

The greatest creator

The Straits Times of 6 August 2011 contains a number of articles that were especially troubling. The first report was titled “Boys pretend to be possessed by gods to trick girls into sex” (A 3). The court heard that one of the victims, aged 14, was told by four boys that she would receive punishment from “Chinese gods” if she did not have sex with them, one of whom was only 12.

Another article read “Sect leader ‘with 79 wives’ guilty of child sexual abuse” (A 35). 24 of them were under 17. The jury, in San Angelo, Texas, convicted the leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints and eleven other male members of sexual assault and bigamy.

The third report was based on the 22nd July 2011 bombing and mass shooting in Norway by Christian rightist Anders Behring Breivik (A 37). The report writer argued that revenge (“an eye for an eye”) in such killings might be justified.¹

The fourth article, written by an Indonesian correspondent, spoke of “Books and bombs in religious schools” (C10). It reported on the difficulties that such schools faced in teaching positive values to their students so that they did not end up as religious radicals.

The common denominator in all these problems is a belief in God or gods. Why and how does the God-idea or god-belief lead to such problems? One significant explanation must surely be that such an idea has to do with “power.” Whoever speaks for God or the gods are likely to be taken by believers or the gullible to have divine power. The classic expression of this belief was that of the “divine rights” of kings or the “mandate of heaven” of the Chinese emperors. Such ideas were the basis for absolute monarchy. Although absolute monarchy has effectively been abolished, the psychological problems rooted in theistic ideas still haunt and harm us.

Ideas can be very powerful in influencing how we think and how we act. While it is true that a belief in some kind of divinity might inspire their believers to do good, the reverse, too, is likely to be true -- that those who are good and kind by nature are likely to believe in some kind of existence of “higher power.”

However, the healthy minded and open-hearted are more likely to be kind to others and be beneficial to society whether they believe in such a power or not. In short, belief in divinity is not always related to being good.

In fact, those who are maladjusted socially or suffer low-esteem are likely to wish or imagine that the divine is on their side, or even that they *are* divine themselves, and above the law. If we entertain a falsehood constantly enough, it soon becomes a truism, and a devastating one.

As far back as the Buddha’s time, there were powerful priests who tried to maintain their power (with which came wealth, status and pleasures) by claiming that they alone were God’s mouth, they held the sacred scriptures and they were the only way to God. The Buddha was amongst the most prominent opponents of such religious absolutism.

¹ See “Believable fiction,” *Inspiration* 52 (2011).

Absolutism here means that we are completely under the power of another. We ourselves have no power to succour or save ourselves, much less to help others: we are simply powerless, and need to rely on an external power: the priests and the gurus. The Buddha fully rejects such an idea.

In simple terms, the Buddha teaches self-empowerment. We can heal ourselves and maintain our spiritual health in four stages. Firstly, we all hold some kind of belief about *the self* (the “I” behind our actions). This self decides what is good or what is bad for us without our ever knowing why, without our having any say. The self keeps us on an autopilot of reflexive motions and emotions.

Secondly, this self is false and contrived, rooted in craving, that is, a false sense of lack. We feel as if we are missing something or someone wants us to feel that we are missing something. We are like a rich man who does not know we are rich, or who does not know how to wisely use our riches, and are misguided by foolish relatives and false friends.

Thirdly, we understand and accept that the self is false and contrived. To “understand” means to have a clear vision of the situation; to “accept” means to feel that we need to make an effort ourselves to get out of the situation. It’s like we see a huge rock blocking our path. The false gurus and sin-sellers may keep pointing to the rock, and try to lead us down a side-road to some gingerbread house in a dark forest, away from our intended journey. The Buddha’s teaching is like a helpful road-map warning us of dangers of the path, and showing us how to keep to the safe and right track.

Fourthly, and most importantly, we must ourselves examine the situation. Then, we will see a path around the rock. Carefully and avoiding all distractions, we go around the rock, or over the rock, if necessary. If we move on, we find ourselves back on the safe right path to freedom and salvation.

As we travel down this road to true happiness and nirvana, we see other travellers, too. Some share with us what they have (such as food, or an umbrella); others help us up when we stumble; yet others share with us kind words of their own pilgrim’s tales to inspire us on.

We, too, share what we have with others, help them up when they stumble, and share inspiring words with them. Even in the darkness of our lives, we are still safe in such numbers, as the dawn draws closer.

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