

## RELIGIOUS UNDERCURRENT

Religion requires an act of faith to believe fully in its core principles and foundation. People cannot put their trust in and fully understand a religion without first questioning and possessing some kind of doubt about their beliefs. Without first acknowledging the problems and holes in religion, one cannot begin to disprove or accept them. The short story *In the Penal Colony* possesses an allegorical nature that communicates Kafka's doubts and criticisms of religion.

Essentially, the penal colony in which the story occurs acts as a microcosm for the entire population of the earth; they await their judgment from God. The members of the colony anticipate their punishment: death. Every member, no matter what the nature of his crime, receives the same punishment from the Commandant. In this respect, the Old Commandant acts as a God-like and Christ-like symbol, providing judgment and punishment for his colony. The explorer asks the officer about the Old Commandant and his role in building the torture apparatus: "Did he combine everything in himself then? Was he a soldier, judge, mechanic, chemist, and draughtman?" 'Indeed he was,' said the officer."<sup>1</sup> Kafka subtly allows the reader to feel a sense that the Old Commandant that the officer follows devotedly possessed a kind of omniscience, similar to God's. God knows all and sees all. In this respect, the reader begins to visualize the Commandant as a God-like figure: When a colony member commits a crime against him, he knows all. He sees all. Therefore, he punishes all.

Kafka also subtly depicts the Old Commandant as a God-like figure through his death. After the sole advocate for the old regime's judging process dies, the explorer

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<sup>1</sup> Franz. Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," Complete Short Stories. (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971), p. 144

seeks out the Old Commandant's grave, only to find a prophecy transcribed on the headstone. The explorer reads the headstone of the Commandant which says, "There is a prophecy that after a certain number of years the Commandant will rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait!"<sup>2</sup> Kafka cleverly uses this prophecy to reinforce his allegory of the Old Commandant as a God-figure. In the Bible, a prophecy surrounds Christ which claims that after Christ's death he will rise from the dead within three days time. The prophecy proclaimed on the Old Commandant's gravestone acts as the same type of prophecy within Kafka's imaginary world. Unlike Christ, the Commandant never rises from the dead within Kafka's time frame, therefore communicating to the reader Kafka's skepticism of religion and faith. Ultimately Kafka criticizes the Judeo-Christian belief that Christ rose from the dead by refusing to allow his God-figure to return to the earthly world and take control of his colony again.

The rules to which the officer strictly adheres come directly from the Commandant through instructions he left after his death. When the officer explains to the explorer the directions that he follows to operate the torture apparatus for punishment he claims that "I [the officer] am still using the guiding plans drawn by the former commandant. Here they are"—he extracted some sheets from the leather wallet—"but I'm sorry I can't let you handle them, they are my most precious possession."<sup>3</sup> The documentation that the Commandant left for the officer acts as a symbolic representation of the role the Bible contains within the Christian faith. Christians possess a written text from God that essentially acts as their life guide. The Bible contains commandments

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<sup>2</sup> Kafka, 167

<sup>3</sup> Kafka, 148

which they must follow and instructions on how to live in a holy manner. One could view the manuscripts and plans the Commandant left behind as a sort of Bible for its most devoted follower. The officer follows the plans very strictly and even claims they are his most precious of possessions, giving them an almost holy feel. Kafka uses little details such as the plans to suggest subtly that his story possesses a deeper, allegorical nature.

The violent nature of the torture and punishment the offenders receive displays Kafka's view of God and religion. The apparatus that performs the punishment for the Old Commandant and tortures those who offend his rule, operates as an altar for the God-figure and as a symbol for religion as a whole. In the Bible, people sacrificed animals on altars to display their faith and belief in God and did so as a form of praise. Because the apparatus tortures many members of the colony and kills them simply to satisfy the Old Commandant's view of justice, it acts as an altar, which the officer uses to sacrifice humans brutally for his God-figure. The explorer describes the apparatus as violently "writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours"<sup>4</sup> with the needles piercing the skin, and causing the condemned tremendous amounts of torturous pain. Kafka uses the torture apparatus to display symbolically his feeling that religion enforces and engraves its rules and beliefs on an individual. The Commandant engraves his strict rules and standards of justice on those who challenge his set rules, just as religion requires a follower to adhere to strict beliefs and rules.

Kafka also uses certain components of the apparatus itself to symbolize his view on religion. When simple leather straps cannot hold the condemned down, the officer claims that he "shall simply use a chain"<sup>5</sup> to bind the man to the torture apparatus. The

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<sup>4</sup> Kafka, p. 149

<sup>5</sup> Kafka, p. 151

chains that bind the condemned to his death symbolize the binding and restrictive nature of religion. Religion's rules and strict demands for obedience bind individuals to it, and restrict their freedom, just as the apparatus binds and restricts its victims. The explorer silently thinks to himself that "the injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable."<sup>6</sup> Because the apparatus and the whole concept of torture symbolize Kafka's views on religion in this story, Kafka uses his explorer to display and state blatantly the unjust nature of religion.

Kafka's use of the officer within the story represents an orthodox religious follower. The officer devotes his life to carrying out the punishments of the Old Commandant and he claims that "the new man has certainly some inclination to interfere with my judgments, but so far I have succeeded in fending him off and will go on succeeding."<sup>7</sup> Kafka utilizes this statement to characterize the officer as a faithful and dutiful disciple and advocate for the Old Commandant, paralleling a believer or follower of certain religions and that person's commitment to their god. The colony's devotion to the Old Commandant's methods of punishment and justice has moved on with his death. The officer is "its sole advocate, and at the same time the sole advocate of the old Commandant's tradition."<sup>8</sup> Like an orthodox follower, the officer spends his time and energy living and enforcing the traditions of his God-figure. He strictly adheres to the rules and regulations set before him by his Commandant just as a religious follower obeys the regulations of the religion to which they belong.

Kafka uses allegory throughout his short story *The Penal Colony* to convey his skeptical and somewhat disbelieving view on religion. He subtly interjects his doubts

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<sup>6</sup> Kafka, p. 151

<sup>7</sup> Kafka, p. 145

<sup>8</sup> Kafka, p. 153

throughout his story, letting the reader pry and probe deeper to find them. A person's beliefs and faith require questioning and doubt in order for the individual to truly grasp and immerse himself in the religion. Believing without questioning blindly binds an individual to a fate and leaves them unprepared to encounter and confront the problems and gaps that might arise within that religion.