

Religion as illusion

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, expressed his basic view of religion in “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood” (1910)¹ by saying that “religiousness is to be traced to the small human child’s long-drawn helplessness and need of help.” This, of course, may well be true of Christianity in Europe in his times. We also need to ask if we see this trend in Buddhism today.

In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927),² Freud sees religion as “the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity” that stunts, even denies, our intelligence in order to maintain its illusion. In *Civilization and Its Discontent* (1930),³ he continues his arguments concerning religion as a control mechanism, but emphasizes more on its punitive aspects. Religion is now, to him, a “mass-delusion,” more harmful than the merely fanciful error of an “illusion.”

If illusion is of any use, it is well and often expressed in art, where beauty can inspire, even heal, us. A work of art, and the artistic process itself, may express an illusion, and do so beautifully. This, in itself, is certainly not a delusion (taking an illusion to be real), like religion often is. In this sense, we might say that art is more helpful to us than religion.

However, unlike art, religion (at its best) can humanize and socialize us. It can make better individuals of us, and allows us to interact productively and creatively with others. At its worst, religion can amalgamate us as a force like a swarm of locusts against some imaginary sin or projected evil, and demands or allows us to destroy what is most sacred to all beings—life itself—without any compunction. Religion may teach us to do good, but it can also delude us into believing that the sin, evil or bad that we do is actually good. That’s delusion.

Karl Marx passionately viewed illusion as a means by which the rich and powerful enslave the poor (or the poorer) to their elitist views for their own benefits for millennia. The poor and oppressed themselves have nothing to turn to but religion. He famously says that religious suffering *is* real suffering and also a protest *against* real suffering. “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.”⁴

Yet, we know very well that Marx’s ideas, and the communist vision he inspired, failed to remove religion from society. It just went underground, and at the slightest opportunity, shows itself like glinting sun-rays through cracks in the dark cold prison walls. The real prison is our ignorance and craving, the true roots of religion. Only when we uproot ignorance and craving, can we free ourselves from religion.⁵

A careful and intelligent study of religion, especially in terms of developmental psychology, helps us understand why religion still persists, despite Freud’s prediction that religion would everywhere be abandoned in the face of scientific advancements (1927). In a sense, Freud is

¹ S Freud, “Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood,” *Standard Edition*, 11 London: Hogarth Press, 1957:63-137.

² S Freud, “The Future of an Illusion,” *Standard Edition*, 21 London: Hogarth Press, 1957:5-56.

³ S Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” *Standard Edition*, 21 London: Hogarth Press, 1957:64-145.

⁴ Karl Marx wrote this in his Introduction to “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” 1843.

⁵ See Reflection, “[Pious fiction](#),” R406, 2015.

right to some extent, but religious delusions still overwhelm our societies. Sectarian cruelties and mass violence still lurk like a prehistoric T-rex devouring us to this day. Religious violence can be massive like an organized swarm of raptors that suddenly wreak massive havoc and death on a global scale.

Perhaps, we still have profound needs and primordial instincts that even modern learning, science, or politics cannot satisfy – and which religion seems to encourage. Or perhaps, learning, science and politics still have not uprooted delusion from religion; or they need to better understand why we love or need illusion.

Historically, learning and science have done significantly well in stripping religion of its more dehumanizing and anti-social nastiness. It is more likely today to see religion civilly preaching love for God and wealth, or refuge in the Buddha and money. Religion thrives on illusion: now it thrives on the illusion that wealth is life's meaning and purpose. Hence, a lot more remains to be done.

If we are observant and honest enough, we might notice that our own view of religion *changes* over time. As children, perhaps, we were conditioned to fear evil, love God, worship Buddha, revere ancestors, perpetuate our race. As we turn into adolescents, we fear losing our objects of lust, which can be worse than religious fear itself -- unless we have no worthwhile object of lust. Then, we turn to religion.

Yet, our adolescent “lust affairs” often remain with us longer than our pimples and angsty hair-styles. Many of us never emerge from our adolescence. It hardens around us like a shell, a dense armour, we laboriously and proudly move around in. It has become a shell of narcissism. It draws and holds crowds. We love crowds, especially when they love us. We haven't really changed; we don't want to change. We seem to enjoy burdening ourselves with an empty shell.

Our adolescent shell may sound hollow, but it is adamant, we see its hardness like diamonds. With its hardness, we control others, even try to change the world. Indeed, we are the kind who become movers and shakers – for good or for bad -- for our church, temple, centre, tribe, even the world. With it, we might even bring about a Great Reformation, as it did in Martin Luther (1483-1546), a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation.

Erik Erikson's classic biography, *Young Man Luther* (1958),⁶ relates how Luther's adolescent rebellion against an abusive and domineering father was at the psychological roots of his rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church, and how his personality both limited and promoted different aspects of his religion. We are reminded, once again, that God is in the details.

What's the point of all this? The vital point is that we must and need to accept that religion *is* an illusion, or religion is about illusion. Notice how we cannot really prove empirically or convincingly that any of our religious beliefs -- God, heaven, nirvana, Amitabha, Guanyin, karma, rebirth – are really true. Yet, for some reason, we find them (or any of them) meaningful.

Note that I do not say that they are false ideas -- we don't really know. Hence, they are illusions. An illusion, like desert mirages, can be real (we can actually see them). But we know that mirages, despite their visibility, do not really exist. Mirages have beauty and mystery – like

⁶ E Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A study in psychoanalysis and history*, New York: W W Norton, 1958.

works of art – to which extent, such illusions can be inspiring and healing. But, we must not delude ourselves that they are real, as you and I are real! Otherwise, we really need to carefully read Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*.

If we make serious efforts to see our true personality with the eye of honesty, we will see that we do have serious personal problems, especially when we take up religion seriously, especially if we are religious teachers (lay or monastic). To the extent that religion has contained us or mellowed us, that is good. But, as religious teachers, what we speak before an audience can move or mold them in more ways than we can imagine.

The question we must ask ourself in our truest moments with ourself is: Am I teaching religion, or am I teaching my self? Am I really teaching Dharma, or am I projecting my ego? As a rule, if we are still unawakened, we can only teach our self: we share what we know and feel. These are all *illusions*, no matter how true or beautiful they may be (remember the mirage?)

If we strongly and stubbornly believe that what we teach is as "real" as you and I are real, then we are saying that these religious mirages we believe in are real! If we insist that we have tasted joy, peace and wisdom in such realities, then we are (consciously or unconsciously) claiming to be enlightened (when we are not) – we seem to be talking Zen. This is the grandest of delusions. And those who believe us, would be heading down the same path as we are.

Animals believe what their senses show them to be real – these are, in fact, the only realities they know and act on. They would not know what a mirage is; they do not know the difference between illusion and delusion, between true and false. If we do not know what a mirage is, and we do not know what delusion is – what does that make us?

No wonder the Buddha says that if we hold on to wrong views, we would become animals.⁷ And if we encourage others in our delusion, then we will bring upon ourself hellish sufferings. We create our own delusory (but virtually real) worlds. We will be playing our own virtual games for aeons.

On a deeper level, all that has been written here points us to a recollection of non-self. Underlying all things, all our thoughts, actions and words, is the principle that there is no abiding essence, no immortal soul, no eternal self. Immortal soul or eternal self are an illusion. If we think that we have a permanent or eternal soul or self, then we are deluded (we are seeing what is not there, or looking at something but seeing something else). If we see and accept illusion as illusion, to that extent we are wise.

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

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⁷ See (Sāla,vatikā) Lohicca Sutta (D 12,10/1:228), [SD 34.8](#).