

Three thinkers and the divine



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“ What is absurd is the confrontation between the sense of the irrational and the overwhelming desire for clarity which resounds in the depths of man.” -

Albert Camus
The human existence is controlled, monitored, and viewed to assume a predictable pattern. The extent to which this occurs, however, can partly be determined by the individual. Albert Camus passionately argues that faith and religious conviction are but pointless measures constructed by man to provide faulty purpose and avoid responsibility. Fidelity to these practices thus serves to create a perceived comforting, sugarcoated structure to life—an effort which Camus strongly regards as futile. Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Naguib Mahfouz’s *The Thief and the Dogs* both examine Camus’ thesis. Using irony and characterization, they challenge organized religion and question the necessity and practicality of faith in society. From *The Myth of Sisyphus* we find that Camus, although not a nihilist, believes that nothing divine nor absolute exists and that many people use faith in a higher being as a crutch to avoid living and taking responsibility for life. Camus’ world deems divine forces such as God unlikely; therefore, the human’s struggle to make his/her life meaningful in the face of God is absurd and pointless. Instead of concerning one’s self with the ‘ unlikely’, Camus scours the realm of the now: “ Why prepare and wait when we could live?” (Classic Notes). When one realizes all this, “ he knows himself to be the master of his days”.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day...* is embedded in the milieu of a harsh Siberian labor camp (a microcosmic Stalinist Russia) where prisoners are stripped of everything which defines them as individuals, including their religious conviction. Answering the Soviet governmental endeavor to suppress the influence of the Orthodox Church and weaken the Christian

faith, Solzhenitsyn argues the necessity, and lack thereof, of organized religion through his characters Shukhov and Alyosha. Shukhov, the protagonist of the novel, is wrongfully accused of treason and is sentenced to ten years in prison. Disillusioned, his term in the labor camp becomes a habitual effort to cope with the daily corruption and injustice he faces, causing him to significantly doubt his conception of faith. Although not an advocate of organized religion, Shukhov is a man of sound morals and maintains a strong sense of spirituality. “ Glory be to Thee, O Lord. Another day over. Thank You I’m not spending tonight in the cells. Here it’s still bearable” (Solzhenitsyn 134). Occasionally, Shukhov thanks the Lord for all he has given him and prays to be granted freedom, but even Shukhov knows this is a futile effort, for as he himself states, “ however much you pray it doesn’t shorten your stretch. You’ll sit it out from beginning to end anyhow” (137). Although Shukhov observes this practice of ‘ sporadic habit’, he fully recognizes that it has no real net-result; yet ironically, he continues to practice it. Accordingly, Shukhov becomes like Camus: a skeptic of the divine, voluntarily toying with it while outwardly rejecting it. Such cynicism in the merits of faith, however, is only surpassed by Shukhov’s censure of the religious institution. When Alyosha tries to convince him to pray regularly, he argues against any kind of organized religion because of the corruptness of the church. “ In Polomnya, our parish, there isn’t a man richer than the priest...He pays alimony to three women in three different towns, and he’s living with a fourth. And he keeps that bishop of his on a hook...Oh yes, he gives his fat hand to the bishop, all right” (135). Under a veil of respectability, this supposed servant of God filches money and leads an immoral life under the authority of the Orthodox Church. Ironically, Shukhov,

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a man of relatively firm moral uprightness, espouses a kind of spirituality and prays to God for resolution, but is instead compensated with injustice and agony. But to attempt to create meaning of this, in what Camus sees as a meaningless world, is absurd. It is only when one, as Shukhov, assembles the components of his life and examines the significance of his daily actions that he is able to find personal meaning and moral wisdom. Regardless of whether Shukhov reaches this point of inflection or not, however, his practices of faith are uneventful and serve not hing in lessening the plight in his struggle for survival. Contrastingly, Solzhenitsyn provides an opposing outlook on the same issue of organized religion with his character Alyosha. A devout Baptist, Alyosha believes that God placed him in prison to avoid temptation and develop into a more pure Christian. The camp, in this case, serves as an outlet to abandon the physical world and make contact with its spiritual counterpart. In a heightened argument with Shukhov regarding the relevance of prayer, Alyosha states, "...you shouldn't pray to get parcels of food or extra stew... Things that man puts a high price on are vile in the eyes of Our Lord. We must pray about things of the spirit that the Lord Jesus should remove the scum of anger from our hearts..."(135). In believing and preaching so, Alyosha has created a system of making sense and consolation of his plight. By accessing this spiritual understanding, Alyosha is able to solace and comfort himself by voluntarily yielding to the hands of a greater force. " In freedom your last grain of faith will be choked with weeds. You should rejoice that you're in prison. Here you have time to think about your soul"(136). Consistent with Camus' thesis, Alyosha strives to make his life meaningful in the face of God. This, however, cannot possibly be considered absurd because it depends upon the existence of a God. Until proven or

disproven scientifically, the concept of God is an “ individual-specific reality”: if one’s reality necessitates the presence of God, He exists. Therefore, creating personal meaning and justifying his condition in the face of God so is perfectly viable. Accordingly, through faith and recognition of the spiritual self, Alyosha is able to overcome his arduous physical surroundings and survive, deeming his observance to organized religion indispensable. Such questioning of organized religion is likewise found in Naguib Mahfouz’s novel *The Thief and the Dogs*, but in a far more severe light: utter rejection. Mahfouz’s protagonist, Said Mahran, is a thief released from jail in Egypt eager to assert vengeance upon those who have betrayed him. Through these intentions and his ensuing actions, it becomes clear that although Said has an organized religion (the Sufi Islamic faith) to ‘ belong to’, he dismisses its most significant preachings. “ He [Said]...found the Sheikh staring through the window at the sky, smiling. The smile...frightened Said: he wished he could stand at the window... the Sheikh was looking at so he could see what it was that made him smile. But the wish was unfulfilled” (Mahfouz 55). Fully cognizant of the stimuli and responses within his Sufi culture, we find that Said contemplates reaction, but promptly and willingly rejects it. In Sufi society, virtues of the insignificance of time and money and the essentiality for inner faith and spiritualism define the ‘ achieved man’. Said romanticizes his role as a thief, a “ Robin Hood”, filling this societal cavity for achievement and fulfillment by means of piousness with thievery) deserting Sufism. As what society and Said each embrace as significant dispel, it is lucidly clear that Said becomes the epitome of what his society shuns. “ Aren’t you going to perform the dawn prayers?)Said was so tired he was incapable of giving an answer, and no sooner had the Sheikh begun his

prayers than he [Said] dropped off to sleep" (207). The mosque, for Said, becomes a last-resort sanctuary)not a place of worship. This sentiment is reiterated in the words of the Shiekh: " If you had another [place to shelter] you would never have come to me" (55). Thus, for his un-' Sufi'-like manners and malevolent intentions, Said is ostracized and eradicated by the world in which he lives in; in Camus' however, he is crowned king. To overcome the absurd, Camus necessitates for the understanding of an ultimate end: Said is tortured by it, referring to himself as a " hunted man" nearing " the end of his days" (55). Unconcerned with the ' unlikely', ' the Camus' assumes control of his actions to find personal meaning and significance. Said's intentions to reap vengeance upon his perpetrators, fueled by his awareness of a definitive end, are his personal meaning and significance. Therefore, while in Camus' eyes, Said is " the master of his days", rejection of organized religion within his society leads to his bitter downfall. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Naguib Mahfouz's *The Thief and the Dogs* investigate Camus' thesis by questioning the inner workings of organized religion and by evaluating its societal necessity. Through Shukov and Alyosha, Solzhenitsyn offers two opposing views on the relevance of faith for survival within his labor camps. Through Said's blatant rejection of organized religion, Mahfouz examines Sufi society's subsequent excoriation of Said. In doing so, however, the authors are able only to address the issue of the necessity of faith for individuals within specific environments, leaving the larger cosmopolitan question unanswered.