



**HARD TO BELIEVE!**

**A critique of religion**



# Hard to Believe! – A critique of religion

Religion first of all is belief or faith – as opposed to reason. More specifically, it is the belief in supernatural agency. People believe that these powers rule and guide the world and its inhabitants (often after having created all of it in the first place). They believe in the influence of those powers over everything that is going on in the world. To the women and men abiding by its rules, almost every religion promises happiness and success, either in this world or the next (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, the Bahá'í Faith). Other options include a first-class rebirth (Hinduism, Mormonism) or, at least, an end to the cycle of reincarnation (Buddhism<sup>1</sup>).

Religion started out as an attempt by human kind to make sense of the way nature works in order to influence it. Magical practices were supposed to influence the outcome of hunts and harvests, protect from plague and pestilence, ensure healthy offspring and even affect matters not directly connected to nature like the fortunes of war. In those days, forces of nature like thunder, lightning, wind, rain and the sun were uncontrollable and incomprehensible. Transforming those forces into human-like gods that could be called upon (by whatever absurd means) was a way for human kind to declare itself master over nature.

## Swaying the (seemingly) unswayable

Nowadays, we have a much deeper understanding of the forces of nature and we know how to use the ones known to our advantage. Sadly, that knowledge did not affect the popularity of religion. Its core attractiveness still lies in the promise of influencing the (seemingly) uninfluenceable, be it natural or indeed social issues: whether it concerns social conditions that a single individual has no hope of changing (unemployment, poverty, lack of success in competition) or whether it concerns problems even a social humanity might not be able to overcome like heartache, disease or death.

With a religious mind-set, one can consider each headache and every written warning by the boss as punishment from god or, vice versa, every successful date and the passed A-levels as reward. Religion accomplishes this through the subjectification of the objective. Instead of seeing the world as it is – a poorly set-up world, uncontrollable by just one individual – religion offers gods, who are treated as people, most of the time, equipped with will and consciousness. Even if thought of as supernatural beings, religious people still think of them as loving, hating and, hopefully, forgiving ones. These gods see and hear everything and never leave their loyal subjects alone: in this respect, a religious mind could be described as being afflicted by a more or less serious case of paranoia. For anything happening, good or bad, a religious individual looks for and finds a meaning relating back to him- or herself.<sup>2</sup>

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## **The Gift of Meaning**

This sense of paranoia has an undeniable charm for those affected: it makes them feel important and gives a sense of deeper meaning to one's own existence. Hence, it is no wonder that religious people speak about a feeling of security and comfort their religion provides them with. This even (or especially) applies when things go wrong.

For a modern subject it can be extremely comforting to find meaning in everything. Whatever this individual might suffer from – the misfortune always goes along with a sense of grandeur and greater truth. From this perspective it can even be treated as a boon in that it provided a lesson in humility or a test of faith. If you are convinced that the friendly spirit in the sky must have had good reason for creating a world so grossly inadequate for one's needs, you are not likely to rebel or even complain about it. Even though one could easily argue that god cannot be all that friendly considering how inconvenient he set up this world and how much suffering his loyal servants have to endure as a result of this. Thoughts of that kind would inevitably lead to a crisis of belief – or so one would think. But no, religion demands submission, even grateful acceptance of everything the religious consciousness attributes to the unfathomable will of the gods.

## **Centre of the world**

The modern religious mind is surprisingly focussed on the self – or to say it with Freud: magical. It interprets everything that is happening as a reaction of the godly power to any of one's actions, inactions, wishes, wants etc. This fits in rather well with the modern capitalist world. Here, everyone is materially required to see her environment as a variety of chances and opportunities, ignoring that state and capital do not care for anyone's individual happiness and well-being.

Nevertheless, the modern human being is encouraged to believe that the world was created as an opportunity to exert her individuality. Hence, the markets are not to be seen as the unpleasant competitive proving grounds they are, but as a plentiful collection of fascinating opportunities.

This kind of self-delusion (which can be quite beneficial in order to function well as a modern subject) does not necessarily need gods. But they are a convenient addition and reconciliation for the burdens one accepts when wanting to be successful.

In a religious mind, the rest of the world tends to be treated as an instrument for the divine reward or punishment of the self. This weird impotent omnipotence of one's own thinking is a political issue from the outset. If someone regards the improvement of his relation to god as life's very substance, then consequently any attempts to change the world are nothing more than a means to influence this deity/these deities. This religious build-up might be done by individuals or as an explicit political movement.

## **I pray – you bless**

To influence the god(s), one has to follow a certain set of rules. There are ceremonies of worship and praise intended to show respect to the respective god or goddess. There are prayers intended to communicate the believers' requests to the higher power. Some of these traditions of offerings and pledges that work as submission under the sacred power via sacrifice happen in open form (Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Catholicism), some are masked (Protestantism, Judaism, Islam).

Neither of these practices usually improve the quality of life of their followers.<sup>3</sup> In the end, not even those desperate attempts for appeal can hide the fact that an important part of the spiritual message consists of abstinence and deprivation.

Apart from grand declarations of renunciation (feasting for instance), there exists a wide range of nasty practices of self-flagellation and self-punishment that some religious zealots inflict on themselves and from their beloved followers, without contemplating what kind of sadistic weirdoes their gods must be to ask for such self-destructive behaviour. While there might be some individuals who gain pleasure from this kind of treatment, this is certainly not the point of these practices.

The underlying idea of those attempts to influence the deity is that there will hopefully be some kind of trade: "Good behaviour for good fortune". This exchange was practised in a literal sense when the old heathen gods were offered sheep, pigs and cows for their favour. Nowadays the exchange may happen in an individual and subtle way, but the whole concept remains very much unchanged and alive. It is one of the foundations of the modern systems of belief, though the scholars of theology, the "study of god", have always condemned such notions: making demands is seen as a lack of humility, which is in itself suspicious. It could also give rise to doubts about the existence of a higher power if people took this idea too seriously and started putting it to the test.

So the pious women and men have to console themselves with attempts to win god's favour through humbleness, blind faith and abstinence, albeit knowing that it is a deal with an uncertain outcome; knowing that one should never tempt god.

## **Submission as agenda: At first, oneself...**

No matter how charming some of their customs may be, religions are fundamentally infused with an attitude of servitude which has an extremely conservative quality. Instead of changing the world, one submits oneself to the will of its creator through self-restraint in order to get special treatment. Sin is a concept known to every religion and every cult, even the ones known to regard worldly pleasures with favour. One of those sins is hubris, e.g. overstepping the line separating god from man in an act of insurgency. Another popular sin is materialism, e.g. being interested in seeing ones needs fulfilled, leaving heaven to the pigeons and sparrows.

Sensual pleasure, whether it is tasty food, refreshing beverages or enjoyable sexual intercourse, is generally frowned upon amongst the men and women of faith. If they do not outright declare “gluttony” and “lust” as deadly sins (Christianity), they still find a whole catalogue of restrictions to take the fun out of life (Judaism, Islam) or are devised as sermons of restriction and pain from the outset (Buddhism). Even the few still existing religions that do not condemn sexual pleasure per se (e.g. Hinduism) are very rare (most of them are polytheistic ones) and accept it primarily as a way of honouring their deity. It is through the submission of the self that the religious personality places itself in the centre of its world.

### **... and then the others as well!**

Now, a religious mind could just wallow in its delusions and leave the rest of the world alone and, spiteful as they are, find solace in the thought that the unrepentant materialists will one day have to face the fires of hell or reincarnation as slugs.

Annoyingly, the gods insist quite vehemently on being worshipped by all their creation, so the recruitment of new followers is one of the best ways to score some favour-points with them (except in Judaism). In which way the higher power is supposed to benefit from listening to the drivel of its countless subjects remains a mystery, as well as the question why the gods do not just admit everyone to paradise without obstacles like free will, sin, the devil etc. Those, who not only ask those questions but also really care about getting an answer inevitably have to leave the terrain of the spiritual at some point since they do not want to believe – they want to know.<sup>4</sup>

If a religion has tasks like charity on its agenda, it is practically a must that the heathens, for their own sake, are confronted with its divine truth. And should they refuse to take the teachings to heart or if the holy book contains the commandment of jihad (the fight for god against oneself as well as non-believers), well, then there is always the option of “saving” them by fire and sword.

Even in a religion like Buddhism which renounces conversion by force disciples undertook several crusades of considerable magnitude. Those who cannot understand these contradictions should not try to find answers in the holy books but ask themselves what purpose has been (and still is being) pursued by this interpretation of religious lore – and to what end.

What makes those “misinterpretations” so easy is related to the “supernatural nature” of religious texts. Gods do not get in touch with humans – if they did, we would seriously reconsider criticising religion – therefore leaving no actual “proof” that supports one interpretation of a gospel or another. So there is always a lot of arguing about what the will of the respective deity might be. Both the Koran and the Bible emerged as a co-production 30 to 70 years after their founder’s demise – assuming that we accept Jesus as an actual historical figure. These writings are wonderfully contradictory, so there is room for

interpretation to everyone's taste. The reasoning behind some dos and don'ts, which are now characteristic of these religions, is quite often nothing but a complete over-interpretation of the respective texts (e.g. issues with meat and milk in kosher Judaism, prohibition of alcohol and the obligation for women to veil themselves in today's mainstream Islam). Some of them even contradict scripture (e.g. the disregard of the Christians for the Jewish commandments concerning food, clothing, etc.).

Fundamentalists especially pick out parts of their religious scripture and interpret them in accordance with their world-view, which often is rather misanthropic. While the prophet makes various points about Jews and Christians, the Koran says nothing about the United States, about capitalism or about suicide attacks.

How you can reconcile "love thy neighbour" with blessings of guns or signs reading "God hates fags" – is a line of reasoning that is as irrational as it is futile. In order to find answers here, one has to leave the realm of rational thought. A discussion about the right reading of scripture is a task one should leave to the believers.

## **Fundamentalism and refoundations**

Reformative movements of any kind are rooted in the very nature of religion. The living conditions in a world filled with domination, no matter if secular or clerical are always miserable enough for people to turn to a higher power for help. When things have turned bad enough, some people may try to appease their god with a "return" to what they deem the true path. 'Fundamentalism' claims to re-establish the unity between the word of god and the actions of his followers. Such a "restoration" is always a big fat lie about the past. It is a typical conservative shtick: their respective ideals are being projected into a supposedly glorious past, while the return to the traditional values is displayed as a cure for all current problems. Furthermore, every religion has to deal with its own separatist movements. Some of them have diverged greatly from the religion they originated from (e.g. Christianity from Judaism). This is also part of the essence of religion: if a mind with an overly strong affinity for the spiritual starts hearing voices, it does not consult a psychiatrist. Instead it either goes on a killing spree or it founds a new cult (Protestants, Chassidim, Shiites, Alevites) assuming the position of the next prophet or Mahdi, as Jesus Christ reborn, the true messiah or Buddha reincarnated. Or, in some cases, they just invent their own religion from scratch (Sikh, Bahai, Mormons). That is not to say that these cults were or are founded based on visions in every single case – there are exceptions. The answer to the questions of why and where some new religions and cults become popular often depends on whether they are compatible with changes in social conditions (e.g. Protestantism on the dawn of the capitalist development).

In other cases the reason is simply force: which part of the modern world is Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu is neither the result of some heated discussion between theologians, nor were there ever any forms where people could just fill-in a religion for themselves. In the world of today, religion is part of the "national culture" – that is why it

brings nationalists to the scene when citizens start praying to new gods rather than to the traditional ones.

## **Religion as a resource of morals for leaders and protests**

Private property (“Thou shall not steal!”) and the power of control of men over women and children are implicit in the moral codices of almost all the existing religions. Poverty and paucity are not to be abolished; if anything they are being glorified and/or morally mitigated. Being dissatisfied with the conditions of one’s life is seen as insolence for “who are we to question the will of god?” He must have his reasons for imposing all these hardships on us. Why exactly it is that people are at each other’s throats all the time is of no concern to religion. It is content to waggle its finger with threats of punishment in the afterlife.

And for every problem in this mortal world that cannot be dismissed as “god’s will” amoral misbehaviour is blamed. It is no wonder that rulers in pre-bourgeois times (when they still actually ruled as kings and lords) thought of the various faiths – whether they shared it or not – as something quite useful. So, somebody religious is allowed to criticise this life. He is allowed to take religion up on the great offer it has to make for our coexistence: justice as a standard used to evaluate the behaviour of his neighbour (not of god, though). Abstract morality is the basis of religious reasoning, which separates itself systematically from every positive reference to the needs of human kind, and only thinks in categories like “if everyone would do that”, “it’s all right as long as you’re honest”, “Sometimes you just have to deny yourself some things ...”, etc. Accordingly, religious moralists are quite self-righteous and cold-hearted when they are intent on reforming their fellow men and women. They also like to accuse each other of not being humble enough, which tends to happen when one dares to make a judgment-call that others think is due to themselves.

In spite of their belief that the god(s) already put everyone and everything in its right place, there are some social protesters among the religious. Sometimes god’s servants even support uprisings of the servants of the mundane rulers or at least declare sympathy for their cause. As we mentioned before, the fact that the esteemed supernatural world leaders very rarely give direct orders to their loyal subjects leaves room to justify pretty much every activity.

The uprisings that join forces with god these days protest against an immoral, heretic rule, demanding justice and morality.<sup>5</sup>

They do not strive to be up to a reasonable, but instead a very irrational standard. Even a “Theology of deliverance” is nothing but a demand for justice and dignity for god’s faithful servants. It might seem more likeable for someone to deduce a right to own land, bread and milk from the bible than attacking abortion clinics, for example – it still does not provide a reasonable programme for a satisfaction of needs, and, from its line of reasoning, still has more in common with the Taliban than a fight for a world without oppression and poverty.

## Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed are no comrades

Religion takes a hostile position towards a sensible constitution of the world, towards the recognition and sensible determination of human needs and towards any effort to satisfy those needs in a planned manner. If everything is or can be god's will, unfathomable and all, all we can do is to surrender ourselves to it, then there is, consequently, a limit to every reasonable analysis. If someone looks for meaning (instead of cause) in all the bitter aspects of life, diseases, natural disasters or unemployment, she endows all human tragedy with god's blessing and comes to a moral conclusion ultimately justifying it.

Not just institutionalised religion, but religion itself, not the "corruption" of the doctrine by some priests, but the doctrine itself is the problem. Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed are no comrades, nor will they ever be.

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*By the way, whenever Buddhism is mentioned in this text, we mean the religious practice in commonly Buddhist countries, not its use as a sort of "meditation/philosophy" in Western countries.*

*Some argue that god is too much of a godly figure to be meddling in the everyday world – after all, s/he already created it perfectly. Yet, that does not keep a lot of religious people to look for the godly meaning in all sorts of things – even if these things are far from "perfect".*

*In themselves these actions may well be a harmless pastime – and even for followers not always extremely exciting. In order to make those rituals more interesting, some movements try to turn spiritual celebration into a happening.*

*There are some inner-religious debates that are based on reason. But you have to start with believing in God – at least this very foundation is not subject of a religious debate. Then there are attempts to proof the existence of a higher power by reason, but they failed.*

*We refrain from discussing the Peasants' War and the like; up to the French and American Revolution every political matter was expressed religiously and even in those two wars, people were convinced that "the Maker" and his "natural law" resp. a "higher power" was on their side.*

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