

Pious fiction

Religion is mostly make-believe, where we can make others believe and live it. It is a highly imaginative way of moving people the way we want them, where we want them. **Spirituality**, on the other hand, is a quest or an understanding of the spirit (the meaning and purpose) of life, of why things are the way they are, of how they arise and pass away, of what we can learn from all this, and to actually benefit from such a quest, without harming oneself or anyone else.

Religion is easy, even fun, to follow, as it is a crowd effort: we get to hear what we like to hear; we are simply followers. While the religious crowds keep obediently going in a rutted circle or following some higher power or hidden voice, the spiritual person labours to grow and rise in a spiral of understanding, where our old self evolves into a new self, and on to selflessness. Spirituality demands self-effort (seeing into our mind and heart) where we need to question, to doubt, to seek, to find, to free oneself -- a self-effort which also benefits others. Spirituality is always a personal quest even when we have other like-hearted spiritual people who share our vision and action.

Understandably, religion is for the masses; spirituality is for the individual. Sadly, most of us do not really trust ourselves; we need the approval of others, to be accepted by others. This is what fashion is about. Someone comes up with some brilliant or bizarre new idea or design, and the crowd approves. If we do not, then we are out of fashion, out of class. We fear to be alone, because we feel as if we do not exist – we have no self – when we have no others to measure or triangulate ourselves with.

Even more interesting is the fact that religion is no more the sigh of the oppressed, as thought over 150 years ago.¹ It is now the huff and puff of the rich and powerful, a tool in their quest for resources and control over others. Money is the root of religion today; religion is always about money in one form or another.² It is the measurement and commodification of the human spirit.³

One of the most interesting aspects in the study of religion is the investigation into its struggle with spirituality. It is fascinating and rewarding to learn how we twist our imagination to shape religion into our own image, and draw a following and its benefits. When we understand this most human and worldly of religiosity, then we are in a better position to understand what to avoid in religion; indeed, to avoid religion itself, and to see and live the spirit of life.

The problem of religion is not difficult to understand if we see it as a most human endeavour. We all have needs: we perceive a lack within ourselves. It's like the natives living in poorer parts of Myanmar or northern Thailand. We think that they lack the privileges that we enjoy in the first world. So we build new homes, and donate computers and other modern amenities to them. We are effectively "modernizing" them (as we try to modernize Buddhism). In other words, we are trying to drag them into our world, and, inadvertently, they will face the problems that we are facing with modernity! Or else, we could be only be imitating what the colonial masters and missionaries have been doing to the "heathen" world, the fruits of which we still see today in Asia and the Third World.⁴

Such humanitarian projects should not merely raise the living standards of the natives, but more vitally, they should teach the natives to be self-reliant, that is, to tap the potential of their own culture and mobilize themselves as a community. The best way to help such natives, then, is to educate them so

¹ In 1843, Karl Marx wrote in his Introduction to "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."

² See reflection, "[Aliens and UFOs in Buddhism](#)," R146, 2010.

³ See **The Three Roots, Inc**, [SD 31.12](#).

⁴ See the reflection, "[The harlequin effect](#)," R404, 2015.

that they can rise to be amongst the best minds of their own society (or even better them) to solve their own problems. We have not lived long and deeply enough with them to truly solve their persisting problems, but given the tools of self-reliance and wisdom, they would better themselves with each new generation.

If we look deep enough into the history of Buddhism, we can see that it went through at least three important stages from its inception to our own times. During the first period, beginning with the Buddha himself up to about 500 years later, we have **the arhat ideal** predominating a teaching where we are encouraged to seek the Dharma for ourselves so that we may understand it and be liberated.

With the Buddha's passing, the Buddhist scholars, thinkers and adventurers often stopped listening to the Dharma, and neglected their own mental development. Some felt lost without the Buddha; others felt they could do what they liked, now that the Buddha was dead. Then, they started writing their own sutras and books on Buddhism. By worldly standards, they were great works: they were meant for the world, anyway – unlike the early suttas, which are the way out of this world to nirvana.

Those who listened to these great teachers and thinkers quickly believed them. After all, they had no Buddha to turn to; so, they might as well believe a living teacher who teaches these new ideas. This was an age of belief. However, being human, these teachers and thinkers enjoyed their success, and even won the support of rulers and the powerful, and they floated around on society's higher echelons.

This development was noticed by other clever people from those times and after. They noticed that religion was an easy way to attract patronage, power and pleasure. They only had to come up with new and more interesting ideas about religion, especially with claims of giving easy succour and salvation. For them, nirvana was too distant and too dull a destination. There were now not-too-distant paradises in all the 10 directions. The number of Buddhas, with long impressive names, arose at the fiat of these teachers and thinkers. The "Bodhisattva" was no more the Buddha in quest of awakening, but became cosmic and timeless Beings who can effectively grant our every wish at our mere mouthing their names. There could be no easier religion than this, so it became very popular.

As the religious market became more crowded with great and pious teachers and thinkers, the religious competition grew more feverish. Resources were becoming more scarce, and the believers were demanding even simpler and more instant answers to their problems. What most failed to see, however, was that these problems had worsened because of their *beliefs* and false practices. This is like accumulating wealth, and buying and storing a lot of things and food, but never really having the time or idea of using them well or at all.

In the third stage of religious development, the Buddhist gurus and shamans came up with all kinds of ideas, stories and rituals. The believers now do not even need to believe; they only need to simply follow. After all, this is the age of Buddhist magic: just believe and your wish was granted. Nirvana seemed even more distant, if any believer ever heard the word.

In that age, mindfulness was effectively outmoded; it was eclipsed by something more magical and modern: "crazy wisdom." Followers were told not to fret over troublesome precepts or moral virtue. No matter what precepts we broke – even the worst ones – there is a sutra or holy text that could cleanse us of all our evils. All we need to do was just recite a few lines of it, and, in due course, just its title, and we were promised even heaven itself.

If this pious fiction were really true, it might explain why there are so many believers and followers in Buddhism today, especially the traditional race-based Buddhisms. Religion, it seems, has removed from us the wish or need, even the ability, to think, or to feel. We only need to believe and follow. One of

their leading gurus proudly declares: “The unbelievable is not always the improbable. The inconceivable is not always the impossible”!

The French people fought hard to free themselves from such pious fiction. One of their greatest minds warns us: “**Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.**”⁵ The events and evidence of such atrocities are reported weekly, even daily, in our newspapers and mass media. Do we let them come to our land and home, or our minds? Only wisdom can truly free us from such atrocities; only self-awakening can rouse us from such nightmares.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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⁵ Voltaire, alternative translation of passage from “Questions sur les miracles,” 1765; see [SD 27.5a](#).