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The Pursuit of Salvation

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The Pursuit of Salvation

“Never waste your food,” my parents recited again at the dinner table. They continued, “If we had this much food growing up in the Philippines, we’d be so blessed. Please don’t take it for granted.” Throughout my childhood, nearly every family meal consisted of this conversation. My parents seized every opportunity to remind me of their early impoverished life in the Philippines. Their stories increasingly strengthened my gratitude for the life my brother and I were born into. Having back aches from stiff bamboo beds, depending on conveniently-priced junk food as nutrition, and rationing small portions among large families—these circumstances generated the everyday reality for my parents growing up in the province of Ilocos Sur. Still, the most difficult part for me is openly accepting that this reality isn’t only their past, but it is many people’s present.

Since immigrating to America in 1992, my parents have worked restlessly to create a promising life for their future kids and families back home. Key components include my father serving in the Air Force to pay for his education and my mother overcoming the culture shock of having to work as a foreign Registered Nurse. Now, as I reflect on their selfless journey, I acknowledge that they have not only fulfilled their promise, but have reached achievements bigger than they originally envisioned. Because of them, my brother is currently in school

pursuing his second Bachelor's degree, and my four year journey for a Bachelor's degree in Nursing is underway.

Attending Dominican University here in San Rafael, California has opened my eyes to innumerable perspectives—especially from my experiences this past semester in Service Learning. I've interacted with people who noticeably resemble the impoverished lifestyle my parents once suffered through. I've seen these helpless people gather within communities, yet still feel attacked by loneliness. I've asked myself, what has created this division in our community? Why haven't we shed light on these issues before? And if we have, why has the light been neglected? I've learned that the injustice of socio-economic marginalization is negatively affecting the lives of so many people, especially in Marin County, and it is our mission to fix this. The first step forward starts in the heart of San Rafael: Health Hubs at Marin Community Clinics.

Socio-economic marginalization is the unequal treatment of minority groups under subdivisions of race, age, ethnicity, gender, financial capabilities, education status, and many other socially-labeled categories. In other words, opportunities are limited based on an individual's association to particular groups. Many root causes give rise to this injustice. Within San Rafael, I observe the following issues: discrimination of diverse peoples, favored education status, and Marin County's overall economy. San Rafael houses a population of diverse racial and ethnic groups, however, these minorities still face noticeable segregation. According to Data USA, "18% of Marin County, CA residents were born outside of the country" ("Data USA: Marin County"). That 18% hits a soft spot for me, knowing that a fairly large portion of them are from the Philippines, just like my own family (see Appendix A). These people of color struggle

with setbacks, especially in the education system. Generally speaking, most employers prefer hiring educated candidates with college degrees. Alexa Elejalde-Ruiz from the Chicago Tribune explains, “Employers are raising their educational requirement for new hires, a trend that troubles workforce development experts who say it puts jobs out of reach of those who need them most. Nearly a third of employers say they have increased their educational requirements over the past five years” (Elejalde-Ruiz). The problem here is, education is unattainable without money and money is unattainable without a job. Marin County’s economic structure has encouraged a cycle of concerns for families who are financially incapable. Lack of education and employment leads to inadequate supply of necessities such as food, housing, and protected healthcare. Fortunately, Health Hubs at Marin Community Clinics strives to obliterate these hurdles with compassionate service.

Marin Community Clinics is an independent and non-profit organization located in downtown San Rafael and Novato. As a Federally Qualified Health Center, they claim to “improve the health of patients and community by providing high quality, cost-effective, culturally sensitive, patient-centered health care” (Marin Community Clinics). The clinic gives rise to Health Hubs—a weekly program offering free food distribution, health screenings, group exercise, and nutrition education open to all. Throughout my service here, Florencia Parada, the coordinator, has shared remarkable information about the San Rafael community. The injustice of socio-economic marginalization caught my attention from the very first day that Florencia addressed it. I specifically remember when Florencia presented flyers that read, “Values of Health Hubs: hope, inclusivity, respect, and community.” As she posted them on the wall, she explained, “I want to remind our participants that it’s not us versus them. It’s we. We’re in this

together.” Her advocacy for unity motivated me to inspire change within an excluded community.

Serving at Health Hubs was life-changing. In truth, I initially wasn't expecting much from committing to only a semester-long service period. After all, it was just a requirement for school, right? My ignorant preconceived notions were quickly proven wrong as I started to develop connections with people at my community partner. I greatly appreciated how much selfless effort the returning volunteers were executing; carrying heavy boxes of food across the parking lot isn't as easy as it seems. Their devotion quickly inspired me to act through unconditional and selfless love, as my religious beliefs encourage me to do the same. As a follower of Roman Catholicism, I aim to carry out the principles of the Catholic Social Teaching. Caring for individuals with a holistic approach is foundational for establishing strong faith and is absolutely necessary for redemption. God claims that when we see suffering in someone, we see God. If we reject that person, we have rejected God in his suffering. But, to what extent does this apply? If we are asked to help someone who has committed one of the Seven Deadly Sins, must we believe that this is God testing our loyalty and compassion? Or in turn, is this the temptation of evil that we must avoid? These controversial dilemmas present themselves at Health Hubs. One day, when the line was moving slowly, an infuriated man lost patience and started cursing at the volunteers. In these instances, fearful hesitation questions the act of unconditional love. Such troubling situations have fueled new thinking for me. God ultimately has a plan for his children to reside with him in heaven as long as we carry out our work as peacemakers. The Beatitudes provide a moral code promising exchange based on merit, “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied,” and “Blessed are the meek, for they shall

inherit the earth.” Roman Catholicism has inspired me to see the experience of socio-economic marginalization as a form of sacrificial work in exchange for redeeming salvation. This suffering resembles Jesus’ lifestyle. This earthly injustice is key for admittance into the afterlife of salvation. Living a painful life here on earth promises a beautiful and everlasting afterlife, as long as you stay true to the faith. However, what does this mean for those living lavishly comfortable here on earth? In God’s eyes, they’re sinners by greed and gluttony with their abundance in money and food. I see the founders and volunteers at Health Hubs as middle-men to God’s saving. They give and continue giving to those in need. They understand that overall, our salvation will steer far from reach without the synergy of good works and good faith. Hypothetically, perhaps the volunteers are only serving out of obligation and fear of guilt? Though this could be a possibility for some, the genuinity of Health Hubs stumps that rhetorical. Health Hubs only promotes a loving and hopeful environment, which most closely aligns to the core values of Christianity.

Health Hubs has exemplified Christian values since the very beginning. Before they established modern clinics, patients were treated in church basements. As Good Samaritans, the volunteers at Health Hubs consistently served others without expectations to receive something in return. This behavior still circulates within the community. Christians live out Jesus’ Golden Rule to “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Florencia truly believes in this and encourages the Health Hubs community to do the same. I remember when she powerfully exclaimed, “We refrain from using the word ‘illegal’ here. Even if they are from another country, and they may not be a ‘citizen,’ they are still human. We are all human. This language is hurtful. But, simple body language can do so much. A smile is all it takes.” Florencia believes that all

humans are created equally and deserve respect, which is an ideology similar to *Imago Dei*, meaning that “God made humans in God’s image.” But, if this idea were definitely true, then why are all humans extremely different individuals? This is because God is everything. God is all of us combined, and united as one. God is Incarnation: the presence of sacred spirit within mortal flesh. We must treat each other with respect, for God is within us.

Protestantism and Pentecostalism are other branches of Christianity that slightly contradict the teachings of Roman Catholicism. These branches suggest less obvious approaches to solve socio-economic marginalization. If the goal is to improve lifestyles for the suffering, the Protestant concept of *sola fides*, or dependence on faith alone, will not foster drastic outcome. For example, if an individual is actively seeking a job, the single act of wishful thinking will not help them get it. A desired outcome of employment requires work and action, as demonstrated in Roman Catholicism. Pentecostalism, on the other hand, associates itself with the “Prosperity Gospel,” claiming that God calls us to be rich. I personally disagree with this perspective and rather agree with the “Social Gospel,” claiming that God calls us to be poor. Health Hubs has created such a human-centered environment that is far concerned from lavish, materialistic living. Christianity aligns the closest with this community, but several other religions offer enlightening perspectives as well.

Similar to the Social Gospel interpretation of Christianity, Buddhism suggests a solution to socio-economic marginalization through complete elimination of attachment to materialistic possessions. They encourage detachment from everything on earth that invokes suffering—which is actually life itself. For the Health Hubs community facing injustice, the Buddhist method of adhering to The Eightfold Path can lead to positive outcomes. A lifestyle of

right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration is pure enlightenment that opens the gates to Nirvana. Additionally, the Health Hubs community dealing with suffering resembles Siddhartha's journey where he witnessed four sights of the different stages of life. If we view the injustice through this lens, it doesn't seem as terrible. Maybe the impoverished should be completely mindful of their suffering and stop seeking comfort through attachments like food, money, and education. Are these people suffering at Health Hubs on their journey to the after life? Perhaps Health Hubs is an obstacle impeding them from the learning outcomes of genuine suffering by offering an easy way out. Is it better to leave them alone so they may embark on this self-fulfilling journey?

The Theravada way of Buddhism recommends an approach completely opposite to Health Hubs' by encouraging self-rewarding enlightenment and withdrawal from surrounding communities. For an injustice like socio-economic marginalization, cohesive effort of the community working toward a common goal is essential for success. Buddhism turns away from this idea and preaches the importance of individual advancement. The problem in Buddhism is not the society itself, but the way the individual decides to perceive it. In *God Is Not One*, Stephen Prothero describes social injustice and how a Buddhist might think, "I suffer because of how I view the world, not because of political or economic structures that oppress or impoverish me" (Prothero 180). In other words, a shifted mindset is all you need for enlightenment. Unfortunately, this is much easier said than done. How does one appreciate impermanence if their lives are put on the line because of it? Impermanence means you'll never receive the education you want, you'll never keep the job you thought you could, you'll never know when your next meal is, and you'll never have a stable roof over your head. The escape from suffering

is only found in the afterlife in Nirvana, but how can we eliminate suffering on earth if the method of detachment leads to more suffering?

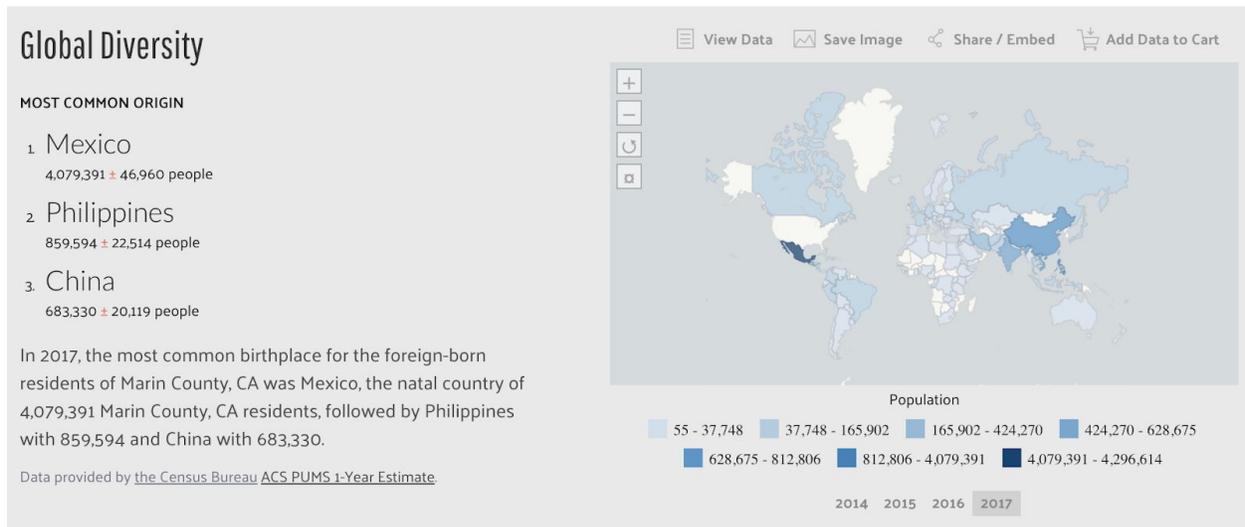
Confucianism's answer to this: don't try to eliminate it. Just let it be, and accept that your life is meant to be this way. It's catered to your individual destiny. While Buddhism focuses on the escape from this world, Confucianism focuses on the divine qualities the earth already possesses, and how we may come to terms with it. Similar to Health Hubs' approach, Confucianism prioritizes the cultivation of social relationships and education. To become a *junzi*, one must live through *Ren* "human-heartedness" and *Li* "ritual/etiquette/propriety." I agree with majority of the Confucianist perspectives. Others, I personally question. Social life is indeed essential when addressing issues like socio-economic marginalization. Hospitality and caring for others promotes positive change that is necessary. However, propriety doesn't seem viable. Propriety is conformity to the inevitable hierarchical structure. Confucians believe that there is "importance in knowing your place and staying in it... Some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean in subjection" (Prothero 111). In essence, this is true. If participants weren't suffering, the volunteers wouldn't have a reason to serve. One is dependent on the other, as we are all independent of everyone within society. If socio-economic marginalization is the problem, then hierarchy is the cause of it. Inequality among different groups of people is what breeds this unfair treatment. To break down these barriers, we must eliminate placing people into categories and instead, classify all humans as "we," just as Florencia teaches us to at Health Hubs.

When we compare and contrast these three religions to one another, both overlapping similarities and drastic differences appear. All religions address the important of love and good

will, but in their distinctively unique ways. Christianity promotes unconditional love for others, Confucianism promotes sheer acceptance of those different than you, and Buddhism promotes love and acceptance, but within yourself. Many pathways can definitely lead toward the same summit, but ultimately, there is no definitive answer. The complications of socio-economic marginalization make it extremely difficult to point out an obvious solution. Life works in stitchwork that is oddly specific but inexplicable. The thing is, even if we have the ambition to fight injustice, the ongoing cycle is bound to fall down and restart. What goes up must come down; the idea of paradoxical balance is natural. It's beautiful.

Overall, hardships are excruciating while good times are liberating, but if we were all maintained in monotonous tranquility, life would breed no purpose. We learn from these waves and we prosper with experience. But perhaps, this stitchwork isn't organized by the universe, but a higher power? If it's Buddha, Confucius, or God, then so be it. Will they help us rectify these injustices? That decision is out of our control. This doesn't mean we can't control our circumstances, since we are creators of our own realities. The peacemakers at Health Hubs know that if they work at their full potential, they're contributing to a greater outcome. Health Hubs will continue to bring more job opportunities to the table, they will continue to raise their voices about the issue, and they will continue to be that light for many people who have only known darkness. My parents were saved from injustice and brought into the light by gracious work *and* faith. If we make the promise to do the same out of pure good, salvation will reign in our future. So, let's make the future happen now.

Appendix A



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