Sins in Christianity and Chinese Culture

First Year Seminar

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The discussion of sins has been a compelling topic of human beings: The Christian definition of sins has been influencing generations of people, warning that their behaviors can have unexpected consequences. Nowadays, Dan Brown’s new novel Inferno is touching this appealing topic with complicated plot and controversial behaviors of the characters.

In Dan Brown’s Inferno, there are two main controversial characters—Bertrand Zobrist and Elizabeth Sinskey. Their behaviors are controversial because some people define them as sinful, and others claim them to be noble. To identify the sins in Inferno, I will appeal to Christianity and Chinese culture as reference. The paper will analyze the definition of sins in Christianity and compare Zobrist’s and Sinskey’s behaviors with them; Furthermore, the paper will also introduce the similarities between their behaviors and historical events in China.

The definition of sins in Christianity raises several concerns. First, Christianity defines sins as the violations to the God’s will and introduces seven deadly sins as wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony. However, these definitions have some doubtful propositions. If God exists, it seems sin is an absolute truth and an existence independent of human world because they are dependent on God instead of human’s cognition. However, the existence of God, as the foundation of Christian sins, is a controversial topic. Many philosophers, such as Descartes, tried to prove the existence of God; but later criticizers such as Nietzsche and Sartre attacked their arguments and claimed the death of God. If the premise of God’s existence is under suspicion, the validity of sins is doubtful, too.

The seven deadly sins draw the line between the good deeds and the evil deeds. Suppose a world without concepts of sins, a person’s desire is unlimited, and the desire will bring serious consequence: for example, a person with greed can do anything, even killing other people, to get what he wants. In the absence of morality, a person’s unlimited freedom cost others’ freedom (such as the freedom to live). Therefore, defining sins limits each individual’s freedom, and create the maximum of overall freedom; but this limitation can be overused sometimes, and consequently the nature of human, such as anger out of being offended, and desire for better things, is oppressed. As Jesus says “If someone slaps you on your left cheek, also give him your right cheek.” When the nature is oppressed, people are restricting their behaviors all the time with the fear of miserable afterlife in hell. They are placing their hope for a better life after death in another world, the heaven. As a result, people cannot fully live and enjoy the life they are living.

The definition of sins is bounded by a limitation: the time when the definition was established. Christian sins were introduced hundreds of years ago, and during Renaissance, Christianity was criticized. In later centuries, some philosophers and social activists advocated releasing human nature from the lock of Christian morality. Before the American Civil War slavery was prevalent and normal; however, after the Civil War, slavery is condemned as a crime. The definitions of sins and crimes are changing with time, and with human subjective conceptions.

The definition of sins has another problem: it is absolute. For example, “violence” is defined as sin in Dante’s inferno. If a person is under attack by a robber, and the person fights back and kills the robber, is his violence considered a crime and sin? Or, as Dante defines heresy as sin, when the authority or the majority is making wrong decisions, is it sinful to speak up one’s voice to express correct opinions?

In Dan Brown’s Inferno, the main character Bertrand Zobrist’s behavior is closely related to Christianity. Zobrist is a genius biologist, and he observes the serious consequences of overpopulation, and therefore he decides to invent a virus to control the growth of population. The virus will make one-third people lose the ability to reproduce. At the cost of ability of reproduction, future generations have more resources to utilize and survive on, and human race will not be extinct. In the book, Zobrist views his own behavior as “my gift is future, my gift is salvation, my gisft is Inferno.” (Inferno, P7) Is Zobrist’s behavior considered as sin?

Bible says that humans are created in the image of God (Genesis, 1:27), and humans are endowed with certain rights that cannot be violated. Zobrist’s behavior will be recognized as sinful in the perspective of Christianity because he violates other people’s rights. However, as the previous paragraphs indicate, the foundation of sins—the God, is still a suspicious proposition. Even Zobrist’s actions are sinful according to bible, many similar events are happening in real world.

From protestors against U.S. prison for terrorists captives to vegetarian against meat eating, many people opposing any action beyond their comfort zone. Zobrist invented a new virus which takes away people’s ability to reproduce, and at the same time sustain the living of next generation. When there is a new disease among population, medical researchers have to do the experiment on a small group of people in order to test the effectiveness of the new medicine, and this involves substantial risk that the people in the experiment will die if the medicine does not work. Even though a minority of people are against this measurement, but they cannot stop this trend, a trend for the good of the majority. This trend is more obvious and the policy for the majority good is more valued in developing countries, such as China.

Why is Zobrist denounced and chased by WHO? Hundreds of years ago, when heliocentric theory was proposed, the scientists were punished to penalty with the reason that these scientists were sinful in confusing and poisoning the mind of innocent population. In the same way, Zobrist cost the reproduction ability of one third of the population in order to save more people, is considered sinful. The possible explanation is that this method is beyond human imagination, and his action will severely damage the reputation and authority of World Health Organization. Therefore, it is a mission for them to eradicate “heresy” and keep the homogeneity of ideas. If Zobrist’s idea attracts enough supporters and even becomes one of the mainstream values in the society, his virus will be discussed on academic journals and television news as serious science regarded by WHO.

From the analysis above, Christianity identify Zobrist’s behaviors as sinful; however, many similar events are happening in real world, which on the opposite improve the living standard of majority people. China is a good example of favoring the strategy of “majority good”.

In Chinese culture, both in Buddhism and Taoism, there is no concept of sins, but the concept of the consequence of an action. Zobrist’s plan is to sacrifice the ability of reproduction of one-third population to save the resources for the next generation. It is anti-humanism that is advocated in western world. However, as a developing country, China sacrifices the basic rights of civilians to develop the economy and reinforce its international power. During the urbanization in twenty first century, many old buildings were razed for making space for new buildings, and those who originally lived in the old buildings received little compensation that they could not buy new houses. The same thing happens to farmers living in the countryside. The government takes their farmland and house, and they are forced to work in city for low wage. The lifestyle that lasts for generations is suddenly changed by urbanization. Zobrist’s behavior resembles Chinese government in its inclination with utilitarianism: to maximize the benefits of a larger group, the policy maker needs to sacrifice the benefits of some people. The great achievements of the victory of battles, or the substantial increase in GDP will be recorded into history, but those victims are always forgotten. Taoism used to say, there is no absolute bad or good, and the benefit of one side costs the benefits of the other. It is impossible to devise a solution that benefits all. Zobrist’s plan cannot be said to sin.

Chinese culture, instead of stability, is changing with time. Since ancient time, China is a country with monarchy; through thousands of years, Chinese people are living with servility under the rule of the emperor—they care about themselves more than they care about the country and society; they are alienated from politics, and rarely doubt authority. During the monarch time, some democratic activist advocated overthrowing monarchy and establishing new political system; Unfortunately they were captured by the government and punished by decapitation. The penalty is surrounded by a circle of audience citizens, and they witnessed the whole execution with eyes as if they were watching a theatre show. Without any specific facial expressions, they were wondering what to eat for dinner after the penalty and how to make a living.

In the beginning of twentieth century, the emperor of China—Qianlong, implemented the policy of closed-economy; he closed all the ports of foreign trade, and refused to learn from western countries and their technology. Finally, Chinese monarchy was dissolved under the pressure from industrialization from western world and China was involved into the war with Japan. The crisis in some extent diminished servility by stimulating Chinese sense of justice. Many Chinese people risked their life to collect confidential information for Chinese army, and many soldiers died in battlefield. Because of the sense of justice and cooperation, China was finally protected from the invasion of Japan. Therefore, the callousness and neutrality could not save the country.

In Dan Brown’s Inferno, Elizabeth Sinskey adopts the method of eugenics education to tackle the overpopulation problem. However, this solution does not have effects. When Zobrist was proposing the possible plan, she was commenting on his plan to be mad and insensible. Grounded into her own mindset, Sinskey refused to accept any new things which is beyond her comprehension. In this sense she resembles the emperor of China Qianlong, who is limited by his own conception and the time he lived in as well. Zobrist’s plan intimidated Sinskey just like Western technology intimidated Chinese people at that time. It is also possible that Sinskey realized the feasibility of Zobrist’s plan, but she was afraid of the responsibility that was too much for her to handle. She was unconsciously evading it because it was out of her “comfort zone”.

Sinskey as a decision maker and authority was not successful, but is her behavior defined as sin in Chinese culture? Chinese culture is composed of diverse religions, which include Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucius. There is no evidence in these religions that shows Sinskey’s behavior as sin. However, Buddhism indicates that as a good Buddhist, he or she has to keep an open mind and accept diverse opinions with a peaceful mind. Therefore, Sinskey’s behavior cannot be seen as sin in Chinese culture, but it is undesirable, too.