



## ***Religion in an Individualistic Society***

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During my freshman year at SUNY Oneonta I took a class on world religions. I remember that my professor warned the class about entering a relationship without discussing religion. I thought at the time, "How can you discuss something so important and serious at the start of a relationship with another person?" It would be awkward, as if it was an interview for a future marital arrangement. It turns out that during the time I was taking the class, I started dating my boyfriend, Rudy. Rudy and I have very different beliefs about religion and now, two years later, it has brought up some very important issues. Would we raise our child with or without religion? Is it possible to raise a child without religion to become a moral adult? Can a child without religion want to practice religion when raised in such an individualistic culture as that in the U.S.? What circumstances lead to the development or the loss of beliefs?

Although personal characteristics and situations have a great impact on individual lives, it is also necessary to look at the bigger picture. Using my **sociological imagination** I intend to analyze the place of religion and religious beliefs in my relationships in a broader social and cultural context. This is because our beliefs are often affected by the relationships we have with others—such as the relationships of mother to daughter or husband to wife— and with

society at large. In her essay "For the Love of Our Many Lives" (2002), Stephanie Roth stresses the same point when she explores how her relationships with her parents led her to make and then change important decisions about her choice of schools for higher education. This is also what I intend to explore in the context of my attitudes towards religion. What choices affect our lives and do we really make them ourselves or are we on a life course that nothing can change? Is religion relevant to our moral self and social identity?

I was raised as a Lutheran Protestant. I still practice this religion, professing:

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen." (Apostle's Creed, Dr. Martin Luther: The Small Catechism).

Lutherans are not very strict or formal in their practice. In my experience I have had every opportunity to develop my own beliefs, both by my church and my mother. To me being a Lutheran is an **ascribed status**. I was born into it and even though I do have the power to leave this group, I will not.

Rudy was raised as a Catholic. As a child he went to a private Catholic school

and believed in God, Jesus, the saints, the holy mother Mary and the pope's divine power. Rudy developed very different beliefs as he grew up. Today he does not believe in religion as a whole. He believes in spirituality, Karma, and the possibility of a higher being. Rudy's experience as a young Catholic was not as liberal as mine was as a Lutheran. The Catholic religion is very strict in its methods of practice and its beliefs. Rudy could also feel the fear and sadness from his mother if he decided not to believe in Catholicism but left it behind anyway. It is obvious that Rudy's new religion is an **achieved status**.

If a child is raised in a household by parents who do not have the same beliefs the child may become confused about her or his own **identity**. In her essay, "Honor Thy Father and Mother" (2002), Nancy Chapin states, "Parents are transmitters of attitudes that the child adopts in forming a self-image... Our parents are our primary means of socialization experience that provides the lens through which we perceive ourselves" (Chapin 47). This is important. Children learn and develop beliefs through experience and as infants they experience life mainly through interaction with their parents or guardians.

If my child is raised without religion, is it possible that he or she will still become a moral person in society? From a **Structural-Functionalist** point of view, religion has served many functions in the past. First, it provides communities with a meaning of life. Questions that cannot be answered through factual scientific evidence can be addressed through the Bible. Second, religion provides personal support and means to worship the lord (for those who believe). These functions can be considered the **manifest functions** of religion or functions that are intended. There are also unintended functions or **latent functions** of religion. Religion keeps every society under surveillance. There is no question about the difference between right and wrong. The Bible,

the Koran, and the Torah all have specific rules for behavior and consequences for misbehavior. Through fear of eternal damnation because of "**deviant**" acts, individuals can be taught to become moral members of society. Another latent function of religion has to do with exerting domination and power. Religions, particularly the Catholic religion, exert power over their followers and they gain respect and glory from it. L. M. Damian critically addresses this issue in his essay "Conspicuous Conflict" (2002) by stating that "Large groups with special interests are always involved in a conspicuous conflict against each other, so they fool potential followers into thinking that membership will earn them power and prestige. The glory, however, is given to the existing ones" (Damian 11).

In spite of criticisms such as that by Damian, given the many functions of religion it seems to me impossible to raise a child without it. Religion has a structure that no other institution has. I believe that it would be most beneficial for a child to grow up with a set of beliefs and come to her or his own conclusions later. However, Aaron Witkowski would perhaps disagree with this method of child rearing. He discusses children's rights in the essay "Children: The Unheard Society" (2002). He states, "Our society was born for the reason that people wanted freedoms, and that a strict rule on how people live their lives was wrong" (Witkowski 113). Witkowski may argue that not allowing my child to have a choice on religion is wrong. Rudy has the same theory. He would rather see his child grow and come to an intellectual decision about his religion on his own without persuasion from parents. Although I see his point, I am more concerned with what is lost or not found during childhood religious experience. I want my child to come to her or his own reasoning but I do not know if childhood without moral instruction is the best method. In the Native American culture it is a custom to allow

children to do as they please because most feel that this is the only true way to learn the best and most peaceful way of living (Aulette 178). The majority of Native Americans are considered to be very spiritual and peaceful, which could serve as support for Witkowski's perspective.

Both Rudy and I were born and raised in New York City, although we did not meet until I came to Oneonta. Being Americans and more specifically New Yorkers, we both tend to believe in individualism. Neither Rudy nor I ever wanted to follow the social trends. This seems a common trait in American children, adolescents, and even adults. Americans strive for individual fame and glory. In order to achieve success in the U.S., one must stand out from the group. Americans try to escape most forms of conformity. For individuals living in the U.S., conformity might be considered a frightening concept. My high school had suggested frequently that uniforms would be beneficial to the school. I remember that most students, I included, were outraged by the idea. No one wanted their privilege taken away to express their identity through dress. With these views, why do some people conform to social **norms** and why do others break free? (This last question involves my assumption that Americans support individualism because I have unconsciously referred to identity as a more positive idea than conformity, using the words "break free.")

How do Rudy's and my individualisms affect our beliefs? Perhaps I was destined to be more of a conformist due to aspects of my personality and the circumstances of my life. In his essay, "The Capitalist Cuckoo's Nest" (2002), R.F.A. discusses situations in his life that led to a "rebellious personality." R.F.A. believes that the more the world tried to constrain him, the more he rebelled. He also states that his love for Rock music had a significant impact on his life and his attitude. This seems to be very similar to Rudy's move-

ment through life. Rudy majored in Music Industry, wants to be a famous musician, and avoids most of society's trends. I, on the other hand, am interested in social work, psychology, and jobs that usually require a suit and tie and an office. I never felt constrained as a child. I always felt that I had the right and freedom to choose. I have also felt that I am in somewhat of a competition with my siblings. I work harder and harder each day to attain approval and respect from my siblings and my parents. In the movie *Patch Adams*, the character Patch, played by Robin Williams, seemed to be extremely individualistic. He also had views much different than that of the woman he fell in love with. Patch had undergone many difficult situations that made him believe that the only way for happiness is through rebellion and non-conformist ideas. Patch's girlfriend was conservative and conformed to institutional norms of the medical establishment. She reveals late in the movie that she was molested as a child. These circumstances created an attitude that emphasized conformity. She wanted to achieve success the most respectful way possible. So, it seems that for each of the mentioned characters constraint or pressure to conform led to rebellion. Yet different circumstances led both Patch's girlfriend and me to feel a need to prove ourselves and therefore conform to more of society's norms. Referring back to Roth's view (2002) on personal relationships, both past and future relationships affect our judgment. My relationship with Rudy has led me to feel differently on the issue of marriage. I always believed it was the next step and I almost took it for granted. Now I feel that it is not a necessary step and that what really matters is our relationship. Patch changed his girlfriend's outlook on life in many ways. She freed herself from social constraints rooted in **social structure** which made her life predictable.

**Role conflict** refers to times when one or more **roles** are incompatible with each

other and cause stress. Religion in an individualistic nation can cause role conflict. Specific demands of modern individualistic life make it difficult to always follow religious teachings. The Catholic religion has required that 10% of a person's or family's income be donated to the church. This percentage is called tithing. Ten percent of one's earnings are a great sacrifice that some cannot afford to make. When a person has to choose between a successful life and career and a religious sacrifice in a society that emphasizes individual success, the choice seems clear. It would take a devote martyr to choose the church over his own success. Perhaps this may seem wrong but when living in such a society a person's **values** are very different from that of a person living in a conformist nation.

Throughout the years, the Pope has placed many rules on Catholics using his "divine right." One such rule is that Catholics should not marry outside their religion. This would be considered blasphemous or a negative **sanction** at the least. In America today, religion in general has much less of an effect over society than years ago. It is not uncommon that people of two different religions engage in serious relationships, wedlock, and childbearing. In his *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life* David M. Newman cites N. Glenn (1982) suggesting that in the U.S. "over one-quarter of all marriages occur between people of different religions" (Newman 213). This can also be directly correlated with the emphasis on individual identity. A person's identity is made up of traits, characteristics and social group memberships. **Deterrence theory** assumes that a person is considered to be fully capable of weighing costs and benefits in a rational manner. This theory is most often used in the context of sanctions for **deviance** but can also be used to relate to an individual's choice in following the norms of their religion or culture. The Catholic religion requires a strict dedication at great costs. Catholicism requires conformi-

ty and sacrifice. Individualism, which has often been equated with selfishness, has less such similar costs of being part of social groups, though it may encourage **ethnocentrism**, and bring about **social dilemmas**. When trying to incorporate both these cultural traits of religious commitment and individualism in one's life, conflict occurs and a decision must be made. If a person's religion is less rigid, there is less conflict with individualism. Lutherans are very casual in their beliefs and practices in comparison to Catholics. It would be much simpler to resolve the conflict between religion and culture with a more liberal religion. Each person has the power to decide her or his own identity.

Another issue that emerges from individualism is materialism. Individualism promotes materialism. According to the PBS documentary *Affluenza* "children are the fastest growing consumer segment of the population today." Materialism perpetuates social dilemmas inducing conflicts between individual interests and social commitments. Children growing up in a materialistic culture will continue to be a dominant feature of our nation. My youngest brother owns every game system ever created, from the first Nintendo to the, now ever-so-popular, Playstation 2. He would get upset and even angry if he could not own these systems and every accessory that is attached to them. My brother and I were both raised Lutheran, so why did he become so materialistic? I believe that religion often teaches the importance of quality, not quantity. I am more religious than my brother. Perhaps a person cannot live in an individualistic, materialistic society and be very religious. I also purchase more than needed, but I am much more frugal than my brother or Rudy. I for one have been happy with what I have (or do not have). I have always considered myself lucky. Rudy is also easily pleased but he is always looking for something better. He insists on having two televisions, a nice car and many

gadgets (mp3 player, digital camera, road-runner, etc.). Perhaps if he believed in religion, he would be less materialistic.

The rise in materialism may correlate with the decrease in participation in religious activities. Decades ago, when communities predominantly grew their own food and made their own clothing, material possessions were more highly valued and considered a blessing. As time went by, the technological advances took their toll. The industrial and technological revolutions sparked massive mobilization of peoples and resulting social conflicts and movements, during which lifestyles were drastically changed. Today, material goods can be mass produced anywhere in the world. Most of us have never milked a cow, maybe never even seen a real one but before technology sprung up it would have been considered common knowledge to know the entire milking process. Technology breeds **anomie**. Every person's life is forever changed due to mechanization. This anomie has created a massive **free-rider** problem among Americans today. No one understands the value of a dollar. Mass production, materialism, and individualism have come about at the expense of moral values. This is something that religion has consistently tried to warn its followers. Anything in excess is wrong.

**Gurdjieff** (1950) shatters the determinance theory with the idea that man is incapable of making any decision. Gurdjieff believes that in ordinary life individual life is completely a result of external influences such as social institutions, organizations, and culture. Therefore, no person really has a choice to weigh pros and cons in a meta-cognitive way, unless trained consciously to harmonize his/her inner selves and centers. Gurdjieff believes that there are "uncontrollable conditions which may not permit this liberation" from external conditions of ordinary life (1118). He refers to people as "victims of contemporary civilization." He does state, however, that it is

possible to break away from the slavery of civilization and become an independently functioning individual. Despite some of Gurdjieff's valid points, it may appear to be contradictory to say that a man can be both a slave to but capable of becoming, as an individual, free from social constraints. If a person can be a slave to civilization, he or she can also be a slave to individualism. It is important to remember that our civilization promotes individualism. Our civilization being individualistic, one may argue that a person can be both individualistic and yet not able to escape society's standards. Individualism and rebellion have become trendy in U.S. culture, and Americans have become a slave to finding their unique identity.

Films like *The Matrix* or computer games like *Sim City* relate to the world as a predestined, systematic software machine. Perhaps the fate of my child's life is already written and the choices I make in raising her or him will not affect the outcome. Here issues such as **birth cohorts** and **cohort effects** come into play. It seems strange that groups of people carry out a similar course in life when born around the same time. For example, because of the recent war with Iraq and because of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Rudy and I will both experience difficulty in gaining employment and in other financial areas. Someone in their sixties may not experience a significant change due to early retirement and pension. A child who does not have major financial worries may not realize a difference in the economy. When looked at this way the cohort effect does not seem that mystical or strange. Perhaps there are specific rules that determine our destiny. In *The Matrix*, Neo must choose between two pills. One pill is his ignorance and the other is enlightenment to reality. Even though Neo is given the choice between the pills, the move still defines the outcome. Later in the film, Neo seeks an oracle that knows all. If this oracle can see the future, then the future must be

fixed. From such a fatalistic point of view, no matter what decisions I make the proper or destined outcome will arise and religion is just one factor that may lead to a predisposed end.

The important fact to remember is that two people, Rudy and I, have both been raised religiously yet have developed such different beliefs. This could be a result of globalization. According to L. R. Kurtz (1995 1) as cited in Newman (204), "Technological advances are making many of the world's religions even more international: 'Jews from around the world can now fax their prayers to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Fortune-tellers in China provide computer-generated astrological charts... American television offers its viewers Christian preachers and Buddhist teachers.'" Through technology the world has become increasingly interconnected. Using telephone, television, and the Internet are a few ways in which the world has moved closer together. It would seem that these advances would promote religion and strengthen beliefs but it seems to have the opposite effect. "Exposure to competing worldviews challenges traditional beliefs" (Newman 264). This increase of information and the decline of Catholics' status are largely connected. Recently many Catholic priests have been accused of molesting children. This information could have been censored if Catholicism still had power and **authority**, and if the world's gossip was not so easily communicated and discussed. Many Catholics that I know personally have lost their faith due to the recent revelations. This **stigma** will be carried by the Catholic Church forever and I do not know how anyone could continue to respect the church as before, let alone raise their children in it. It is difficult not to acknowledge the **stereotype** of priests as molesters. The power of the Catholic church has truly been remarkable at times. It is a bureaucratic organization whose following expands across the globe and involves a **hierarchy**

**of authority**, ranging from the Pope, to the clergy, and to the Catholic priests themselves. This hierarchy leaves no room for the expression of ideas from the people that are most involved. The Catholic Church's rein is similar in comparison to many large institutions. Whether a person should have freedom to choose one's beliefs and religion invites important philosophical debates. I believe an individual should have the ability to choose whether or not to make decisions for himself or herself rather than live his or her lives as a pawn in the world's chess game. The question of following social norms or seeking freedom from them provokes too much anxiety. Therefore the individual often decides, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid rebellion.

The documentary *Multiple Personalities* discusses the effects of extreme anxiety and stress resulting from childhood abuse. Gretchen, a woman with multiple personality disorder, cannot deal with horrible memories of her abuse. She has developed alternate personalities, inventing "ways of bearing the unbearable." This is something that every person does to a degree. Gretchen's alters are unhealthy and dangerous. An average person supposedly takes on one personality and lives with that, until that person decides otherwise. In the film *Good Will Hunting*, the protagonist Will has several personalities that are hidden underneath his social mask. Will unconsciously hid aspects of his personality that might render him vulnerable to pain resulting from childhood trauma. A person's personality and identity is drastically shaped by her or his childhood experiences. If Will had been raised by a stable, loving family he may have most certainly been as intelligent as he is as an adult, but many aspects of his identity would have certainly been different. He would be more open to establishing stable relationships. He would have found joy and motivation in being successful. There are many people who are raised in a religious home but are abused. Reli-

gion does not seem to be the deciding factor in moral development in these cases. Security and Love may come first.

In the political documentary *The Big One*, Michael Moore allows the viewer to get a glimpse of what greedy corporations will do to benefit themselves and no other, laying off **workers** from their jobs. These people end up not having enough money to raise and feed their families. Like economic enterprises such as greedy corporations, religious institutions begin to look very disturbing when they are put into the wrong hands. Such abuses of power is another factor that has led to loss of power in many churches. Besides, given the increasing stresses of life, today it is difficult to make time for religious practice. I, for one, used to attend church every Sunday. Since I have been away at school and away from my family, I have found it difficult to do this. Besides, due to constant layoffs and job relocations it is difficult for families to stay connected to the church. These survival measures come at the expense of meeting the traditional requirements of religion. For example, one major requirement of most religions is to interact with fellow members in the church. How can one feel connected when they are always moving around?

Moreover, there have been situations where religious people have acted in extremely immoral ways (e.g. molestation, terrorism, etc.) and these occur both at home and across the globe. Citing Jurgensmeyer (1965) Newman writes, "The rise of religious nationalism around the world has created a threat to global security. The values and institutions of Western countries are frequently blamed for a society's moral decline. The possibility of violence by supporters of religious nationalist movements has brought down political regimes, changed the outcome of elections, strained international relations, and made some parts of the world a dangerous place for Western travelers" (Newman 265). Religion can be misused in the wrong hands.

I stated earlier how I agree with Chapin and her views on parenting. Children learn from their guardians. This is the only way a child can become a moral individual—by mirroring their loved ones. But perhaps religion is not the only factor that will raise a child to be moral. There are many factors that affect the development of a child. Religion is just one of them. Religion cannot and will not save everything, but I feel confident that when times are hard God will comfort me. God will show me the right and most moral way of living. However, religion and God are not the only factors that affect life. Rudy feels that the best lessons are learned through experience and although it is always helpful to believe in God to move things along smoothly, it is not necessary. If the child can relate to anything with comfort and confidence, the child will have all of what he or she needs. Perhaps all a child needs is security in life.

Rudy often seems confused about his beliefs and does not like to converse about concepts of eternity, infinity, or space. I have a specific belief through the Lutheran church that gives me courage to explore the areas that Rudy will not. I believe a child needs some sort of belief system to feel secure. According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the first step toward becoming a healthy individual is physical needs and safety (Engler 344). These needs must be met before a child can progress toward self identification and an accurate belief system. I believe that children do need these qualifications, along with some sort of **ideology** to reach self actualization. It is obvious at this point that the best way to raise a child is through providing security and love. Religion is an important factor, however not the only factor. World events, period effects, cohort effects, and relationships in everyday life all play a part in shaping our decisions as individuals in a society.

I am not certain that I answered the question with which I began this essay; per-

haps I just made it more complex. Religion is a very important part of my life and I would like it to be a part of my child's life. However, through this exploration I have realized that it is not the most important factor.

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