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Intro to Religion-103

I came into the study of religion without any biases, without any preconceptions and a vague notion of the real practices and rituals of the various types of religions that existed. However the phenomenological approach towards the study of religion was able to present a broader examination of all types of religions as well as their differences and similarities. Without any real background of any type of religion, everything was unfamiliar. Therefore I was able to approach attending any type of ritual service without any preconceived notion but that of a purely academic standpoint. The first service I attended was that of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

First let me make a correction to my previous statement about preconceived notions. I had attended a few church services when I was a child but I had paid little attention to the happenings during the services. I cannot recall the name of the church or even what type of church it was but I do remember pews and Bibles. Maybe that was what I expected when I entered the Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Kingdom Hall is where the many members of the Jehovah's Witnesses gather or congregate to tell "the good news of the kingdom" or community. The Kingdom Hall is a small aspect of a holy community for Jehovah's Witnesses. They gather once a week in shared sense of the holy and a common faith. The overall amount of Kingdom Halls that exists all over the world demonstrates the human quality of being religious within communities of faith.

Jehovah's Witnesses can be classified as a modern religion in that its development came to life during the early 1870's in the form of a small Bible Study group in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. They are highly monotheistic, in that they believe in only one God, to whom they refer to as Jehovah. The name "Jehovah" is stressed because it provides a more personal name in reference to the creator other than terms such as "God," "Lord," or "King." To the Jehovah's Witnesses, their religion functions as the governing principles that guide and aid in dictating the morals in their lives. The principles function to provide emotional, social, as well as intellectual direction. Emotionally, they offer practical values such as seeking spirituality and being mild-tempered, peaceable, merciful, and so on. On a social scale, they seek to spread good news through the community by teaching these values and in turn improving the community. Intellectually, they hope to impart knowledge and the wisdom of Jehovah to everyone.

Entering the Kingdom Hall, I was struck by the simplicity of the room. In replacement of the pews were gray chairs and where the traditional highly decorated ornaments were supposed to be, there were none. A preacher was not present in his customary garb but rather a speaker who would not present a sermon or preach but would conduct a public lecture on a subject of current interest to be followed by a Bible study centered on a Biblical theme or prophecy. The Jehovah's Witnesses were iconoclastic in rejecting the depiction of the holy. The walls were bare and the room was stark in decoration, it could have been a public meeting place instead of a ritual church meeting. The service began when a speaker dressed in a regular Sunday suit conducted a lecture concerning a very modern topic. On that day the topic happened to be "Godly Wisdom in

a Scientific World” where the speaker, Zach Massey, tried to reconcile scientific theories with the word of God and his advice. He spoke in a very calm, almost passive manner but with belief. It greatly contrasted with the booming, strong, aggressive manner of churches with preachers. In support of his opinions, Zach made several references to the Bible or the Holy Scriptures. They regard the Bible as the Word of God and as something sacred to their belief. The 66 books are interpreted as being inspired and historically accurate. In this case, they can be regarded as sacred history in which the entirety of human history is holy and sacred. However the common use of Old Testament and New Testament are imprecise; the Old Testament is called the Hebrew Scriptures whereas the New Testament is referred to as the Christian Greek Scriptures. The scriptures are understood to be literal although rule of thumb dictates that there are exceptions when expressions or settings may be indicate they are figurative or symbolic. In that sense, scriptures are considered in almost absolutist response, they consider all stories of their own tradition to be true. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe their own religion to be the one true religion and in that context, it can be deduced that all other religions are false. Although Jehovah’s Witnesses are a modern religion, their scriptures are closed in that information or other ideas can no longer be attached.

Heirophanies or manifestations of the sacred are present in prophet and avatar figures. Jesus Christ, a common figure in many religions, is a charismatic avatar. Due to his status as the son of Jehovah, he is depicted as an authoritative figure endowed with almost supernatural or superhuman powers or abilities. The Jehovah’s Witnesses acknowledge many prophets; some of the prominent ones include Moses and Joshua. Yet there is a lack of a sacred place or city; they feel that the true Jerusalem and Bethlehem

no longer exist in the world today. The cities today have been destroyed by warfare and using methods that are vile and objectionable to them. Certainly they assumed and believed that those cities survived in the past but no longer today. Jehovah's Witnesses observe one sacred or holy day of the year called the Memorial Supper or what we commonly refer to as the Last Supper. Adhering strictly to the Bible, Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate what they consider to be man-made holidays such as Easter or Christmas. They feel that Easter is not to be celebrated for the reason that the Holy Scriptures speaks against it. Additionally, they recognize one rite of passage often identified as baptism. Baptisms are performed for adults when they deemed themselves ready to accept and enter into the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses. It is generally unaccepted to baptize young ones and baptisms occur with full submersion into the water. Several features of sacred space, time, and figures are present in the Jehovah's Witnesses beliefs although relatively fewer than others, their devotion to the holy scriptures provides an enclosing set of restrictions as well as organized principles to guide them.

As noted before, the Jehovah's Witnesses observe the Memorial Supper as one of their traditional holy rituals. In this meal, real wine and unfermented bread are served to all members. The ritual of the Last Supper is purely representational; the sacred is a remembered presence. This ritual is repetitively conducted every year as a traditional link in remembrance of Jesus in a structured and rehearsed manner. In a social sense, the Memorial Supper is a commemorative experience binding the community of the Jehovah's Witnesses in a renewed sense of humanity. Two prayers were performed during the service in supplication and thanksgiving to Jehovah. Prayers are performed and can be acknowledged as a ritual, however the prayers differ at each service. It is

unlike that of the Hail Mary's that is utilized by Catholic members. The process of prayer was initiated first by the speaker, followed by the bowing of heads of all members. We were immediately enveloped in a stage of luminosity in that we were in a state of homogeneity and amenity while following the prayer. Once the prayer had been completed, everyone was reincorporated back into our usual state.

To a new arrival such as myself, the first service was daunting in that I was inexperienced and unfamiliar with the religious language and references mentioned. The latter part of the service consisted of a Watchtower discussion, something similar to that of a Bible study. A pamphlet was supplied in order to follow along in the discussion that examined the particular piece of prophecy for the day. In my case, we were discussing the subject "They Coped With Thorns in Their Flesh" where the speaker utilized theological language in alluding to Biblical events and situations. All members would partake in the discussion though never really questioning the stories or the words of the Bible. Being able to discriminate between literal and figurative aspects of religious language has been a prevailing weakness but the challenge of distinguishing between the two allows for increased flexibility, and a heightened sensitivity to nuances within the Bible. Overall, the entire service used a simple linguistic tone.

Due to the iconoclastic facets of the Jehovah's Witnesses, symbols are glaringly lacking. Jehovah is never depicted; it is considered pagan and disgraceful to worship what they would refer to as false idols in the image of God.

In contrast to the relatively austere and unadorned settings of the Jehovah's Witness service, I attended the service of the All Saints Parish, or an Episcopalian church on Easter Day. The All Saints Parish was a parish of the Anglican Province of America and decidedly unlike that of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Little did I know that their service would be ceremonial and especially on the day of Easter. Before entering the church, many dissimilarities appeared. First, there was a choir dressed in red gowns each holding their hymnal book proceeding into the entrance of the church. A reverend, rector, and several members of the vestry were present and handing out a pamphlet for the ceremony that would occur during that day.

From the start, it was apparent that the members of this church were not iconoclastic; the pamphlet featured a painting of the Resurrection in remembrance of Jesus' return after death. Upon entering the church and the doorway, I witnessed many types of adornments within the church. Pews were located on the right and left sides of the church with a center aisle lined with red carpet. Kneeling benches were supplied in order to kneel and pray several times during the service. The room was dark from the filtering mirage of colored panes and woodened panel walls. The smell of incense dominated the room and the altar featured a large cross. That day was a special occasion on Easter commemorating Jesus' resurrection. The service consisted of several ceremonial rituals. A hymn initiated the beginning of the service where both the choir and the members commenced to sing.