

Ecclesiast: A Novel Exploring Atheist Morality and Discrimination in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

One of the many reasons why atheists are shunned is the common belief that lack of faith leads to a lack of moral foundation. However, analyses on the moral behaviors of atheists and religious people show that atheists behave similarly to any other group and that they possess their own methods of discovering a moral foundation. This thesis explores the discrimination atheists face within Indonesian society, and how atheists are able to develop and possess their own moral foundation. This thesis uses Turiel's psychological Social Domain Theory, which is used to explain the moral panic around atheism as well as how morality develops outside of religious teaching. The creative work comes in the form of a magical realist novella about a young woman who slowly reconstructs her view on morality while on a journey to find God for an old corpse, guided by a mysterious archivist.

Keywords: atheism; moral development; moral domains; magical realism

INTRODUCTION

The concept and applications of faith, especially religious faith, have captured the minds of psychologists and philosophers for centuries. The APA's Dictionary of Psychology describes religious faith as a "belief and trust in a deity or other spiritual force seen as setting standards of conduct, responding to prayer, and (typically) assuring the ultimate triumph of good over evil" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). That definition implies that faith is essential in setting standards of conduct, i.e. being able to distinguish right from wrong, which has been an equally fervent subject of debate. The existence of atheism, a label that is generally accepted to mean "the metaphysical claim that there is no God" (Draper, 2017), comes into question once put under the lens of faith as the 'only' guidance for human moral development.

Conservative ideas regarding atheism still persist in the modern day in highly religious developing nations, particularly in Indonesia. Whereas only 22% of the Western Europeans interviewed agreed that "belief in God is necessary to be moral," 96% of the Indonesians interviewed held that same view (Tamir, Connaughton, & Salazar, 2020). Wahid Foundation researcher Alamsyah M. Djafar described in the Jakarta Post how the government's formalization of religion as well as other factors such as "economic inequality, the politicization of religion and wide-ranging uncertainties in various sectors" led to this result, as religion as an institution provided "a sense of certainty and safety" to its congregants (Iswara, 2020). Oppression of atheism has always been rooted in the belief that people who do not believe in a god are more likely to commit "evil" than those who do, and that people who believe in a god are more likely to do "good" than those who do not. In reality, religious beliefs have little correlation with people's morality. The question is not whether religious faith is bad, or whether people should believe in God at all. Instead, within this thesis, I would like to explore the stigmatization of atheism in Indonesian society, and how atheists develop moral foundations separate from religion, in order to better bridge the understandings of religious people towards atheists.

The genre of this creative work is magical realism. Magical realism is a “narrative strategy that is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction,” prominently known for the works of Latin-American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019, para. 1). It has been most aptly defined by its “description of the supernatural in a dead-pan way” (Hart, 2012, p. 263). Though fantastical in nature, magical realism as a genre is often used to explore the supernatural and bizarre in a realistic setting, often in order to convey a larger social critique, and thus it is not too surprising that it should be a favored genre for exploring ideas presented by transcendental concepts.

My form is the novella, which “typically starts at about 20,000 words and tops out at 50,000, which is the minimum length for a short novel” (Smith & Acheson, 2018). It is suitable for my form because the length is enough to explore my central theme of religion and two of my primary protagonists, without needing extraneous elements. As author Tara Deal described, the novella is a fitting form for “an idea that depends on a character’s development or philosophical investigations rather than a single point to be made about something emotional or aesthetic” (Deal, 2018, as cited in Smith & Acheson, 2018).

The theory being implemented is Turiel’s Social Domain Theory, as reviewed by Smetana (2013). Social Domain Theory suggests that humans make moral decisions based off of three different domains or categories: the Moral Domain, the Conventional Domain, and the Personal Domain. In Turiel’s theory, morality is prescribed based on concepts of “welfare, fairness, and rights” (Smetana, 2013). The Moral Domain are values prescribed to these concepts. These aspects can be derived from answers to typical questions regarding morality, “such as hitting someone, stealing, or transgressing human rights” (Mustea, Negru, & Opre, 2010). The Conventional Domain contains reasoning based on “expectations regarding social behavior in different social contexts and facilitate the smooth and efficient functioning of the social system” (Smetana, 2013). In other words, it is when cultural and societal norms are taken into consideration when making decisions on behavior. As it is based on a culture, and thus a mutual agreement between consenting parties, they are considered “contextually relative, consensually agreed on, contingent on specific rules or authority commands, and alterable” (Smetana, 2013). Religious conventions and cultural practices are “considered to be a part of the conventional domain because they are based on authority norms and are applied only in reference to a specific religious context” (Mustea, Negru, & Opre, 2010). The Psychological/Personal Domain is grounded in “notions of the self and personal agency” (Smetana, 2013). This domain revolves around matters considered to be of personal choice, distinguishing the individual from the rest of society. Unlike the Conventional or Moral Domains, this Domain does not dictate how others should behave, but instead is an exploration of the individual’s view on the self and their own actions and considerations.

These domains are more easily decided in their typical examples, but many more examples combine them, all of which cause the level of cognitive dissonance. Notable conflicts of each domain are referred to as Ambiguously Multidimensional Events, where “individuals make different domain attributions about the same event” (Smetana, 2013). Within the narrative, this takes the form of certain religious characters believing that atheism is a Moral threat, while other characters may only discriminate against atheists based off of Conventional thought. Furthermore, the Moral Domain is established not through laws and religion, but through empathy, as “people are concerned with understanding how others make sense of social events, and use their understanding of motives and dispositions when making judgments about others” (Martin, 2015). Therefore, atheists may learn to develop their own understandings of the Moral and Conventional Domains based on their inherent empathy and socialized environments.

Within this project, I raised two questions: a) why Elia's community discriminates against Sol and Elia, and b) how Elia and Sol develop their own sense of morality separate from any religious beliefs. The purpose and answers to these questions are that a) the community ostracizes and later attacks Sol and Elia due to their perception of them as a moral threat and an outsider of social convention, and b) Sol and Elia develop their own morality through their experiences and care for others, as well as their pursuit for welfare, rights and fairness.

This creative thesis revolves around a woman named Elia and her early experiences with a strange archivist simply called Sol at her college, known by her community as 'the prophet who does not believe in God' because of his ability to 'know and remember' everything, despite his lackadaisical atheism. In this storyline, Elia searches for God, Sol displays his altruism despite his godlessness, and they both must deal with the discrimination they face as atheists.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of my work is how one's proclaimed faith does not decide one's moral development. Both Elia and Sol are conventionally faithless in regards to a monotheistic God, but that faithlessness leads to Elia struggling with her own sense of justice and goodness in a supposedly godless world, and Sol finding purpose and meaning beyond the expectations of society. Their pursuit of a higher being or purpose in life shapes their worldview through their experiences in assisting the vulnerable people around them, just as the surrounding character's own militant faiths shape their behaviors and actions towards the main characters.

Plot

The story begins with a brief prologue detailing the last promise the main character, Elia, makes to the corpse of her friend, a prostitute named Zara. Zara asks for Elia to find God for her so that she may apologize for her sins, and Elia, despite being a closeted atheist, follows through with her wish.

In the events of the story, Elia is looking for a book written by Paul Erdős, whom she believed had successfully written the equations and answers of God. At the suggestion of Mr. Hasan the librarian, she and her friend, Andreas, go to the archives behind the cemetery to meet an eccentric archivist named Sol and his assistant, Melati. Sol showcases his ability to read the contents of people's hearts and see supernatural beings, and after failing to find what she was looking for in Erdős's book, Elia asks if he is able to see God. When Sol proclaims that he does not think God exists, Elia challenges him to show her evidence, despite believing his claim. This leads to the inciting incident of the plot: After some arguing, Sol suggests that if Elia wants to learn what he "knows and understands," she must prove that she is able to bear the burden of that knowledge.

The rising action consists of Elia coming back to the archives every evening to gain Sol's trust, while finding her own ways to see what Sol sees. Her church acquaintances berate her for her mission, and she engages in a discourse about the nature of God with a college acquaintance, Farah. When Mr. Hasan asks Sol for help in getting rid of a strange entity disturbing his library, Elia follows after them and is attacked by a "memory." She learns from both Mr. Hasan and Sol that the powerful "memories" of people linger in the world if they are forgotten, causing calamity and disaster. Sol stops the memory from asphyxiating Elia by "remembering" them, and Elia becomes more determined to understand his vision.

Later, the priest in Elia's church, Father Alfonso, asks the archives for help in getting rid of a memory causing women in his community to go mad. Sol is shunned by the people associated with Father Alfonso, but the memory possessing the most recent victim insists on talking to him. While Sol is conversing with the memory, Elia and Father Alfonso recall the incident with Zara, and Elia becomes more jaded towards religion and the idea of God. Elia sees a memory of a girl in reflections of glass, and she follows the memory, attempting to "remember" it as Sol did. Sol assists her when she falters, and decides her determination is admirable enough for her to learn his vision.

After some years have passed, Elia has gained more ground in "knowing and remembering," and she grows closer to Melati. The archives receive a hopeless client looking for meaning in life, Sylvia Onggo, who reminds Elia of Zara. She recalls the full details of how Zara died to Melati, and why Elia feels she has owed something to the dead woman. After giving the client meaning in life, Elia comes to terms with Zara's death and becomes intimate with Melati.

The climax of the story occurs during the last client case, involving Ustad Aziz Mihardja. The Mihardja lineage and Sol had a long history together, until Aziz covered up the rape and burning of a girl at the hands of his old students in their religious school. The girl's memory plagues and tries to kill Aziz's daughter and Elia's acquaintance, Farah Mihardja, but due to Aziz's lack of cooperation, Sol doesn't intervene in putting the memory at peace. Elia secretly sneaks into Aziz's house and tries to "remember" the memory instead, leading her to find out about the incident and become enraged at Aziz for causing it and Sol for letting it fester. Sol reveals that Aziz cutting Sol off is the reason why the memories could not be at "peace," as they have not been confronted by the society around them directly, and that his "remembrance" would only delay the inevitable. Elia calls Sol a terrible person for allowing the memories to fester, and leaves to try and expose the people responsible for burying these memories.

Sol, affected by Elia's words, decides to finally confront Aziz and Father Alfonso for their wrongdoings. He sends evidence of their wrongdoings to journalists and tells them so that they may have the chance to come clean themselves. Several days later, after Aziz tells the former boys involved in the girl's death about their imminent exposure, the archives are burnt down. In the climax, Elia comes in time to try and save Sol, but he declares near his death that they both know she cannot save him. Elia curses the nonexistence of God, but Sol, in a change of heart, reaffirms Elia's mission and tells her to find God for herself, not for him or Zara.

Years later, long after Sol's death, Elia returns to the ruins of the archives after a long journey. She meets Mr. Hasan, Melati and Farah once again, and she reveals to them that she has fully developed Sol's sight. The resolution of the story concludes with Elia finally accepting how she doesn't believe in God while continuing the work Sol did in the past, for the world's and his sake.

Characters

1. Main Characters

- Elia Hapsari

Age: 18-20

The main character of the novel, Elia, is a college freshman. She has brown skin, black eyes, and long, curly graying black hair that she initially keeps in a bun. By the end of the story, her hair turns white and defies all attempts to be tied down. Having grown up in a Catholic family, Elia is initially accustomed to the comfort of having a god, though the occasional hypocritical act or ambiguously moral priest made her question otherwise. In her youth, she befriends an ostracized pregnant woman

named Zara, who she holds dear in her heart. She finds Zara dead in her home, and Zara's corpse tells her to find God and ask Him for forgiveness on Zara's behalf. Despite not believing in God, Elia takes on this mission and begins her journey in finding a being she does not believe in.

- Sol

Age: Indiscernible, but physically 40-50.

Sol is a man of indeterminate age, looking anywhere between forty to fifty years old depending on who you ask, and he has short white hair, dark skin and large, golden irises. He is a strange fellow with a slight trickster streak, sometimes joking and alluding to the private lives and hearts of individuals he has never met before. Underneath the mysterious archivist facade, however, is a man with lofty ideals, as invested in the betterment of the world around him as he is crushed by the cruelty of it.

2. Supporting Characters

- Zara

Age: 25

She is an ashen-skinned and red-lipped prostitute who dies in Elia's arms, leaving Elia the last request that leads her throughout the journey. Not much is known about Zara other than that she was born poor, has no family, fell in love and was taken advantage of by Father Alfonso sometime during Elia's adolescence, and later died of being poisoned by Alfonso once he realized she would not keep the secret of their unborn child for long. Along with Melati and Zara, she represents the people that suffer from abuse of religious authority and beliefs.

- Melati

Age: 17-19

She is a pale girl with brown eyes and hair dyed shades of blonde, though now they are rather grayish from lack of care. Melati is a playfully cynical girl, always mocking Sol's "new assistant" for her ignorance and straightforwardness. Along with Citra and Zara, she represents the people that suffer from abuse of religious authority and beliefs.

- Andreas

Age: 18-20

He is a young, dark-haired man who is Elia's Christian friend. The two are supposedly close, as Andreas was the only member of their church who treated Elia's grief for Zara with respect. He represents the people who are pressured into discriminating against atheists due to conventions rather than morality.

- Farah Mihardja

Age: 18-20

She is a tan-skinned, young, somewhat sickly woman who wears elegant dresses and a well-maintained headscarf. She is one of Elia's project partners during college. She is a bright and well-read woman who believes that all things are rational because of the existence of God. Despite this, she does not abhor Sol's observation of God's nonexistence, and is fond of Elia despite suspecting Elia to share the same beliefs that he does.

- Father Alfonso

Age: 48

He is the leader of the local Catholic church as well as a long-time friend of Elia's family. Unlike Aziz, he used to regard faith in a light-hearted and thoughtless manner, which led him to slowly losing his grip on goodness as he came across his church's choices and mistreatments of marginalized and vulnerable people. He is a "client" who approaches Sol to deal with an epidemic of women who have gone deranged from memories possessing them. He has pale skin and graying black hair, and he also wears spectacles. While he possesses a faithful exterior, he eventually reveals doubts in God that Elia also shares due to being involved in the same traumatic events she did. Along with Ustad Aziz, he represents the religious members of society who believe that discriminating against atheists is essential in maintaining societal morality.

- Hasan Mihardja

Age: 46

He is the local librarian and the person responsible for sending Elia to Sol in the first place. He has dark skin and black hair, and he is a devout Muslim. Despite this, he is incredibly close to Sol and enjoys sharing ideas with the man. He and Farah both converse and engage with Elia on the matter of God and morality.

- Aziz Mihardja Age: 50

He is a religious leader in the local mosque as well as Hasan's older brother. Aziz has dark skin like his brother, but his hair is completely white. As a child, he and Hasan admired Sol equally, and the two were close. He grew up to be a young teacher at a madrasa when his students raped Citra, who would later burn alive due to her shame and rage. Aziz helped cover up the girl's death, but at the cost of Sol's deep disappointment towards him. Guilty and afraid of being exposed, he accused Sol of blasphemy and discredited the archivist in the eyes of the whole community by exposing his atheism, leading to the situation within the story. Along with Father Alfonso, he represents the religious members of society who believe that discriminating against atheists is essential in maintaining societal morality.

- Zuhair Mihardja

Age: Died at age 67

An old friend of Sol during the Dutch colonial era, and the great, great grandfather of Aziz and Hasan Mihardja. Little is known about Zuhair other than that he and Sol liked to argue with one another, but were very close. Zuhair is to Sol what Zara is to Elia; a dead person who's promise weighs on their soul.

- Sylvia Onggo

Age: 35

She is a Buddhist woman who had recently lost both her child and her husband in a car accident, and she has since been utterly depressed. She is a pale woman who has cut off all her hair. She comes to Sol to ask if he can help her find meaning in life and the universe. She is a reflection of Zara, both being women who lost their children and their lives (Zara physically, Sylvia spiritually), and she serves to help Elia come to terms with Zara's death.

- Citra

Age: Died at 15-years old

She is the first spirit Elia meets once she starts developing her sight. As a spirit, she appears as a burning corpse covered in holes and punctures, and she is so very, very small. Her family were zealous Muslims, and when she had been raped by students of the local madrasa, she was ostracized and berated by the society around her. As the pain and shame of the incident grew inside her, her

blood boiled and burst into flames, leading to her death. Ustad Aziz was a teacher of the madrasa at the time, and he helped cover up the murder for the sake of his students. Citra's resentment was so strong that the effects of her memory are visible to normal people, leaving smoke and shapes of fire across her wake. Her memory has persistently tried to take the life of Farah, Aziz's daughter. The bitterness of her existence has also led other memories of wrongfully lost and forgotten people from the district to be stirred once more. Along with Melati, she represents the people that suffer from abuse of religious authority and beliefs.

2.3.4. Conflicts

Elia deals with four types of conflict throughout the story, all of those also being shared with Sol. The first type of conflict Elia deals with is Man Against Self, otherwise known as Character vs. Self. Character vs. Self conflicts are defined by "self pitted against self," where a character confronts their beliefs and underlying darkness (Lamb, 2008, p.79). Throughout the creative thesis, Elia faces her past in various ways—reliving memories of Zara, having to dodge questions about her atheistic beliefs, lying about herself—and she struggles to accept the loss of her faith in the face of the world's cruelty. Sol realizes that the supernatural conflicts of the novella resulted from his long dispute with the kin (Aziz) of his old friend, Zuhair Mihadja, and he struggles to reconcile his promise and his need to enact justice.

The second type of conflict, one that both Elia and Sol face, is Man Against Society, otherwise known as Character vs. Society. Character vs. Society conflicts are stories centered around characters "pitted against society is in every struggle against the government, fight for civil rights, or push for change" (Lamb, 2008, p.78). Sol's opposition of the religious establishment incites constant mockery and harassment from the people around him, and his words were even used against him when Aziz Mihadja accused him of blasphemy before the events of the story, a criminal charge in Indonesia. In the end, Aziz threatens to accuse him of the same charge, using the legislative laws of Indonesia to further suppress him. Furthermore, the more Elia associates with Sol, the more 'tainted' she is seen by her peers.

The third type of conflict is Character vs. the Supernatural. Character vs. Supernatural are conflicts "in which the protagonist or protagonists are working against supernatural forces" (Craiker, 2021). As Sol's unofficial assistant, Elia follows him while he deals with the various spirits and otherworldly beings referred to as 'memories' that plague the local townsfolk. These encounters help deepen Elia's view into the world and assist her in her ultimate conflict in finding (or not finding) God, a supernatural being who seems to be absent in her own life.

The fourth and final type of conflict is Man Against Man, otherwise known as Character vs. Character. Character vs. Character is a straightforward external conflict of "variation of conflicts man has with man" (Lamb, 2008, p.78). While it is a minor part of the story that appears at the end of the novella, the conflict between Elia, Sol and Aziz Mihadja comes as a conclusion to the themes built up throughout the narrative up to that point. All of these characters find themselves in conflict with each other over their ideals, and though one may be considered more judicious than the other, all sides are humans in difficult situations.

CONCLUSION

This project's central purpose was to explore the common myth of the inherently evil atheist and how morality develops beyond the realm of religion and fear of God. I have attempted to portray

various different perspectives on what religion means to one's sense of goodness, but if nothing else, I hope that I made it clear that such things are inordinately unclear.

Characters of different faiths treat Sol, the known atheist and heretic, and Elia, an individual who has gained suspicion of being an atheist, in different ways. Open-minded religious intellectuals such as Hasan and Farah Mihardja regard Sol's knowledge as a great treasure and Elia's curiosity as a virtue. However, others regard the two (especially Sol) with a deep disdain. Father Alfonso attempts to persuade Elia to stay away from Sol, fearing that she had followed the same path Sol did. Ustad Aziz, once a friend of Sol, regards him differently after Sol throws his religion back at him, indicating his clear lack of faith. These two characters are flawed and have their reasons for believing Sol to be a moral threat, but ultimately, they do not embody the same goodness they accuse Sol of distorting, committing and burying the atrocities and memories that plague the story. Unlike Farah and Hasan, they allowed their faith and convictions to blind them from their own sins, believing that one day "someone in the afterlife would cleanse them," as Elia describes in her dressing-down of Sol in Chapter 5. Aziz's conviction primarily leads him to abusing his power to suppress Sol, both nearly putting him in jail for blasphemy, as well as inadvertently sending his former students to burn down the archives and kill Sol.

Not all religious folk discriminate against atheists specifically due to their own beliefs. This is exemplary in the small interactions Elia has with various members of her own religious community. Some characters harangue Elia not because they believe it is morally correct, but because the societal conventions around them dictate that Sol is unworthy of respect, and Elia is ridiculous for regarding him in any way beyond contempt or suspicion. Andreas, Elia's close acquaintance, shares his reservations regarding Sol to Elia, and treats him in an alienating way when they eventually come across him. In Chapter 6, when Elia gains portions of Sol's knowledge, she understands that Andreas does not care for whether belief dictates morality; Andreas knew that if Elia finally accepted and became open with her atheism, she would be looked down upon, just like Sol. In the words of Elia's observation, "[all] he knew was that the people around them would be against her, so long as she followed this path. It was never a matter of judgment or God for him, only the cards society had dealt them both." Discrimination against atheism may be rooted in moral panic and fear, but it is furthered by societal convention.

With all that being said, the heart of the work has always laid in Elia and how she develops her morality without faith. Elia's journey to accepting her beliefs and convictions started from her talking to Zara's corpse, believing that she could never live up to its expectations as an atheist, to her crying at the brink of Sol's death, openly wondering what God has anything to do with the world after everything that had occurred. Farah challenges her on what it means to be a good person without the existence of God, and her journey with Sol further solidified in her mind that a person who believes in God is not necessarily good, just as a person who doesn't is necessarily evil. However, despite the wrongdoings of some of the religious characters she meets (namely Aziz and Alfonso), this does not mean that she is under the impression that freedom from religion makes someone good. Elia strengthens and further develops her moral compass throughout the story. When she first discusses her morality with Zara, she describes how she believed that humans, like her, believe in morality due to evolving cultural conventions suitable to the survival of the species, using the same social conventions that Turiel described in his Moral Domain Theory to showcase this. However, after thinking about her friendship with the ostracized Zara, even Elia confesses that she cannot understand why she still believes certain things are right or wrong, outside of what convention has taught her. Elia finds motivation in her love and empathy for her fellow people, just as she showed empathy towards the ostracized Zara.

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Due to his role in the story as a mentor figure, Sol's development in the story is tied deeply with how Elia sees him. The theme of his story is about the burden of memory and the consequence of forgetting. When describing why he does as much as he can to help people who seemingly despise him, Sol describes how he sees memories and people like he sees a garden of flowers, beautiful in its time but temporary. In this description, he describes his archival work as an act of preservation, both for the memories and the people involved in them: "That is why I remember as much as I can. That is why I do the things I do. I would suffer a thousand wounds if it meant letting these fleeting memories bloom for just a little longer." While he knows all the cruelty of the world, he persists in his kindness due to an inherent love of people and their memories. However, similarly to how Elia is driven by the words of a lost friend, Sol is trapped in the past. After nearly being arrested from an accusation of blasphemy by the great, great grandson of his dearest friend, Sol chose to preserve his best friend's dignity rather than bring justice to the girl Aziz had wronged, which led to the memories haunting the events of the story. It is only through an outsider's scolding that Sol finally confronts Aziz and Alfonso, realizing that his promise would only be shallow if he sacrificed the goodness of his heart for it.

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