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**“Dads Are Kinda Rough”**

PART 1:

The individual, whom I will name *N*, differing from me in gender, race, and ethnicity, whom I interviewed met me at Starbucks on Monday, November 20 at 8AM located on I-Drive in Orlando, Florida, the heart of Orlando’s tourism. This particular Starbucks was situated directly opposite from SeaWorld and right next to Aquatica, and so, the shop was bustling with tourists or locals engaging in their pre-Thanksgiving festivities, as I interviewed the individual during the holiday break. For the entire interview, I decided to write concise notes on the deeper meanings of his responses. We sat at the outside seating anterior to the shop and the closest table to the front door. I remember being conscious because we met when the Starbucks was operating at its peak, and my interviewee was notably opinionated and, as one would say, audaciously outspoken and quite loud, about religion, particularly being Judaism, Islam and Christianity, so I was worried about customers getting... offended.

My interviewee, as he described, “was a pretty hard Roman Catholic and now is a stone-cold atheist”. In his own words, he defines religion simply: “religion is poison”. And so, I decided to focus the interview upon his three-word definition of how religion is poison, in which I understood religion as being this inherent negative because it perverts the individual morality and reasoning, thus highlighting the issue of religion for him: religious thinking.

## PART 2:

This disposition was not a visceral cognizance of spontaneity, rather, an organic development of sorts. *N* was exposed to religion at an early age, integrating himself into the Abrahamic religion of Christianity, specifically Catholicism. Over time, he was beleaguered by only the worst of trepidations that a religious individual could acquire: doubt. *N* found himself raising questions regarding the nature of God and the extent of His supposed benevolence, questions that did not produce satisfactory answers, ergo, the expectation of maintaining faith and taking as gospel certain definite “truths”, such as the dogma that the Virgin Mary was assumed into heaven bodily, was to him, unattractive. There is the start with this axiomatic understanding that no matter what the answer is, individuals must believe these “absolutes”, hence, are working backwards from this conclusion, consequently provoking an uncertainty towards what the grand, metaphysical, “why” is. Regardless of his uneasiness, *N* performed the duties expected of him, sitting on the pews praying, yet doubting the point of it all, wondering if he was just... mumbling. Ironically, the place where it all came together for *N* was from reading *Come Be My Light*, written about Mother Teresa, a woman that was held up as a pristine paragon of Catholic virtue, in which, according to *N*, she wrote a letter to a priest confessing that even she did not hear the voice of God when she prayed. Her priest wrote back reassuring her that *that* is the proof that God exists, instigating *N*’s final snap. He declared that there was no winning this argument. This misconstrued, circular idea of the absence of evidence being the evidence for the proof, being that “I do not hear God, therefore he exists”, opened *N* up to entertaining atheist ideas.

***The Disparity in Relations to an Individual's Decisions for a Society and Themselves***

A portion of *N*'s responses raised the question: If the struggle is for an individual and personal growth, and an individual does grow personally, is that not better for society? When religion seems to struggle for its own independence, it seems that the society begins to suffer. By and large, if an individual is struggling for something, which, in principle, is a "good" thing, even if it does not directly impact the collective whole, it will, eventually, engender impact in a positive sense for themselves if the moral reasons for the struggle are ultimately "good".

Therefore, a larger discussion question lay at the heart of *N*'s responses: Is there ever a struggle that is negative to an individual? I would imagine Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of the autobiography *Between the World and Me* written to his teenage son, Samori, would reply to the question, employing only the most careful, poetic, eloquently constructed of prose, with the following: "Hell no."

Coates' concept of the Dream can be defined, in a broad sense, as a whole-hearted pursuit for the traditional "white American Dream", yet feigning ignorance in regard to the injustices embedded deep into the nooks and crannies of the fabricated Dream, persisting in modern day, with the Dream entailing this belief that the establishment of America is the product of a higher power, or, "God's handiwork", where freedom and opportunities are tangible concepts to all Americans (Coates 12). Throughout the literature, he assesses the role in which the Dream threatens the eventual dissipation of black "bodies", or spirit. Coates endorses a pessimistic outlook of what the world is and can be, promoting the tenant that the beauty of a struggle is the affirmation of a dignified self that the struggle avers, therefore, although a struggle may not elicit the betterment of society, the struggle itself has meaning. In his hierarchy,

he places hope below struggle, and that individuals should not turn to a hope that the trials, the tribulations, in life will improve. The value of a struggle, in the end, rests in the assurance of an individual's honor and sanity. However, Coates' analogy of the Dream is described as the Dream being "treehouses and the Cub Scouts" yet "resting on [their] backs, the bedding made from [their] bodies," (Coates 11). Coates argues that the Dream was and is only achieved by the exploitation of black Americans. Further, Coates indicates a fear of "thieves... try[ing] to enlist [his son] in [his son's] own robbery and disguise their burning and looting as Christian charity," as well as black individuals being "fastened to their god, a god whom [Coates cannot know and in whom [Coates] does not believe. But, god or not, the armor is all over them... or perhaps it is not armor at all. Perhaps it is life extension, a kind of loan allowing [his son] to take the assaults heaped upon [his son] now and pay down the debt later," (Coates 101), (Coates 142). Thus, though the Dream, a seemingly eminent and acclaimed, and congenitally Christian, idealism of what a goal should be defined as, is the default aim shared amongst the vast majorities of Americans, the Dream is, nonetheless, toxic in regard to cultivating an individualized body. Struggle, on the other hand, is entirely meaningful and regardless of whatever situation a person is in, their body, their individual struggle to settle into themselves, should be embraced, which is the overall message to Samori.

*N's* response to that would seem to be that a struggle to even if, on the surface, improve, has nothing to do with society, it is ultimately better for society. If a struggle is not about improving society at large, but about some small element, such as an individual's house, or an individual's personality, the improvement of those individual elements is ultimately beneficial. However, whether the impact to a broader "society" is inherently negative or positive, the

struggle itself has meaning to the individual, posing a convergence with Coates' critique. *N*, however, admits that the term "society" itself is broad. People use the word society, but, when scrutinizing its definition, which is essentially a collection of individuals, a struggle that does not benefit the individual, but is so for society, this means, for *N*, that the worst evils on the world are perpetrated on precisely this. In one of, for *N*, the most extreme propositions, which is the Nazi's, their ideas were that they were struggling for the German race, not trying to benefit individuals, but what happens when someone is trying to struggle for an ideal that is beyond the individual? As he firmly states, "You crush the individuals, i.e., you crush people." Once individuals are taken out of the struggle, this creates the very idea needed in order to justify, for *N*, the worst acts of human rights violations, connecting with the religious notion of self-sacrifice.

*N*'s responses regarding sacrifice is typically framed from a religious and political framework. To put a caveat on whether it is something to be praised, *N* states that sacrifice should only be praised if the sacrifice is edifying to the individual making the sacrifice. This refers back to the point, where if the individual is taken out of the struggle, there begins the justifying of heinous acts. Coates would agree with this point made by *N*, forming a connection with his readings on the sacrifice of black bodies in making a fictitiously great America. Coates recalls instances from his childhood where, each February, there would be school assemblies to discuss the Civil Rights Movement, where in these assemblies, there would be film screenings meant to inspire an American nationalism, where the "teachers urged [them] toward the example of freedom marches, Freedom Riders, and Freedom Summer", however, in the films, Coates notices the fetishization of black Americans mistreatment and suppression, further

accentuating the divide between that of black and white Americans, where, as Coates interprets, “the black people in these films seemed to love the worst things in life”, (Coates 32). This introduces the idea that black Americans, too, accept the Dream by trying to ascertain a dream that was systematically constructed to be intangible. Therefore, sacrifice, to both Coates and *N*, must be something that lifts the individual up. It must be a sacrifice that has been freely given by the individual, and it must be something that is already in keeping with their own, individual ethics, not a group-think, as *N* would put it, because it is not their own understanding. If someone, who has their own individual ethics that they have developed and who has compiled logical steps in order for them to be this individual as a growth point, chooses to sacrifice themselves, that is something to be praised. In an individual context, if it is in keeping with their individually developed understanding of right or wrong, and it is freely given, then yes, sacrifice can be praised.

The very nature of the meaning of struggle to both Coates and *N* resonates a unison. Coates would argue that a struggle is meaningful only if the individual is uplifted or heightens their development of a personal pneuma, and *N* would contend to that by arguing that a struggle is meaningful only if the struggle A. cultivates an individual's sense of self *and* B. must always have the individuals as the center-point of the struggle. Coates would agree with *N*'s credence that religion does falsify an individual's ability to reason and effectively provide rationale towards life and its uncertainties. Coates urges individuals to remain in a falsifying territory, as opposed to others who believe that their lives will get better in the end, especially if a God gives them this hope, with religion being an oppressive force in the context of appreciating the individual body. The beauty of struggling bodies does not need a God behind it, and this beauty

is just as sustaining as any religious belief. Moreso, if God gives the right to an activism, then the object of hope can crash at any moment. Therefore, Coates would agree with *N* on the subject of reason and its subversion, particularly in the context of Christianity in America. The underlying principle for the two atheists is the same: religion is poisonous in regard to crafting an individual's sense of morality. With the exception of the “Jeffrey Dahmer’s of the world”, to *N*, the majority of people are born with basic, innate qualities centered around compassion. These qualities are often manipulated in order to puppeteer individuals to engage in morally corrosive acts. For *N*, religion does that. Specifically, religious thinking. The struggle to improve is valuable, arriving at the destination is evil. And so, individuals should struggle to improve themselves, but individuals should never get to the end because then, the point is lost. It is, as *N* would champion, all about the journey with an unreachable end.

To wrap up the deeper ordeal hidden in the underbelly of Coates’ philosophical outlook on religion, being that fundamentally, there is no hope for a better world, *N* would principally attest to this, due to his belief of an underlying human essence of rapaciousness and greed, coupled with the religious belief of sin being forgiven through repenting. It is almost as if individuals have a masochistic urge within them which religion placates to. For *N*, Christianity seems to possess an almost malicious permanence due to the enchanting phantasm of being forgiven of any guilts without having to do any “real work”, connecting to the idea of religion being responsible for perverting individuals of utilizing their own rationale, as religion is the ultimate “get out of jail free card.” *N* notes particular instances in his life where people criticized the extent of his freedom of choice, where he could “rape or murder as many people as he wants since God is absent from his life”, and, to that, *N* states that this indicates a lack of morality with

that of the religious, since the only thing preventing the religionists from engaging in morally “wrong” behaviors is an... “imaginary friend”, as *N* would probably say, labeling the manner as a sort of “wish-fulfilment”. The overarching fraternity of religionists include the element of taking advantage to participate in reprehensible acts because they are being forgiven. Coates would agree with his fellow atheist, again drawing parallels with black bodies holding up the figmental Dream.

### ***The “Why?”***

*N* does, however, indicate a flaw of atheism, being a dubiety of what can replace religion that can provide an individual both solidarity and dignity. There is a serious lack of any alternative, for *N*, of an ability to provide that connection, that meaning, that attraction that there is a place that individuals can seek refuge in, that instigates a complex gravitation of binding individuals to this captor.

At a basic level, everyone is scared of the dark and is scared to die. In Sigmund Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud states:

“It is an infantile prototype, of which is in fact only the continuation. For once before one has found oneself in a similar state of helplessness: as a small child, in relation to one’s parents. One had reason to fear them, and especially one’s father; and yet one was sure of his protection against the dangers one knew. Thus it was natural to assimilate the two situations... a man makes the forces of nature... [by giving them] the character of a father. He turns them into gods... not only an infantile prototype but a phylogenetic one, (Freud 21).



To sum up Freud's point, God is not just seen as the Father, but he is seen as a *father*. *N* would wholly agree with this interpretation of God being given the characteristics of a father, even citing this particular work of Freud as being the premise of his belief of why God is represented as a father. *N* states simply: "Dads are kinda rough. That's why God is a father." *N* holds that by giving God the characteristics of a father, it fills the void for all the pain and suffering of the world. Religion gives a semblance in trying to justify why bad things happen and why things cannot seem to go right and what makes it "okay," as it is human nature to fall into a child-like helplessness. There is an aspect of the human experience that is sort of, as *N* defines as, numinous, where there are these moments that individuals have that can be defined as experienced poetry, moments where individuals feel there is a larger connection to an abstract "something". In an intellectual substance, *N* understands that humanity is part of a much larger logic and force that is moving in the universe. There are moments where people want to attempt to connect with that and feel that beyond their own individual experience. Religion can provide an access point. In that regard, it has fulfilled that human need.

Freud would have a great deal of merit when analyzing this aspect of *N*'s religious disposition. When looking at Gods perceived role in the world, problems are lucidly presented. If He is a father, that explains it, as fathers, in the familial role, are generally a protector, a figure of staunch vehemence, or as Freud would describe, "his longing for a father is a motive identical with his need for protection against the consequences of human weakness," (Freud 30). Also, there is an element where, from a scientific perspective, humans evolved before God did, therefore God was created in man's image. Emphasis on man. From a standpoint of evolutionary biology, women were generally seen as cattle. When man developed a society and thought of

ways at how to organize that society, people in power did not want to give up their power, so, for *N*, it helps individuals, who are men, that man has a divine authority who is also masculine.

There is an emphasizing of patriarchal ideas on how to control women. No religion in the world does not confine women, according to *N*, and the perception of God as a father reinforces patriarchal norms. Parallels can be drawn with Freud's interpretation of God as a father, however, Freud's description of the differences between a mother and a father do reflect a biased view of women, implied when Freud states that "the mother is soon replaced by the stronger father," emphasis on "stronger", and so, Freud would somewhat agree with *N* on this (Freud 30).

Freud and *N* possess similar beliefs on how religion hinders the development of morality for an individual. *N* holds a grounded confidence that religious belief is justified, though the justifications of the belief are not ethical, similar as to how, as he provides the example being, that the internment of the Japanese was justifiable, but the justifications were not ethical. Freud would mostly concur with *N* on this explanation, as Freud argues that "religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity, like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose of the Oedipal complex, out of the relation to the father. If this view is right, it is supposed that a turning-away from religion is bound to occur," translating to mean that religion is a delusion: an unjustified universal obsessional neurosis that must be cured (Freud 55). Further, both *N* and Freud believe that logic and rationality can be used to unify a society, as religion, for *N*, is deeply flawed, and for Freud, "Our God, [Logos, will fulfil whichever of these wishes nature outside us allows," (Freud 69). Rationality, in turn, will precipitate a procurement of the individual morality that religion distorts.

However, *N* does not believe that through rationalization, quantification of every element should occur. Although he believes that no one person has the answers to all the questions in life and that none of the answers can be achieved if individuals are not constantly curious, educated, and rationally reflect upon their encounters, the pathologization of human nature's obsessiveness of the quantification of everything should not be coupled with a pursuit of logic, as there is, as he says, nothing to learn from reducing everything to an objective entirely, such as experience.

### ***Religion Versus The Religious***

There is enough human experience in the world, both religious and nonreligious, to say that an individual's capacity to understand the inner mechanics of the world is miniscule. There are those who have had tremendously profound spiritual experience that would justify that there is a larger force working. For *N*, the religious lexicon or religious language has prostituted a large sum of vocabulary, vocabulary associated with that of religion. The word *divine* personifies the metaphysical forces in the universe, giving *it* this idea that *it* is a personality, that *it* is a individual, that *it* is, therefore a God, but when analyzing the evolution of the universe through time, whether it be the life cycle of a star or the way in which the plants die and reincarnate or the cerebral ecosystem of how the universe and the galaxies and all human actions seem to fit together in a scale far beyond human understanding, that is something that is an experience that can be developed, even if it is through prayer activities or meditation activities that is ultimately edifying to the people experiencing it. To *N*, people might call it *divine*, but religion has poisoned that word.

John Dewey, author of *A Common Faith*, would agree with *N* on his interpretation of experience and the monopolization of religion in regard to defining what a *religious* experience is. Dewey states:

“The idea that “God” represents a unification of ideal values that is essentially imaginative in origin when the imagination supervenes in conduct is attended with verbal difficulties owing to our frequent use of the word “imagination” to denote fantasy and doubtful reality. But the reality of ideal ends as ideals is vouched for by their undeniable power in action... The unity [effected through imagination] signifies not a single Being, but the unity of loyalty and effort evoked by the fact that many ends are one in the power of their ideal, or imaginative, quality to stir and hold us,” (Dewey 40).

We give ourselves up to, therefore, a unification of ideals. That is what defines a God to Dewey. Not a singular force, rather, the stringing of intellectually compiled interpretations of the environment which individuals find themselves and putting these components together like the final product of a puzzle: a God is symbolic of our ideal values. This submission, this voluntary yielding of the individual body, the individual morality, in the deceptive trade of lives to a life of subjugation under a one, omnipotent, definitive “God” is a life of indentured servitude, more even, voluntary slavery. Dewey would contend to *N*’s interpretation of the Being existing within an experience, not due to the omission of the elements of religion on what makes an experience instinctly religious, as Dewey makes the conscious choice to remain ambiguous in his characterization of being a believer versus a non-believer, but rather, due to his belief that an experience is religious based on how the conditions in which certain ideals that arise from experience makes an individual *feel*, in *N*’s case, the empowerment and edification of an

individual in a particular experience, whether it be meditation or prayer, noted when Dewey states that “the ideal values that are thus symbolized also mark human experience in science and art and the various modes of human association: they mark almost everything in life that rises from the level of manipulation of conditions as they exist,” (Dewey 38).

When defining whether the value of God to an individual is placed in God's perceived role in the world or whether the value is found more in the presence of a God in an individual's consciousness, *N* would maintain that the significance lies in the perceived role in an individual's life: a personal God. To *N*, if the value is found in that of God's role in the world, all of us would have to believe that God is, well, using a more... conservative and censored colloquialism, the biggest “freaking butthole” to exist, raising questions of: “Why do children get bone cancer? What about the tsunami on Boxing Day?” Clearly, whenever these individuals think of God's role in the world, they are thinking of their individual experiences in the world and God's role in making the world for *them*- it's ultimately a narcissistic view of things. For *N*, looking at God's role in the world, there are many cracks that come up in the foundation of that argument. For most people, it's the perception of God in their life that has guided them than their belief as to how He operates in the larger world. Dewey, too, would agree to *N*'s belief- to a certain degree. Whether it is the existence of God in the mind of the individual or the hand of God guiding, intervening, shepherding the forces of the world, nonetheless, if the individual believes the manifestations of a God in either of these bodies brings about certain emotions, that is the *religious* power underlying in any of these experiences. Both, whether outwardly triggered or inwardly realized, have value, regardless of how it was promoted. That is what makes an experience fundamentally religious. Not due to the constructs of religion, rather, the *emotions*

that are triggered from which an experience arises. Dewey states that “the religious is “morality touched by emotion” only when the ends of moral conviction arouse emotions that are not only intense but are actualized and supported by ends so inclusive that they unify the self,” (Dewey 21). Therefore, the latent religious connotations of experience are defined, as posited by Dewey, by *emotion*, not one supreme force as God. Individuals give themselves up to some hope, individuals have some structure of faith, and even if a believer perceives God acting in their interactions in the physical world or their relationship with God in their individual consciousness, both experiences have value, both experiences are religious.

The morality of it all is found, for Dewey, in whether the individual is uplifted or empowered, regardless if the catalyzing power is rooted to religion or a non-religious grandeur. What is irreligious is perceiving the value of humanity in all its glory in solitude from nature and other individuals. For *N*, people have experiences, in some cases subjectively, and there has been enough subjective experience that individuals can see objectively, that is indicated across a large number of religions. Yet, where people have experienced these profound, spiritual experiences, there is overwhelming evidence to say individuals experiencing the universe or experiencing a force working within the universe is clearly apparent, and it seems that for most of history, the tools for having these experiences have been monopolized by religion. People should, for *N*, follow the tools and not the religion, where they can also attain these experiences too, and thus, whether it be through, for example, meditation, the experiences that people have had have been universalized enough where something is going on beyond our scope, and religious experiences have provided a conduit or avenue to get around them. Clearly, something is going on, and religion, as *N* spurns, has been the one keeping the gate. But those experiences are real enough to

say that they are worth obtaining, that individuals should try to obtain them. And *N* airs that these experiences should be taken out of the hands of religion. The accessibility of people entering these religious states is really profound. There is something going on. Religion, *N* reiterates, will not allow others to find out more, revealing a deeper issue of morality regarding the proprietorship of religious experiences.

For Dewey, where religious experiences are common, *N* asserts that these experiences are felt primarily by believers due to religion dominating the tools utilized to access these experiences. However, Dewey would be helpful in understanding *N*'s view that there are spiritual practices that come from within religion that are useful for people to experience beyond themselves, but religion did not invent them, even if they were, *N* believes, discovered through religion.

### ***Conclusion***

Religious thinking, for *N*, is poison as it gives an individual a nature. "They tell you who you are" he states. Religion is not useful when an individual is starting off with this notion of being asked to uphold the virtues expected of religion. And so, it confuses the individual into believing that they are supposed to be this conventional, cookie-cutter character. *N* reveals that if he had religious experiences outside of religion, he would have known who he was as a person without as much struggle as he did and as he continues to have. He had these experiences that allowed him to figure himself out because they came with the baggage of religion, however, it had made the process more existentially painful than it needed to be. There was this struggle with what he was experiencing and with what he was told. "Religion tells you who you are. That's not helpful for anybody."

Religion is the one thing that will convince otherwise morally normal people to agree to really outrageous, heinous, acts, according to *N*. It is the one force that prevents people from ever using their own capacity to reason out information. The belief that some people have this revealed knowledge, that, by looking at history, by looking look at current society, that mentality is always a recipe for the horrific. For *N*, religion poisons everything it touches because it hinders an individual's ability to “use their brains”; it makes people agree to sacrificing their own morality.

For *N*, it bears repeating because in an age where, even among non-religious people, there is an instinctive view that religious individuals should be respected, that religion is worthy of respect. Religion is worthy of, according to *N*, no respect, and that being religious is something that people should “live down” rather than “live up to”, due to this perversion of morality- a product of religious thinking. And it is through these critics, being Coates, Freud, and Dewey, that we can draw parallels between their works and peruse the various cases in *N*'s life that we can see the relevancy of critiquing religion in the wider world and the extent to which these ideas are truly applicable.



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