Is subjectivity truth? Musings on Kierkegaard and Potok

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
No one’s beliefs lie stagnant from the time of their creation, yet everyone must always come home. That is to say, incorporating past beliefs (coming home) is a vital process in creating new ones which cannot stand alone. Core values must grow with the individual as they experience life to a greater and fuller degree. Knowing how, when and what to modify is the pressing question of change, but old beliefs should not be rejected altogether. This conflict produces the line between one belief and another, one side and another and this line should not be erased. The only way to reconcile them is to recognize the truth in each without discarding either and embrace the tension that it creates.

I grew up in a conservative Christian household in which questioning Christianity was not expressly prohibited but only allowed to some degree. At the end of short flight in doubt, I always had to settle back into the nest of faith and resignation. It was almost as if it was a pseudo-freedom or as if that small amount of questioning had been built into what was permissible. The idea was that world views or religions other than Christianity were too false to even worry about or discuss. Christianity had been selected as the default setting and nothing could override it. This group mentality was emphasized in many areas of my life; all of the Christian groups, family gatherings, and the minimal exposure to people outside our faith made it easy not to question and to just sit back and believe. However, there was always something,
whether it was doubt or God, that called to me from outside what I knew, outside what was comfortable.

The herd mindset is one of Soren Kierkegaard’s biggest enemies and as he sees it, greatest barriers to knowing God (Kierkegaard, 1846). Decisions cannot be made within it rather they must be made by the individual alone. Kierkegaard calls this a “leap of faith” into faith. He refers to leaping into belief in God since he cannot prove objectively that there is a God. Rather he subjectively chooses to seize the difficulties of God and believe. In his words, “Christianity has itself proclaimed itself to be the eternal, essential truth that has come into existence in time; it has proclaimed itself as the paradox and has required the inwardness of faith…” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 213). He says that if one were to try to explain the paradox so it was “fixed” and made sense, it would no longer be a paradox (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 219). If we understand the paradox without the confusing and conflicting part, then in truth we do not understand it. This idea of paradox shows that difficult and seemingly contradictory parts of the Bible or between the Bible and other religions are not to be shied away from. A paradox causes difficulties because both truths are in opposition of each other (Kierkegaard, 1846). It would be easy to discard the paradox of the infinite tucked into the finite human, yet one cannot. If one holds to Christianity, one must believe by faith alone while still holding fast to the paradoxes, so a new view will be opened. This is different than how I viewed the world before. As explained by Kierkegaard, the paradox and tension are acceptable even necessary to faith whereas I believed they were a detour from faith. A key element in this is the right of the person to choose to accept these paradoxes and how one should orient themselves to Christianity (Kierkegaard, 1846).
Individuality is key in this leap of faith that Kierkegaard prescribes (Kierkegaard, 1846). The decision to do something by following the crowd, is not one’s own decision and therefore robs the person of their autonomy. In each person’s autonomy, there must also be authenticity which is to be truly and only you. It is necessary according to Kierkegaard that each person be authentic (Kierkegaard, 1846). To merely follow the crowd is not an authentic act but if a decision is made individually to believe in a religion or a certain world view, then though this crowd is being joined, it is not being mindlessly followed. The distinction here is that by deciding, to join Christianity for example, one becomes a participant and no longer an observer. To be an observer or speculative thinker is to be a dependent follower who thinks they have a grasp of the issue though they could not be farther from the real truth. And this is incompatible with authenticity. In order to be authentic, one must be an active participant (Kierkegaard, 1846).

Chaim Potok illustrates this concept of authenticity and individuality in his book My Name is Asher Lev. Asher Lev, a young Jewish boy has a great gift in the arts, but the conflict is that per Jewish tradition, there should be no graven image (Potok, 1972). However, he loves to draw and does so while he is young. His mother goes through a very serious illness which affects him to the extent that he stops recreating the world on paper. He begins to believe that art is wrong and without purpose. At one point his mother tells him how good he is at drawing and he replies, “I hate it… It’s a waste. It’s from the sitra achra [Evil One]. Like Stalin” (Potok, 1972, p. 52). The pain and loss of goodness in his life caused him to become bitter and to lose his own joy. He began to pray he would grow up, meaning he would stop drawing (Potok, 1972, p. 50). Asher’s eventual loss of individuality resulted in dejection that touched everything in his life.

One morning when his father commanded him to get up for school his thoughts ran as such,
“Now, I thought. Now now now. But I’m tired. And I don’t care. And what difference does it make? Oh, I’m tired. Why am I so tired?” (Potok, 1972, p. 70). His strength was taken, and nothing seemed worth fighting for when he stopped drawing. The authentic part of him was buried and by having to follow the tradition of his family, he withered away. Potok illustrates by this young boy that one cannot follow just the traditions of the faith, but rather, must synthesize their tradition with who they are and what makes them an individual (Potok, 1972).

Individuality and authenticity for me is a challenge since I grew up in a background that pseudo-encouraged it. There was a small amount of variability in what I could do, however it had to be within the set parameters of conservative Christianity. We could talk about other world views but only with the purpose to defeat them, to find their error. Kierkegaard and Potok both emphasize individuality and how important it is for all world views. But individuality is not the only factor in one’s world view. In The Chosen by Potok, another Jewish boy must reconcile his interests and gifts with his strict tradition (Potok, 1967). Danny Saunders is a brilliant young man with interests stretching far beyond what his family and religion say are necessary or permissible and he must incorporate and reconcile these two conflicting desires (Potok, 1967). Danny is able to reconcile his interest in psychology and his cultural and religious heritage in the end. He leaves rabbinical college to become a psychologist, however promises his father that he will remain a faithful practicing Jew (Potok, 1967). He does not reject his tradition and heritage, rather he uses it to guide his future and new beliefs (Potok, 1967).

When two desires, ideas, beliefs, or world views are in opposition, it is reminiscent of a paradox. The paradox comes in when both desires, both beliefs are held simultaneously. This is in the essence of Christianity in the ideas that God became flesh, and humans having eternal life
in them. Christians have to be able to reconcile conflicting ideas even to believe in the Trinity, that God is three in one. So, the tension between individuality and tradition must also be mulled over and processed without one being destroyed by the other. Each person must incorporate it themselves so that they maintain their authenticity and autonomy. This is vital because if each person does not do this, they begin to follow the crowd, lose their individuality and wither away as Asher Lev did (Potok, 1972).

Kierkegaard and Potok helped me put into words ideas that had been in my head for many years as I grew in my faith. My world view will always be changing based on new truths that I discover; however, I know that it is just as important to not let my individuality be infringed upon, as it is to hold the old beliefs tightly. I will not hold some of the staunch conservative views and traditions I grew up with, but I will not reject them all together. There is a measure of truth in them that cannot be disregarded. Christianity truly is a paradox and at this point we cannot resolve it, nor do we need to. Living in the paradox is a conscious choice not a passive apathy from the difficulty of understanding it. Each person should be a participant in the paradox not an observer and the tension of it should not be resolved. Old and new beliefs when incorporated into each other, do not disintegrate but rather are truer because of it.
References:

