

Josh Korenblat

Faith in the Void

In his book *Fear and Trembling*, the nineteenth-century Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard measures the wavering pulse of human faith; in one moment of doubt, he exclaims, “Alas, this movement is one I cannot make! As soon as I want to begin it everything turns around and I flee back to the pain of resignation. I can swim in life, but for this mysterious floating I am too heavy.” (78) When Kierkegaard writes of a “mysterious floating,” he attempts to put into words a spiritual state that defies rational comprehension. Few men have ever attained this state, but many have tried. As the primary spiritual reform movement during the European Middle Ages, monasticism sought to draw its faithful out of the muck of secular life, and instead elevate its adherents to a Christ-like state of pureness. Having shed the tawdry trappings of human desire and secular materialism, a monk could then assume a more divine form. In an obvious bit of propaganda, manuscript illustrators would at times portray angels and apostles as monks. As idealistically envisioned by one awestruck observer, pious monks all but sprout wings: “Already here on earth they had a life characterized by celestial, angelic purity and holiness of conscience.”(Goetz, 96) Yet as Kierkegaard understood, faith arises only through a state of constant spiritual doubt and laborious ineptitude on the part of the follower. Without faith, a monk would not complete his spiritual journey. Like any human endeavor, medieval monasticism could arrive at its supernatural destination only through failure and struggle.

Many contemporary critiques clipped the wings of monasticism; in these writings, slothful, indulgent monks plummet from the path of heaven. For all their dedication to the ways of Christ, medieval Cluniac, Cistercian and Franciscan monks could still lower their eyes to less enviable exemplars. By their mere presence, the many reform movements and their myriad rules testify to the imperfect nature of the monastic system. Emerging from a monkish silence, even the most revered monastic spokesmen testify to the endless struggle against desire; secular voices, meanwhile, also rose to lambast the corruption of monastic and Christian life. With an acerbic wit, the fourteenth-century Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio dissects his corrupt society; he spares neither the secular nor the

religious realms from his pointed tongue. Perhaps Boccaccio's critiques distill prevalent attitudes towards religion in secular society, but one may only offer conjectures in this regard. Without a doubt, Boccaccio hopes to amplify his progressive voice through the polyphonic device of ten storytellers. When Boccaccio's young characters regale each other with stories of myopic, bloated, sexually dynamic monks and nuns, they seemingly detail a religious life so plagued that it must be left for dead. However, by inveighing against a faulty religious institution, Boccaccio ironically finds hope for religion. Even in the face of fallen angels and corrupt monks, faith takes flight within the populace. This paradox makes sense for Boccaccio: true faith arises only from the absence of concrete evidence. Corruption corrodes the institution of religion; it cannot, however, touch the essence of religion—which remains the faith that lies at its core. In fact, corruption serves religion in hidden yet beneficial ways, for it forces the faithful believer to fortify the mechanisms of his heart. Because the Middle Ages lacked reason or much undiluted spiritual purity, faith filled the void.

Part of the frailty of the monastic system stemmed from its inconstant backbone. The monastic code, written by the original reformer, St. Benedict, outlines the ascetic life of the typical monk. A monk should limit whatever brings him physical comfort or pleasure, for those stimuli originate in the world rather than in the heavens, where all of the monk's energy and attention should be devoted. Though St. Benedict states that a monk should always strive for restraint and humility in choosing his worldly wares and activities, he leaves a remarkable amount of his code in a haze of qualifiers—it is hardly well said. In order to divert much of a seemingly absolute doctrine into more manageable streams of thought, St. Benedict assures that his document remains open to individual interpretation. Much of his writing reads as a nebulous, organic document instead of as an ascetic dogma. Throughout his doctrine, St. Benedict reveals sensitivity to the human condition, which belies the otherworldly aims of his movement. Surprisingly, he does not write domineering, broad laws. In "Of The Clothes And Shoes of the Brethren," he writes, "it is the abbot's business to take thought for this matter" (Benedict, 125); in "Of the Daily Manual Labor," he claims that "idleness is the enemy of the soul," yet he still places qualifiers in his argument, writing "Sick or delicate brethren should be assigned a task or craft of such a kind that on the one hand they be not idle, and on the other be not

overborne by excessive toil or driven away from the monastery. The abbot should have consideration for their weakness.”(113)

As the reader progresses through the Benedictine code, the list of escape clauses steadily grows. In “The Measure Of Food ,” St. Benedict at first allows only for a paltry amount of sustenance upon the monk’s meal plate, yet he then states, “But if their work chance to be heavier, the abbot shall have the choice and the power, should it be expedient, to increase this allowance.”(95) He allows monks only a small measure of drink at the dinner table, but then writes, “But if the circumstances of the place, or their work, or the heat of summer require more, let the superior be free to grant it.”(97) This advice, coupled with the fact that an abbot must lead primarily by example rather than admonition, creates an intrinsically inconstant religious system. In effect, all of the power and all of the decisions regarding the scope of monastic life funnel into one man—the abbot of a particular monastery. Of course, not all men—not even abbots—have the impenetrable moral fiber to make such an ideal system a crystalline reality. Given the authority to delegate just a tad more comfort to oneself and one’s brethren, so as to keep everyone satiated, most people would quietly select the option of greater comfort.

Here lies the root ailment between the feuding Cluniac and Cistercian monks, two later reform sects. Like an apple that rots under the sun, corruption spreads slowly and from within. The Cluniacs, the black-robed monks, had perhaps over-indulged in the liberties afforded to them by the Benedictine code, and the effects began to show. Though monasticism in theory withdrew from secular urban life, it in truth still provided important services to the greater community. Beyond the bustling scriptorium, monks interacted with the laity and often served as the intermediary between the clergy and the laity. They cared for the sick and the poor, and housed pilgrims in their monasteries.(Goetz,72) Thus, a fat monk or a richly attired monk would reveal corruption to the outside world; after all, monks— supposedly toiling all day, eating and sleeping very little—would logically not suffer from obesity or refinement. Yet, as revealed in many sources, monks had grown accustomed to lenient abbots and some measure of luxury.

As a reaction to this complacency, St. Bernard helped to establish the Cistercian sect. The Cistercians championed the meager life, one devoted to severity, silence, and

prayer; in doing so, they upheld the idea of *christo imitato*, the original aim of asceticism. In his *An Apologia for Abbot William*, Bernard of Clairvaux lists bountiful evidence of misdeeds committed on the part of his counterparts, the Cluniacs: laziness, gluttony, cupidity, and mendacity, to name but a few. With an inappropriate frequency, these monks plunged through the porous qualifiers of the Benedictine code. In the section entitled “On the Negligence of Superiors,” Bernard indicts the Cluniac abbots: “It is only human nature to be lenient in respect of liberties that one allows oneself...when those whose life should trace a path of life for us to follow set us instead an example of pride, it is indeed a case of the blind leading the blind.” (Matarasso, 54). In other contexts, placing the blame on “human nature” would seem more palatable. However, Bernard’s indictment grows all the more resolute once one remembers that each monk strove to imitate Christ—the only divine human—and that the abbot above all others would set the example of spiritual purity. A monk must suppress human nature, with all of its attendant vagrancies, in order to imitate the divine nature of Christ.

By its very existence, the perturbed letter further evidences the less than perfect nature of monasticism. Distracted and reduced to squabbling, in this instant Bernard had less time to devote to his vigilant prayer, his intellectual endeavors, and the other activities that made him a saint. In Italy, Francis of Assisi created another new sect, the Franciscans, who actively traveled into the secular world in order to beg and preach. Franciscans discarded much of the intellectual tradition inherent to the Cistercian monks, and instead relied on an even greater form of Christian mysticism. With all of these sects disapproving, improving upon, or rejecting one another, obviously medieval monasticism stood on less than celestial foundations. Any integral system—especially one that aspires to commune with paradise—would not fragment into so many pieces.

Not all of monasticism’s shortcomings trace back to the Benedictine code. Much of the problem lies in the inherent paradox of a human enterprise devoted to perfection; indeed, people are not perfect. Though one observer claimed that monks “prefer to satisfy their spirit rather than their body,” (Goetz 96) the process of selecting the mind over the body was not without its wandering temptations. As Bernard attests, desire and sin constitute the human soul, and wayward impulses often captivate the heart. In his *Three Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Bernard states, “natural inclinations...are not and cannot

be subject to the law of God,” and that “Our natural inclinations entice but degrade”(68). Natural desire and the grace of God remain polar opposites; the lonely monk can only flail in the abyss between the two. From this painful struggle, which may consume every ember of the body, a monk may emerge in the glow of an enlightened state. Even Saint Francis of Assisi had to first indulge in wicked ways before his religious epiphany, and Saint Bernard enigmatically claimed that his sainthood derived from his reputation, not his life. William of St. Thierry, a close friend and confidant of St. Bernard, devoted a long written meditation to the baseness of the human soul. He laments, “The wretchedness that is in me Lord, is at once so impenetrable and so extensive that I can neither examine it in detail nor survey the whole in all of its amplitude.” He then bears eloquent witness to the struggle that must ensue when one reconciles an unworthy soul with the majesty of God: “So while your face is ever bent on me in purposeful goodwill, I in my wretchedness am always gazing down at the dull earth...I enter the darkened house of my conscience, seeking to identify the source of this murk, this hateful fog that comes between me and the light of my heart.”(121) If these great figures struggled with their all-too human souls, then imagine the difficulties encountered by monks of less pious stature.

Monasticism attempted to lay celestial groundwork here on earth; not surprisingly, the dream proved too distant and ephemeral. In order to find God, one must toil and indeed subjugate the natural workings of the human soul, which aspires to first satisfy the pressing desires of this world. To return to Kierkegaard and his work *Fear and Trembling*, one must be “willing to labour and be heavy laden” (Kierkegaard 58) in order to arrive at the summit of true Christian spirituality. For this reason, the strain of Christian asceticism in the holiest of monks reaches extremes—St. Bernard suffered from physical ailments and ate very little; his body could not harmonize with his rising soul. The aforementioned shortcomings of monasticism thus become necessities; when one places idealism by the wayside, one sees that by its very nature, monastic life resembles a battle more than a state of perpetual bliss. Like any struggle for a worthwhile cause, casualties mount; monasteries may slip off the precipice of God’s service and into more secular ways.

Conflicts between nature and the law erupt throughout Boccaccio's medieval work, the *Decameron*. This time, however, the law assumes a secular form instead of a divine form. With the acute sensitivity of a satirist, Boccaccio examines a society rife with laws that work in opposition to the natural cravings of humanity. To illustrate the concerns of the author, in one story a woman named Madonna Filippa carries out extramarital affairs and others nearly burn her at the stake for the transgression. The cruelty of the law outweighs the crime, which in fact involved adults who merely wished to satisfy their natural desires. Before her possible death by fire, Filippa argues her case: "it might quite rightly be called a bad law," and of her excess desire she asks "Is it not better to give it to a gentleman who loves me more than myself, rather than let it go to waste or spoil?" (Boccaccio 398) Not only does Madonna Filippa save herself from death with her witty retort, she inspires the crowd of onlookers to change the unfair statute for the better. This story offers a microcosmic view of Boccaccio's sweeping philosophy. Concerning the laws of secular society, Boccaccio repeatedly shows how they contradict human nature. His characters indulge in the pleasures of the flesh without undo guilt and often without fear of punishment by authority figures. In one story, even nuns, the female counterparts to monks, succumb to their natural inclinations and sleep with a supposedly deaf mute gardener. Boccaccio would disagree with Bernard, who believed that these desires "entice but degrade"; for Boccaccio, humanity degrades itself only through the suppression of these desires. A consummate humanist, Boccaccio sees a world filled with death and misery, and he challenges the laws that limit the already scant pleasures that people have at their disposal.

With this almost Dionysian philosophy, Boccaccio seems to espouse a profoundly anti-religious message. He portrays religious figures as just a bit less guilty than Rasputin. At best, monks succumb to gullibility, but usually they commit the greater misdeed of sanctimony and hypocrisy. Throughout the novel, natural impulses conquer monasteries; in one early story, a monk spots a lovely young girl. The aptly named Dioneo, one of the young storytellers, elaborates: "The moment he saw her, he was passionately attacked by carnal desire." He soon sleeps with her, but the abbot stumbles across the misdeed. Though superficially prepared to admonish the now absent monk, the abbot cannot rise above his own burgeoning sexual attraction to the young girl who sits

before him. He thus rationalizes his unholy opportunity, wondering, “Why shouldn’t I have a little fun when I can get it? Troubles and worries I can get every day! This is a pretty young girl, and no one knows she’s here...No one will ever know, and a sin that’s hidden is half forgiven!” Never mind the all-knowing presence of God—the abbot will have his way. Having thoroughly convinced himself to consecrate the libidinous act with the willing young lady, he commences with the misdeed. Dioneo notes “the heavy weight of his dignified person” (39-41) during the sexual act. Apparently, the obese abbot has behaved self-indulgently before. The whole scene whips up a perverse mockery of the Benedictine code, for the monk secretly watches as the abbot partakes in the pleasures that he too found irresistible. The monk argues, “But sir, I have not been a member of the Order of St. Benedict long enough to have had the opportunity to learn every detail of the order’s rules. And up until just a moment ago, you never showed me how monks were to support the weight of women as well as fast and vigils...I shall always behave as I have seen you behave.”(42) Here, Boccaccio characterizes an infinite circle of hypocrisy within the holier-than-thou walls of the monastery.

Above all others, the tale of Fra Cipolla revels in corruption and hypocrisy. Like the other tales, Boccaccio uses hyperbole and irony to make his point all the more memorable and humorous. Yet this story falls short of a thorough skewering of religious life because its true intention lies elsewhere. In keeping with Franciscan practice, Fra Cipolla would travel into the local villages in order to preach and beg for alms. He returns frequently to the town of Certaldo. The inhabitants of the small village naively believe everything the unctuous monk espouses—even when his tales strain the limits of credulity. In order to increase the amount of alms heaped upon him, Cipolla carries religious relics that imbue him with religious credibility. On this particular day, Cipolla hopes to pass off a parrot feather as something else entirely; namely, a feather from the wing of the angel Gabriel. Two young men, hoping to expose Cipolla as fraudulent, replace the exotic plume with a sad hunk of charcoal. When he preaches to the “simple-minded men and women who were in the church”(406), Cipolla discovers to his chagrin that the feather is gone and a lump of charcoal stands in its place; someone had played a practical joke on him.

Rather than succumb to humiliation, Cipolla immediately concocts a ridiculous, winding story to arrive at his conclusion: The charcoal is a relic of Saint Lorenzo, the martyr who was burned alive. To add insult to injury, he then promises the gullible crowd that “whoever makes a sign of the cross on himself with the charcoal will live for one year safe in the knowledge that he will not be cooked by fire without his feeling it.”(409) By virtue of his quick wit, Cipolla transforms a banal object into a relic; he likewise transforms ordinary physiological reactions into miraculous evidence of his relic’s authenticity. Of course, anyone would feel the pain of a flickering fire, with or without the useless charcoal. Interestingly, Boccaccio does not critique Cipolla as he should. Instead, the overall tone of the story celebrates the crafty, clever friar. Boccaccio never chooses names accidentally; “cipolla” means onion. Despite the choice of the typically scandalous religious figure, the real focus of the story rests on the broader powers of the friar, who spins elaborate stories that transform reality. Cipolla creates a fiction that resembles an onion. One must peel through the transparent layers of reality in order to find the actual truth, and many different levels to the same story exist all at once. More often than not, the audience does not know if the words of the storyteller actually adhere to reality; in a world of elaborate falsehoods, one can only hold onto faith.

Throughout the *Decameron*, Boccaccio returns to this subtle examination of the nature of truth and its relation to faith. After all, he brings an entire world to life through two levels of fiction—he filters his voice through his young protagonists. Arguably, Boccaccio rises above the level of invective in this concern with fiction and reality. Certainly, portraying monks and nuns as sexual dynamos verges on the heretical. But with satiric aplomb, Boccaccio ultimately provides a hope for religion by way of faith. Again, true faith arises only when one is confronted with evidence that denies the validity of the original belief. Two stories from the first day illustrate the religious thesis that Boccaccio subtly constructs, and both involve wise Jews who must make decisions regarding religion. The first tale, which concerns the Jew Melchisedech and the famous Saracen Saladin, reigns as the most metaphorical tale in a collection that usually relies on double entendres instead of more grandiose metaphors. Of course, Cistercians read the entire Old Testament as a veiled metaphor for the coming of Christ; one need only read

how St. Bernard transforms the amorous “Song of Solomon” into a religious text to see how elastically metaphors can behave.

Here, however, Boccaccio’s sage tale remains clear and concise. The Jew must tell Saladin which ring out of three is the true ring, just as he must reveal the name of the one true religion: Christianity, Islam or Judaism. One hears the voice of Boccaccio through Melchisedech’s ambivalent conclusion: “concerning the three Laws given to three peoples by God our Father which are the subject of the question you put to me: each believes itself to be the true heir, to possess the true Law, and to follow the true commandments, but whoever is right, just as in the case of the rings, is still undecided.”(38) In an age of religious intolerance—Saladin opposed the bloodthirsty Crusaders in the holy land—Boccaccio’s thesis is stunning in its open-mindedness. He does not condemn religion with an atheistic sneer; rather, he skims multiple truths and realizes that faith may only exist in the unknown. None of the three great religions monopolize the true path to enlightenment, and the triumvirate itself might even be founded upon fiction. But in every case, the faith that springs forth from its adherents is palpable, true and alive; a sustaining force in a void of half-truths and mystery.

The second story, concerning the Parisian Jew Abraham and his Christian friend Giannotto di Civignì, shows how faith operates in the void that religion creates. In spite of its pretenses towards absolute truth, religion bases itself on incredible stories that defy logic—virgin birth, resurrection, and other assorted miracles. So when the institution of religion debases itself through hypocritical practice, the adherent has even less to hold onto with his desperate, prayerful hands. Giannotto, fearful that his friend Abraham, a “straightforward, trustworthy person”(35), will descend straight into hell simply because he was not born into the true religion, attempts to convert the Jew. Abraham would first like to see the papal court in Rome, where the holy manifestation of Christ awaits. Giannotto, chagrined, realizes that Rome is Sodom rather than Eden; he ponders, “but if he goes to the court of Rome and sees the wicked and the filthy lives of the clergy, not only will he not change from a Jew to a Christian, but if he had already become a Christian before, he would, without a doubt, return to being a Jew.”(34) Indeed, when Abraham visits Rome, he encounters an incredible cornucopia of sin that Boccaccio clearly delights in detailing.

Asked what he thought of the court in Rome, Abraham inevitably replies, “I don’t like them a bit, and may God condemn them all;” He then lists misdeeds that other religious figures commit throughout the *Decameron*: “I saw there no holiness, no devotion, no good work or exemplary life, or anything else among the clergy; instead, lust, avarice, gluttony, fraud, envy, pride, and the like and even worse...”(35) Multitudinous sins such as these force one to flash back to the amoral monks of the other tales, and to the less-than pious monks that Bernard describes in his *Apologia for Abbot William*. Clearly, the wise Jew would seem to want to wash his hands clean of the whole odious mess, but ironically, he finds faith by treading through that very muck. He explains, “And since I have observed that in spite of all this, they do not succeed but, on the contrary, that your religion continuously grows and becomes brighter and more illustrious, I am justly of the opinion that it has the Holy Spirit as its foundation and its support...”(35) He thus decides to convert to Christianity. Here, Boccaccio illuminates the paradox of religion: nascent faith may grow only in the absence of real sustenance; faith, indeed, manifests itself in those times when one has every justifiable reason to relinquish all that one cherishes.

If Boccaccio consistently chooses names that characterize his stories, then it is no accident that the Jew in this tale is named Abraham. In the Old Testament, the Jewish patriarch Abraham defined faith. Asked by God to commit an evil act—and without a given justification for it—Abraham must decide how much faith he has in the unproven benevolence of his God. As chillingly recorded in the Bible, Abraham must raise his knife to slay his innocent son Isaac. Even as Abraham proves his devoutness, the details of the human sacrifice horrify the reader: the sharp knife; the blindfolded, unaware son; the collecting bowl for spilt blood. Abraham must fortify his heart to the righteousness of God, because doubts could reasonably assail him during the heartbreaking task. As he raises his arm to kill his beloved son, angels intervene—Abraham has passed the ultimate test of faith.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard uses Abraham as the icon of religious faith. He writes, “So let us either forget all about Abraham or learn how to be horrified at the monstrous paradox which is the significance of his life, so that we can understand that our time like any other can be glad if it has faith.” Furthermore, one must “judge for

himself whether he has the inclination and courage to be tried in such a thing."(Kierkegaard 81). Like Abraham, medieval society had bountiful reason to mistrust the promises offered by religion. If the monks, the erstwhile reformers, fell prey to insidious desires, then certainly even more sins snaked through the church itself. From St. Bernard to Boccaccio—from the righteous to riotous—the modern reader traces an ever-present corruption in medieval religious institutions. Yet within the failures and the struggles of Christian life, the true believer may find the distant courage of Abraham, and thus sow the seeds of enduring faith.