

Believable fiction

“If science is facts, religion is fiction.” How far is this true, if it is true at all? In simple terms, we can say that while science is evidence-based, religion tends to be faith-based. Now let us define the terms “evidence” and “faith.” The simplest question we can ask is: What are the bases of “evidence”? We can safely say that what we call evidence must come from our five physical senses, that is to say, we have seen it, or heard it, or smelt it, or tasted it, or felt it. And there is a sixth basis of evidence, that is, the mind: how we think, or reasoning. So we have a total of six means of evidence.

While we undoubtedly depend on our six senses to know things, how can we be so sure that what we know are really what they are, that we are not making it all up. One of the most famous of western philosophers, René Descartes (1596-1650), even wondered if some demon out there were putting things into his head! Science, on the other hand, could be said (again on a simple level), refuses to believe in this demon, but regards our senses as being trustworthy enough, albeit humanly limited. So science must depend on ever more sophisticated instruments to measure man and the universe. As such instruments and methods of observation become better, science improves itself, correcting past inaccuracies and mistakes. In short, science, at its best, is our evolving experience of the external world.

Interestingly, now with the meeting of science and Buddhist contemplative teachings, a new world of scientific learning is opening up. Using Buddhist meditation methods and teachings, the mind scientists are now more confident and successful than they were about a century ago in charting and measuring what goes on in our minds. We are now discovering new worlds in an age of the exploration of inner space, so that we can truly call these times the Millennium of the Mind.¹

Let us return to our purpose here, that is, an examination of religion on a deeper level. Based on what we have said so far, we can venture to say that religions in general are less concerned with “evidence” as it is defined and used in science, but more with how we think. Someone or a group of people thought up some ideas (such as a creator God, the devil, good, evil, heaven, hell etc), and they decided that only they are right, and others should follow them. If we accept such a teaching or system, then we have “faith” in them. This “faith,” however, is based mostly on the ideas of others. As such, we cannot really be too sure of its truth and goodness.

Indeed, if we carefully examine what the world religions are teaching (such as a creator God, the devil, good, evil, heaven, hell etc), we must say that they are simply objects of faith, that is, they are fictional at best. Even religious people, who are serious thinkers, honest to themselves, know this to some extent, but lacking any better explanation, or perhaps held back by fear, find it not worth their while to speak out against them or to give them up.

¹ See **Meditation and consciousness** = SD 17.8c: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>.

Informed Buddhists, however, *enjoy* such religious fiction. We begin their Buddhist lives listening to the life of the Buddha, with all its miracles and wonders. The Buddhist teachers tell us about how karma influences the quality of our lives. We are told that while some religions speak of being “born again,” we are reborn again and again, in different worlds of humans, gods, demons, animals, ghosts, hells, and of course, heavens. We are taught that there are parallel universes, so that when this physical universe ends, we would be reborn in other universes, and so on.

Informed Buddhists, however, know fiction to be fiction, and leave it at that. It is like reading a great story-book. We need to momentarily suspend our imagination and judgement to really enjoy it. So we accept these wonderful Buddhist “fictions” for what they are, that is, as long as they infuse our lives with goodness and wisdom.

Take the teaching of karma, for example. It is a teaching of self-accountability, moral initiative and spiritual liberation. It teaches us that our conscious actions have moral worth, that we can change things if we try hard enough, and we can be truly happy if we learn to understand ourselves. Surely, this is a better fiction than belief in an all-powerful creator, on whom we depend for happiness and purpose in life. Indeed, if we care to examine destructive human behaviour, where the perpetrator thinks he has the right to dominate, hurt or destroy others, such false views are, as a rule, rooted in or encouraged by a belief in an all-powerful God.

The 22 July 2011 Norway bombing in the Regjeringskvartalet (the Government quarter), outside the prime minister’s office, in central Oslo and mass shooting of young people at camp on the island of Utøya (which killed 68 people and wounded 96), two hours later, were done by a single man, steeped in Christian fundamentalism and a deep hatred of Muslims. Historically, this is not an isolated incident, but a pattern of violence that goes far back into ancient times. So much large-scale injustice and violence have been committed in the name of God. This devastation will continue so long as the fiction of “power embodied” continues to be taken seriously as a truth.

The “fiction” of karma, on the other hand, reminds us that we will bear the fruits of our own actions: good begets good, and evil evil. This means that we should keep to the golden rule: since we hate suffering and want happiness, other do so, too. As such, we should act in a way that is mutually beneficial.

The “fiction” of rebirth enhances the meaningfulness of karma by reminding us that our bodies may die, but our actions live on. Our consciousness will continue to act in new bodies in future lives. This means that we need to keep this world in good order and the environment healthy, because we will be coming back to what we have left behind! Surely this is a better fiction than a heaven or hell into which we are thrown by the fiat of an almighty God with whom we can negotiate with prayers and faith.

To be Buddhist, on the other hand, is to take religious fiction as they are, as long as they are useful in our personal growth and spiritual evolution, just as fairy tales and moral fables have

moulded our childhood and grounded us in healthy values. But we know and take fairy tales and fables as fiction, no matter how useful they may be.

There comes a time when we need to leave the external world and its fictions aside, as it were, and look into the real “creator” of our world and the fictions we live by. We do this by patiently, attentively and compassionately examining our minds, looking into our hearts. The key to understanding our minds and hearts is our beautiful breath, the blissful stillness when we are truly at peace with ourselves. Only when we have truly touched this inner peace, do we realize true wisdom and liberation. Only then, is everything truly beautiful.²

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² You might like go on to read **Tevijja Sutta** (D 13) = SD 1.8: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/1.8-Tevijja-S-d13-piya-pto1.pdf> .