

The publicized behavior of the Christian hierarchy in many parts of the world in relation to pedophile allegations and of the Buddhist monks who are running wild and violent in Sri Lanka has revived within me the need to reaffirm the skepticism about religion that I developed intellectually during the four years that I read philosophy at Peradeniya.

I passionately believe in things spiritual-namely things of the human spirit that include empathy and feel for other humans especially when the

People identify themselves by saying: 'I am a Christian,' 'I am a Muslim,' 'I am a Hindu,' 'I am a Buddhist,' and so on. Do they realize that by adopting such an identity one is pre-committed to a particular fixed perspective about reality? This makes it difficult to open one's mind and consider competing perspectives and thereby arrive at one's own conclusions as an independent, conscious, being. An independent intelligent being would take an unfettered look and will not be bound by a "Holy Book" or interpreters of a Holy Book. The naïve person would be comfort-

the current reality we face is unsatisfactory and illusory and that one must strive for something that would be our ultimate panacea. In this sense religions are all dogmas of death. This after-life myth makes the



Shyamon Jayasinghe

dealt with in life.

IN DEFENCE OF THE NON-RELIGIOUS



latter are in distress; kindness, compassion, the need for love and to be loved; creativity; sensitivity to a work of art or literature and so on. Our moral fibre is generated from compassion, truthfulness and empathy. This obviously does not depend on having any affiliation to a religion. Confucius said: "Do not do unto others what you do not want done to you." This is the commonsense rationale for morality.

On the other hand religions stultify our spiritual and moral sense by founding moral behavior on fear. This is the fear that on 'Judgment Day' you will be damned into hell if you've done pretty bad. For fear to keep a person good doesn't make such person moral; he has to do right on a self-realization and an act of volition. The fear element is there even in popular Buddhism and Hinduism. The LowedaSangarawa makes reference to 'niraya' of 'apaya' meaning the equivalent of the Christian hell where wrongdoers are burnt. Even in scholarly Buddhism and Hinduism, however, the likelihood of being reborn in bad shape represents an operating threat that is perceived as justifying moral behavior.

Religion also stunts the growth and development of human consciousness by having imposed on men and women its own constructed 'reality' from above. Instead of learning and forming our independent ideas as to the universe and the meaning of life a whole theology or metaphysics is forced on us. At this point we stop thinking. We are told to be sheep and just follow the Bible, the Koran or the Torah.

In the case of Buddhism we have a different scenario. The Buddha himself encouraged freedom of thought and enjoined followers (Kalama Sutta) not to believe because he says it or because other credible people say it or because tradition says it or because it is there in books but to test his Dhamma as a goldsmith would test gold with fire. However, the established Buddhist hierarchy anywhere is not going to encourage much free thinking beyond the square. Reputed scholar Martin Wickremasinghe died an unhappy man due to the slanderous attacks he had received after publishing BavaTharanaya that gave a somewhat unorthodox interpretation.

able in relying on such an external provider of the truth while a conscious, critical, mind will loathe that.

Science alone can enable people to comprehend reality but theologians have had a hopeless record of resisting the findings of scientists that take away their beliefs. Propositions or conclusions with regard to the universe are purely the jurisdiction of science. Theology is not a source of knowledge; only science is. For instance the question as to whether God exists is one that is the province of science to ascertain on the examination of evidence. That is an important issue which impacts on our knowledge of the universe and our place in it. The same is the question of rebirth in Buddhism and Hinduism. There is no need to privilege religion in our search for knowledge in such empirical areas.

The religions we have today had been established during pre-scientific times. In the absence of scientific thinking and scientific method it was left to theologians to try and help us understand reality. They unloaded a whole lot of unbelievable gibberish. We are told that the earth is 10,000 years old and that God created the whole universe in just seven days. We were told for ages that the earth was the center of the universe. Copernicus, who found it was not, was forced to make a public confession that he had uttered a terrible lie! Even today the teaching of evolution in biology is banned in some American schools. Charles Darwin was so scared to announce his path-breaking findings that he delayed the announcement and eventually delivered it in a watery way. We are also told by religion that dead people can rise from their state of being dead or sojourn in an after-life of Samsara from womb to womb or from human to a snail and back to human again. The follower has to swallow some of the worst fiction stories ever. We are prohibited from having sex for harmless pleasure and are banned from using condoms to prevent unwarranted pregnancies and diseases. The list is large and I had better stop here just in order to save my life.

A common thread in all religion is the belief that

truly religious withdraw from making a real life out of life and from enjoying the joy and splendor that the only life we can ever know of does possess. Instead of withdrawing from life why not engage in beautiful acts of charity to our fellow human beings? Isn't this more productive or less hypocritical?

Most of us join a religion at birth when our parents clamp their religion on us, infants. Christians baptize in this manner. Actually it isn't right to identify a child as a Christian child or Muslim child or Buddhist or Hindu child because that child is not conscious at this stage in order to assume such an identity. Yet in Sri Lanka our Birth Certificates carry the name of the religion as an identity mark much as our gender and our race do. How could a system of belief become a permanent identity

mark?

From the time of this naming at birth one is socialized in a powerful way to stick to the religion named. Religion is one of the most powerful socializing instruments in society. The socialization is so total and invasive that our states of mind are virtually permanently altered to embrace the world or reality given to us. As kids we grow to believe that 'there's a Savior up above, looking down below,' and monitoring our every movement. A terribly overworked Savior he's got to be! We are told that "Allah, the Great and the Compassionate, orders our destiny, "and hence we pray: 'praise be to Allah' even when we are unfairly

Small wonder that followers all over the world would die and fight and kill in the name of their religion. At the hands of parents, family, friends, school, church, by priests, Mullahs and Swamis and a whole hierarchy the follower is given a full dose of the constructed reality and dreadful fear of the consequences of leaving the fold. Naturally religion is ironically one of the most divisive forces in global society creating conflict and war. You, reader, may now be a Buddhist; but had you been born in Afghanistan that would have been a different story. You may have joined the Taliban and destroyed the great Bamyana Buddhist statues.

This whole business is a farce: One fights for an identity imposed on one as an infant and for a reality that is entirely constructed by questionable priests, Mullahs and monks; yet one dies for that reality and slays others on its behalf. Isn't this madness? One's consciousness is killed at the beginning and one's mind is blocked and blinded. I am not suggesting that all religious followers are blindfolded and naïve characters. There are many who do possess their crap-detectors but who wouldn't leave the faith of their birth for reasons of social comfort and peace or even as habit. Some of the latter may accept some of the teachings but not all. There are also the plain hypocrites who are mere traders in the religion and employ religion for their personal gain in power or profit. The latter are religious predators that prey on populations.

Despite all these objections the allure of religion will never die out. Religions are a pressure on our wallets in no small measure. A whole industry has grown around religion and followers have to make all sorts of donations. There is the well-known story of a bouffant-haired evangelist in America who urged his parish "to give until it hurts." I recently visited a Taiwanese temple close by and found they were selling the privilege of "transferring merit to the dead" for a mere ten dollar token. That was merciful on their part!

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03 8707 4604 / 0402 025 516
email sannasanews@gmail.com
ads.sannasa@gmail.com

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90777523 - 0450303527