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Sociological Analysis of *Hacksaw Ridge*

Religion is a strong conviction for some people as it motivates their feelings and their actions toward themselves and others. This conviction can be displayed in public ways such as church attendance or private ways such as prayer. *Hacksaw Ridge* explored the ways in which religion motivates actions, especially those that are against cultural norms, and the ways in which one grapples when their religious conviction goes against public or cultural expectations.

Hacksaw Ridge was a film about Desmond Doss, a devout Seventh-day Adventist who was the first person to be awarded the Medal of Honor without carrying a weapon. When he was younger, Desmond and his brother Hal were wrestling outside of their house, and young Desmond grabbed a brick and hit Hal in the head with it. This frightened his family, but luckily Hal lived through it with just a knot on his head. Later in his life, Desmond heard and then saw his father beating his mother, and when his father pulled out a gun and pointed it toward his mother, Desmond took the gun and almost shot his father. He was reminded, however, of the Sixth Commandment that instructs believers against killing others.

Hal enlisted in the Navy, and their father was quite angry with him because their father served in World War I and lost many of his fellow soldiers in the war. It was clear that the war also greatly affected their father as he resorted to alcoholism and domestic violence. Desmond was inspired to enlist in the Army because he felt that he could not just sit idle while others fought, so he enlisted as a Combat Medic. Throughout the film, Desmond struggled against his fellow soldiers and officials because he refused to carry a gun or kill anyone as doing so was

against his religious beliefs. During the Battle of Okinawa on Hacksaw Ridge, many people were killed or injured, but Desmond repeatedly returned to the line of fire to save people and lower them down the ridge so they could be treated.

Society attempts to morph the beliefs of individuals who do not conform. In this case, Desmond was unwilling to conform to the norm that soldiers carry guns and kill their enemies. It was clear, especially in the beginning of Desmond's time in the Army, that the higher ranked sergeants and officers were annoyed by the fact that Desmond would not carry a gun or kill. Sergeant Howell and the ranked officers above him continually tried to convince Desmond to quit the Army because his religious beliefs conflicted with what they recognized as the goals of the Army. They were especially hard on him and ensured that Desmond's fellow soldiers knew that he was the weakest link. This encouraged the other soldiers to beat Desmond up.

The Army generals thought that Desmond was crazy because he believed that God spoke to him and through him. They did not understand Desmond's religion, so they tried to convince him that he was insane. Desmond attempted to explain his relationship with God and how it shaped him and his actions, but they did not attempt to understand at first. This scene was similar to a malpractice by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that sparked the events in Waco, Texas in 1993 with the Branch Davidians. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians, had a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation and believed that he was in the line of King David (Tabor 315). He and his followers resided in a compound, and rather than attempting to understand the religious motivations behind Koresh and his followers, the FBI raided their compound and unnecessarily killed many people.

The malpractice by the FBI was that they ignored religion. As Nancy Ammerman described in her article *Waco, Law Enforcement, and Scholars of Religion*, members of the FBI may have disregarded religion because they were not personally religious, they believed religion was an excuse for power, or they did not understand differences in religious interpretation (Ammerman 2-3). There was a scene in the film in which one of the officers talked to Desmond about how he was also Christian, but he never felt like he should not carry a gun. This displayed a difference in interpretation between the officer and Desmond. The high-ranking Army officials in *Hacksaw Ridge* were similar to the FBI at Waco because they did not take the time to understand how Desmond believed, and they labeled him as crazy and were hard on him. It is possible that they thought Desmond used religion as an excuse not to fight. They also said that Desmond waved his morals in their faces by disobeying orders, when they were waving their morals in his face by not attempting to understand.

Religion motivates action, especially those against cultural norms, in many ways. During the film credits, interviews with some of the people who were portrayed were shown. Desmond's brother Hal said, "When you're under conviction, that's not a joke. That's who you are," (Gibson). This was definitely seen in Desmond's actions. His religious beliefs were a major part of the person he was. Religion motivates action in that it provides a moral code for people to follow. In his article *Can Religion Cause Behavior?*, Mark Regnerus detailed, "Such a moral order is not established by people's own desires and decisions but instead exists apart from and above them, providing standards by which to evaluate those desires and decisions," (Regnerus 44). Desmond followed a strict moral code given to him by his religion. His denomination (Seventh-day Adventist) heavily believed in not killing others, so he also stood by that belief.

In his early life and also later in his life, Desmond also exhibited characteristics of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as described by Christian Smith. This concept was created to encapsulate how some people are unable to articulate their feelings regarding their religious beliefs, but they follow basic principles. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism includes the belief that religion provides one with morals to follow such as being kind to one another (or not holding a gun or killing others), God gives one comfort and makes one happy, and God created the world and watches over it (Smith 162-163). Though Smith's work focused mostly on teenagers, Desmond was still young when he fought in the Army. When Desmond hit his brother with a brick and almost killed him, he was drawn to a frame in their house that listed the Ten Commandments. He walked up to the frame, where in his mind the Sixth Commandment about not killing others was highlighted. At that point in his life, he was too young to completely understand his religion, but he understood the morals that he was to follow.

Desmond also used God as a therapist. When he was put into a cell to prepare for his trial, he prayed to ask God what he should do: plead guilty or stand up for his beliefs. Though Desmond and Smitty did not get along well in the beginning, when Desmond was unable to save Smitty on the battlefield, he felt abandoned by God and asked God to help him understand God's plan. To him, God showed him the way. As Desmond became older and more mature, he knew how to articulate his faith (and did articulate it many times to the officials), but he still used his religion to set his morals and God worked partially as a therapist for him.

Desmond grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist church, so his denomination heavily influenced his morals as well. From previous research about Seventh-day Adventists, they are pacifists ("Peace"). This means that because of his religion, Desmond refused to carry a weapon

or kill anyone. Desmond also did not want to serve on Saturdays, as that is the Adventist Sabbath. When he first mentioned that, the officers laughed in his face, but after he saved so many people on Hacksaw Ridge and they realized his integral part in their battle, they began to respect him more and they allowed him to pray before they climbed the ridge. Lastly, when Smitty and Desmond were in the ditch after searching for more injured soldiers, Smitty asked Desmond if he was planning to eat the food that they were supplied with, and Desmond replied that he could not eat meat. Though not directly explained, this was likely motivated by his Seventh-day Adventist beliefs as well because they heavily follow the Old Testament and believe that the body is a temple, so people should only consume clean foods (which oftentimes is not meat) (“Health”). Desmond is just one example of how religion motivates actions, even those that are against cultural norms.

Hacksaw Ridge also dealt with how one grapples with religious convictions versus public and cultural expectations. Much of this discussion can be seen directly in thinking about how religion motivates actions, because Desmond was forced to weigh his beliefs versus what was expected of him many times throughout the film. He was unwilling to part with his beliefs to please others or to conform to societal expectations or expectations from leadership. When the other soldiers beat Desmond up in the middle of the night, he allowed it to happen without fighting back. After growing up wrestling with his brother and wanting to stand up for himself, he probably had some urge to fight back, but that was against his beliefs, so he did not. He also refused to tell the officers who beat him up because he did not want them to be in trouble.

Additionally, there were many times when his service in the Army would have been much easier if he simply carried a rifle, but he still refused. Some people would be willing to

sacrifice their beliefs for convenience, but Desmond was devout and strong in his religion and morals. He was denied his furlough toward the beginning of his service because he was not trained on the rifle since he would not touch a gun. He was forced to go on trial to be sent to a military prison because of that, and was unable to attend his own wedding. Many people would have compromised, but he upheld his beliefs. Finally, when his fiancé Dorothy thought that he was going to go to military prison, she tried to convince him that it was acceptable to just swing the rifle around and that the only reason he would not do it was because of his own pride. He explained to her that he would not be able to live with himself (another example of his morals) if he touched the rifle. Dorothy even tried to tell him, “Don’t confuse your will with the Lord’s,” (Gibson). He understood that upholding his beliefs was not just for his own will, so he had to stand against her in that instance as well, no matter the cost. Desmond showed time and again the struggle that persists in upholding religious beliefs and how it contrasts with societal norms.

Rather than fueling the fire and parting from his morals because he was angry at his leaders, Desmond showed them kindness. His religiousness motivated him to be selfless and care for others, which is why he wanted to become a medic. He also showed kindness to his fellow soldiers and his leaders on the battlefield by nursing them and dragging or carrying them to the ridge to be dropped down for treatment. He put everyone else’s needs before his own and was in the line of fire multiple times to save others. Desmond displayed the many qualities of religious peacemakers as described in Sharon Erickson Nepstad’s article, *Religion, Violence, and Peacemaking*. He rejected cultural norms, and rather than fighting those who did not believe the same way as him, he believed that anyone could be redeemed (Nepstad 405). One of the qualities of a religious peacemaker as described by Nepstad is stepping across enemy lines (Nepstad 405).

Desmond stepped across enemy lines when he helped the Japanese soldier underground and sent some of the Japanese soldiers down Hacksaw Ridge. He also attempted to engage in a dialogue with high-ranking officers about his religion instead of becoming angry with them, which is another quality of a religious peacemaker (Nepstad 405). He could have easily blown up on everyone for not understanding, but he did not.

Pacifist and peacemaker Desmond Doss fought valiantly for the United States. He never fired a shot, but set an example to his fellow soldiers as well as his leaders on how to be selfless. Religion is oftentimes seen in a negative light because of its abuse or because of what is considered religious terrorism. It was refreshing to see someone who was religiously motivated, grappled with how to uphold their beliefs while adhering to expectations, and someone who, motivated by his religion, showed kindness to all people. Desmond Doss was a fabulous example of a religious role model, as displayed by a religious sociological analysis.

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