

Religion, Power, & the Body

My relationship with religion has always been one of hesitance approaching contempt. Most of my childhood church-going memories are of my grandmother's stuffy, middle-of-nowhere, pews-packed-with-old-racists Methodist church. The hesitance I felt was because even as a child, I felt disconnected from the discourse being constantly poured into my ears by the smooth-talking Southern Preacher, Doug, who sold used cars during the week, and the contempt I felt later on was because church, as a child of the Midwest, meant your body was subject to a very specific power system: that Jesus loves you, and he wants you to sit and listen to how much he loves you for about four hours every Sunday. Historically, religion has preyed (no pun intended) on fear, ignorance, and intolerance, establishing power systems within the politics of one's body, of the bodies of one's religion, and of the bodies of other religions. Focusing on Freud's notion of subjectivity, Michel Foucault's work on power, and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this analysis paper will attempt to show how religion, using arguably the longest-standing systems of power in the world, subjugates bodies and thereby creates subjects capable of abject ethical hypocrisy whilst still sustaining that power system.

Before launching into discussions of power, I wish to discuss the foundation of religion in subjectivity. For Foucault, power is necessarily bound up in subjectivity, as "the body becomes a useful force [for power] only if it is both a productive body and subjected body" (Foucault, 1977: 173). The body engaged in a power relation must first be objectively productive and subjectively subjugated. Before all those lovely activists for the Westboro Baptist Church can go and hold signs, they have to possess the ability to hold signs (a challenge, to be sure) and be manipulated into doing so by the Church through televangelism, online communication, and traditional tactics. But the original development of religion, by which I

mean the major monotheisms of Christianity and Islam, which represent the dominant ideologies in modern culture, was dependent upon humanity's ability to first recognize themselves as objects in an objective world, then to recognize their subjectivity, and finally to attribute both their objective and subjective existences to a deity. In the beginning, after we recognize our own bodies and thus develop Lacanian identity, we are alone in the dark with the fears that arise from this separation. After the child develops a sense of identity, splitting from the mother, "subjectivity is thus split and illusory... there is thus an ongoing process of identification, where we seek some unified sense of ourselves through symbolic systems" (Woodward, 1997: 45). The split subjectivity, which Freud called "*Ichspaltung*," explains why many turn to religion in an attempt to unify the whole. Freud, in *The Future of an Illusion*, discusses the psychical origins of religious ideas: "they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind... The benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life" which first arise from the struggle against the father (Freud, 2007: 147). Religious belief arises from fear based in the unconscious. One attempts to satisfy this fear by developing an illusionary wish-granter who takes the place of an omnipotent and benevolent father. Given that they are the products of the unconscious, it is no small wonder, then, that most conceptions of god are typically embodied, as they are projections of man's own embodied self:

All religions, with their demi-gods, and their prophets, their messiahs and their saints, were created by the prejudiced fancy of men who had not attained the full development of their faculties. Consequently, the religious heaven is nothing but the mirage in which man, exalted by ignorance and faith, discovered his own image, but enlarged and reversed—that is, divinized (Bakunin, 1916 : 23).

Bakunin further discusses how this embodied deity implies the negation of human ethics, allowing humanity to act in whatever way it sees fit. There are many arguments back and forth, which ultimately go to individual faith and how well each subject is positioned by the power structure of religion to believe the illusion of actual reward and punishment by their deity.

Ultimately, however, this power structure can only have been put into place by humanity's ability to recognize its embodiment and to then project that embodiment onto the illusory father-figure of its collective unconscious.

When defining the power structures of modern religion, however, it should be clearly stated that belief is almost entirely socially formed through power structures rather than purely through the psychical origins of religion defined by Freud. Widespread belief, by which subjects are constantly interpellated, interrupts before children have minds of their own to "find" religion. I vividly remember being forced to watch VHS tapes about the Bible as a child, possibly before seeing actual films. This relates to Foucault's concept of power-knowledge, which states that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1977: 175). Therefore, one's sense of religion, from a subjective standpoint, is determined primarily by a preexisting power structure into which we are introduced, and secondarily, or at least simultaneously, by the psychical origin of one's subjective belief in religion.

This being said, the power structure created by religion is two-fold: it creates a power structure within a religious subject and a power structure between multiple religious subjects. The latter can be defined as Foucault's "body politic," in which the bodies of the subjugated masses are seen as "a set of material elements and techniques that service as weapons, relays, communication routes, and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge" (Foucault, 1977: 175-176). The body of the religious is manipulated to at all times serve the power structure to which it prays, kneels, sacrifices, fasts. In the modern context, this now involves technological worship, in which the body is placed before a screen in most church services and forced to watch

terribly made slide shows about the glory of god. This internal power structure relates closely to Catholicism, the religion most typified with guilt. In Catholicism, God is an omnipotent, omniscient, ultimately benevolent being absolutely obsessed with sin, a la Santa Claus. Here we are reminded of Foucault's theory of panopticism: "to this correspond anonymous instruments of power, coextensive with the multiplicity that they regiment, such as hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification" (Foucault, 1977: 209). The cornerstone of the panopticon, and indeed of religion, is hierarchical surveillance. One is seemingly berated in church, to "let Jesus into your heart," presumably so that he may guide your soul to heaven in the event of the Rapture, or, more likely, to spy for Big Daddy. The panoptic model of power-knowledge relations acts on religious bodies in the individual and masses through symbolic surveillance and the threat of eternal punishment on the body in Hell (which can be waylaid through holy water on the flesh, symbolically feasting on Jesus' blood and eating *his* flesh, as well as a whole heavenly host of options). But power structures also act upon the body through the use of abjection.

Because the divine was created by subjective bodies out of fear and a need for love, the felt presence of the divine on and in our bodies is something that we both love and fear: the essence of abjection, which Kristeva defines as "a vortex of summons and repulsion[s]" (Kristeva, 1982: 1). Abjection, in religion, is the absolute reflection of the power structures' subjugation of the masses. At the heads of these fluctuating power structures are their foundational texts, the Bible, the Koran, etc. What all of these texts hold in common is the notion that humanity is fundamentally flawed in our bodies and our flesh, both subjectively and objectively. For the religious, their lives are spent rectifying, through the body, their sins. Abjection, "and even more so abjection of self, is its only signified. ... Mystical Christendom

turned abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God” (Kristeva, 1982: 5). Abjection of the self through religion is a singular discourse, in which the body is abased ritualistically before god. Biologically, one of the first methods in which this is enacted on the flesh is through circumcision. For males, this has become culturally normative, but is still potentially life-threatening, as “approximately 117 neonatal circumcision-related deaths... occur annually in the United States” (Bollinger, 2010: 78). But for females, the act of circumcision is so brutal that it is no longer referred to as such, but rather as genital mutilation. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons” (“Female genital mutilation.” 2013). FGM is one of the primary examples pointed to today by atheists wishing to demonstrate how a power system, when unchecked for so long, can get away with ethic abjection. Islamic women, mainly in Africa, but increasingly in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe endure torture, often without anesthesia, and after being mutilated, may have “recurrent... infections, cysts, infertility, an increased risk of childbirth complications, [and/or] the need for later surgeries” (“Female genital mutilation.” 2013). Because the sexual desires represented by their genitals are sinful and abject, the genitals are circumcised, forgetting that this act is abject, and that afterwards, this woman may be seen as abject by others. This power system creates a never-ending chain of abjection based upon the individual and the masses capable of ethical atrocity.

Abjection also takes the form of hatred against the other, the infidel. Although this notion is most closely related to Islam versus Christianity, it is important to remember that in the historical context, this has not always been so. Christianity attempted to destroy the Muslims countless times on the Crusades. But, in a modern context, the body of the religious subject is

used as a technological weapon to destroy the abject in the case of the suicide bomber. In terms of abjection, the infidel represents, to the believer, “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules ...” (Kristeva, 1982: 4). The body of the religious is subjugated so far that it is positioned purely as an object of destruction pointed towards the “abject” body that the power structure defines. Foucault defines the microphysics of power being “exercised on the body... not as a property, but as a strategy; that its effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation,’ but to dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings” (Foucault, 1977: 174). The body is controlled at the smallest level by power structures, *controlled*, not *owned*; and it is manipulated to an end. Whether through genital mutilation or complete self-sacrifice, power structures manipulate their subjects through abjection to ensure that they remain in power.

In preparing for this paper, I dove into the seemingly endless chasm of hour-long YouTube videos showing Christopher Hitchens, the famous *Vanity Fair* columnist and one of the greatest writers on atheism, debating the subject of religion. One of the main things I took away is a point made rather simply by the name of Hitchens’ book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens’ assertion that religion poisons all is absolutely correct—we began on this planet ignorant, afraid; we told ourselves what we needed to in order to quiet those fears, and that power-knowledge has been poisoning us ever since, growing ever larger, making others abject, each other abject, and, ultimately, abject within ourselves. Hitchens, and I believe Foucault, would agree that theists must examine their beliefs and the power systems and code of ethics they sustain by believing in them, and in doing so, recognize themselves as a body, a subject, and a limited flesh.

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