

Bokononism as a Functional, albeit Satirical, Religion

Elaine Wiley

In many apocalyptic stories, people turn to religion once they realize that the world is going to end, hoping to find peace and to cope with the great disaster. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963), however, the citizens of San Lorenzo all subscribe to a religion to cope with ordinary life, and the end of the world just happens to take place. Vonnegut's fictitious "Bokononism" is anything but a classic religion, yet it gives its congregation of believers the serenity and strength to survive their lives of quiet desperation. Bokononism thrives on San Lorenzo, the tiny island nation of its origin and its banishment, giving heart to its miserable occupants with its cynicism and lies. The eccentric and elusive creator Bokonon, the uneducated and silently rebellious islanders, and the totalitarian government combine to create an environment of religious persecution and strength similar to those settings which many of the "real" religions have endured throughout their histories. Though Bokononism is in itself ridiculous, it serves the same purposes as established religions do for those that believe in them, and its ludicrousness furthers Vonnegut's satirical commentary on religion as an institution.

Though *Cat's Cradle* is not primarily about Bokononism, the novel introduces the religion even before the table of contents and gradually reveals the intricacies of its practices and beliefs as the plot develops. Bokonon is the founder and leader of this religious system, and it is his open cynicism and blatant lying that makes Bokononism so easily acceptable and effective. Bokonon arrived on the island of San Lorenzo naked and "reborn" after a shipwreck, and he and the other survivor from the ship attempted to make the island a utopia. When they both failed, Bokonon created his religion as a way to give hope to the people, and his partner took on the role of dictator for the people. Thus the stage was set for the peaceful holy man against the vicious

tyrant, and the people were able to forget their unhappiness in the vicarious thrill of this great struggle. Bokonon's partner threatened to kill him and all his followers, organizing searches to capture him. The goal was never to actually catch him, however, because the entire religion is merely a distraction and capturing Bokonon would destroy the illusion. Both parties benefitted from this system; the partner became all-powerful in San Lorenzo, and Bokonon lived in an environment of peaceful security. Both roles were completely necessary to maintain Bokononism and the happiness of the public. As Bokonon explains about his partner's successor, " 'Papa' Monzano, he's so very bad, / But without bad 'Papa' I would be so sad; / Because without 'Papa's' badness/ Tell me, if you would, / How could wicked old Bokonon / Ever, ever look good?" (Vonnegut 102). The deceit and elaborate arrangement form the basis for Bokononism, and the nonsensical practices and beliefs support the façade of happiness that the citizens of San Lorenzo adopt.

Jonah, the narrator and protagonist, gives an initial warning about the content of the book he is writing, which is, in fact, *Cat's Cradle*: "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either" (Vonnegut 5-6). This, of course, is the basis of Bokononism; the entire religion is openly a giant fabrication. One of the aspects of the religion is *foma*, or "harmless untruths," a word that Bokonon coined. Bokonon later describes his own written account of Bokononism cosmogony as a pack of *foma*. Among the various other beliefs is *boko-maru*, the practice of rubbing one's foot against another person's foot to mingle the souls, the Bokononist method of making love. Bokononists also believe in the ideas of a *karass*, or a group of people that are unknowingly connected to one another to do God's will; *zah-mah-ki-bo*, or inevitable fate; and *wampeters*, or the objects that

connect all members of a *karass*. The people within Jonah's *karass* are connected by the *wampeter* of *ice-nine* that leads Jonah and everyone in the novel to their *zah-mah-ki-bo*.

Attempting to assess whether or not Bokononism is as viable as real-life religions is difficult because a great deal of dispute exists among scholars about what religion is exactly. There are two major types of religion definitions: those that focus on the substance of religion, and those that focus on the purpose religion serves (Pargament 240). The major religions— Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, to name a few—are not the only viable forms of religion if one examines the concept from different viewpoints. In fact, these religions, or at least the experiences individuals receive from them, may even be eliminated from the list of true religions and instead be identified as “frozen religions,” or religions more identifiable by the structure of churches than by ideals and purpose (Yinger 90). Contemporary religion, therefore, is invisible because only the traditional religions are noted (90). Theoretically, if Bokononism fits the standards of substance and function, it could then be reasonably considered as a religion as much as other established religions. Though it does not have a network of church facilities or widespread popularity, Bokononism does have a core belief system and serves similar purposes to what real religions serve.

Looking at religion from the substance point of view, several different criteria have been offered as methods of defining the conditions that religions require. Possible requisites include the acknowledgment of evil as an inescapable fact of life and a belief that humans can be saved from this evil (Yinger 89). Bokononism clearly acknowledges the existence of evil, though the explicit goal of the religion is to keep its members from paying attention to what makes them unhappy. Bokonon clearly sets up the dictator of San Lorenzo as the devil-figure because this person is the one responsible for outlawing Bokononism and threatens to kill its believers on a

great metal hook. The religion itself is Bokononism's offer of escape from evil, as is the practice of *boko-maru*. Bokononists focus on what makes them happy and avoid the evil that surrounds their daily lives and indulge in the practices of the religion that provide this distraction. Though Bokononism does not necessarily offer reassurance of a peaceful afterlife, the doctrine provides a means to escape from the looming menace of the San Lorenzan dictator and the other forms of evil that its followers encounter.

Other qualities that make up religion include awareness of the problems of the human condition, rites and beliefs that respond to this awareness, and organized groups to encourage awareness and to maintain the rites and beliefs (Yinger 91). By all appearances, Bokononism does not fit these criteria because it is based on "harmless untruths" that mask the problems of the human condition. This religion, however, knowingly disregards the truth, suggesting that its followers must first acknowledge the problems to comprehend how to ignore them. This internal dichotomy is comparable to the process of "doublethink" from George Orwell's *1984* (1949).

Winston Smith, the protagonist, describes the process:

"To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic... to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself... to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed" (Orwell 36).

Bokononists must complete a process very similar to doublethink. Because Bokonon openly states in his teachings that everything he preaches is a complete and total falsehood, his followers are meant to understand that their beliefs are not true. In order to follow Bokononism, however, they must believe the Bokononist doctrines. Thus they believe the lies, all the while holding the knowledge in their minds that their beliefs are false. Accordingly, Bokononists are actually

conscious of the problems of the human condition, whether they know it or not. Bokononism also has a system of rites that supports its awareness and ignorance of the problems of humanity. *Boko-maru* is a way to forget the subconscious realization of the human condition, and Bokononism even has its own form of last rites to deal with death, arguably the greatest concern that humans have to face. Another gap between this definition of religion and Bokononism is the presence of an organized group that binds all of the members of the religion together. To account for this disparity, the entire nation of San Lorenzo can be judged to be the community to which Bokononists belong. The government of San Lorenzo expressly forbids the practice of Bokononism, but Jonah comes to discover that everyone on the island is actually a devout Bokononist. In fact, when the supposedly Christian dictator of San Lorenzo is on his deathbed, he implores Jonah to hunt down and kill Bokonon because he preaches lies. When the time comes for his last rites to be read, however, he tells the Christian doctor that enters the room, “I am a member of the Bokononist faith... Get out, you stinking Christian” (Vonnegut 218). Though members of the Bokononist faith cannot openly assemble in groups, there exists an invisible and rebellious community that fosters the beliefs and rituals of Bokononism. Bokononism can thus be said to adequately, if atypically, fulfill the minimum requirements from the perspective of substance of what qualifies as a religion.

Bokononism also functions as a true religion based on its function and the purposes it serves. One possible way to define the purpose of a religion is as a means to discover meaning in life (Pargament 240). Bokononism does not explicitly provide this meaning, but rather gives its members the comfort of having their destinies taken out of their hands. According to the Bokononist doctrine, “everything happens as it is meant to happen,” and the followers thus have no need to worry about whether their actions are right or wrong (Broer 57). Meaning is given

because each Bokononist believes that God has his or her individual fate in his hands, regardless of how unhappy life may be (63). Another definition and one of the most simplified methods of viewing religion is humanity's reaction to chaos (Yinger 89). This explanation certainly applies to almost every major religion because, traditionally, people with religious beliefs turn to their religion in times of uncertainty or distress for answers and consolation. In a similar way, Bokononism answers this call for its followers. The end of the novel gives testament to this when unimaginable chaos comes down upon the people of San Lorenzo in the form of *ice-nine* and worldwide destruction. Bokonon leaves a note at the site of the mass-suicide of his network of followers:

To whom it may concern: These people around you are almost all of the survivors on San Lorenzo of the winds that followed the freezing of the sea. These people made a captive of the spurious holy man named Bokonon. They brought him here, placed him at their center, and commanded him to tell them exactly what God Almighty was up to and what they should now do. The mountebank told them that God was surely trying to kill them, possibly because He was through with them, and that they should have the good manners to die. This, as you can see, they did (Vonnegut 272-273).

Though the manner in which Bokononism offers a response to chaos is not particularly optimistic, the people are given a means to react to the chaos of the world they live in. Thus, Bokononism fulfills the purpose of giving life meaning and providing a way to cope with chaos to its members.

There is perhaps no better way for Kurt Vonnegut to satirize the institution of religion than to create a worthy religion of his own that contrasts as vividly with established religion as Bokononism does. The religious book of Bokononism differs in many respects with the holy books of the world's major religions. *The Books of Bokonon* are handwritten and never completed because Bokonon is constantly adding to them. Because Bokononism is all one giant façade, anything relating to absolutism within the religion would be illogical, including a

definitive end to their bible (Davis 157). Religious texts in the real world have definite limits and conclusions because the religions themselves work operate within a system of absolutes, but Bokononism accepts the changing world and adapts accordingly. This places traditional religions in a conformist light and subtly mocks the idea of humankind's implementation of order in an uncontrollable world. The ways in which the people behave and feel within Bokononism also comment on religion as a whole. Bokonon encourages his followers to turn away from misery and focus only on what is comfortable, and as a result the people are truly no better off, except by the fact that they do not care about their misery as much. Instead, they become "turned into hopelessly conforming, petrified statues as effectively as Ice-9 could have done" (Broer 62). Rather than allowing the San Lorenzans to feel how they wish to feel about their lives and struggles, Bokonon effectively exercises control over them by changing life into a great play in which all the people are actors; they perform their parts and learn to forget the problems of real life (Klinkowitz 98). This perception of Bokononism parallels the role traditional religions can often play in the lives of their followers. Bokononism's superficiality mirrors how "frozen" religions can merely barrage believers with ritual and structure while offering no real solutions. Even the environment that Bokononism operates under mocks other religious institutions. Bokonon himself is responsible for the banning of Bokononism because, as he says "So I said good-bye to government, /And I gave my reason: / That a really good religion / Is a form of treason" (Vonnegut 173). The people of San Lorenzo are incapable of ever improving in situation, so Bokonon arranges to have their religion outlawed to strengthen the blindness the people have toward their awful social conditions. The excitement and sense of persecution makes the people less interested in seeking actual improvement. This method of strengthening faith by fabricating outside threats mocks this practice in other religions and also society as whole.

Hitler's accusations against the Jews, the Pope's apprehensions about the Muslims during the crusades, and the current conflicts in the Middle East were all strengthened by the sense of outside forces plotting. These likenesses between Bokononism and other religions not only support Bokononism as a viable religion, but also work to criticize other religions. Looking at the false Bokononism, the reader is able to notice the absurdities of this particular religion, which leads to similar perceptions of religious institution as whole.

Were Bokononism adopted in the real world, it would likely have a decent-sized following, even if it never reached the level of popularity that the most common religions have attained. The idea of forgetting unhappiness and living within the comfort of lies is appealing in many ways, and Bokononism technically offers all of the same benefits that traditional religions do. The purpose behind Bokononism, however, is not to create a new alternative to the myriad of religious concepts already available to humanity today. Rather, Bokononism is set up in an effort to portray the ways in which religion falls short. When the end of the world crashes down upon humanity, religion may give comfort, but the world still ends. As Bokonon says in his final chapter:

“If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity, and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who” (Vonnegut 287).

Against the ideas of what religion is supposed to be, Bokononism qualifies as a feasible example of religion, but ultimately, Bokononism cannot control chaos or give meaning to life. No religion really can. Bokononism merely serves as a mirror to reflect that the institution of religion is a human institution with human limitations and problems.

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