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THE REPERCUSSIONS OF RELIGION ON SOCIETY IN “THE CONVERSION OF THE JEWS”
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ABSTRACT

Is religion good or bad for society is an age-old question? It is true that a belief system is required to get us all through existential anxiety but considering religion as the only antidote for such anxieties is debatable. Even though religion itself is not inherently a bad thing, it can very much become that as it is one of the main sources of fanaticism and numerous contemporary conflicts. Religion, a man-made institution, established for various reasons, removes what is essential—God—from the equation. This paper discusses the repercussions of religion on society through “The Conversion of the Jews”, a short story from Roth’s first book *Goodbye, Columbus*, 1959. The story is about a 13-year-old Jewish boy named Oscar Freedman (Ozzie) whose innocent question to his Hebrew school teacher results in disastrous potentials—screaming fight with his teacher and mother leading to a desire to jump from off the rooftop. Although the story is plainly allegorical, the situation discussed is a very real, very local threat.

Key words: repercussions of religion, Philip Roth

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DISCUSSION

Many may not agree that religion complicates a number of different societal aspects but sadly it does. For instance, it has a tendency to cause or exacerbate human conflicts by promoting tribalism—divides insiders from outsiders. This sort of attitude deprives the believer of basic human kindness which is a major threat to cultural unity. Roth captures this common yet fiendish behavior through Ozzie’s mother, Mrs. Freedman, who, on reading a casualty list in the newspaper about a plane crash at La Guardia which killed fifty-eight people says that it was a tragedy because she discovered among the list of those dead, eight Jewish names. Her heart does not go out to the other fifty people as it does for the eight Jewish people. This hostility of hers startles and disturbs Ozzie because he believes that all men are created equal. When he brings this up to Rabbi Binder during a free discussion time seeking explanation for his mother’s cold behavior, his questions which come

from the deepest part of him, the part that is not Jewish or anything but human, is seen as a threat and Ozzie is just made to sit down.

It is true that faith is the core of every religion without which belief is incomprehensible but when a religious mind is closed to any idea other than the one it believes and refuses to accept even simple logic and think using one's own intellect, faith—an inner assurance limited to one person—can easily become fanaticism—assuring others feel the same way, by force, if necessary. For instance, when Ozzie questions Rabbi Binder, his condescending Hebrew teacher, why God who “could create the heaven and earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days” couldn't “let a woman have a baby without having intercourse,” he is threatened through physical blows and verbal abuse. He is merely patronized for his quest for explanations and is even threatened that he would not get Bar-mitzvah. This act of Rabbi Binder shows that a fanatic does not need a bomb strapped to one's body to ruin lives, all one needs is lack of tolerance, justice and kindness.

Although Rabbi Binder, who represents religion, seeks power and tries to control Ozzie by labeling him as a rebellious child, Ozzie fights for freedom against rigid mentality and takes up free thought over tradition. He feels that each of us is different and it is unfair that we should believe someone else's experience. He, instead, chooses the right way to discover it all by himself, to see through his mind and understand things in his own unique way. The spirituality within him makes him brave and it dares him to do things that he did—he stands up for what he truly believed and controls fear and uses the best of it. When Rabbi Binder forces Ozzie to question, Ozzie lets go of his fears and blurts out his question:

“Stand up, Oscar. What's your question about?”

Ozzie pulled a word out of the air. It was the handiest word. “Religion!”

“Oh, now you remember?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

Trapped, Ozzie blurted the first thing that came to him. “Why can't He make anything He wants to make!”

Ozzie's desire to know the truth invites him to reason and question it all out, unlike, all the other kids in the class who do not understand or agree with what was being taught to them but prefer to stay close-mouthed. Ozzie battles the obscurantist forces of tribal superstition and becomes a lone champion. He fights the type of religion which is the hypocrisy of human belief system—trains it's believers to practice self-deception by shutting out contradictory evidence and trusting authorities rather than one's own capacity to think. Michael Huemer, a professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado, said it well during a debate “Is religion good or bad for the society?” that the greatest downfall of religion is that it stifles progression—as it stunts creative thinking by slowing intellectual progress, promoting the acceptance of the implausible, and creating false general conceptions about reality—all of which are harmful to progression in society.

Children become the most common victims of religious faith as they suffer at the hands of self-righteous religious adults especially parents who choose between righteousness over love—Ozzie's mother hits him as she views his want for deeper knowledge as a refusal to accept traditional dogma. She and Rabbi Binder are unaware that it is absolutely wrong to turn off children especially when they have questions regarding their religious faith as that forms the core of their identity. Ozzie words it so beautifully in his final commandment before jumping from off the roof: “Mamma, don't' you see—you shouldn't hit me. He shouldn't hit me. You shouldn't hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God—”

Ozzie follows his heart and does what he felt was right. Although his desire to know the truth is repulsive to his dogmatic Hebrew teacher who assaults and bloodies his nose and chases him to the synagogue's roof, his attitude of not bowing to that which does not resonate right to him sets him free. He attains inner peace and rises. At the end, he makes his classmates, Rabbi Binder and

Mrs. Freedman bow to what he honored enough to make it divine. Before he jumps into that yellow net laid by the firemen, his spirituality carries him to great heights which he did not know existed “A question shot

through his brain. "Can this be *me*?" . . . Louder and louder the question came to him—"Is it me? Is it me?" . . . "Is it me? Is it me Me MEMEME! It has to be me—but is it!"

CONCLUSION

"The Conversion of the Jews" is a very real example of religion turning into a weapon by zealous people like Rabbi Binder. It is true that religion gives meaning to life. It gives one identity. However, if it is not practiced in moderation, the consequences can be so outrageous that it affects the believer as well as the unbeliever alike.

Rabbi Binder, the aggressive and thoughtless religious freak, at the end, is made humble when he pleads Ozzie not to jump from off the rooftop. When Ozzie succeeds in making all the Jews including Rabbi Binder "convert" it seems as if God himself is against the forces of tradition. Even the Bible warns against those who claim themselves to be so pious, as they take pride in belonging to a religion, but, those are the ones who lack basic human nature like love, kindness, patience and the like.

Whether religion is good or bad really depends on how it is practiced and lived. It is important to practice religious tolerance and acceptance as the boundary between faith and fanaticism is fluid and can be easily interchanged. Just like how Swami Vivekananda in his speech at World Parliament of Religions, 1893, says "As different streams having different sources all mingle their waters in the sea, so different tendencies [religions], various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to God."

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