

²⁹ Ibid. 65.

³⁰ Ibid 123.

that we will never really know what is going on. Caputo sees his task, presumably his answer to the Augustinian question, as finding these gaps in human knowledge and keeping the awe that arises from them alive. He writes, “The task of radical hermeneutics is not to decipher the speaker beneath the mask but to alert us to the distance which separates them—and then to preserve and keep it open.”³¹ The mask in this sense in the phenomenological world we all experience and the speaker is everything we do not understand. The awe that humans feel in the face of what we know is indeed important, but one cannot base an ethics or a social philosophy on it.³² In the same way that Tippet’s notions of prayer and faith are destructive forces, so is Caputo’s idea of not knowing who we are.

What American society needs in the face of such overwhelming individualism is not an idea of not knowing who we are as it is precisely these kinds of notions that Tocqueville took notice of *Democracy in America* and said would cause individualism to run rampant. Simply embracing these categories and attempting to reclaim them as something other than they are is not going to provide the answers that America’s communities need. Rather, America’s communities need to focus on knowing who we are and trying to understand and appreciate that identity. They are going to need to grasp on to something tangible that can be evaluated and improved, something that existentialism is able to provide.

³¹ Caputo, John D. *Radical Hermeneutics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987. 290.

³² I mentioned previously that Caputo’s approach is incapable of establishing an obligation towards one’s community. This may seem to be an odd claim as in his book *Against Ethics* this is exactly what he says he does. Caputo writes that he wants to give up on ethics which is based on reason and base existence on obligation, which he says, plainly, “is there” that exists factually. My problem with this is that in postmodern religion, obligation, in Caputo’s sense, has no ontological grounding. It is not until you have the massive background of something like Sartre’s phenomenology that one can say I *do* have a responsibility to those around me.

EXISTENTIALISM'S RESPONSE TO POSTMODERN RELIGION

Up until now, orthodox religion has been the only organized group to drum up an answer for what this approach means, why it is not a step forward, and what a better alternative is.³³ Existentialism has hardly yet entered into this discussion. When existentialists have discussed religion they have only focused on institutional religion, largely criticizing it for its dogmatic views and denial of individual human freedoms. Nietzsche is most famous in this respect for publishing *The Antichrist*, which was a scathing attack on institutional religion categorically. Sartre's atheism was essential to his philosophy but he never connected it to something comparable postmodernism.

Part of this has to do with the fact that at its height the existentialist movement existed before postmodernism ever arose. Additionally, existential thought has dismissed postmodern religion as a worldview that is not academically rigorous and thus not worth have attention paid to it. In the late 1960s Hazel Barnes discussed Paul Tillich's approach, one that can be classified in retrospect as postmodern, for being too vague and ambiguous, but never goes as far to say why or how it will be destructive if individuals actually use it as a life philosophy.³⁴ As postmodern religion has grown, however, it has become an academically rigorous field that has

³³ Orthodox religion claims that postmodernism, by accepting the death of God and moving forward from that point, is missing out on something valuable that orthodoxy has to offer. The Catholic theologian Anthony Godzieba writes, specifically with Caputo in mind, "theology must not shy away from making postmodern conversation about religion more *theologically* responsible." (Godzieba, 2003) For Godzieba, the reformulation of the religious question to what do I love when I love my God denies god of the essentialist ontological existence, which is where he argues all of the beneficial aspects of spirituality are derived from.

Godzieba does not even find what Caputo is doing to be original or postmodern, claiming that it is simply rehashing the natural religion of the enlightenment. He says this rehashing strips orthodoxy of all of its flesh and history and lets philosophy determine what is and what is not spirituality. This philosophical approach is what he calls "atheistic Lutheranism." (Godzieba, 1999). He calls it atheistic because, as we have seen, Caputo wants to distill the "rational element" out of religions and use that in developing the spirituality of his approach. For Godzieba and Orthodoxy, spirituality and religion does not have to be rational. The power contained in an essentialist God is far beyond rationality.

³⁴ Barnes, Hazel E. *An Existentialist Ethics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.

begun to pose serious challenges. Nonetheless, philosophers today have not done enough to apply existential thought to postmodernism and show why it comes up short and how we need to move forward.

Only very recently has the Sartre scholar Ronald Aronson tried to take the initiative and use existentialism to show how existential philosophy can be used to develop a coherent secular humanism that focuses on the development of community and identity. When this is finally done the postmodern religious approach and the atheistic approach, both of which accept the death of God, can finally be compared, which is what I will do at this point. Before focusing on what Aronson has done however, I want to look at two existential thinkers, Nietzsche and Sartre, and show how their philosophy can and needs to be used in the deconstruction of postmodern religion.

NIETZSCHE

In his self-proclaimed masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche outlines a figure that bears tremendous similarities to the practitioner of postmodern religion: the Last Man. Nietzsche despised and, for the sake of humanity, feared the approach that the Last Man represents. He writes, “Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer give birth to a star. Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the *last man*.”³⁵

Nietzsche argued adamantly against the philosophy of the Last Man because it advocates what he labels as sinning against the earth, the most dreadful act one could commit after they accept God has died, as I have argued postmodern theorists have. Nietzsche writes, “Once the

³⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. In *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin, 1954. Pg. 129.

sin against God was the greatest sin; but God died, and these sinners died with him. To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth.”³⁶ Nietzsche considers sinning against the earth the highest sin because if search for meaning and purpose is relegated solely to the phenomenal world, after notions metaphysical world have died along with God, then man has to express a certain sense of gratitude towards the world. The Last Man, along with postmodern religion, evades this notion of gratitude towards the earth. Rather than define themselves and their existence by what they know and what the communities they are part of have accomplished, they look the sky and dwell upon what they do not know and upon potential “forces” that we will never see nor experience and what they may or may not have done to and for humanity. The use of the imagination in creating metaphysical mysteries for oneself can only serve to further the anxiety that comes attached to the human condition.

Nietzsche does not rule creativity out, however. He writes, “A new pride my ego taught me, and this I teach men: no longer to bury one’s head in the sand of heavenly things, but to bear it freely, an earthly head, which creates a meaning for the earth.”³⁷ This idea of creation is at the center of Nietzsche’s vision of a meaningful secular society. While society continues to dwell upon what they have historically labeled and right and wrong, good and evil, Nietzsche says the more authentic individual must create their own way. Only an individual subjectivity can lead them to this way. Nietzsche writes:

A trying and questioning was my every move; and verity, one must also learn to answer such questioning. That however, is my taste—not good, not bad, but *my* taste of which I am no longer ashamed and which I have no wish to hide.

“This is my way; where is yours?”—thus I answered those who asked me “the way.” For *the* way—that does not exist.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid. 125.

³⁷ Ibid. 144.

³⁸ Ibid. 307.

The focus upon individual subjectivity is not a recommendation for the atomization of society, however. What Nietzsche wants to do here is to invert the way meaning is established in society. Rather than have an overarching umbrella of meaning established by the community that individuals draw their meaning from, Nietzsche desires for each individual to establish meaning for themselves first and then establish a sense of community through social hermeneutics. Meaning has to be established bottom up, not top down.

Part of the problem with postmodernists is that even though they have accepted the death of God, they read what Nietzsche is doing badly, forcing them to feel like they need to carve out a new philosophy that is separated from the atheism Nietzsche represented. In response to Nietzsche who wanted to do philosophy with a hammer and tear institutions down, Caputo writes, “The devilishness of deconstruction... is not the devil itself, and is not to be conceived as a way of destroying faith or tradition, but rather of exhibiting their contingency in an effort to preserve them and keep them open ended.”³⁹ He wants to faith and tradition open ended because he is opposed to the macho style of Nietzsche and the way he embraces existence. Caputo asks, “How much truth can a spirit endure?”⁴⁰ He sees the world as Nietzsche views it as one where God must be conceived of as incompetent, cruel, or nonexistent, none of which would offer him any sort of meaning. In any of those life the cruelty of life would be too much to bare. Because of this, Caputo calls the way Nietzsche views the world “The Tragic Sense of Life.” He says about this view, “The real different between the religion and the tragic is that, in the tragic view, suffering is not a violation, not an injustice, not an intruder without rights.”⁴¹ It is here where Caputo’s reading is most misguided, where he goes too far. Simply because suffering is not a

³⁹ *More Radical Hermeneutics*. 199.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 247.

⁴¹ *Radical Hermeneutics*. 285.

violation against something sacred, whether it be humanity or the earth, does not mean that it is to be glorified. It only means that suffering does not have a transcendental meaning. Suffering for Nietzsche must be understood for what it is, and it is simply a part of the human conditions. For Nietzsche when a husband beats his wife, standing with the wife in the name of spirituality doesn't add anything to the situation. If anything it belittles the fact that all fault lies with the husband. When a volcano erupts and buries a village, it only means that perhaps men shouldn't set themselves up to be victims of natural disasters. Spirituality has nothing to do with the situation. It is only the phenomenological relationships between men at the world that deserve any attention for Nietzsche, and what Caputo refuses to accept.

While postmodern religion embraces the idea of social hermeneutics, they are still, by necessity, drawing from the unknowable metaphysical world as the primary source of inspiration in forming their own way. In his discussion of small people with small values, Nietzsche writes, "O heaven over me, pure and high! That is what your purity is to me now, that there is not an eternal spider or spider web of reason; that you are to me a dance floor for divine accidents, that you are to me a divine table for divine dice and players."⁴² Nietzsche will allow for meaning to be derived from any source that one can experience, but he will not allow for meaning to be come from fairytales that are taken to be truth solely upon faith. As I stated above, to do so would be to sin against to earth and to be so ungrateful as to look for meaning outside of what we have been lucky enough to inherit from the earth and from our communal history is unacceptable.

Nietzsche does, however, profess a standard by which one can authentically go about establishing their own way: the eternal recurrence and the will-to-power. The eternal recurrence

⁴² *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 278.

and the will-to-power, though two different ideas, cannot be fully considered without both being present. The eternal recurrence is the notion that one could be presented with the same exact existence eternally; that once one died they would be born ago and be made to live the same existence under the same circumstances forever. Nietzsche does not believe in the eternal recurrence as a literal possibility for the consciousness, it is only a thought experiment, but what he wants to be taken from the thought process is that even though we shall only live one life on this earth, we should live it as though we were to made to live it the same way eternally, to find self-affirmation of the existence we have chosen. The individual, when faced with something like the eternal recurrence, has to look in all directions temporally: to their future, present, and past. Philosopher Alphonso Lingis elaborates this point writing,

This kind of remembering and this kind of forgetting intensify to extreme the presence of the will in the present, affirming itself and affirming its affirmation of itself, like a light reiterating itself infinitely from the start on mirror surfaces facing one another. Such is the Nietzschean experience of eternity—not an eternity in extension, the endurance of a stagnant moment without past and without future, starched out linearly without end, but an infinity in the present moment, an eternity in intensity—the “deep, deep eternity.”⁴³

With that kind of emphasis on the here and now, there is considerable pressure to make choices that embrace the earth as we see it, and not direct our hopes and wishes towards metaphysics. Nietzsche writes, “Eternally recurs the man of whom you are wary, the small man.”⁴⁴ This criticism is leveled at the notion that the Last Man, and thus the postmodern religion practitioner, would wish to live their lives on this earth over and over again eternally using a vague belief in the metaphysical world as the basis for their existence. Choosing to do so would be to affirm that one’s individual self and the community they live in are in sum meaningless; that, despite the vast existence one can explore phenomenologically, it’s just not enough. Affirming oneself

⁴³ Lingis, Alphonso. “The Will to Power.” In *The New Nietzsche*, edited by David B. Allison. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997. 60.

⁴⁴ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 331

in the face of this angst, in the face of the nothingness that makes the Last Man and postmodern religion resort to metaphysics, is the goal of the will-to-power.

As stated above, the will-to-power is the self-affirmation or self-overcoming of one's self in the face of nothingness. The will-to-power is not a lust for control or domination, but a desire to not be constrained by either societal domination or false truths, whatever they may be. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes that he has observed, "Whatever lives, obeys."⁴⁵ He finds this appalling as obedience, whether in the form of religion or government, would stifle the creativity that we have seen Nietzsche values so. It cedes the individual's autonomy to a higher power. A life that is not its own law, judge, avenger, and victim is *mere* existence. Nietzsche writes, "Indeed, the truth was not hit by him who shot at it with the world of the 'will to existence': that will does not exist. For, what does not exist cannot will; but what is in existence, how could that still want existence? Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but—thus I teach you—will to power."⁴⁶ This declaration as the will-to-power as much more than the will to existence is important. An existence that passively accepts the way things are is, whether they be morals, government, or religion is the Last Man. They have stopped creating and they have continually sinned against the earth. To be truly grateful for our existence, we must continually create and work to make our community and ourselves better than they were when we were given them. The Last Man and the practitioner of postmodern religion stare and wonder at the world and they rejoice in its mystery, sinning against the earth. They see what they do not understand about the world and accept that they may never understand it. It is this acceptance of the mystery of the universe that allows them to look at the rest of the relationship in their lives and accept that they may never understand those either. This is the

⁴⁵ Ibid. 226

⁴⁶ Ibid. 227

mere will-to-existence. The secular viewpoint that Nietzsche is seeking to create from is one that looks at the world and focuses on what we do know, and then seeks to overcome that: “I am *that which must always overcome itself*,”⁴⁷ writes Nietzsche. This viewpoint will never be satisfied with accepting mystery. That mystery is to be conquered by our creativity and our ingenuity.

It is only when one possesses the will-to-power, when they refuse to accept a passive existence in the world that cedes power to forces beyond its control, that an individual could wish to live their life over and over again eternally, according to Nietzsche. Any other type of existence wishes for something else and ceases to be originally creative.

SARTRE’S PHENOMENOLOGY

As clearly as Nietzsche intended for the will-to-power and the eternal recurrence to be interpreted, they are however little help in developing a secular humanism on which society can be based. They are extremely helpful for individuals, but it is hard for them to be extended on to communities, which is evidence by the odd community that Zarathustra develops at the end of his journey. After Nietzsche, it isn’t until the 1930s with Jean-Paul Sartre that existentialism really starts to take stabs at developing a humanism. Before we start exploring the way Sartre’s thought is useful in the deconstruction of postmodern religion and establishing a humanism it is beneficial to thoroughly explain his phenomenological approach.

The subtitle to Sartre’s main treatise *Being and Nothingness* is “A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology.” For Sartre these two terms were interrelated: it was impossible to study being outside of the guise of phenomenology. Sartre argued that an ontological dualism was no longer viable in philosophy because even if there were a transcendental God, man will never know him and therefore can derive no real information from a metaphysical idea about God.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 227.

Man's project, then, is to derive meaning about being from what they can know. This limits an honest study of ontology to the phenomenal.

Once this dualism is dismissed objects appear in their ontological entirety, or ontological fullness. Sartre writes, "The being of an existent is exactly what it appears.... What it is, it is absolutely, for it reveals itself as it is. The phenomenon can be studied and described as such, for it is *absolutely indicative of itself*."⁴⁸ There are, of course, an infinite number of ways that an object can be perceived. In this way, an object transcends itself through the infinite number of ways it can be perceived, creating a new relationship; "the infinite in the finite,"⁴⁹ which replaces the old dualism of being and appearance. This new opposition restructures the problem in question fully, moving from metaphysics to phenomenology. It focuses on the appearance itself rather than the being behind the appearance.

It must be clarified at this point what does the perceiving and what is perceived. For Sartre, it is consciousness that perceives. He follows Husserl stating that all consciousness "is consciousness of something"⁵⁰ by definition and focuses strictly on the intentionality that comes from being conscious of an object that is what it is. Consciousness, in fact, is nothing other than this intentionality. It is in itself, in fact, *nothing*.⁵¹ Consciousness, therefore, is dependent on what it perceives to exist. If there were nothing for consciousness to perceive, it would cease to be. It would be an oxymoron to say that, "consciousness can be conscious of nothing." If there is no object to be perceived, there can be no consciousness. Likewise, because consciousness is,

⁴⁸ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956. 4.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 11.

⁵¹ Solomon, Robert C. *From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001. 259.

by itself, nothing it cannot be an object for itself or an object for another consciousness. It can only be conscious of other beings.

This aspect of consciousness, that it is in itself nothing, leads us to one of the more important points of Sartre's philosophy. He writes, "Since consciousness is not *possible* before being, but since its being is the source and condition of all possibility, its existence implies its essence."⁵² In other words, a being must exist as a being for it to be conscious of something, and thus to act upon what they are conscious of and develop an essence for themselves through their actions and choices.

At this point it is required to clarify the two different types of being in Sartre's phenomenology: the *being-in-itself* (the object of consciousness that is without consciousness) and the *being-for-itself* (the being that possess consciousness). Being-in-itself is what it is and it is not what it is not, but most importantly, it simply *is*.⁵³ A simple example of a being-in-itself is a chair. A chair does not have consciousness, it only exists and is perceived. It does not make choices or try to become transcend itself because it has no desires to do so. It is completely a chair and will never become something else. Sartre speaks of this kind of being as "coinciding with itself." A chair is in everyway a chair and nothing else.

Being-for-itself, on the other hand and it is what it is and it is what it is not. Being-for-itself is identical with consciousness and the human being is the only being that has consciousness. As stated above about consciousness, it is up to the being-for-itself to develop its own essence through their actions and choices, of which they have absolute freedom over. Sartre writes, "it is freedom which is the foundation of all essences since man reveals intra-mundane

⁵² *Being and Nothingness*. 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 29.

essences by surpassing the world toward his own possibilities.”⁵⁴ In perceiving the world through its consciousness, the being-in-itself assigns values to what it perceives and develops desire through those values. It is this desire that causes the being-in-itself’s existence to become incomplete.

A being-in-itself is a complete and fulfilled being, as it is what it is what is and will never being anything else. Every consciousness desires to be complete and fulfilled, to have its own fixed essence to be able to declare “I am *x*” and want for nothing more. A being as such is never disappointed or wanting for anything because it has everything it needs. On the other hand, being-for-itself, is always seeks to transcend itself and get more out of existence. Sartre writes, “Human reality by which lack appears in the world must itself be a lack.... The existence of desire as a human fact is sufficient to prove that human reality is a lack.”⁵⁵ The lack of the being-for-itself, then, is that it is not a being-in-itself.⁵⁶ At the same time, being-for-itself desires to be absolutely free.

Additionally, it is consciousness that brings nothingness into the world. It is the knowledge that a being-for-itself could cease to be that causes it to always transcend itself, to refuse to be a being-in-itself. It always nihilates what it is to become something else. Sartre writes, “The necessary condition for our saying *not* is that non-being be a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunts being.”⁵⁷ To use Sartre’s example, if I were to walk into a café and expect to see my friend Pierre and he is not there, I am conscious of his *absence*. When we become conscious of Pierre’s absence, we become aware of our own potential absence

⁵⁴ Ibid. 566.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 106.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 117.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 43-44.

and our own possibility of becoming nothing. It is because of this realization, that the being-for-itself always desires to transcend itself into another more desirable form of being-in-itself.

As I stated above, a being-for-itself is absolutely free in the choices and actions it makes as it tries to transcend itself. Sartre writes, “For the for-itself, to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is. Under these conditions freedom can be nothing other than this nihilation.”⁵⁸

Because being-for-itself is thus in a constant state of nihilating one’s being-in-itself, it is never one thing. It can never have a fixed essence and is always free to choose what one’s next action will be. Sartre writes,

I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself, or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free. To the extent that the for-itself wishes to hide its own nothingness from itself and to incorporate the in-itself as a true node of being, it is trying also to hide its freedom from itself.⁵⁹

When one denies this absolute freedom, they act in what Sartre calls “Bad Faith.” Bad faith is the denial of one’s own freedom or the freedom of another. More technically, Sartre writes that Bad faith is when “consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself.”⁶⁰ It tries to become a being-in-itself. Examples of Bad faith could be when student blames a bad teacher for a poor grade or when a religious individual accepts hard times as part of God’s divine plane. These are considered bad faith because they avoid responsibility for what one is responsible for in their absolute freedom. The student had the freedom to achieve high grades, but did not. The religious individual had the freedom to prevent hard times from coming upon them, but did not.

Good faith is another evasion of absolute freedom that Sartre discusses which, is in a way, more destructive than Bad faith. One engages in good faith when they actively know they

⁵⁸ Ibid. 567.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 567.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 87.

are denying their freedom yet continue with freedom denying action anyway. The best example of Good faith is radical orthodoxy: individuals who have accepted that God no longer exists but follow religious ordinances strictly. Good faith is worse than Bad faith because an individual acting in Bad faith can change their action when they realize they no longer want to deny their absolute freedom. An individual acting in Good faith has already weighed these options and chosen to deny their freedom.

It is important here to clarify further what Sartre means by absolute freedom. This freedom is not to be confused with the idea that an individual can do anything they want at any time. By freedom he means that man always has a choice. This choice is not to be confused with power or with success. These choices are always subject to man's *facticity*. Sartre defines facticity as "nothing other than the fact that there's a human reality in the world at every moment."⁶¹ This facticity dictates what choices are available to us and is the sum of the choices we have made in the past and the choices that others have made around us. For example, if an individual is a prisoner of war and is being tortured, their facticity is defined by their choice to engage in the war and subsequently to be captured as well as the choice of their capturers to join the war and to capture them (as well as the rest of their long histories). In this moment, in this facticity, man still has freedom because they still have choice. They have the choice to give up secrets that their torturers want or not, or they have the freedom to last one more second before becoming unconscious. Freedom can be this small for Sartre. Nonetheless, it is still freedom.

This friction between the desire to be being-in-itself and being-for-itself is what Sartre calls man's impossible ideal: the desire to be God. Sartre defines God as a being-in-itself-for-

⁶¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War, 1939-40*. Translated by Quintin Hoare. New York: Verso, 1999. 105.

itself.⁶² It has a fixed and complete essence while at the same time is entirely free to transcend itself. God, as a being-in-itself-for-itself would not even be subject to facticity. It would actually have the ability do anything at any moment. Nonetheless, God, as a being-in-itself-for-itself, is an ontological impossibility. With God out of the picture and thus no essences prior to existence, as I stated above, man is forced to create meaning for all things on his own. This is what Sartre calls *contingency*.

The concept of contingency goes back to the definition of consciousness and the for-itself: “consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question insofar as this being implies a being other than itself.”⁶³ We have seen that this questioning is where the notion of nothingness arrives in human existence, but it is also where human existence derives meaning. When an object, both being-in-itself and being-for-itself, is perceived consciousness desires to know what it is and what meaning it has and why it exists. Since the question why something exists rather than nothing is impossible to answer, contingent meaning created by consciousness has to be applied to an object. This process applies to everything we see: chairs, education, the environment. We assign meaning to everything. It is important for an authentic existence, however, that this meaning is not assigned in Bad faith. This would entail treating something like nature as an active identity that interacts with human life’s. Contingency must acknowledge the freedom of being-for-itself and has tremendous affects upon an individual’s facticity.

Up until this point I have treated being as if it existed as an atomized entity and that the only thing a being-for-itself could be concerned about was its own consciousness. Man exists in a world with other men however and their interactions with each other are important. This mode of being is *being-for-others* and it is an essential component of our facticity. Sartre writes,

⁶² *Being and Nothingness*. 127.

⁶³ Ibid. lxxiv.

“Consciousnesses are directly supported by one another in a reciprocal imbrication of their being. This position allows us at the same time to define the way in which the Other appears to me: he is the one who is Other than I; therefore he is given as a non-essential object with a character of negativity.”⁶⁴ This overlapping with each other results in the nothingness created by consciousness and it is something that will never go away as long as the being-in-itself is a conscious being. In his play *The Flies*, Sartre writes, “I have come to see myself only as they see me....Am I anything more than the dread that others have of me?”⁶⁵ Man, in turn, is the contingent meaning that other man apply to him. Thus it is self-serving for conscious, when being-for-others, to assign contingent meaning in a way that reinforces each others freedom and limits the nihilation of the Other’s consciousness. It is in this way that Sartre’s existential phenomenology ends up being about man’s relationship with the rest of humanity, about community. For Sartre, a community that finds their meaning through being-for-others and avoids bad faith is the only authentic kind of community.

SARTRE’S HUMANISM

With that context in mind, we can now explore the relationship that Sartre’s existentialism has with postmodern religion and secular humanism. In his 1946 lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre sought to explain clearly how and why existentialism was not a bourgeoisie, individualistic philosophy. He said, “The fundamental meaning of existentialism resides in... when we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid. 289.

⁶⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul. “The Flies.” In *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Trans. by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage, 1989. 103.

⁶⁶ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber. Edited by John Kulka. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007. 24.

This is, in a way, a Sartrean imperative. It says that once we have recognized that God is dead and are left with nothing other than the freedom act in whatever way we desire, if we are to avoid deteriorating into selfishness, narcissism, and nihilism we have to recognize that we are along with all other human beings radically free and responsible for what we do with that freedom. To exist in an ethical community would be to respect that freedom.

This authentic community has to be based upon this Sartrean imperative and on the ontology of being-for-others. It cannot remain stuck in Nietzsche's deconstruction, which is why Sartre is important for humanism. Sartre writes,

Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of his existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God.⁶⁷

For Sartre, it is only when one has reached this conclusion that a valid attempt at establishing a humanism can be made. Any other attempt, whether from orthodox religion or postmodern religion would be in bad faith, and thus evade the essential issue: man finding himself again. For this process Sartre lays down an ethics that needs to govern it. When Sartre brings up the idea of subjectivism as Nietzsche did, something very central to his existentialism, he discusses how one can make a choice in subjective position and what the choice they make means. He writes, "To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all."⁶⁸ At first glance this seems to be a regurgitation of Kant's universalization principle, the universal maxim. Kant said that when we make a decision, it has

⁶⁷ *Existentialism is a Humanism*. 46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 29.

to be such that we would wish that every human being would make the same choice in the same situation.

The difference between these two theories comes when Sartre says, “If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves.”⁶⁹ Kant would cringe at Sartre’s materialism here. While indeed Sartre acknowledges that one’s decisions have implications for the rest of society, he does not think they transcend to all epochs. Kant, believing in a transcendental theory of the Good, would believe that our decisions transcend to have implications for all epochs. He did not believe that we establish the essence of the Good, as Sartre does.

Sartre also addresses the issue of how to treat human beings in ethics specifically in relation to Kant.⁷⁰ For Kant, a human being was an end in itself, and therefore could not be treated merely as a mean. For Sartre, the human being was a being-for-itself and therefore could not be treated as a being-in-itself. It is up to the being-for-itself to develop its own essence through their actions and choices, of which they have absolute freedom over. Sartre writes, “it is freedom which is the foundation of all essences since man reveals intra-mundane essences by surpassing the world toward his own possibilities.”⁷¹ To treat a being-for-itself as a being-in-itself would be to deny that for-itself it’s freedom, thus acting in bad faith.

Again, the difference here between Sartre and Kant is in their view on essences. Kant believed *a priori* that a human being was a privileged being that categorically could not be treated as a means. The essence of the human being was such that to do so would be morally

⁶⁹ Ibid. 31.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 33.

⁷¹ *Being and Nothingness*. 566.

wrong. Sartre, arguing that being-for-themselves have to create their own essence, does not believe that man owns any privileged position. This comes across in his politics, which refuse to condemn violence and in fact argues in defense of it in many cases. When man loses the privileged position provided for him in Kant's theory, the ethics governing human relationships becomes very different, as seen in Sartre's writings on being-for-others.

This does not mean a reversal into something like the state of nature, however. One of the most important things about existentialism is that one cannot live an authentic, atomized life. An authentic communal environment is just as important as an authentic individual existence. What is most important in establishing these authentic modes of existence is the acceptance of radical freedom and the understanding of bad faith.

Juliette Simont expands on this notion briefly, exploring the idea of generosity in Sartre's work. As part of the ontological character of a consciousness in a group, the being-for-itself becomes at least partially comfortable with their being as a being-in-itself, though, as we have seen, never even close to fully comfortable. But, in this small zone of comfort, a being becomes familiar with the notion of generosity both for others and of other for themselves. Simont writes,

In relation to the Other, generosity consists in grasping his 'being-in-the-midst-of-the-world,' that is, his share of finitude and facticity, his 'fragility' or his essential 'exposedness' with respect to the in-itself, which falls, unbeknownst to him, as his lot to the extent that the active transcendence of his 'being-in-the-world' is his perpetual surpassing of it as well as offering to him this dimension of himself of which he was unaware.⁷²

An example of bad faith that illustrates why this feeling of generosity has not developed in America since Tocqueville, which comes up repeatedly in Sartre's work is that of non-action. Quietism, refusing to act in your community, halts progress in its path. Quietism is an issue that I mentioned first with Tocqueville and the individualization of American culture and then was

⁷² Simont, Juliette. "Sartrean Ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, edited by Christina Howells, 178-209. New York: Cambridge UP, 2008. 191.

seen as being reinforced by Tippet and Caputo's work. Within Sartre's ontology, because of the lack of reestablished essence, meaning, or goal, if one does not act either out of anxiety or fear, their communities and their societies will fail. There is no cosmic purpose proving for this.

Sartre writes

Quietism is the attitude of people who say: "others can do what I cannot do." The doctrine [existentialism] that I am presenting to you is precisely the opposite of quietism, since it declares that reality exists only in action.... For existentialists, there is no love other than the deeds of love; no potential for love other than that which is manifested in loving. There is no genius other than that which is expressed in the works of art.⁷³

If community is to be strengthened in the US, they have to embrace a world view that expresses community and solidarity, something that postmodern religion does not do, but existentialism can. With these tools established for developing community, Sartre's ethical community becomes a community of freedom. Not too many parameters were established *a priori* other than that. This is because man and the community he is part of is free to decide on what form the community will take.

ARONSON'S HUMANISM

Still, an actual working theory of humanism cannot be left so vague. It must take stock in the current epoch we are part of and show what a community needs to be formed around. Ron Aronson gives up all aspects of spirituality in his most recent book, *Living Without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists, and the Undecided*. He attempts to find meaning and purpose in what we have and what we know, not what we have faith in. In doing so, Aronson takes issue with the notion of a transcendental purpose that I have repeatedly mentioned is glorified by postmodern religion. He does so because man's autonomy is helpless in the face of it and that faith in a cosmic purpose

⁷³ *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. 36-37.

casts things in a way that usually ends discussion rather than beginning it. A healthy sense of linkages, large purposed, and logics and forces beyond our control might lead someone to an environment, epidemiological, sociological, political, economic, and historical study, and yield important insight. What if we work at making this vague intuition concrete rather than recalculating empty profundities? We can often get somewhere—as long as we are willing to admit that things may be happening randomly, or for no reason at all, or for dozens of reasons.⁷⁴

When Aronson says that we need to admit that things may be happening for no reason at all it is not the same as Caputo's notion of embracing not knowing who we are. While Caputo wants people focus on the unknown and become spiritual over it, Aronson sees worshipping what we do not know as entirely pointless. Anything that comes from doing so can only be speculation. The answer that postmodernists cannot give to this response is why it is better to base an existence on metaphysical speculation rather than phenomenological experience.⁷⁵

The beliefs that come from metaphysical speculation have lifted the burden from Americans of having to worry about community and the hard work necessary to make lives better for everyone. Aronson claims that hope is becoming privatized and that after the great disasters of the 20th century, children are being raised without utopias and without the sense of urgency to create a better world; without the sense of obligation to be a social self. He writes

Hope is becoming privatized.... After the disasters and vast transformations of the twentieth century, children are being raised no only without utopias, but also without a social sense that it is possible to create a better world. They are not being taught to see their private self in tension with their social self, as in my case, but to be unaware of having a social self.⁷⁶

In a move to ensure that children are raised feeling this friction between the obligations of a social self and a private self, instead of postmodern approach that necessarily results in the destructive atomization of society, Aronson advocates approaching the world without a preconception of meaning. Here, Sartre's influence is clearly present in Aronson's thought, and

⁷⁴ Aronson, Ronald. *Living without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists, and the Undecided*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2008. 140.

⁷⁵ Aronson doesn't want to ignore what we do not know however, nor should he. Human beings out go explore what we do not know and attempt to figure it out and how the human race relates to it. Until we do so, no meaning can be derived from it.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 194.

we see how he takes it further than what Sartre had originally done. This approach forces individuals to look to themselves to provide meaning. Aronson points out there is so much that we can now if we don't stop at being simply amazed at the world, if we go a step further than Tippet and Caputo are willing to and focus on what we do know rather than what we have faith in. Here it becomes clear that many of the goals between postmodernism and humanism are the same, only humanism actually contains the tools to these goals. These shared goals are things like hope, community, peace, and a better future in general. To show how humanism establishes these things, Aronson asks

What can we know, then? An amazing amount if we free ourselves from fears, prejudices, and official stories, and if we develop the disposition to avoid weird beliefs and we learn to make connections. Enough to create a decent life, if we approach the world's growing complexity and its accompanying mountain of information actively and intentionally, determined to make sense of things. Enough to live by—if we chose to know.⁷⁷

It is only in valuing these aspects of life that genuine attachment and obligation can arise.

Aronson claims that in an atheistic approach we can find new adult ways on sensing unity with the world around us. We belong and we contribute to something much larger around us: our community and our world. Aronson focuses on the feeling of gratitude and how important it is to raise children as social beings who feel grateful for the world and the community they have inherited. This gratitude is where we get our feeling of connectedness from and instead of lending our power to a being above us and then asking for it to be lend back to us, we may be able to feel our power as drawn from, and connected to, all that we depend on.⁷⁸

This sense of belonging and this sense of community, which one has an inescapable responsibility to and for, is something that only an atheistic theory can provide. If we are to make a change in the world as individuals and as communities, we must see ourselves as

⁷⁷ Ibid. 149.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 63-64.

responsible for it. We must hold ourselves and those around us to account. In doing this we lay claim to what we have accomplished as a people, a feeling that is rightfully ours, and not a deity's or nature's. At the same time we are responsible for our failings. When we do this we realize what is possible and what is impossible. We begin to understand what our limits are and that history is not always on an upward path.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important things that we can learn from evolution, something what we must choose to know, is that not everything happens for the better from our human vantage point. We cannot be complacent and accept approaches to the world that escape responsibility *to this world* in any way. Aronson closes his book saying

It no longer makes any sense to expectantly anticipate the advent of the peaceable kingdom, a better world on its way—or even that our children's or grandchildren's lives are likely to be better than ours. Nothing and no one beyond us is protecting us or pointing us in the right direction. Nothing and no one beyond us is guiding the world. No historical logic is making the world better.⁷⁹

The only thing that can make the world better is us: individuals and the communities we belong to. A philosophy that endorses this sentiment and refuses to shirk responsibility is necessary if positive change is going to take place. If we are to foster community, we must tell our children how important that community is and how it's all we have to depend on. If we want to learn from the universe and the cosmos about ourselves and what it means to be human we have to choose to understand it for what it is and not anthropomorphize it to make ourselves feel more comfortable. If we want our children to understand that they are responsible for the world, just as we are, we cannot tell them that regardless what happens, everything is going to be ok, because there is no reason to think that. Postmodernism need to take a look at what they have

⁷⁹ Ibid. 192.

given up with the rejection of the all knowing God, namely the community that goes along with institutional religion, and what they have gained by replacing it with a spirituality that has no spirit. They are losing far more than they are gaining, and they have a lot to gain by going that extra step and embracing the world we all live in, as an atheistic humanism does.

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