

## Animal farm

Of all the paths of human quest for meaning and purpose, none is so compelling as religion. What is even more compelling about religion is *how* it provides us with what we seek: *seek and we shall find – itself*. Each and every organized religion we know today is ready with the right answers to what it sees as life's meaning and purpose. Although many of such fiats from different religions overlap, their differences are so real that they show, indeed, prove, the uniqueness of each of these religions. They differ from one another in very significant ways.

Yet, it is the very same ideas – the existence of an almighty agency, God, that creates all that there is, that gives us the spark that defines us, our soul – so each religion says – that make it unique – and yet, these same religions are not very different from one another. How can one religion be right and all else wrong?

Now, suppose all of them are right, or right in their own way. If all of them are right, then they really serve no purpose. We only need the common ideas that they hold. In fact, this is what has been happening: people think that they have a better understanding of this sameness, but their view of it is better than the rest. So, we have a new religion or cult.

The reason why such “sameness” is possible is because religious beliefs and views are very private things that have neither empirical proofs nor verifiable answers. In other words, they can all be wrong. Now we are caught in a double bind: if they are all right, then, it makes them obsolete by their own definitions! If they are all wrong, we do not need them, anyway.

On account of this double bind, a religion must assert that it is the only source of truth and salvation. To do so, these religions must zealously advertise their “uniqueness” so that people believe it. The reason we must *believe* in a religion is because we can never really know it. Religion, then, is a struggle for a valuable share of the market of belief. Here, religion is no different from any business that peddle themselves.

If they are more different to one another than they are the same, then, which one of them has all the right answers, or even one right *useful* answer that will not harm others? Each religion is sure that *it* is the right one, and all else wrong. If we take this argument by its own strength, then, we must conclude that since they cannot all be right, then, they all must be wrong. Or, that even where they are right, that rightness serves little good for mankind, but more for the benefit of only that religion itself. If it seeks only to be right for its own existence, it draws attention only and finally to itself – then, what is it?

What if there is a religion or system – call it what we may – that exists for the sake of denying itself, of rejecting the Self, any kind of abiding essence? Isn't this what science has discovered – that even the atom (that which cannot be cut into further pieces) is not the final state of matter, that there is *no* final state of matter? It all depends on how we view things. But science is not religion. We can still choose to walk the liberating path of awakening even now – but we must make that choice ourself and effect it. For, there is such a path, but we need to seek it within ourself.

At this stage of human progress, we know significantly better than ever before that no religion has all the answers, and often religion itself is the problem. Humanity has gone through

unimaginable sufferings on account of religion, the iron hand in velvet gloves instilling fear, ostracism, exploitation, slavery and wars – and where and when allowed, even today, will do the same, but more horrifically, yet more subtly, thanks to modern technology. After all, it is religion that invented the idea of Armageddon, the ultimate final war.

One of the key reasons that religion is doing less damage to us today is because of those great humans who have courageously and wisely spoken out to advance neither Theology nor Theism but true learning, technology, communication and freedom. If we are willing to learn – which means seemingly endless questioning – we are very much less likely to be treated as sheep to be herded or fishes to be netted or a crowd to be harvested.

Indeed, religion is tamer today than it ever had been, and its language more refined, and its actions seemingly more humane, to attract others for its own good. Religions, like viruses, copy one another: they are self-replicators. Take, for example, Buddhist meditation. Only years ago, Buddhist monks and meditators were invited to teach Christian priests and believers to meditate. The God-believers then tweaked the meditations towards God and faith, and stamped their imprimatur on them. Now, we even have what is called “Christian mindfulness.” Many are beginning to think that it is “older” than Buddhist meditation!

Such borrowings, of course, will subtly but surely change the religion. Religions that meditate are less likely to think of wars or cause them – no more can they regard the lives of unbelievers to be like those of pests to be exterminated, as they did in the past. Perhaps, we have a good sign here of future religions – of religions meditating, even meditating together – but let the future reveal itself.

During the colonial era, religion tried to conquer those they deem to be lesser than human (that is, practically the world beyond much of western Europe) for the wishes of “gospel, glory and gold.” Today, a religion’s gospel is so easily available in the mass media, that it means all things to all man. The holy book is no more the privy of the priesthood or ruling class. Today anyone with some glib and glam can start their own church or temple to save the world and build a world of savings.

Religion, without its biblical tooth and claw, is no more able to bathe in the glory of the bloodshed in its holy name. Today, we leisurely tour the memes of well manicured buildings, haunted chapels, imposing structures and superstitious objects that hint of tired miracles that still work for the pious and the gullible.

So, religion is only left with its last of three wishes, as it were, that of gold. Hence, it makes good sense to simply define religion today as “pious business.” Religion is still a very rich source of wealth and security for those who desire an easy life and still be worshipped for it. We only need to speak the language, play our part, work the magic, and spoon the illusions that are so dearly loved.

Religion today is a tired old mare, but many of us are still fascinated by the farmer that works the mare. After all, he’s a farmer who has a sprawling farm with countless sheep, goats and herds of animals, and his farm hands are legion. Life seems easy and fun on the farm. More than all these things, or perhaps, because of his experience with them, the farmer is a fascinat-

ing teacher. He's able to tame the animals, and his farm hands are always there at his beck and call.

This is a story about **modern slavery**, one that is more dehumanizing than bodily slavery, but which is overwhelming us in the name of religion, even as we read this. It is a mental slavery. It is a story for the thinker and the seer, it is to empower us to be doers, to change things for the better, or at least not to become a part of the problem. Whether it is hell or heaven here and now or hereafter, it is an allegory of our own making, whether we know this or not.

Our task is to free the human mind in peace, opening up our heart with joy, and looking within at the beauty, seeing the rise and fall of things – this task of freedom is too sacred to be put into someone else's hands. This is the teaching of the historical Buddha.

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

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