

Brandon Uzice

Professor John Crow

REL 1300-0015

1 December, 2015

Time and Religion

It is a fact that religions, whether they be big or small, have evolved to become something so different from what they once were that no one could have predicted these changes centuries ago. From the Catholic Church of Medieval Europe to the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints it is apparent that the old rules no longer apply in this new age world. As society and peoples' ideologies evolve with the times it is necessary for religion to do the same in terms of how strictly the respective religious texts are interpreted when it comes to morality, so as not to scare off those with modern lifestyle choices. The key word here is morality, which has had its definition mutilated and bent to justify the new ideas accompanied by these changing times. Through analyzing any timeless religion, such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam, one can begin to fully realize just how the modern times affect the religions' interpretation of morality.

However, before delving into the various religions one must first understand what it means to be morally acceptable. This meaning can differ greatly depending on the type of people you ask, where you ask, and what context. For instance, according to the Pew Research Center 65% of the polled population of Pakistan viewed contraceptives as morally unacceptable whereas Germany only marked 1% as of 2013 (Poushter, "What's Morally Acceptable?"). For the sake of argument, it is important to not only take into account what the respective religious texts interpret as morally acceptable but also various other factors. In order to limit discrepancies as

much as possible, the instances compared need to be remarkably similar to each other so as to ensure that what they define as morally acceptable is mainly influenced by the religious texts.

Moving on, one such account of how modern lifestyles have redefined a religion's perception of morality would be the Spanish Inquisition. According to the Oxford Bibliographies, the Inquisition was founded to discover and punish any heretics of the Catholic Church (Nalle). This was deemed morally acceptable by the interpretation of religious texts at the time. The methods utilized by this organization were very harsh by today's standards, including strangulation and burning at the stake. Despite its namesake, the use of the Inquisition spread through many Catholic countries, both in and outside of Europe. Fast-forward to modern day Europe and such acts performed by any organization would not be tolerated by anyone, let alone the Catholic Church. Today's people would not stand for any sort of punishment of innocent individuals. If the Inquisition were to be introduced in the modern era it would die out almost immediately given that it would not be able to gain a following that would view its actions as morally acceptable. As time went on, the Catholic Church came to this realization due to spreading of enlightened ideas. The Inquisition was effectively abated thanks to the changing lifestyles of the peoples that religions ultimately cater to.

Furthermore, another example of modern ideals affecting religious interpretation of morality includes Judaism and the various sects that have stemmed from it. The two sects that are the most radically different yet are still widely practiced in the modern day are Orthodox and Reform Judaism. The Orthodox Jews are known for sticking to the ideals that have always been present since the ancient era. In accordance with the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Reform Jews are largely based on human judgement rather than strict ordination of the Torah (Silberman). One such issue that both sects address is how women participate in the synagogue. Orthodox

Judaism tends to lean towards the separation of men and women during worship as morally acceptable. Reform Judaism on the other hand does not adhere strictly to specific rules present in the Torah and views the separation of men and women as irrelevant. Orthodox Judaism is a more traditional interpretation of the religious text while Reform Judaism is a relatively new concept. In addition, the only reason Reform Judaism exists is to present a form of Judaism that is adjusted to the modern individual's ideals by bending the perception of what is morally acceptable in the religion. Although, it may not be as drastic as changing the entire religion's stance on morals, the introduction of a new sect still points to the idea that religions need to adjust to the changing values of the people.

Additionally, how women of the Islamic faith view the hijab is another instance of modern ideas trying to influence how morals are interpreted. According to Rhys Williams and Gira Vashi, the hijab is meant to protect women from men, the latter of which will always be influenced lust and desire ("Hijab and American Muslim Women"). In modern America's culture there has been a push from feminists and the media to portray the hijab as a symbol of oppression for women. However, the opposite is true for the women that are actually from the Islamic faith. Muslim women view the hijab as a way to express their religious identity as it has always been incremental to the religion itself. Despite this, it is still common for women to be from the Islamic faith and not sport the hijab. Initially, in the Americas it would have been unheard of for Muslim women to remove the hijab but ever since public opinion changed that has not been the case. The issue is still relatively new in America so it has not had time to permanently amend how the religious texts interpret the hijab morally but it is ongoing and definitely has potential for a change in the near future.

These three instances all provide just examples of religious morals being influenced by a changed society but they do not clearly explain why the phenomenon exists. One such answer, as provided by David Baron, suggests the rules that govern the animal kingdom also stand true with coming and going of religions. The process of Darwinian natural selection can be translated nicely into religion by simply stating the strong outlive the weak. If religions did not continue to adapt and change in response to its followers then it would soon be left behind for more accommodating pursuits. Of course, many religions today try to stand true to ancient ideals in these modern times. One perfect example would be the Orthodox Jews, but this is only one sect in religion that spans thousands of followers. Many of the other Jewish sects are preferred by the followers because it allows for them to continue their worship while still living a life that is considered well-adjusted in the society they live in. On the other hand, if Judaism were only Orthodox the number of followers would be drastically lower. Many potential members would be scared away by an unaccommodating lifestyle and they would consider other religions that present themselves as more appealing. Survival of the fittest is incremental in the existence of many religions and without a follower base they would fail to survive (“Religion in Modern Society”).

To supplement the Darwinian argument, New Religious Movements provide prime examples of how the changing times affect the stance religions take on morality. According to the Encyclopedia of Religion and Society, New Religious Movements are of recent origin and consist of a recombination of existing cultural themes and discoveries present in other religions (Swatos). Much like how Conservative Judaism developed in response to Reform Judaism these New Religious Movements provide the proper incentive for more popular religions to keep adapting. If one of these smaller religions develops a moral concept that seems very appealing to

a wide audience it may attract a large following. This would in turn affect the larger religions negatively as they would lose followers prompting them to adjust how they interpret specific morals in order to remain appealing. Many New Religious Movements are classified as small but one day they could expand rapidly becoming a World Religion much like how many of the major religions of today once did.

Ultimately, the ever changing times create a massive influence on how religions interpret their traditions, holy texts, and requirements especially when it comes to morality. Evidence can be seen with abolition of the Inquisition from medieval times to the modern day Europe, where all religions are tolerated. The same can be said with Judaism as various sects begin to feel more comfortable with providing equal opportunities for both genders despite what ancient traditions would prefer. Additionally, the Muslim hijab issue in western culture shows how morally acceptable traditions are a still a heated topic of debate in the modern world. All of these examples have roots that point to the process of natural selection where the religions are forced to adapt their moral outlooks in order to cater their followings. New Religious Movements are the budding flames that continue to place our more established religions under fire. This adds fuel to the engine that is the ever changing faith, providing the evolution that the followers so desperately need. These communities that provide guidance and help shape almost everyone's lives might actually be more influenced by the peoples' ideologies then the people are influenced by the religions.

Works Cited

Poushter, Jacob. "What's Morally Acceptable? It Depends on Where in the World You Live."

Pew Research Center. FactTank, 14 Apr. 2014. Web. 1 Dec. 2015.

Nalle, Sara. "Spanish Inquisition." *Oxford Bibliographies*. N.p., 26 Aug. 2011. Web. 1 Dec. 2015.

"Judaism". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*.

Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 04 Dec. 2015

Baron, David. "Religion in Modern Society." *Religion in Modern Society*. N.p., 24 Aug. 1998. Web. 01 Dec. 2015.

Williams, Rhys H., and Gira Vashi. "Hijab and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves." *Sociology of Religion*. Oxford Journals, n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2015.

Swatos, William H. "Content Pages of the Encyclopedia of Religion and Social Science."

Content Pages of the Encyclopedia of Religion and Social Science. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2015.