

What the hell¹

Notice that most religions today almost never talk about hell. We are rarely, if ever, warned that if we do not believe what they preach, or practise what we are taught to do, we will go to hell. Instead, we are told again and again that if we believe, we will be rewarded with all our secret, or not-so-secret desires fulfilled in heaven. And if we practise what we are preached – like giving as much money and wealth as possible to the church or temple – we are promised that will be richly rewarded by God or Karma.

The simple answer is that our belief in God and what the preachers preached are often deeply rooted and closely related to our social realities. In Europe, when the Roman Catholic Church dominated their courts and countries, religion was defined by the powerful and the rich, that is, the upper classes – the ruling and the priestly classes – often the two were the same.

The other two lower classes – the warrior class and the working class – defended and slaved for these two upper classes. They were not so well educated, or not educated at all, and not even able to read. The Bible was in Greek or Latin, which only a few of the educated upper class members could read.

This was a perfect arrangement: whoever knew the Bible, defined God and all the official beliefs. The upper classes spoke for God, the lower classes served those who spoke for God. In other words, the lower classes only knew what the upper classes told them. God spoke to no one.

The living conditions of the warriors were tolerable enough, even luxurious, by modern standards. After all, they protected and served their lords who were empowered by God himself, especially the king. The kings were said to be ordained by God himself: they were said to be kings by the will of God.² In other words, the kings were God's representatives on earth. As such, the kings had absolute power, even over the lives of others. This is called the divine rights of kings.

The lives of the working class in Britain – and in the rest of Europe, and the world, where kings and emperors still ruled – were simply deprived and squalid. These workers were, as a rule, born workers, lived and died as workers like their fathers and their fathers before them, and so on. Mothers were not thought of very much, because they were women. In the eyes of religion, women were lower than men (the Bible says that Eve tempted Adam, remember).

The lives of the working class in those days, even in Victorian Britain – when the God-loving British ruled an empire “over which the sun never sets” – made the British empire possible, by slaving for the soldier class, who in turn fought and died, without question, for the ruling class. We only need to read the numerous stories of Charles Dickens for the dramatic realities of the working class.³ The living conditions of such working class were best described as being like “hell.” And nobody, if they could, wanted to fall into such a state.

The French Revolution (1789) put an end to the dehumanizing idea of the divine rights of kings, and, in important ways, freed us to live on as free human beings. With this new freedom, the Europeans began to understand and use the power of technology and wealth (the former was the basis for the latter). This was the Industrial Revolution (late-18th-early 19th centuries, starting in Britain), which, by

¹ (Informal) This is said when we suddenly realize that our plan is not important to us and that we will do something else, or that we are not concerned about consequences or risks: *I was supposed to be working this evening but – what the hell – I'll go to sutta class with you.*

² The ancient Indian brahmins, too, used this same con – that they were born from God's mouth, and so spoke for Him. The workers were born from His legs, and so were a lower class who had to serve the upper classes. See eg **Tevijja Sutta** (D 13), [SD 1.8](#). The religious con is more sophisticated today: this is often done through the mass media, social networking and the Internet. Religious marketing is still with us today.

³ See eg *Oliver Twist* (book, 1838) and *Hard Times* (1854).

the way, was possible, mainly because of the raw materials and resources supplied by (or rather plundered from) the colonies (like Malaysia and Singapore).

The ideas and benefits of the Industrial Revolution quickly spread across Europe, and into the United States. Cities became bigger and better (for the upper classes, mainly), but at least, the working conditions seemed better than before. This was because the economists now understood better the nature of “labour,” “production,” “supply and demand,” and so on. The general idea was now to have more and better machines and ways of enjoying things in life.

It was, as if, heaven has come to earth. It does not make sense any more to speak of “hell” in such prosperity and plenty, when even the working class is benefitting from their work – or so it seems. After all, without the working class, there is no “labour,” and without labour, no “supply” can be produced to meet economic “demands.” The whole idea is geared towards “the wealth of nations” (which is actually the title of the period’s key work by Adam Smith of Scotland, published in 1776).

One of the key ideas presented by Smith was that of the “division of labour.” Things can be produced better (bringing more wealth) if the work is broken down into a series of manageable and effective parts, and a person manages each of these parts. This idea was effectively put into practice by people like Henry Ford in the US, and he profitably produced the first automobiles on a massive, relatively cheap, scale in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

One of the key features of the Industrial Evolution, which is the foundation of how most of urban workers and entrepreneurs think and work today, is that everything is measurable. People are measured according to how much time they can or have given to the work. Since people are now measurable, they are also replaceable, like parts of a machine. People are paid according to their strength and skill. So people now have value, but of a material kind, for the sake of effective production.

One of the social sectors that benefitted from this new material prosperity is, of course, the church and temple, or organized religion. If we know any priest or pastor well, we would know they would have some of the latest electronic gadgets or computers. The church or temple would have sophisticated lighting, sound and computer systems (besides recreation areas and swimming pools), and so on. In other words, we now need to “market” our religion since it has become a “product.” And our religious market comprises “clients” who are seeking material wealth and comfort.

In some ways, this kind of material progress existed in the Buddha’s own times, and he knew its implications. The Buddha, in his compassionate wisdom, teaches us to learn to “let go” of things. The world out there is neither good nor bad: how we think about it, makes it so. So the real world we must work with, is our own mental revolution, inner change.⁴

In human terms, the world is today clearly a better place to learn and practise Buddhism (or any religion) than it was ever before. We are better informed of the Buddha’s teachings today than ever before. But all kinds of fake and bootleg versions of Buddhism are easily manufactured, marketed and consumed today. If we do not really know what we need for true happiness, then the hell of consumer Buddhism will shadow us.

One of the key teachings in Buddhism is to understand that nothing in this world is worth clinging to.⁵ We cannot really hold on to anything in the world. They are all impermanent. The only way to enjoy the world is to understand this universal impermanence – even heaven and hell are impermanent states of mind. But they are real, all right. They come in cycles, one after the other. Break the cycle, and we are free from both heaven and hell. We are then truly happy.

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⁴ See **Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) Sutta** (A 6.63,3.4), [SD 6.11](#).

⁵ See **Pācāla Sutta** (A 7.58,11), [SD 4.11](#).