

## A Late Twentieth Century Re-Vision Of Christian Existentialism: Subjective Religions In Patrick Friesen's The Shunning

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### Abstract

*This article examines Patrick Friesen's "The Shunning" framing it as a reflection of the author's Mennonite background and a critique of institutionalized religion. Focusing on the character of Peter and his struggles with faith amidst societal pressures, the study explores themes of individuality and the religious authority. By incorporating multiple narrative voices, the poem presents a multifaced view of these themes, aligning with Kierkegaard's existential theories, highlighting the absence of stable orientation points and the individual's confrontation with conflicting life choices. The article aligns with Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. Overall, the study offers a nuanced interpretation of Friesen's work and its philosophical interpretations.*

**Keywords:** Patrick Friesen, Christian existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, Existential crises, Church and self-righteousness, Stranger/Other.

### Introduction

Patrick Friesen's modern free-verse epic *The Shunning*, written partly in prose form, mirrors his Mennonite upbringing, from which he untied himself when he was still a teenager. This study argues that the poem should be read as an elaborate revision of the original theories of Christian existentialism (as explored by philosophers like Kierkegaard), and raises questions about how an individual's relation with God is potentially sabotaged by an institutionalized view of religion licensed by the 'representatives of God,' which aims at unquestioning submission of the masses to divine truths. *The Shunning* pictures a rebellious character named Peter who was shunned by the Mennonite society pressurized by the Church authorities, to let Peter realize how he is deteriorating his own faith, his life and afterlife, how he is destined to be a part of the very 'hell' that he doubts. This poem deals with the story of two brothers and their families, and a priest named Loewen. Peter's wife is Helena, while his brother Johannes Neufeld's first wife is named Carolina after whose death he marries a woman named Ruth. Johannes and Ruth have a daughter named Anna. Some sections of the poem are narrated by the omnipresent narrator's own voice while others are constituted of the monologues of the afore-mentioned characters. The fact that the poem is a collage of different voices recounting experiences from different perspectives creates the idea that its concepts, especially those related to religion, are multifaceted. Even the characters who do not speak directly to the reader add perspectives through their presence in the narrative. Therefore, the chapter argues that the

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manner in which Friesen constructs dilemmas of religion bear out Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity in so far as the latter contends,

There are, in short, no longer traditional patterns, codes, rules or 'pre-allocated reference groups' that individuals can look to as stable orientation points in their lives and be guided by. Rather, individuals now face an array of conflicting life-choices on their own, meaning that they face them in increasing isolation and with little prospect of assistance from any collective body or system. (Bauman 7)

Friesen begins with a very revealing yet brief epigraph: "some praise God / some cry uncle" (11). What strikes the reader first of all is the marked irony in the statement, the modern-day man's choice between an Omnipotent God Who appears distant at times to doubting souls and more immediate though human channels of succor. He wants to draw attention to the rigidity of the religious people, who are busy in their prayers and salutations, who take pride in performing sacraments, who feel pleasure in self-righteousness. They are busy praising God. And some of them, not claiming to be righteous care for a rebellious soul, care to ponder upon the questions he asks, to think about whether or not it is worth alienating him, or to help finding answers that keeps him in conflict with church and with the idea of a Christian God.

Friesen mentions a verse from the Bible, Daniel chapter 4, verse 32, which explains a dream of king Nebuchadnezzar who was told to be deprived of his royal authority and would be driven away from his people in the wild where he will live with the beasts, he will become one of them. "And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field..." (Friesen 13). The dream further explains that king Nebuchadnezzar will be wild like beast, his hair will be like the feathers of an eagle, and his nails will be like claws of wild birds. And his body will be drenched in dew. Seven years will be passed, until his sanity will be reinstated and he will acknowledge that the God is the supreme power, who is mighty and sovereign over all things on earth, kingdoms and glory, He gives them to anyone He wants. The verse symbolizes the spiritual journey of a common man, who struggles with his faith, and go through trials and tribulations in order to learn the spiritual lessons, in order to find a truth about his existence and a meaning to make sense of the things. The verse also suggests the tragic condition of the Jews when they were exiled from Germany. They were put under a great trial; they were exiled to be deprived of any territory, to be shunned like oxen, to be "natural nomads" (Bauman 85). Until they recognize the true reality of their existence. It was only due to their phenomenal experience that they found to be what they are today. Friesen wants to convey that in order to have a personal spiritual growth one needs to breakdown, just like the earth is ploughed before it is harvested. The life of a man is similar to the earth; it needs a breaking point or a turning point from where the internal journey starts. "I asked father why the garden needed ploughing / And without thinking or raising his eyes / He said that for anything to grow the earth must be turned" (Friesen 18)

Friesen wants to convey that a breaking point or a turning point of every individual varies, there is no particular formula for when and how it should start, and to what degree it can or cannot exceed. The turning of the heart does not depend on the obligations determined by the Church, which depends on the teachings of a priests or a cardinal, a spiritual journey depends upon the subjective relationship of a man with God, which depends on a personal relationship with God according to his or her faith. Soren Kierkegaard a Danish philosopher, poet and a theologian who is extensively known as an existential philosopher, asserts that faith amplifies the possibilities in the life of a man (Christian). Who so ever does not have faith indulges into despair which according to Kierkegaard is equivalent to sin. "And for the whole of Christianity it is one of the most decisive definitions that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith" (Kierkegaard 93). In his book *Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard shares the importance of a personal relationship of a man with God, which totally depends on faith. Since faith drives the life of every individual, it is a subjective phenomenon. And every person builds an individual relationship with God according to his or her faith. Hence the spiritual growth is

subjected to independent choices, one must choose for himself, only then one can escape anguish.

Friesen's main character Peter seems never to be happy or at peace because he was experiencing anguish within himself and problems with the church. "Uncle Peter had the farm beside ours. I remember him as quiet, serious man he seemed never to be happy... I was young then and I remember him from the time when he was having trouble with the church" (22). Peter was having trouble with the church not because he did not believe in God, but because the God in whom Peter believed seems to be the different than the God of Loewen (a priest). Loewen teaches about the God who punishes, from whom every individual should fear, who perishes those who commits sin. "It is fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (qtd. in Friesen 28). Loewen waters the fear of death and punishment in the spiritual mass yet he prays for their salvation. "Bible closes. They bow their heads and Loewen prays for my salvation and they will do the right thing" (Friesen 28). Friesen writes that it was the first day on that particular Sabbath that Peter felt he was shunned by the teachings of the church. He was left with the conflict that what could possibly salvation means when God only punishes who sins? Why Jesus spilt his blood when sinners are bound to go to hell? Peter was suffering; he was an obstinate man, very opinionated and infrangible. His nephew said he heard people saying that they never saw Peter stooped not even when he had to carry heavy bags he had too much pride. (22) But pride was not something that should have cost his life; it was a part of his nature, and not his sin. He wanted to live a faithful life, a life full of essence, but when he started to question the doctrine of the church his tragedy started. Before he was ostracized from the Mennonite community, he himself got alienated from people, all he wanted was to be left alone, because he knew they judges him and cannot understand him. Peter was also aggressive, he wanted catharsis, but when it comes to his faith that he was not allowed to question he couldn't give vent to his frustration and stress. "Uncle Peter left people alone and he wanted to be left alone. He would go into bush when he felt too strong about one thing or another" (Friesen 22).

When Peter tried to express his personal views, he started to have trouble with the Mennonite community. "He said more than once that there couldn't be such a place as hell, not with a loving God. That's what started all the trouble with the church. Peter must have mentioned this to someone and the pastor got to hear about it I guess" (Friesen 30). It was Peter's perception that didn't let him accept that God who let his only son die on the cross for human beings would let them burn in the hell. Peter believed in a merciful and a loving God. As Kierkegaard emphasizes on having a personal relationship with God which has a miraculous power to surpass all the stipulated rules and moralities. Because the limitation in choosing for oneself puts a man or women in despair because it never let a human being explore the infinite possibilities when he feels himself in unison with the divine. And despair bounds human beings to grow spiritually and emotionally, it limits his potential to be conscious of the consequences of his own actions whether good or bad.

And if so, if thou hast lived in despair (whether for therest thou didst win or lose), then for thee all is lost, eternity knows thee not, it never knew thee, or (even more dreadful) it knows thee as thou art known, it puts thee under arrest by thyself in despair (Kierkegaard 27).

Peter not only longed to have that relationship with God, he believed in his mercy and grace. His perception about the scripture was the way he wanted to perceive God. He believed in the grace that Jesus bestowed on human beings, the law says in the Old Testament that "the soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). Whereas Paul the apostle of Christ declares that "you are not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them, (Matthew 5:17) According to Christianity, grace is the fulfillment of the law. It was the grace which Peter wants to have faith in, he was ready to be redeemed, he wanted to experience the transcendent union with God, to be free

from guilt and shame and receive the salvation which Jesus not only promised but bestowed upon humanity by giving his blood on the cross.

sometimes the sun glowers  
 burns me black into soil  
 so that I am Adam again before sin  
 before creation's frenzy  
 Lord Jesus Christ breathe into me  
 make me man make me flesh again  
 as God the Father in the beginning  
 and take away all sin and shame (Friesen 24)

Peter wanted to feel free from sin and shame, he only wanted to be a man of flesh and blood, who might commit mistakes or a sin, but he would be redeemed by the magnificent relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ who broke the wall between man and God Almighty after the disobedience of Adam. One can only receive salvation and grace if he is able to have self-realization, self-examination through his or her own spiritual journey, until one finds that grace which is the soul of Christianity, a Christian is but a mere wanderer, a traveler and a stranger in his own faith. Kierkegaard emphasis on the self-realization that Jesus encouraged, which could only be practiced if one is free to examine himself and not always be examined by someone else. "let every man examine himself.' They are Christ's own words, and they must (especially in Christendom) be again and again enjoined, repeated, addressed to every man severally" (149). Practicing freewill that Jesus encouraged is largely incapacitated by the spiritual teachers like Loewen, since Christians reckon priests as the apple of God's eyes, they influence the perception of the practicing Christians. Loewen tried to convince Peter in every way, he taught him through the holy Bible, he gave him references of heaven and hell, but failed to convince him. He then decided that Peter should be ostracized and should be persecuted for questioning religion. The whole Mennonite community broke ties with him; the doors of the church were closed for him. He was not only banished by the community and the neighborhood, but also his wife was told to end relationship with him, in spirit if not physically. This left Peter in despair, even though he wanted to be a good practicing Christian, even though he wanted to go to church, he felt a gap a labyrinth between the church and himself.

I must come back  
 sit on the benches  
 if I am to be loved again  
 But how do I come back? (Friesen 37)

It was unfortunate that religion which supposed to show path to the followers starts to derail them, a spiritual leader who supposed to be a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness and goes after the one which is lost abandons Peter, for questioning the doctrine of the church. He struggles to express his personal view point in the society which expects submission and demands conformity. Peter struggled to find his own version of truth because scriptures are not limited to the interpretations of priests and cardinals. The Bible says that man's knowledge is not complete, the word of God is yet to be understood, and a man who knows in parts shall keep on exploring the word until the time comes for a perfect unison with the divine. "For now, we only see a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in parts; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). The Bible does not dissuade the subjective interpretation, the truth is subjected to the interpretation of the receiver of the gospel. It depends on how much faith a person holds in his heart. The truth is subjective to a great extent. When the Bible says "then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32) it addresses everyone that believes in the Christ, not to a specific group or a person, so the truth can be explored by anyone like Loewen or like Peter. None of them has an authority to claim his version of truth truer than anybody else's truth. Bauman raises the same question.

“What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?” The typically postmodern questions do not reach that far. Instead of locating the task for the knower, they attempt to locate the knower himself” (100).

Even though Loewen could not prove the authenticity of doctrine of his own faith and his functional faith, he did not approve of the truth that Peter aspired for or might have explored from the gospel. In spite of helping him sorting out his conflicts the priest considered him a conflict. In spite of pointing out the lapse in his own teachings and helping Peter sort out the doubts with the doctrine of the religion, the priest considered Peter a dent on the religious community. Peter’s contumacy towards the church was innocent like a stubbornness of a child, who aims riffle at the sun thinking he could bring the night.

and I almost forget  
you aiming a rifle at the sun  
thinking you could bring night. (Friesen 50)

The isolation made Peter more stressed out, it wasn’t only the estrangement of the neighborhood, the Mennonite community and relatives, but his wife Helena also who distanced herself from Peter, and she started to sleep alone. She loved her husband and she feared for him, whereas people in the church thought she fears Peter, and despises him for being sinful. Helena did not despise him, but she wanted to bring back Peter to the Lord, but even she wasn’t completely sure from where she should bring him back? “I never feared him, though sometimes I feared for him. I loved him. They were right in thinking I was hoping to bring him back. But from where?” (51). Everyone made Peter a stranger for the community, a decree which Loewen managed to pass against him made him feel as “the other” because they were unable to relate to him. It was a reluctance of the religious authority to understand and accept him with his conflicts and with the perception which was different than theirs. It was the intolerance of leader of a religious community which dragged Peter even far away from the benches of the church. The Bible teaches that the troubled one should not be avoided or alienated, he should be accepted and well treated.” Jesus answered, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). Whereas Loewen resented Peter, he could not stand the difference of his opinion, he could not stand the way Peter felt about God, he considered Peter not one of the true Christian, but “the other” who not only negated his teachings but also pose a dent on his ego and his self confidence. “It is only the admixing of resentment of ‘the Other’ to the gardener’s self-confidence which is truly explosive” (Bauman 36). Peter was being torn apart between his knowledge about compassion of God and between the way he was ostracized by the community and his own wife. He knew he was going through a conflict, and might have committed against the doctrine of the religion. He was entangled in his own conflicts but still he desired to be forgiven, to be accepted.

he smells rope at his wrists  
the approaching rain  
raises his head in the dark  
forgive he says  
at last  
me (Friesen 41)

Peter despaired, and in Christianity to despair is to sin, he despaired because he felt he should have been saved. He despaired because he felt he was stuck somewhere he could not return from. He despaired because his faith did not match the doctrine of his Christian faith, he despaired because he was not allowed to express what he thought, he despaired because he had to keep quiet and he was forced to believe what he was taught. Whereas he had his own belief. And he believed that things are surely not the way they are told. “Things are not what we are told they are or forced to believe they should be” (Bauman 175). Peter did not only get to break the relationship with the people around him, he also broke a relationship with his own self.

“Despair is the disrelationship in a relation which relates itself to itself” (Kierkegaard 12). He started to feel terrible, inexcusable and worthless in such a way that in a peculiar moment of great despair he could not justify his existence, he could not find a reason to live for. “For in the fact that he despaired of something, he really despaired of himself and now would be rid of himself” (Kierkegaard 16). Would that he could find refuge in his faith, would that he could find a reason to live, would that he could have faith in the words of Jesus Christ who said “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). He would not have wasted his life.

in one appalling twitch  
 here beside this creek  
 blood spilling worthless  
 blood seeping in earth and heaven this night  
 where tomorrow  
 red sky.(Friesen 46)

Peter’s suicide does not only prove that he was experiencing Christian existentialism, which Kierkegaard talks about, he highlights the fact that one must choose for himself and one must risk to have individual choices, otherwise a man is bound to experience existential dread. One may lose in his journey but not choosing to take up any path helps nothing. “Such is the way a man always acquires courage; when one fears a greater danger, it is as though the other did not exist” (08). Peter lost courage to keep on fighting for his own reason. He was puzzled and could not find a way, his suicide puzzled many around him. And most probably sowed the seeds of doubt and uncertainty in their minds as well. What Loewen wanted to stop was about to begin in other people’s mind as well. “I’m puzzled by this suicide. I imagine it had something to do with his trouble with the church. Though what that trouble was I don’t rightly understand. Strange people” (Friesen 49). His brother’s wife Carolina thought to name her child after Peter because she realized that “it would be an honor for the child after all Peter had been a good man who hadn’t lived a false life only his own life. That made me think it over. Carolina was right Peter had lived his own life and maybe it was complete” (Friesen 74). She realized that it is better to be true to oneself, as Peter certainly was. And people like Loewen are not genuine enough to be followed, who proves to be unproductive, inadequate and insufficient representatives of the religion, shuns people from following their heart and following their faith. Who don’t let people see a loving God who promised that He will not remember their sins for His own sake (Isaiah 43:25) and preaches according to the hardness of their own heart. Who take pleasure in the agony of other people. People like Loewen feel superior while they make others feel inferior and sinners who will be thrown in the hell fire. They feed on the fear of the common people, which don’t let them help the troubled and make him believe that with faith he is forgiven, but keep them lingering on with the fear of the hell fire and the living God. Peter’s suicide sheds many curtains from the windows of people’s perception. They started to realize that behind the face of the priest there was a sadist who could never save the troubled but who could only double their despair. “And you never saw someone who could hide better. Behind the preacher. Behind the Bible. Behind God. Yes, if you knew that man you knew something about Mennonites. Not everything mind you” (Friesen 90). After Peter’s suicide Loewen died in an unfortunate accident, the narrator who reported his death said that the same Loewen who used to speak for the Church with the burden of brotherhood, but never condemned those who let Peter die and let all of them wash off their hands with indifference died under the burden of the heavy logs, a man lifted a log from his legs but he could not lift a heavy log from his chest before he oozed out blood which froze them and then he died. The heavy log on his chest symbolizes the burden on his heart and on his soul of letting the troubled sheep die. He didn’t prove to be a good shepherd, he derailed them, and let them wander in uncertainty and being spiritually destitute.

Religion is clearly a state of mind. It is also clear that it is not exclusively the acceptance of certain propositions as true. It seems therefore that it may best be described as an emotion resting on a conviction of a harmony between ourselves and the universe at large. The phrase 'a true religion' is scarcely accurate, since religion is not a system of propositions, but an emotion. (Shrubsole 408)

Religion cannot be followed truly if it is imposed on human beings, people should not be forced to believe in something which they cannot connect with. Because religion cannot be suggested but felt, as in above mentioned quote it is explained as an emotion. Without the emotional connection everything related to religion seems to be a hallow sacrament.

I kiss His hands and His feet  
and though my lips redden  
I cannot taste His blood. (Friesen 26)

Friesen highlights the role of the church and of a priest in the century which was already losing faith in the institutions, people who were skeptical of already established truths; the role of the church also seemed deficient. At the political level, there was the system powerful enough to challenge the rights and the reality of other groups or nations, at religious level there were 'representatives of God' who challenged and snubbed individual's right to question and to interpret Holy Books according to their own mind. There was a constant war going on against human existence even after the war had seized. It was from the inside, which could find no end, and a human heart standing on the edge where he finds nothing to resort to, even if he wants to. In spite of claiming to offer salvation and eternal life, religion fell short of the remedy against existential crises, and identity loss. Even though *The Shunning* holds a conflict of its century's discontent when it comes to religion and a person's individuality, but it does not fall short of the hope Friesen might have aspired, by suggesting the need of a "search for meaning" and "knowledge of ambivalence" (Bauman 174).

Do you understand this? where we come from?  
it all adds up  
figure it out for yourself (Friesen 89)

Man is already torn apart between the conflict of what he ought to be and what he is not, he feels confused in his present reality, he seems to find no answers to his existential questions. "I don't know how the world works anymore. How I got here so fast" (Friesen 90). The preciseness of this life puts a man into nothingness. The essence and the meaning of a human life which religion had to provide seems to be failing. "That's how it goes. You live a while and then time happen" (Friesen 90). Man does not give himself margin of being satisfied with his present reality, he is too critical of his own self, and there is a constant pressure of the world which makes him feel he is lesser than what he is expected to be. Bauman says, in order to hide what man is not but pretend to be, he believes in his heart that he can never be morally right. There is a constant war going on in his heart because of his ego which never let him be at peace with his own self.

Only man is subject to neuroses, only human life has the structure of neurosis, as "only man is doomed to be torn between two destinies, because in his ego there exists a faculty that incessantly watches, criticizes, and compares, and in this way is set against the other part of the ego". This split into the watcher and the watched is the human condition incorporated and reformed into the drama of the psyche. In order to hide that they are not what they pretend to be, the powers of the world force man to believe that he is not what he ought to be (Bauman 175-176).

For all these times when a human being is broken down, the religion plays an important role, but in order to do so there should be a freedom to read the scripture according to one's own understanding and insight. Bauman says "The reader is a writer while he reads; readers write their books into the books they are reading so that these books could be read" (192). When the Christ taught his followers that every man should examine himself, he also gave

them freedom to think and decide for themselves. God has given man a freewill and it cannot be practiced until the thirst of the knowledge is not quenched, until one is not able to perceive meaning according to his own understanding. The meaning of the gospel is subjective and that is a gift of God for the mankind Bauman says.

The 'gift of the Jewish God', so to speak, was the overwhelming need to search for meaning, the knowledge that the thirst for meaning is as insatiable as the depth of divine wisdom is unfathomable, and the determination to continue the search - however partial and temporary the reward. The gift of God was, so to speak, the knowledge of ambivalence and the skill of living with this knowledge (174).

Patrick Friesen highlights the inefficiency and incompetence of the church and its representatives by portraying the life of a simple farmer who did not stop questioning the doctrine of the religion but at the same time he wants to live a faithful life. Peter committed suicide by diving deep in despair due to the emotional and psychological strain given to him by society and the church, who considered him a weed in the garden and abandoned him. Friesen emphasized on the need of acceptance and tolerance in religion and society as well. In a society it is important to accept and tolerate other people's version let it be secular or religious. As Simmel brings light to the fact that:

A world in which everything is in constant motion is a world in which certainties of any kind are hard to come by... What is truth in one context of the individual's social life may be error in another. What was considered right at one stage of the individual's social career becomes wrong in the next.(qtd. in Bauman 96).

Friesen asserts that it is mandatory to accept the diversity of thought, and to respect the truth which comes to light by someone else's perspective, because every truth is prone to revision and whatever one believes in, is the matter of his own faith. If one has to live in this society where things are uncertain and ambiguous, one must learn to make peace with ambivalence.

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