

# Extreme skepticism of organized institution in j.d. salinger's the catcher in the...

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It will forever be mankind's instinct to impose moral codes upon ourselves and those around us. These moral codes are based on subjective ideas deemed important by their creators; they have served as the basis for most organized institutions, including but not limited to the government, education, and religion. However, for as long as these codes have existed, so has resistance toward them. Personally, I believe that a healthy amount of resistance is essential to keeping moral codes and our legal system, which is derived from these codes, in check. I cannot remember a time when I was not skeptical of opinions presented to me. In church, I questioned the priest; at home, I questioned the normality of my parents' bitter relationship, and continue to question the fairness of the regulations they impose upon me. Skepticism of the institutions that impose rules upon us is essential to the health of those functioning within these institutions, as they must use the ideas of skeptics to adapt as the social aspects of the lives of those who take part in them evolve. However, in many cases the emphasis that these institutions place on their regulations detracts from the true message that the institution itself is attempting to portray: schools can stifle the true spirit of learning, the stuffiness of organized religion can take away from the true spirituality of a relationship with God. Holden Caulfield, high school drop-out and protagonist of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, however, expresses such an extreme skepticism of organized institutions, most significantly with regards to religion and education, that he inhibits his own developmental success.

Holden firsts mentions a higher meaning whilst visiting his former history teacher at Pencey Preparatory, the school he had just been expelled from: ““

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You wondered what the heck he was living for” (6). Holden assess others’ lives constantly, feeling depressed when he comes across the misfortune of others. This was the case not only with his former history teacher, Spencer, but in multiple instances: when he meets a prostitute he cannot help but feel sad for her; he is even depressed by such misfortunes as menial as a fashion mishap or when he comes across nuns eating a smaller breakfast than he is. Though he seems to be easily saddened by others failures, Holden, perhaps the biggest failure of them all, seems to avoid an intrinsic evaluation of his own life’s purpose. However, despite Holden’s insistence that he is “ sort of an atheist” (99), he contradicts himself in the same sentence with the statement that he “ likes Jesus and all” (99). Holden is religious himself, but is so skeptical of the institution and its leaders that he unable to develop religiously. When Ossenburger, a Pencey Preparatory alum and the eponym of Holden’s dorm, proudly proclaims that “ he talk[s] to Jesus all the time. Even when he [is] driving his car” (16), Holden first displays his skepticism toward religion: “ That killed me. I just see the big phony bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiffs” (16). However, it is not merely churchgoers that Holden seems to be hesitant of: he especially fears the church leaders, who represent the institution itself. Holden does not mind Jesus, perhaps the foremost symbol of spirituality itself, but insists that the Disciples “ annoy the Hell out of [him] if you want to know the truth (100). To Holden, the Disciples represent the rules and regulations imposed by the Church, which he is inherently resistant toward. Holden again displays this resistance toward the rules of the institution with his proclamation that

he “ can’t stand ministers” (100) because “ they all have these Holy Joe voices when they start giving their sermons.” (100)

These sermons, intended to proclaim the tenets of the Christian belief, stifle Holden’s spirituality, forcing him to turn away from them despite his common belief in God. Holden again shows this tendency while conversing with a fellow classmate, Ackley. After toying with the idea of joining a Catholic monastery, he quickly rejects it: “ The kind of luck I have, I’d probably join one with all the wrong kind of monks in it. All stupid bastards” (50). Holden clearly has no trust in the institution; his extreme skepticism prevents him from even considering further exploring religion. When Ackley is offended by Holden’s attack of Catholicism, Holden remarks that “ nobody’s making any cracks about your goddamn religion” (50). Holden’s reply is true: Holden does not lack respect for religion itself, but rather for the institution itself. This skepticism of the institution surpasses what is normal or healthy—he is instead inhibiting his own development by constantly demonizing the church.

While in his former history teacher’s room prior to leaving Pencey Prep, Holden expresses what can only be called a nonchalant attitude regarding his departure: “ Well...they’ll be pretty irritated about it... This is about the fourth school I’ve been to” (9). Obviously, formal education does not sit well with Holden. Throughout *Catcher in the Rye* Holden displays his skepticism of institutions as he struggles to escape the grasp of institutionalized education while seeking an informal education of his own through his solo journey through New York City. To Holden, the schools he has attended represent the

very elitism that he despises so much. For example at Elkton Hills, a school Holden had previously attended, the Headmaster “ went around shaking hands with everybody’s parents when they drove up to school. He’d be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents” (14). This display of elitism was a serious enough offense that Holden claims it was “ one of the biggest reasons why [he] left Elkton Hills” (14), along with the “ fact” that he was “ surrounded by phonies” (14). Holden repeatedly denounces the phoniness of elite prep school, from Ackley and Stradlater, fellow students at Pencey, to Harris Macklin, Holden’s roommate at Elkton, even to “ George Something,” a friend of Holden’s sometimes girlfriend Sally Hayes. Holden insists that Sally’s interaction with George, a student at the elite prep school Andover, was “ the phoniest conversation you ever heard in your life” (127). Holden believes that the only purpose of prep school is to “ study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddamn Cadillac someday” (131). This view of phoniness and Holden’s extreme hesitance toward participating in it is so incapacitating that he cannot succeed as a student, hence his four expulsions. Near the end of Holden’s journey, he visits one of his former teachers, Mr. Antolini, who taught English at the Elkin School. Mr. Antolini takes a nonconformist view of education. He introduces to Holden the idea that education is important for personal growth in addition to “ phony” pursuits. Mr. Antolini is quite similar to Holden: he frequently drinks, his life is somewhat of a mess, and he seems to lack concern for material possessions. Mr. Antolini professes that “ educated and scholarly men, if they’re brilliant and creative to begin with—which unfortunately, is rarely the case—tend to

leave infinitely more valuable records behind them than men who are merely brilliant and creative... and—most important—nine times out of ten they have more humility than the unscholarly thinker” (189-190). This view addresses each of Holden’s views of the evil of education: rather than an emphasis on the material value of an education, Mr. Antolini speaks of records left behind, records that could make Holden feel valuable for the first time in his life, and addresses both the arrogance of many educated men and rarity of an intelligent student. Finally, Mr. Antolini mentions that these brilliant, educated men possess humility, which is perhaps the trait Holden most values in life. Holden is open to these ideas: though he doesn’t immediately express these emotions he does not talk back to Mr. Antolini and even lets Mr. Antolini offer him the couch to spend the night on. Holden may fear the institution, but he does not fear the knowledge itself.

Ironically, Holden’s fear of rules and the institutions that enforce them will perhaps be alleviated by the very institution we soon learn he is being treated in. As he learns to acknowledge his problems and moves toward addressing them, perhaps Holden will finally learn to embrace the world around him, or at least to tolerate it. Regulations will never cease to exist, and though they will always be regulated by skepticism, it also important for us to remember that sometimes we must choose our battles; we cannot change every rule we disagree with, nor would it be possible for everyone to be satisfied.