

Unsatisfactory religions

The Sandaka Sutta (M 76) speaks of four kinds of unsatisfactory religions or belief-systems, namely:

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| (1) knowledge-based religion | including claims of omniscience, |
| (2) scripture-based religion | mostly belief in an almighty creator-God, |
| (3) reason-based (speculative) religion | includes intellectual and materialist systems, |
| (4) foolish religion | superstitions, views of the gullible and the deluded. |

It should be noted that these four types of “unsatisfactory systems” do not undermine the principles of wholesome religion, but that *they bring neither moral discipline nor spiritual liberation*.

Here, I have used “belief-system” (including religion) broadly to mean *any system founded on sense-based evidence*. In this sense, the meditative aspects of early Buddhism are *non-religious*, insofar as they transcend the physical senses, and works on mental focus, inner stillness and spiritual insight.

(1) Knowledge-based religion. A “knowledge-based religion” or tradition-based system here specifically refers to a system whose leader or followers claim to have some level of omniscience, especially that one can know everything *all* the time. In our own times, we have word-based (logocentric) religions that claim their God or religious figure have such an omniscience.

Since almost anything can be made out of words, it is possible to imagine the most fabulously omniscient being. Philosophically, there is the problem that *we cannot define anything into existence*. Just because we are able to “refer” (in words) to a *unicorn*, an idea supported by countless stories and even images and movies, in no way proves that it exists, except in our minds.

(2) Scripture-based religion. A “scripture-based religion” is usually one that relies almost exclusively on a holy book. Their general principle is that whatever is written in the holy book is right and must be accepted so without question. Various ways of enforcing such a dogma are used, the most common is the threat of being thrown into hell for unbelief. This threat is rarely, if ever, taken seriously today because most of us do not believe in such notions.

Early Buddhism teaches that it is more useful to understand heaven and hell as mental states rather than actual places. If we habitually conduct ourselves well, we would be able to live quite happily here and now. If, on the other hand, we habitually do bad, it will catch up with us in due course. We do not have to wait for any future life.

Holy books tend to be dogmatic, and they need to be so, as words can mean anything to anyone, depending on the agenda of whoever has the power or respect to interpret them, rightly or wrongly. So the leader has to make sure that his version is the one people follow. “Dogmatic” refers to the notion that the truth is in the word, that is, the truth is defined *externally*, rather than as true reality (which is beyond words). Every preacher has his God.

Scripture-based religions are especially harmful to the individual when they are *tribal*, so that individual voices are never heard, drowned by groupthink or tribal hearsay. Such religions tend to teach that the world and the universe were God-created, and man is ordained as the master of the fishes of the seas, the birds of the skies, and all living animals on the earth. God creates and destroys the world as he will. As such, man has almost no role or motivation for a sustainable environment as the world would sooner or later be destroyed anyway.¹

¹ See **The Three Roots Inc** = SD 31.12 (6.1.1.2) & Lynn White Jr, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” *Science* ns 155,3767, 10 Mar 1967:1203-1207. [Download](#) or go to: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/31.12-Three-roots-Inc.-piya.pdf>

(3) Reason-based religion. A “reason-based religion” or a rationalistic system is basically a speculative system. This means that we only accept something if we think it is modern, scientific or “evidence”-based. Words like “modern” and “scientific” can be problematic. Does “modern” mean fashionable or up-to-date, but even then how is this related to good and happiness?

The word “scientific,” too, is problematic, unless we are scientists ourselves. Even then, not all scientists agree on everything, especially on matters that are beyond science (like religion). Moreover, we often see commercial advertisements trying to sell things because they have some “scientific” benefits. If we try to promote on “scientific” advantages, then surely, science must be better than religion! Then why not simply turn to science, and forget about religion.

The word “evidence” is even more problematic. Let us take “evidence” as meaning what is palpable or measurable by way of the human sense-faculties. As history, current affairs and common sense have repeatedly shown us, such views and “facts” are sometimes well-reasoned, sometimes badly reasoned, some true, some false. Such a system is unsatisfactory insofar as it tries to reduce all things, including human thought and conduct, to reason, that is, some kind of logical and sensible processes that we can always physically experience or measure, that is, some form of sense-based evidence.

We know very well that logic might work with palpable or measurable things, but most human conduct is immeasurable, as it is *feeling-based*: how do we measure love, desire, hate, ignorance, fear, and other such emotions. Our most significant actions and decisions often over-rule or ignore all reason and logic. This is very clear in such situations as falling in love, our desire to buy things, our drive for pleasure, or our motivation to do good or evil.

Moreover, our senses do not always make good sense of what we experience. Our senses work rather as *filters*, straining and twisting what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. Moreover, we often *superimpose* our own memories and ideas—our perceptions—onto our sense-experiences. Hence, we mostly only see what we want, hear what we want, and think only what we want.

With remarkable insight and intrepidity, **the Saṅgāra Sutta** (M 100) actually says that such religions, and academic and scientific systems are based on mere faith, that is, insofar as they fully rely on *the physical senses* as the proof or evidence for their beliefs without understanding how the mind fabricates and influences such sense-experiences! Of course, such systems may still work if the faith is based on wisdom, that is, experiential knowledge that is beneficial for everyone.

(4) Foolish religion. “Foolish religion” refers to the most common belief amongst humans. Its major features are that its followers are simply motivated by greed, hate, delusion, or fear (often all four). They invariably believe in some kind of “self” or “soul” that is related to our physical body. Such a view only promotes selfishness and often a fixed idea of things, such as fatalism.

The foolish, when faced with problems, tend to look for answers outside of themselves—such as in God, gods, ghosts, spirits, magic, and rituals—instead of trying to understand their own minds. As a rule, the foolish often doubt or lack faith in their own spiritual capacity, and feel dependent on others or some external “power” for succour and salvation.

Believers in a foolish religion tend to be fearful and gullible. Very often, they would place their full trust and blind faith in a charismatic preacher or guru figure who is a spin master and adept manipulator. Without any practical understanding of the human mind and behaviour, such groups and preachers might actually regard their teachings and practices as being good for everyone. Often enough, their rules

http://www.drexel.edu/greatworks/Theme/Fall/~media/Files/greatworks/pdf_fall09/HistoricalRoots_of_EcologicalCrisis.ashx or <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>.

and rituals serve mainly to keep them in the rut of their exclusive group, even at the cost of their emotional health and spiritual development.

We may be born with a human body, but we need to cultivate the human spirit ourselves. Our parents and society may condition us to behave as social beings, but we are left to ourselves to evolve into spiritual beings. A spiritual being is an individual of the spirit, that is, the mind/heart. Our individuation begins with the opening of our hearts to accepting ourselves just as we are, and to unconditionally include others in our lives as we evolve spiritually.²

Revisioning Buddhism 45

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

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² See "We are not born human," <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/RB44-Not-born-human-111130.pdf>