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Religion and Spirituality in Tarantino's Pulp Fiction

In Pulp Fiction, Quentin Tarantino portrays a violent world where life is confused, cheap and endangered. Throughout the course of the film, nearly all the main characters either die or suffer greatly. One of the few characters that escapes this fate is Jules "Pitt" Winfield, who at the conclusion of the film is still alive and healthy. More importantly, Jules has become enlightened after viewing what he describes to Vincent Vega as "divine intervention." Jules becomes aware that one can find spirituality through religion. In the last scene of the film, in the coffee shop, Jules describes his enlightenment as "what alcoholics refer to as a moment of clarity." This scene shows how Jules comes to a realization about how he needs to abandon his old lifestyle in order to live with this new vision. This film shows in its representation of Jules and his recitals of Ezekiel 25:17 the faults of all ecclesiastical and denominational Christian religions in America. Tarantino shows how religion supports violence and shows the solution to this problem is finding our own spirituality through personal interpretation of religion.

Several scenes portray Jules as either the messenger or the embodiment of Christian religion and show through his actions the malignant tradition of justifying violence inherent in religions' structure. In the last scene of the film in the coffee shop, Jules is telling Ringo his interpretations of Ezekiel 25:17:

I'm thinking maybe it means that you're the evil man and I'm the righteous man and Mister Nine Millimeter here is the shepherd protecting my righteous ass in the valley of darkness. Or it could mean you're the righteous man and I'm the shepherd and it's the world that's evil and selfish.

Jules's first interpretation of Ezekiel 25:17 implies that the church functions to support America's wars, where Jules is the righteous American protecting himself from the evil of others with his gun. The second interpretation implies that religion functions to cement peoplehood, which is giving people a rationale for coming together to identify as a people. Religion does this by creating a sacred foundation for people being together by telling them that they are righteous, good and supported by God. When Jules likens himself to a shepherd, he represents religion, which is protecting the people from the evil and selfish foreign world. Therefore by telling people that they are good and that foreigners are evil, peoplehood justifies violence by creating a righteous justification for war.

Jules' actions towards Brett emphasize religion's support of violence. The preaching of religion and the use of violence by Jules to force religion on Brett parallels with how Christian religion supports the use of violence and war in expanding American hegemony. Tarantino shows this relationship by showing how religion also uses violence to propagate itself through forced indoctrination. The first two times the film presents Ezekiel 25:17 are during the scene in which Vincent Vega and Jules "Pitt" go to Brett's home to kill him; Jules preaches Ezekiel 25:17 to Brett right before killing him. Because Jules preaches Ezekiel 25:17 right before he kills Brett, the implication is that he forces the idea of God upon Brett as he faces the last moments of his life. This action suggests the idea of forced indoctrination. At the conclusion of Ezekiel 25:17, Jules and Vincent murder Brett and soon afterwards his associate, and this murder is the climax of the scene. This shows how religion functions to punish deviants and those which it views as a threat. After saying Ezekiel 25:17, Jules carries out this function by killing Brett, which shows Jules to be the embodiment of religion. Jules denounces these negative functions of Christian religion after he survives the attack by Brett's associate and realizes that he has witnessed a miracle.

Jules finds a new spirituality in religion after a miracle happens to him. Immediately after Jules says Ezekiel 25:17 and shoots Brett, Brett's associate jumps out of the closet, and tries but fails to kill Jules and Vincent after unloading a gun from across the room at them. Jules and Vincent immediately kill Brett's friend, but this incident has a profound effect on Jules as he becomes convinced that what happened was, "Divine intervention." With this realization, Jules acquires a new spirituality which will dramatically change his life. Vincent tries to convince Jules that what happened was just a freak occurrence, and mocks his thinking, but Jules says that it doesn't matter if what happened at Brett's was a real miracle, "What is significant is I felt the touch of God." Jules interprets this miracle as a message from God telling him that his life is too dangerous and that it must change.

Jules decides that he needs to change his job and lifestyle in order to survive. Because Jules changes, he does survive, while Vincent who mocks his decision is murdered by Butch. His decision is, "Basically, I'm just going to walk the earth.... like Kane in Kung-Fu." In this scene though, the audience laughs at Jules' statement, and this seems to indicate that the audience should not take Jules' ideas seriously. Though the audience laughs, they are laughing not because of the invalidity of his idea, but rather the ridiculousness of elevating the theme of a television show to the level of divine revelation. What

Jules says to Vincent shows that Jules has decided to change how he lives; he chooses to stop being a hit man and instead walk the earth helping others. This decision happens as he describes it to Vincent, as they were just eating and he was thinking about the “miracle we witnessed,” and he had “a moment of clarity.” Jules realization shows that he has interpreted this religious experience for himself. By doing this he has found a new spirituality within religion.

While Jules talks to Ringo in the coffee shop, he gives his last interpretation of Ezekiel 25:17, which displays Jules insight into life. “The truth is, you’re the weak and I am the tyranny of evil men. But I’m trying Ringo. I’m trying real hard to be the shepherd.” In this interpretation, he is saying that the world is weak and Jules represented the tyranny of Christian religion; but he also shows how he is trying to live with a new spirituality. This quote shows how Jules has taken religion, represented by Ezekiel 25:17, and interpreted it for himself to discover a new vision for life. Through personal change, social change can occur, and this is why Jules needs to walk the earth and shepherd his spirituality to others. This belief is why Jules explains Ezekiel 25:17 to Ringo, and also why he insists to Vincent after they killed Brett’s friend, “What happened here was a miracle and I want you to acknowledge it.” Already Jules feels he must share his insight with others so that they too can survive. By interpreting religion for one’s self and finding spirituality, Jules is able to survive and becomes a messenger of personal change to help others survive.

Tarantino shows the failure of Christian religion and how by interpreting religion for one’s self people can save themselves. Almost no other character is left unscathed except Jules, and this is because he has abandoned ecclesiastical and denominational Christian religions in America to find his own spirituality in religion. Vincent Vega continues with his lifestyle as a hit man, using violence to enforce his will, and he is killed because he was weak and succumbed to the tyranny that religious ideals imposed on him. Therefore, Tarantino is saying that in order for our society to survive, we need to abandon our malignant religious traditions and find a new spirituality within religion; and that through personal change we can bring about societal change.