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Pain and Power: BDSM as Spiritual Expression

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Abstract

Western society is becoming increasingly secular as religion disappears from the public sphere. This developing identification has created a void as people move away from the traditional, established symbols and maps of meaning. People are still finding and inventing systems to fulfil their existential questioning, increasingly in areas that are traditionally seen as secular. Popular culture and contemporary subcultures are being utilized not just as art, entertainment and community but as religious expression. A prime example of this 'secular religion' can be found in the practice and subculture of BDSM - the intentional, consensual participation in the play of pain, power and sex. The intersection of these primary forces in the human experience present in BDSM makes the practice a fertile ground for spiritual expression. The BDSM subculture can be analyzed as a 'secular religion' by looking at the psychology of pain and power, religious ways of hurting, and BDSM as ritual.

The popularity of traditional religions are on the decline¹ as Western society strives towards secularism. People are increasingly identifying as non-religious as religion disappears from the public sphere, but this does not mean that the drives and needs that religion addresses have declined. People may be moving away from particular symbols and maps of meaning but they are still finding and inventing systems to fulfil their existential questioning, increasingly in areas that are traditionally seen as secular. One prime example of this 'secular religion' can be found in the practice and subculture of BDSM.

BDSM is the umbrella term used to describe the consensual participation in Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism (most kinks fall under this umbrella). It is intentionally participating in the play of pain, power and (often) sex. The focus on the intersection of these powerful, primal forces in the human experience makes BDSM a fertile ground for spiritual expression. BDSM can be analyzed as a 'secular religion' by looking at the psychology of pain and power, religious ways of hurting, and BDSM as ritual.

Pain is the most familiar and universal characteristic of all human experience. It is a sensation that is inexorably bound with mental and cultural experiences and is often accompanied by an intellectual or emotional judgement.² All embodied experiences, including pain, are a mix of "biological facts and cultural consciousness (metaphors, emotions, attitudes)." (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 14). Pain is not the same as suffering. Suffering is not a physical sensation but an "emotional and evaluative reaction to any number of causes, some entirely painless." (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 11). Pain can actually be a solution to suffering. As Glucklich put it, pain can be a "psychological analgesic that removes anxiety, guilt, and even depression." (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 11).

The theories of scholars who have "set the agenda for the cultural construction of embodiment" over the last few of decades, such as Micheal Foucault and Julia Kristeva, require that pain discourse "reflect the way cultures 'construct' the individual as a self and as a member of the community." (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 14). According to Glucklich, theories of pain fall into four broad categories: normative (a theological argument for the value of pain within a specific tradition), critical ("a conversation with the first stance, in which the theorist has not altogether disengaged his discourse and reduced it to a separate level"), descriptive (the reasons for using pain

are the ones stated by the practitioners themselves, whether explicitly or symbolically), and reductive (explains the use of pain by reducing it to a more abstract “fundamental” level of description such as biology, sociology, or psychology). Glucklich posits that reductive theories are the only real explanations for religious pain.³

He goes on to describe several psychological models of pain that are related to religious understanding of pain and power: juridical, medical, military, athletic, and magical⁴.

Juridical pain is punishment by “some personal agency (such as God, satan, or demons) or by some impersonal mechanism such as karma.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 16). This punishment can be seen as just or entirely unwarranted (such as with the biblical case of Job). As Glucklich iterates, “pain may be taken as punishment, but the loving punishment inflicted by a metaphorical father, by God, in order to educate those whom He loves. It educated them for patience and perseverance, which are necessary for salvation.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 21). The juridical model accounts for a large percentage of the cases found in religious literature, and many pain patients still use it’s language in secular and medical situations today.

Within the medical model, religious sources often describe pain as medical and evaluate pain as a beneficial experience. This is not a claim that pain is a pleasant experience but that pain benefits, or heals, the soul. This is the idea of pain as spiritual medicine and it’s values are echoed in the classical medical notion that the cure can be as painful as the disease.

In the secular arena, the military model of pain is a way of conceptualizing pain as an enemy or invader of the body. In religious understandings of this model the enemy is often not the pain but the body, or the embodied soul. “Pain is the weapon by means of which the body is subdued, demons exorcised, temptation averted, in a battle for salvation.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 23). An example of this is Muslim ascetics who have conceptualized *Jihad* as primarily “combat against internal enemies, specifically the ‘soul’.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 24).

The athletic model is primarily a model that conceptualizes pain as training and is closely related to virtue. This is because athletic training requires the virtues of discipline, physical control, and endurance. A religious example of this can be seen in Hebrews 12 where pain is described as God’s training for his faithful, which should not merely be endured but actively sought out. This conception of pain as beneficial training of the self is also very often seen in BDSM. As Robertson explains, “BDSM enables the exploration of weakness, of role reversal, of pain and humiliation or degradation as experiences in themselves rather than things to be overcome.” (Robertson, “Sacred Kink,” 8).

The magical model of pain is one that is often employed in BDSM and one that we will see often in this discourse. It sees pain as an alchemical force “which magically transforms its victim from one state of existence to a higher, purer state.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 25). This can be seen very clearly in both religious and secular BDSM contexts as purifying (purification of the soul, conscience or ego) and transformative (“pain is an essential aspect of passage from one state of life to another, from limited states of consciousness and identity to other, broader identifications”⁵).

In regards to states of consciousness, certain levels of pain possess analgesic qualities and can induce euphoric states related to the “reduction of psychological drives and the experience of dissociation or trance,” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 30) a fact that both anesthesiologists and neurologists are aware of and utilize. States of consciousness and their manipulation is a large part of the discourse of both religious mystical experience (such as mystics, shamans, and practitioners of meditation) as well as secular BDSM experiences (such as ‘subspace’ or ‘topspace’).

The conception of pain and its effects on the self reveals two fundamental types of pain: disintegrative and integrative. Disintegrative pain weakens or destroys the ego and disrupts the relationship of the ego with its lived world (eg. Job’s pain which disrupted his life, resulted in isolation from the world, destroyed his sense of well-being and his desire to live). Integrative pain describes the strengthening of the individual’s telos; their ego, sense of identity, sense of belonging within a community or connection with a god. The individual feels

empowered by the sensations of the pain (such as with initiation rituals). These two types of pain are not mutually exclusive.⁶

Understanding the psychological models of pain and power is key to understanding the use of pain in both religion and BDSM. Disintegrative pain can be transformed into integrative pain, a key focus of both religion and BDSM. As Glucklich states, “only religious language can describe how ‘bad’ pain becomes ‘good’ pain, though it is not only religion that brings about this transformation. [...] Pain can act as a socially and spiritually integrative force that defines and broadens the individual's sense of identity within the traditional community.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 34).

Around the world and throughout time, religious people have scourged themselves, branded and pierced their bodies, sat in frozen rivers or endured high levels of heat. The goal of religious life in regards to pain is to “transform the pain that causes suffering into a pain that leads to insight, meaning, and even salvation.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 40). Religious individuals hurt themselves because the pain they elicit is meaningful and is an important aspect in our ability to empathize and share with each other. The effectiveness of the symbology and experience of pain is based in the way it bridges basic, primal sensations with our highest qualities as human beings existing in a community with other humans. The role of religious practitioners is often to convert accidental pain or illness (often conceived as punishment) into a positive force for transformation, healing, or some other spiritual advantage.⁷ Pain is frequently seen as a solution instead of a problem and the contexts in which pain is used and discussed are extensive: “there are ascetic disciplines, martyrdoms, initiatory ordeals and rites of passage, training of shamans, traditional forms of healing such as exorcism; there are contests, installations of kings, rites of mourning, pilgrimages, vows, and even celebrations.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 12). Religious literature around the world often treats pain not as an unwanted sensation but as a useful and important force worthy of understanding and cultivation.

The book of Job seems to exemplify how the Christian and Jewish traditions treat, and ought to treat, the problem of pain: as medical, pain that benefits the soul.⁸ Flagellation and other forms of mortification of the flesh (such as pious kneeling, fasting, and the wearing of “sackcloth” or hair shirt) has long been used in Christianity for the purposes of purification, punishment or redemptive salvific activity.⁹ In the New Testament of the Bible, flagellation was used as means of driving out ghosts,¹⁰ an example of the magical model.

Many schools of Hindu, Buddhist and Sufi philosophy teach the principle of non-aversion which is the concept that one only experiences negativity and suffering as much as one tries to avoid it.¹¹ Shah Abdul latif, the Sindhi Sufi scholar, mystic, saint, and poet, said: “just as the blacksmith transforms ore into steel, so the mystical guide prepares his disciple by putting him through the fires of pain and suffering in order to transform an ordinary individual into a brilliant receptor of God’s unity.” (Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 25-26). Hindu Tantra, known as Aghora, is a school of thought that questions the role of ego, the relationship of the body in relation to the ego, and the role of the body and its drives within a spiritual context. Vimalananda, one of the monastic disciples of Vivekananda and an early monk of the Ramakrishna Order, writes, “Aghora teaches you to embrace the world, embrace impurity, embrace darkness, and push through forcibly into the light.” (Moore, “Spiritual Sadomasochism,” 70- 73). Clinical analyst Thomas Moore saw this concept as also being an essential part of the Sadian worldview. The fact that physical pain is so tightly connected with submission in Western sadomasochism suggests an inherent understanding of that connection so central to yoga - that the body and ego are inextricably intertwined and therefore to hurt the body is to challenge the ego.¹²

The Sun Dance is a Native American ritual that has been much studied by anthropologists. ‘Sun Dance’ is an umbrella term given to a type of ritual performed by the Cheyennes, Blackfeet, Crows, Arapahos, Sarsis, Teton, Kowas, Plain Crees, Plains Ojibwas, Dakota, Wind River Shoshone, Utes, and several additional plains and rocky mountain reservation communities. In this ritual, such as in the O-Kee-Pa ritual of the Great Plains Native Americans, young men are suspended from hooks pierced through the flesh. The ritual is an initiation and a sacrificial performance. This sacrifice of pain and flesh is for the growth of the self, for the good of others, for the purification of one’s own community, and for the improvement of the world.¹³ It is interesting to note that body modification and hook suspension, a subculture with strong overlap with the BDSM community, is becoming popular among young people in modern Western cultures. There is still a driving need among many adolescents to prove their competence and courage, to themselves and to their communities, by enduring a pain

ordeal. This is one way that youths within secular societies seem to be compensating for the lack of life passage initiation rites that would transition them into adulthood that is increasingly lacking in our Western secular societies.¹⁴

In Wicca submission to pain is explored in terms of initiatory ordeal, purification, an opportunity for transcendence, and as arousal, sensation, and energy generation.¹⁵ The use of the scourge in Wicca is one of the traditional eight paths of power (the eight ways of performing magick)¹⁶ and represents “religious, spiritual, and magical use of the body that introduces pain as arousal and transcendence. [...] The body is elevated to a site of spiritual experience and countered through intense ritual Praxis within a wider ritual context.” (Pearson, “Embracing the Lash,” 12). The scourge is a tool used by Wiccans wanting to confront their shadow-selves, to confront fear, pain and the forces of primordial chaos. As scholar and Wiccan practitioner Jo Pearson testifies, “the traces that the scourge leaves behind on the body are marks both of an encounter with the infinite, and of an experience of self-transformation.” (Pearson, “Embracing the Lash,” 12).

Congregational Church pastor, and BDSM and sacred kink educator, Jack Rinella says that true spirituality needs to be holistic, a spirituality of the body as well as of the soul.¹⁷ BDSM works in this context as embodied, lived religion. BDSM scenes work as ritual and not just comparatively, some practitioners intentionally structure their practice as a religious path. BDSM works as spiritual expression because it taps into three of the most primal, human forces: pain, power and, usually, sex. There is a similarity between “religious” ecstasy and sexual orgasm. Rinella teaches that “understanding the physical aspects of ecstasy is the first step in understanding the emotional, spiritual, and theological aspects of the same (even if differently-labeled) experience.” (Rinella, *Philosophy in the Dungeon*, 20). Pain unmakes the profane world with its physical attachments and leads the mystic away from the body to experience self-transcendence¹⁸.

Raven Kaldera sorts pain as a magical or ritual technique into the following categories: “(a) Pain to achieve an altered state, via brain chemistry, in which one can connect with the universe; (b) pain to create energy for the top to work with; (c) pain to bring people back in touch with their bodies; (d) pain as a sacrifice, usually to a divine power who appreciates such things; (e) pain as strength ordeal, to build courage and self worth by enduring agonizing things; and (f) pain as emotional catharsis, in order to tap into deep negative feelings and expunge them.”¹⁹

We can also analyze BDSM scenes as rituals using Frederick Bird’s characteristic features of ritual. Bird posits two main features of ritual: ritual as drama, and ritual as medium of communication.

For ritual as drama, Bird says that when one acts ritually, they use prepared oral or written scripts that detail how one should speak, gesture and place themselves; and play the roles of characters required by their scripts. Sometimes these rituals call for a re-enactment of historical or legendary events. “Ritual involves make believe. [...] During rituals [...] people pretend to be the characters called for by scripts. Momentarily, they suspend the belief that govern non ritual behavior. Doing this over and over again, tends to reinforce and make real the beliefs that correspond to them, whether these invoke a Supreme Being, the unique character and status of a group, or an idealized objective such as enlightenment or salvation.” (Bird, “Ritual as Communicative Action,” 27)²⁰

Sexuality researcher Dulcinea Pitagora says that there are two main themes regarding how individuals may choose to instill meaning to their BDSM scenes, including: “the administration of pain in order to achieve a transcendent or altered state of consciousness; and an effort towards further self-awareness via the forming and enacting of sexual Scripts.” (Pitagora 2017, pg 48). Sexual scripts become a method for achieving an altered state of consciousness to bring about a heightened awareness of the Self. The process of verbal formation and ensuing enacting of sexual scripts is also a means for accessing ‘subspace’ (a altered state of consciousness experienced by submissives), by “encouraging a heightened awareness of the self that could in turn further an expansion and evolution of an individual's identity.” (Pitagora 2017, pg 51).

Kaldera states that one of the major areas that spiritual BDSM can be broken down into is using ‘intense psychological theatre in a ritual context to create a personally-tailored emotional ordeal for the bottom, whereby they travel to the dark places in themselves and come out safely, and having learned useful things in the

process.” (Kaldera, *Dark Moon Rising*, 5). This reflects the archetypal journey to the Underworld, and the ‘top’ plays both the roles of “psychopomp who gets them in and out,” and the avatar for the uncompromising Death Gods who exist there²¹. A popular mythical drama that is enacted in spiritual BDSM is the Descent of Inanna:

“We are like Inanna, who walked willingly into the realm of Death, who was stripped of her name and power, who was hung on a hook over the throne of the Queen of Death, who had to be ransomed back by those who turn gender on its head and who are willing to weep. She did it because there was no other way to touch the deep wisdom that she sought, no way but to stumble along dark paths to the katabasis point, and trust in all the wisdom of the Underworld that you may one day emerge triumphant.” (Kaldera, *Dark Moon Rising*, 7)

Bird’s other characteristic feature of ritual is ritual as a medium of communication. Bird maintains that when people engage in ritual acts, they are communicating with each other and with themselves. They communicate feelings, beliefs, recognitions, codes for conduct, philosophies, legends, myths, etc.²²

Rinella shows how BDSM can be an affirming experience of one’s strength, “it was a revelation to me that I could take a spanking without making a fool of myself. I was ‘strong’ enough to withstand strap and paddle. I found out what pride a black and blue ass could add to my feelings about who I was and what I was capable of receiving. When I ‘took it like a man,’ the taking confirmed my manhood to myself, building and solidifying my self-image in a positive way.” (Rinella, *Philosophy in the Dungeon*, 140). The BDSM ritual for the ‘bottom’ communicates that they are capable, both to themselves and to their community. Good scenes improve self-image, build stronger relationships, and give the participants a sense of inclusion and acceptance.

Achieving altered states of consciousness is a major goal of both mystic experience as well as BDSM. As we have seen, the very acts that bring pain in BDSM scenes facilitate changes in states of consciousness. As Rinella explains, “it is my experience that bondage, flogging, whipping, fisting, fucking, needle play, and the like all have the potential of altering our brain wave patterns.” (Rinella, *Philosophy in the Dungeon*, 22). Altered states have been used for years by therapists, shamans, priests and mystics to help people overcome feelings such as fear, anxiety, shyness, or social conditioning. Altered states also allows participants to reprogram their identity, assumptions, habits and past wounds.²³ Harrington, a sexuality educator and shamanic practitioner, describes this process: “By forging the soul in the fire of our being, known as ‘distilling the gold of our spirit’ in Hermetic practices, we have the power to change our resonance and vibration of being.” (Harrington, *Sacred Kink*, 14). Power exchange also works to bring people into different states of perceiving and feeling.²⁴

Harrington identifies spiritual BDSM as having its own eight paths to altered states of consciousness: the Path of Rhythm (using repetitive body motion, touch, noise, or visual cues), the Ordeal Path (using purposeful and intentional pain, suffering, challenges or endurance, to push the individual past or through their perceived limits), the Path of the Flesh (using the input from sensual, sexual or ecstatic body experiences, to either remain fully grounded in the here and now, or to use the flesh to open the doorway to beyond flesh), the Path of Ritual (using ritual: repetition of visual, auditory, olfactory or kinesthetic cues and activities), the Path of the Horse (channeling, evocation, and directly tapping into the forces of the universe), the Path of Asceticism (mindfulness and awareness through purification, restriction, cleansing and stillness), the Path of Breath (known in some traditions as the Path of Meditation, this path incorporates all work with breath, breathing techniques, speed or stillness with one’s breath), and the Path of Sacred Plants (using specific plants, herbs, strong drink, chemicals, etc, to triggered altered states of consciousness). Harrison maintains that having the opportunity to step out of ourselves allows the individual to gain control of their experiences by not having their experiences control them.²⁵

Invocative and evocative rituals are also prevalent in spiritual BDSM. Harrington explains, “almost all forms of connecting with the divine are enabled or deepened by altered states. This can be as simple as getting that tingle from knowing that the divine exists and you know it in your skin, to something like erotically connecting directly with deities and universal will.” (Harrington, *Sacred Kink*, 16). Rinella also talks about how the gift of sexual activity is one way for participants to experience the bliss of connection, “likewise religious observance is meant to connect us to the divine. [...] It is no wonder that the purpose of faith is to reconcile us with God. Here then we see the fundamental commonality of sex and spirit - to bring us to completion, that is into relationship

with other and Other.” (Rinella, *Philosophy in the Dungeon*, 96). Kaldera, believes that pain can be seen as a gift from a Creator deity “who gave you your flesh,” or from a Destroyer deity “who teaches you your limits.”²⁶ In describing his relationship with his matron deity he says, “I am as much a slave as my boy is, and my Mistress, my dominatrix, She Who Owns My Ass, is Hela the goddess of death.” (Kaldera, *Dark Moon Rising*, 4). Harrington explains that the exploration of spiritual BDSM is the exploration of the sacred; “sacred experiences, sacred moments, sacred truths and understandings. Kink is simply the lens we are exploring it through, the set of tools in the toolbox of our lives.” (Harrington, *Sacred Kink*, 23).

As we move towards a more secular society and the old, major religions experience a decline in popularity, people come up with new ways to meet their spiritual needs because regardless of the symbols, structure and language that is used the needs and drives of humans that drove us to create religions in the first place (dealing with anxiety, meaning making, a sense of community and belonging, etc) are still the prevalent. BDSM can be analyzed as a ‘secular religion’ by looking at BDSM as ritual, by comparing traditional religious ways of hurting, and analyzing the psychology of pain and power.

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Endnotes

- 1.) See: "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Pew Research Center, last modified December 31, 2019, <http://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.
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- 9.) Jo Pearson, "Embracing the Lash: Pain and Ritual as Spiritual Tools." *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 23 (2011): 1.
- 10.) Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul*. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 26.
- 11.) Alison Moore, "Spiritual Sadomasochism," in *Masochism: Disciplines of Desire* (Sydney: PG ARC Publications 1998), 71.
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- 16.) Sable Aradia, *The Witch's Eight Paths of Power: a Complete Course in Magick and Witchcraft*. (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2014), IX
- 17.) Jack Rinella, *Philosophy in the Dungeon: The Magic If Sex & Spirit*. (Chicago: Rinella Editorial Services, 2006), 15.
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- 19.) Raven Kaldera, *Dark Moon Rising: Pagan BDSM and the Ordeal Path*. (Hubbardston: Asphodel Press, 2006), 25-26.
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