

The Gap between Christianity and Compassion

Many people have commented about the state of modern civilization. Often their commentaries involve hints of the degeneration of the human heart, examples of widespread violence and hatred, and people's inability to cope with the reality right before their eyes. People talk of denial that blocks our ability to be humane. The story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," by Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a good portrait of the degeneration of the human heart and the role of the Christian church in that degeneration. It is ironic that Christians, in blowing the horn of compassion, can be so degenerate in their prejudices. A theme of this story seems to be that the Christian religion, in its typical form, has degenerated in modern times. People have forgotten that compassion and religion are not two sides of the same coin. One can exist without the other.

The inhumanity begins with Pelayo and Elisenda, the main couple in the story. They find a man with enormous wings, dirty, weak and basically helpless, on the shore of the ocean. They stand there, gaping at him and uncertain of themselves, while this man lays uncomfortably face down in the mud. When they finally decide to pull him free from the mud, they throw him in a chicken coop. Instead of treating him to a bed, bath or meal, they put him in something that is notorious for being filthy and extremely unsanitary. Throughout the course of the story, their inhumanity towards the angel continues unchecked. The angel's health is of little personal concern to the couple even when he is sick in the story, and he is treated as a circus sideshow. The couple uses the money they gain from their personal little "sideshow" to build a house equipped with "iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in." Never mind that their child's miraculous recovery at the beginning of the story is attributed to the angel's magic, they don't want him near them or their child. Never once do they show any gratitude toward the angel for the health, money and material wealth gained at the angel's expense.

The couple's treatment of the angel is an excellent insight into Christian hypocrisy. They seem to accept the Christian concept of divinity because they accept that the old man is an angel. They believe the wise neighbor woman when she tells them that mothballs are the proper food for angels, and by attempting to feed the angel mothballs, they show their belief that he is really an angel. But, the couple is very unkind to him. By giving only the barest threads of hospitality and care, they only show their neighbors that they have done the Christian thing of putting up the poor man. No true kindness is displayed. In a way, the outer shell of the angel (dirty, decrepit, incomprehensible, and ill) seems to represent the state of the couples' spirits. The dynamics between the angel and the couple illustrate the most acceptable form of hypocrisy in the church at its worst.

The dynamics between the villagers and the angel are also interesting. The villagers seem to be only a little more humane than the couple, but they are not what one could call compassionate towards the angel. They admire the angel and believe in his healing powers (at first), yet they pluck his feathers, prod him and throw stones at him. In a way, their outward treatment of the angel seems to illustrate the internal dynamics within the church and, more specifically, the preacher. Neither the church, nor the preacher, seem to care about the angel's feelings. The church writes the preacher and asks questions about superficial features of the angel; they want to know if he can stand on the head of a pin, if his navel is different, and what dialect he speaks

in. The preacher's questions for the church go unanswered each time he receives correspondence from them.

Eventually, the villagers give up outwardly, just as the priest gives up internally. They turn to the most inhuman and undivine looking creature in the story: a spider woman. The spider woman was turned into a spider by the divine for being "bad." In turning to this creature instead of the angel, they reject the divine and opt for compassion. Their treatment of her is much more considerate, empathetic and compassionate. It was also compassionate of them to leave the angel to his own devices. The angel seemed to find their attention unpleasant, and it was as if he only wanted to be left alone. The priest went through a similar internal experience as he grew more and more frustrated with the church. His faith grew weaker with each stupid question asked by the church and eventually he also decided to leave the angel alone and tend to more important things.

The angel's inability to reach anyone but the child on any level is also indicative of the gap between Christianity and compassion. He is patient with everyone and very tolerant. His actions represent the kindness that is supposed to be a part of Christ's faith. He is old (just as Christianity is old). He is uncorrupted, hurts none and is not cruel. He seems to be compassionate because he attempts to heal those that come to him, even though he fails in odd ways. But he is incomplete in their eyes because of his packaging (missing teeth, feathers and having a bad heart) and his offbeat healing. Both the compassionate and the believers abandon him eventually. He is alien to all but the child. He is symbolic of something that the ordinary person cannot comprehend and does not live by.

The only creature able to accept the angel is the young child belonging to the couple in the story. There are interesting parallels between the child and the angel. The child's innocence reflects the angel's, as does the combination of humanity and divine inherent in both. The fact that they both caught chicken pox at the same time is highly indicative of the parallel between them, as is the fact that the child was the only one healed properly by the angel. Children have always been a symbol of divinity in their innocence; the winged man symbolizes divinity by resembling an angel. And the child is compassionate in the way that he accepts the angel for whatever he might be. The child does not comprehend bad treatment of someone based on appearance alone. But, the gap is still illustrated through their ages. The man is extremely old whereas the child is young. Their surfaces are totally opposed to each other. This parallel seems to indicate that compassion and religion can live in opposite worlds, and that they often do.

Religion and compassion can live in two different worlds, yet they can also live in one. Being religious does not mean that you will be compassionate and vice versa. I believe Marquez is trying to make a point through the irony in this story. We must become like the child and accept the unattractive and unappealing to achieve the quality evident in both representations of that in this story: the child and the old man. (it was only after the appearance of the unattractive angel in the story that the child grew well). If we do not, the gap between religion and compassion will only remain in the world, as it does in the story. Both must be developed in order to truly accept what exists right before our eyes. Using these lines of thinking, perhaps forgiveness is bit overrated?

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