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Implementation of Religion

Religion throughout history has been a way for people to better understand the purpose of their lives by believing in a higher power; its goal is to ingrain good morals and values into its followers. These basic goals are positive ones, but there has been much quarrel over which religion is the “true religion” and which higher power is the “true god”. However, a better question to be asking is “How can these goals be best implemented to create the religion that will be most beneficial to society?” *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kid asserts through Lily’s narration of Baptists, Christians, and Our Lady of Chains, that religion is most powerful when it is an act of open expression and interpretation, not one of strict boundaries.

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily grows up in Sylvan, a town made up of primarily Baptists. Through the characters of the story, Kidd portrays this religion as strict, and not open to interpretation. For example, when Brother Gerald picks up Lily to bring her into town, he says “In the eyes of God it doesn’t matter whether it’s [stealing] two fans or two hundred. Stealing is stealing. She asked if she could take the fans, I said no, in plain English. She took them anyway. Now that’s a sin, Lily (45).” This quote shows that Brother Gerald, a preacher at a Baptist church, believes there is only one way to interpret the difference between good and bad; he also claims to know exactly what God thinks. These things illustrate that he is not open to other interpretations of religion, and that he believes he must ingrain his own exact beliefs into others. Later in the story, Lily narrates that “According to Brother Gerald, hell was nothing but a bonfire for Catholics (60)” This further reinforces the inference that Brother Gerald is not open to people interpreting religion in their own way; he believes that any religion other than his own is “wrong”. Additionally, the Baptist religion is characterized to be sexist. Lily explains that “[The Baptist] church didn’t believe in […] women having a lot of say in things (60).” These examples come together to demonstrate that Baptism at this point in history was closed-minded towards many groups of people, such as women and those who do not share their religious beliefs.

As a result of the prejudiced mindset of the Baptist church, its followers are characterized to be racist, harsh, and stubborn. One key example of this is Lily’s father, T. Ray. Early in the book when the characters are still being introduced, Lily tells the reader that “[T. Ray had] gone to church for forty years, and [his meanness] was only getting worse (3).” It is clear from this quote that the Baptist church has done very little to fulfill one of the previously mentioned “main goals” of a religion, to ingrain kindness and morals into its followers. Another example of this is the general population of Sylvan, which we can get a glimpse into from the three men that Rosaleen spits snuff juice on. These men get irrationally angry and become extremely violent at the slightest fault from Rosaleen. Similarly to T. Ray, they are unforgiving, hate driven people. The Baptist church is so busy talking about the specifics of their beliefs, and how to react when one encounters a catholic, that they neglect to ensure that their followers are decent people.

Conversely, the Boatwright sisters’ religion, Our Lady of Chains, is categorized by Kidd to be welcoming to various beliefs, interpretations, and groups of people. August explains to Lily that “Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She’s not the statue in the parlor. She’s something *inside* of you. […] She’s the power in you, do you understand (299)?” This quote emphasizes the power of believing in one’s self and not aimlessly hoping that a god will help you. It also makes it clear that while Our Lady of Chains has a distinct story behind her, her meaning can be interpreted in many ways by different people, similarly to a symbol. Earlier in the book, August says to Lily “You know we all have a spirit, Lily, and when we die, it goes back to God, but nobody really knows how long that takes. Maybe it takes a split second, and maybe it takes a week or two (207)” From this it can be seen that while August does claim to know some general things about the God she believes in, she does not impose any strict beliefs on Lily or assert that she has some special knowledge about the divine. This trait differs greatly from the Baptists, who as aforementioned have very specific unchanging beliefs. Overall, the Our Lady of Chains religion is not an organization whose primary goal is to ensure that its believers know exactly what to believe – It attempts to open people up to seeing their God as what they believe a God should be.

The followers of Our Lady of Chains, known as the daughters of Mary, are some of the most kind, open-minded people portrayed in this novel. Their religious beliefs allow them to overcome prejudice, and affect them for the benefit of themselves and those around them. Many characters in *The Secret Life of Bees* are shown to succumb to prejudice, such as the Police officer who comes to investigate May’s death, T. Ray, and even June. June’s story however, is quite a bit different from the rest: firstly, she is the only one who is prejudiced against a white person -- namely Lily -- not against a black person. But what truly sets June apart, is that she is able to overpower her preconceptions, and see Lily for who she truly is. This strength to see past preconceived notions was no doubt derived from her religion, Our Lady of Chains, which teaches open-mindedness and love of all people. Another tribute to the power of being a Daughter of Mary is Lily herself, who became a much stronger and more confident person after joining the group. When she was in Sylvan, Lily was often afraid to stand up to her father, but after going to Tiburon, she does it twice: once she calls him and explains how she feels, and another time she distinctly says “No” to his face. These examples come together show Our Lady of Chains to be a very powerful religion for its followers.

Through the contrasts of Baptism and Our Lady of Chains, it can be seen that strict, discriminatory religions have an adverse effect on their followers -- and transitively society -- when compared to religions which are welcome to individual interpretation. Clearly the religious practices of the era portrayed in this novel had a considerable impact on the racism and sexism which plagued it. Just remember, that in any religion, keeping an open mind is important to maintaining a healthy relationship with other people, many of whom will inevitably disagree with your beliefs.