

## Weekly Reflections by Piya Tan

### Religion can be bipolar

Humans are sometimes defined as tool-using animals. Our evolving minds teach us how to use tools, at first a simple stone to break or cut something, and then fire, and then the wheel, and now the computer and the Hubble telescope, and so on. We invent tools, use them, and discover new things.

One of our enduring inventions is religion. We started off trying to understand why our colleagues change like decaying bark of a tree, and then stop moving like a rock. We learned that we die. Then we noticed that plants, too, die, but they lived again when we planted their seeds. There must be something that survived death: man invented the soul.

But who “really” made the soul? This took a bit longer to understand. We noticed the whims of the weather, and changes in climate, the power of lightning and the natural elements. We felt overwhelmed by the sky, the rivers and the mountains. These things were very much bigger than us. We decided that they were gods. They must have made the soul, too.

Of course, we do not really know how our ideas about soul and God arose. They evolved over millennia. The idea of a single all-powerful God understandably evolved as man found safety in numbers and became more tribal. As the tribe became bigger and more diverse, the many gods, spirits and demons only added to the difficulty of crowd control and the public safety (to simply put it).

As tribe evolved into nations, the many gods too were nationalized. The numerous different cells and tissues that were spirits, demons and gods, slowly scaffolded to form organs of more complex functions, and then into a supreme being, God. One nation under God is likely to be more powerful than divisive tribes with many gods.

Those with the genius of defining God became priests, and those who made use of such definitions to their advantages were the kings, emperors and politicians. And in between them, there were a range of uses and abuses of the God-idea.

The process of defining God is still going on today, as religious groups mushroom with their self-defined God and compete for members and resources. Such a centralized system cannot tolerate deviance or dissidence, because if the centre falls apart, the whole system collapses. That is why God-systems can never be tolerant.

Despite great advances in religion, science and civilization, we are still animals deep down inside. Wild beasts still lurk in the shadows of our unconscious. The Buddhist texts call them “latent tendencies,” comprising of greed (pleasure instinct), revulsion (death instinct) and ignorance (the shadow). We veritably turn into a beast when we are taken over by lust, by hate, or by ignorance.

And yet, we have the ability to know what we are doing: we have reflexive consciousness. That is, we are aware that we are aware. With this reflexive awareness, we can notice what causes pain, how to avoid pain, how to satisfy needs, and most importantly, how to relate causes rightly to effects, to question, to discover, to be happy.

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If we fail in these things, we are hardly human (yet), even if we have a human body. Our bodies have evolved but not our minds. Our prehistoric ancestors learned how to save themselves from dangerous animals, for example, either by running back to the safety of their populated caves, or by climbing up a tree.

But our intelligent ancestors did not (fortunately) think in an either-or way to escape danger. It was not either the cave or the tree. What if the cave was too far away, or there were no trees high enough for safety? They learned that they had a wide range of possibilities for safety from all kinds of danger: they could use a strong broken tree branch as a spear, or hide downwind, and so on. Otherwise, we would not be here today.

Having said that, I must say that I am sadly amused whenever a self-righteous bipolar God-believer challenges others to choose between us or them, either God or damnation, eternal heaven or eternal hell-fire. On a light side, if this kind of heaven exists, it would be populated by profoundly boring bipolar self-righteous one-tracked non-thinkers (who, by the way, swear by the same God, and at each other, too). Surely, most people would rather be in a hell of like-minded free-thinking seekers with different perspectives of life.

The Buddhist view is that whatever exists, by definition, must exist in time: it is impermanent. If something does not exist in time, it is meaningless. There is nothing to talk about. We cannot define something into existence. If we do, then we are delusional.

The Buddha, in his first sermon, admonishes us against two extremes of belief: that of eternal life and that this is our one and only life. The eternalist view is the basis for the God idea, the either-or dualism, the eternal heaven or eternal hell threats. All such ideas can never be real because all existence is impermanence.

The other extreme—this is our only life, so make the best of it—is also false, and can be a basis for self-centred materialism: eat, drink, and do our darndest thinking we won't get caught. Those Singapore lawyers who absconded with their clients' millions and the financial manipulators who crashed world markets are likely to hold such an idea.

If we are to awaken to true liberating reality, we need to rise above these two extremes, these bipolar ways of thinking. The answer lies in self-understanding, that we live in an intimately interconnected world—we are both innerbeings as well as interbeings. And we need to relate to one another ever more from the inside, from our hearts.

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