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The Christian View of Religious Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy. We encounter it every day of our lives, but do we truly know what it is? Many have attempted to define it, but from where do these definitions arise? These are all topics I hope to address in this paper. Although hypocrisy may be thought of currently as a moral or ethical problem, and not necessarily one that falls within the realm of religion, I feel that the great religions of the world have a lot to say on this issue. By looking at the stance taken by Christianity, I hope to bring to light some of the major contributors to hypocrisy.

I have found that many college students begin to take a closer look at themselves during their undergraduate years. As young adults, we are faced with a world that offers a variety of choices. Many of us come from rather sheltered backgrounds. We have grown up in homes where religion and the rules of our parents have had a major impact in guiding our behavior. In the college environment, those guides are not often as strongly present. We no longer live in sheltered homes, and we are bombarded with a variety of people who hold views very different than our own. How we approach moral problems often seems tied to our religious outlook on life. It is interesting to note, that many students, myself included, behave in hypocritical manners during their college years.

As a graduating senior, I have spent a great deal of time recently reflecting on what I believe. As a practicing Christian, I can take the beliefs avowed by the church as a starting point for my own. That works as a good first approximation. At least I know what I'm *supposed* to believe. The interesting question becomes: do I act like I believe that? Would someone be able to look at my actions and be able to deduce my beliefs? I often doubt it. What does that say about the way I practice my religion? I purport that I, and others, suffer from religious hypocrisy.

Webster's dictionary has an entry for "hypocrisy." They define it in this manner: a feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not; *especially*, the false assumption of an appearance of virtue or religion. This definition is particularly good support for my paper, since the religious overtones of the word are not overlooked. In fact, even the etymological data provides insight. Webster asserts that the word comes from the Greek word *hypokrisis*, the act of playing a part on the stage, hypocrisy, from *hypokrinesthai* to answer, act on the stage, from *hypo-* + *krinein* to decide.

Before delving into some Biblical evidence for hypocrisy, I hope to give you a bit more insight into my topic choice. I have been reading a novel for pleasure – something that I do all too rarely these days. The book is called The Diamond Age, and the story takes place in the future – a future in which nanotechnology is

prevalent and moral questions seem just as poignant as ever. While reading recently, I found myself drawn toward the following passage:

“You know, when I was a young man, hypocrisy was deemed the worst of vices... It was all because of moral relativism. You see, in that sort of a climate, you are not allowed to criticize others – after all, if there is no absolute right and wrong, then what grounds are there for criticism? This led to a good deal of general frustration, for people are naturally censorious and love nothing better than to criticize other's shortcomings. And so it was that they seized on hypocrisy and elevated it from a ubiquitous peccadillo into the monarch of all vices. For you see, even if there is no right or wrong, you can find grounds to criticize another person by contrasting what he has espoused with what he has actually done. In this case you are not making any judgment whatsoever as to the correctness of his views or the morality of his behavior – you are merely pointing out that he has said one thing and done another.

Calling someone a Victorian those days was like calling them a fascist or a Nazi... Because they were hypocrites, the Victorians were despised in the late twentieth century. Many of the persons who held such opinions were, of course, guilty of outlandish conduct themselves, and yet saw no paradox in holding such views because they were not hypocrites themselves – they took no moral stances and lived by none. So they were morally superior to the Victorians even though – in fact, because – they had no morals at all.

We take a somewhat different view of hypocrisy, in the late 20th century, a hypocrite was someone who espoused high moral views as part of a planned campaign of deception – he never held these beliefs sincerely and routinely violated them in privacy.

Of course most hypocrites are not like that. Most of the time it is a spirit-is-willing, flesh-is-weak sort of thing... <however> that we occasionally violate our own stated moral code does not imply that we are insincere in espousing that code. No one ever said that it was easy to hew a strict code of conduct. Really, the difficulties involved, the missteps we make along the way – are what make it interesting. The internal, and eternal, struggle between our base impulses and the rigorous demands of our own moral system is quintessentially human. It is how we conduct ourselves in that struggle that determines how we may in time be judged by a higher power.”

It was this (rather lengthy) passage that caused me to call into question many of my actions. I am a “practicing” Christian – or that is what I would have called myself a week or so ago – I go to church and take time to read my Bible.

However, it is not so easy to call myself a Christian when I now see that my actions are not in line with my beliefs. If I were truly a Christian, would I not take more time for others? Wouldn't I care less about the present and more about eternity? I feel that these are important questions that I need to address, and since I have been given the opportunity to choose a paper topic of my own, I felt that now was as good a time as any.

Hypocrisy, as I have pointed out, is not a new trait. As it infiltrates the world today, it was present in Biblical times, too. The early Christian church had to deal with hypocrisy on a regular basis. I think a good way to present the many facets of religious hypocrisy would be to first examine a few key passages from the Old Testament, then to proceed to the New Testament evidence. Once all of the evidence has been brought to light, I hope to come to a better understanding of what religious hypocrisy is and what I can do – and others – to avoid falling into it without concern.

Before I begin my chronological journey through the Bible, I want to take a moment to look at one of the writings of Paul. Paul, one of the most influential apostles, struggled with religious hypocrisy on a personal level. Paul, known as Saul before his conversion to Christianity, was one of the most active persecutors of the Christian church. The story of his conversion is told in Acts, chapter nine:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way (*Christians*), whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” He replied.

After Saul's encounter with the Lord, he became an active evangelist and proponent of the faith. He was suspected of religious hypocrisy by the apostles early in his ministry. These men of faith had a difficult time believing that Paul had truly accepted Jesus Christ as Lord. They worried that he was attempting to infiltrate the group by pretending to be one of them. With time, however, they realized that it was not religious hypocrisy that drove Paul to preach in the name of Jesus – Paul's conversion was genuine. His encounter with the Lord on the way to Damascus had caused a radical change in his behavior.

The book of Romans was written by Paul after his conversion to the faith. He wrote this letter to introduce himself to the people of Rome and to encourage the believers in Christ to help him in his quest to spread the gospel. He hoped to defend and further develop the gospel that he had been preaching and devoted a good deal of his writing to encouraging the early Christians to rely on God's grace. The major themes of the book are faith, grace, righteousness, and justification. The first chapters deal with the foundations of the faith, while the remaining chapters illustrate how these teachings can play a role in everyday life.

Paul's letter to the Romans was a particularly good launching point in my search for Biblical evidence, since the book does a good job of explaining what it means to follow Christ. Understanding this is critical, since I would remain blind to

aspects of my religious hypocrisy without a solid concept of the form a Christian's life should take. In Romans 7, Paul writes:

“We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin, I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is the sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”

It might appear that Paul's words are steeped in hypocrisy from the start. Rather than worry about his actions and take them on as his own personal problems, it seems that he is being a hypocrite by not accepting the actions as his own. I would make the claim that Paul wasn't trying to back away from his personal responsibility in this case. Paul felt that the power of sin was very real, and his word choice forces that to become apparent. Additionally, describing his struggle with religious hypocrisy in this manner emphasizes the aspect of struggle – even war – that is associated with actions and words that do not coincide. This is very reminiscent of the passage from the diamond age. We see a parallel between the speakers' struggles with the good they want to do and the actions that do not make sense in the framework of their beliefs.

“So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Many other examples in the New Testament deal with the theme of hypocrisy. In an earlier quote from The Diamond Age, the speaker in the passage refers to situations in which the “mind is willing, but the spirit is weak.” This quote comes from Matthew 26. In this part of the Gospel, Jesus had gone to Gethsemane to pray prior to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. A group of disciples accompanies him, and they pledge to remain awake and pray while Jesus retreats to a quiet place to commune with God. However. These pledges of support are shallow and soon forgotten as the disciples give way to sleep.

“Then <Jesus> returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter. Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” (Matt 26:40-41)

The disciples’ lack of dedication to the Lord sparked His anger. The Christian God is merciful, but this passage and others suggest that we will be given grace only if we put our entire heart and effort into our religious pursuits. This idea is found many other places in the Bible. If the writer of the Psalms is to be believed,

the following verse from Psalm 66 serves as evidence that those who come to the Lord with sincere and pure intentions will be heard.

“I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.”

And the following verse from Proverbs 15 adds more weight to the argument.

“The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.” (Proverbs 15:8)

One then must wonder what hope exists for the wicked. This passage implies, however, that if the wicked abandon their insincerity and genuinely seek God, they will find him. However, if they make sacrifices insincerely, simply as a ruse to attain the favor of the Lord, God will reject this as false worship. For these reasons, money, attendance at church, and other ‘religious’ acts do not ensure salvation or close communion with God. These actions can be performed without the humility of spirit necessary to acknowledge one’s sin and the need for repentance.

The book of Isaiah deals with hypocrisy as its main theme. Isaiah felt that the Nation of Israel was leading a double life, and he felt a deep sense of disgust for this compromise. The book was written as an attempt to get through to the

people of Israel – he hoped that they would come to see the hypocrisy of their ways and become more sincere with God. In chapter 5, he writes:

“Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes.”

I think the implication of this passage is clear – those who willfully sin against the Lord will pay a price. This seems to be the form of hypocrisy that is most offensive to God. He is displeased when his people do not follow his commands out of ignorance, but his anger rages against those who understand what they should do and do not do it and against those who attempt to lead others astray.

The idea of motivation playing a role in God’s assessment of his people comes to light again in chapter 17 of Jeremiah:

“I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, and according to what his deeds deserve.”

Here we see that since God seeks right conduct that stems from proper motives, good intentions cannot excuse wrong conduct. However, righteous living that seeks to hide ungodly motives is hypocrisy. God judges both errors. For deeds to be rewarded, honoring God’s wishes and acting out of love for him are required.

Later in the book of Jeremiah, more hypocrisy is evident. In chapter 42, the Israelites claim that they will listen to the Lord's commands and do what he says. However, they did not have open hearts. In their minds, they had already decided upon a plan of action. If the word of the Lord conflicted with their wishes, they paid no heed and continued with their original plans. Lord, who saw their true intent and knew that their promises were false, labeled them hypocrites.

This theme is continued in one of the subsequent books of the Bible. In the book of Amos, it is written,

"I hate, despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship with your offerings, I will have no regard for them."

The question that arises from this passage is why God would hate the religious customs that he himself had established. These customs were to be tangible, outward expressions designed to be practiced by those who wanted to demonstrate their faith in and love for God. However, the Israelites during the time of Amos were suffering from religious hypocrisy. They still attended the feasts and went through the motions of offering sacrifices, yet their hearts were not in their actions. By continuing these traditions when the proper motivation had long vanished, their religion was insincere. It had form, yet lacked real substance. The Israelites even took their false worship of the Lord to another

extreme – they used the rituals set forth by their God to worship idols. It was never the customs that God hated – it was the hypocrisy of his chosen people. If God's distaste for hypocrisy were ever in doubt in the teachings of the Old Testament, Jesus' teachings leave no doubt of the Lord's opinion. In Matthew, Jesus says,

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.”

Jesus was extremely bothered by the religious leaders of this time. Six times in chapter 23 of Matthew, he refers to the Pharisees as hypocrites. These men had exchanged the holy for the hollow. They obeyed the word – or claimed to – but they actively disobeyed the spirit of the law. Jesus desires genuine spiritual commitment.

Continuing with the Gospels, Mark has something to say on the subject of hypocrisy as well. In chapter seven of his gospel, Mark writes,

“And <Jesus> said to them: ‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘whatever help you might

otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Corban is a Hebrew word that means ‘gift devoted to God.’ If something were declared as corban, it could never be used for another purpose. The people in this example were running a sort of scam. By protecting their assets by placing them under a vow – even needy parents were excluded from help once the money, property, etc were labeled as corban. This sort of purposeful, willful denial of God’s will was the height of hypocrisy.

The theme of hypocrisy is prevalent in the other Gospels as well. In Chapter twelve of his Gospel, Luke writes:

“Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying, ‘Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.”

This passage is troubling, and at first the comparison between yeast and hypocrisy seems unclear. Evidence from the Old Testament, however, tells us

that yeast was the Biblical symbol of corruption, since its very nature caused it to expand, spreading throughout the dough and corrupting the entire batch of bread. The common saying goes “a rotten apple spoils the whole barrel.” In the same way, a little hypocrisy can spread through a person, contaminating his or her spiritual integrity.

Although the earliest manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not include this portion of John’s gospel, John 8:7 speaks about hypocrisy on another level. Attempting to catch Jesus going against the Old Testament teachings, the Pharisees bring to him a woman caught in adultery and ask if she should be stoned as commanded in the old teachings:

“When they kept questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘if any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’”

Jesus’ goal was to rebuke hypocrisy and draw the people in the crowd toward self-examination. This period of inward reflection before passing judgment was critical. As the masses reflected on their own shortcomings and sins, their desire to see this woman punished dissipated. This passage is reminiscent of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew— take the beam out of your own eye before removing the speck in your brother’s.

The passages from the Gospels have illustrated God's desire to call us to examine our hearts and search out our own hypocrisy. What happens to those who fail to do this? A rather frightening tale concerning the heavy price that can be asked of those who are hypocritical can be found in Acts 5.

“Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, ‘ Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men, but to God.’ “

Before telling the end of the story, perhaps it is appropriate to pause and examine this first section. Often in the modern world we are faced with situations similar to this one. As honest, hardworking folks, we would never outright steal, but it seems increasingly accepted that we cut a little off the top or tell less than the whole truth. However, even if we are able to cut a scheme so that we take an unnoticed fraction of the income, what does this mean in a religious sense? In this specific situation, having sold his land for a good price, Ananias brings *most* of the money he acquires from the sale to the waiting apostles. Peter sees his deception almost immediately, and is incredibly angered by what has been done. I feel it is safe to assume that it was not because of the money itself, given

Peter's words that follow. He is shocked that Ananias would choose to try to lie to God. Even if his deception could slip past those around him, no deception is too small to escape the eyes of an all-seeing God.

It seems clear based on the textual evidence that hypocrisy is something that is thought of as a sin, and sins, by nature, are offences deserving of punishment. The rest of the story in Acts tells us what happened to the two characters:

“When Ananias heard <Peter's words>, he fell down and died. And great fear sized all those who heard what had happened.”

Later in the story, Sapphira is approached and when she, too, lies about the money, she falls dead. Is this what we are to assume will happen to us if we attempt to deceive the Holy Spirit? As lying creatures, we know that God does not strike us dead for this offense. If all who lied were struck down as these two were, who would be left? I found no other textual references that would give greater insight as to the penalty that we would suffer from religious hypocrisy, yet it is my impression that hypocrisy will be part of our ‘final judgment by a higher power.’

From the evidence presented above, I hope the reader has a greater appreciation of some of the forms that religious hypocrisy can take. Religious hypocrisy is perhaps the most serious form of hypocrisy for a person of faith – in

fact all hypocrisy seems to run contrary to God's will. In modern times, hypocrisy is often considered a moral or ethical problem – if it is considered a problem at all. The western approach to hypocrisy in the world is to accept it as part of our nature. I do not argue with that point – as humans, we have many aspects of our nature that serve to separate us from 'goodness' as defined by the Christian religion. If I am to lead my life following the examples set forth in the Bible, the answer is not a simple one. I cannot be satisfied simply to say that I will be hypocritical because it is in my nature.

Paraphrasing from the eloquent passage from The Diamond Age: just because I do not act in the manner a Christian should act does not in any way mean that I believe in the faith itself less strongly. It means, however, that I must struggle to be a better Christian. No one ever said that being a person of faith was an easy task. Judging from all of the ways that God's people managed to get themselves into trouble in the Old and New Testaments – the task is closer to impossible. The *struggle* is real. The struggle is what defines us. I now believe that all my moments of hypocrisy do bring me closer to God, as long as I see my faults and strive toward righting them. A passage in the Bible says that God desires from us a humble and contrite heart. When viewing the ways in which I fall short of the doctrine I supposedly espouse, I cannot help but feel humbled. I think that is the key – religious hypocrisy is spiritually dangerous and very real. As long as I am not content to be a hypocrite, I move myself away from the hypocrisy. And as

long as I am prepared to fight the spiritual battle Paul alluded to in Romans, I may, in time, be judged by a higher power: not for the hypocrisy that has been present in my life, but for the person I have struggled to be.

Reference: Stephenson, Neal. The Diamond Age. Bantam Press: New York, 1995.