

## **What religion?**

It is to our advantage to understand that there are two kinds of religions today. These are two general categories that have been observed to have arisen on account of economic “demands.” “Demand” here refers to what we are looking for (what we want in life) or what we really need (what would help us become better and happier persons).

The first kind of religion<sup>1</sup> we see today, which is most common, is “**constructed**” religion, and the other, which is much less common, is “natural” religion. “Constructed religion” is made up of structures and functions (which are fancy words for “means” and “motives,” respectively, which will become clear as we read on).

“**Structures**” refers to buildings and things we can see, hear or sense (they are palpable things). We tend to be impressed by large clean-looking buildings, with comfortable halls and seats. We see modern technology being used to present religion, such an impressive audio-visual presentation system, great furniture, well-trained workers, and priests in fine robes to welcome and impress us.

These are, of course, good things to have and use for presenting, or even packaging, religion. However, they can also be very deceptive. Just because a “religious” sermon or talk is presented using the modern technology and facilities, or delivered by an impressively dressed religious figure doesn’t mean that it is right or good. This is like buying a product simply because the label or packaging are impressive, but the product is defective, run out of date, or simply counterfeit.

Those seeking succour are likely to be sadly suckered by “constructed” religion, since it is the most available, visible and loudest. We must take religion that is a well-orchestrated performance and well-staged show for what it really is, nothing more – sounds and acts. One rule of thumb here is to ask ourselves, would the Buddha dress like this or do this? Our wisdom will clear things up for us, and put us on the right path; or, at least, turn us away from the wrong ones.

Yet, “constructed” religion may not be a bad place to begin our spiritual quest, especially when we may not have any other choice. But it would be simply disastrous to remain there. This is like consuming the label and packaging, and throwing away the real product! Or, loitering at the impressive university entrance instead of actually attending classes and completing our courses (even collecting autographs from famous professors or garlanding them does not inspire their wisdom in us).

The sad reality is that “constructed” religion tends to attract muddle-headed truants. Their bodies and gestures are present but their minds and hearts are not there. They are often somewhere elsewhere, in some distant paradise, casino or fun place, or on their handphones.

Since “constructed” religion tends to thrive on the success of numbers and the numbers of success, they often have a serious problem of religious window-shopping or religious mobility. “Constructed” religion followers tend to be great shoppers, often moving around looking for the latest exciting talk shows, karmic bargains and discounts, and opportunities for being up close and personal with charismatic and personable gurus and figures. Charisma tends to breed groupies.

Understandably, “constructed” religion has to be “**functional**,” that is, active and innovative in introducing and sustaining a chain and flow of people-retaining activities and endorphin-secreting events. The success of such an approach, as a rule, depends on the charisma of the teacher or the person of a speaker: he should show palpable and measurable signs of success and class. After all, here it is the teacher

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<sup>1</sup> When we are willing and able—and ready—we can replace “religion” here with our own faith, belief-system, or profession, and see the dramatic revelations that may dawn upon us— if we are willing, able and ready.

that matters well above the teaching: the person is the thing. Without the teacher there is no teaching; without the person, there is no crowd: what we desire gives meaning to what we seek.

“Constructed” religion is widely available, wants to be widely available, and is also easily available. The moment we turn to a “constructed” religion, its **memes**<sup>2</sup> will overwhelm us, often subtly. A “meme” is what we have been talking about here: the impressive buildings and arrangements, latest technology and presentation methods, impressive speakers and priestly robes, and big crowds. The means is the end here. A **meme**, in other words, is a self-replicating device, an attention grabber: it draws others to itself, to “me...me,” so it is called meme.

While “constructed” religion openly and sharply sells itself, “**natural**” religion is a home-grown and gentle organic being. It is something almost impalpable, but living and breathing inside us that we often take it for granted, and so tend to neglect it. Then, we will simply starve spiritually (like a crowd of pretas) or become unhealthy religiously (like a substance addict). This self-neglect is simply worsened or heightened when we are caught up with “constructed” religion.

“Constructed” religion is an imaginative “make-up” product, a buffet reality: we put things together as we go along. We tend to pick a thing here from someone we admire, a thing there from another we worship. So we end up as a sort of patched-up colourful but hollow balloon, hissing with hot air, glorious-looking, and high-rising, but hollow all the same. Just a slight needle prick will burst this huge gas-bag.

This “needle” is none other than “natural” religion itself, the dynamic antonym and antidote to “constructed” religion. If we are naive about religion, we are likely to be drawn into a “constructed” crowd. When we are sucked into a “constructed” orbit, we might imagine ourselves to be gods or angels, but we are standing on a tiny pin-head of our made-up faith. It is really crowded for so many angels to stand on a pin’s head!

“Natural” religion is so called because it is as natural as our breath. Natural religion is the understanding that our breath is the most precious thing that we *are*. Our breath is with us every moment of our lives, whether we are happy or sad, rich or poor, famous or obscure, good or bad, no matter what we do. It is the truest of friends. Indeed, if we are not friendly with our breath, we can never be a real friend to anyone.

To befriend our breath is to respect it. To respect the breath is to know and see it for what it really is: ever coming and going, ever rising and falling. The whole world, this universe itself, moves with this breath. No breath, no world.

If our breath is our world, then we have to make sure that we breathe rightly. The best way to breathe is to take one breath at a time. Notice how we perilously try to take in more breaths than we can, when we are angry or upset. Notice how we seem to stop breathing when we are drowned in love or pant with lust. These are all delusions, of course. Only when we return to breathing one breath at a time, we feel naturally normal again.

To breathe rightly is to breathe peacefully. To breathe peacefully is to notice the silent spaces in between our breaths. When we smile at these silent spaces, we *are* peace itself. This is the only lesson of life: to live is to breathe. When we have really learned this, good follows only naturally and happily.<sup>3</sup>

All that lives share one common thing: we all breathe. Just as we do not want others stop us from breathing, we should not end the breaths of others. This is the golden rule. As humans, we not only

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<sup>2</sup> See **Memés**, SD 26.3: [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> On breath meditation, see **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118,5-7 + 15-22), SD 7.13: [link](#).

breathe, but we must breathe happily. To breathe happily, we also need to be free from lust, hate, delusion and fear. The highest truth here is in how we breathe. Our minds and hearts must be free, too, to know all this.<sup>4</sup>

Above all, when we truly know how to breathe, we will first feel a profound peace. Then the breath seems to stop. It has become so subtle that we hardly notice it. Our breath evolves from being a bodily process into a mental presence. When the bodily breath is at peace, it becomes the heart's beautiful breath.

The mental breath empowers us to see real truths (not the constructed truths or virtual reality). The heart's breath inspires us to feel beauty (not religion and memes). Beauty and truth deconstruct our world. Then our thoughts, actions and words are both true and beautiful. This is truth and beauty.

When the constructed walls of religion and worldliness break down, we see that we are really one with everyone and everything: we begin to understand what this actually means. This is true and beautiful.

Natural religion is not even a religion. It is about truth and beauty. It is life itself.

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<sup>4</sup> On the 5 values and 5 precepts, see SD 1.5 (2): [link](#).