

Understanding vs. Imitation

As a Prerequisite of Religious Practice

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The renowned British philosopher **Bertrand Russell** said, “Men are born ignorant, not stupid. They are made stupid by (the wrong) education.”

I wonder if it’s been thoroughly studied as to why, ever since its inception, the phenomenon of religion has acted as the leavening agent of conflict, oppression and insecurity; and as we may observe today, it continues to catalyze global insecurity. Indeed, Why? Evidently, the first step to curing an illness is to recognize what it is, then to search for its root causes. Thus, it’s most fitting to learn what causes the illness of religion, what are the reasons for so much cruelty, and why there seems no end to this misery.

This author believes that such incitements in part stem from the fact that an absolute majority of the followers of all religions don’t understand the language of their scripture as they can grasp their mother tongues; thence, they can’t tell the good in them from the ill. This is open field for some opportunists to assume the guise of religious advocacy, take advantage of the ignorance of the majority, interpret the writings as they wish, and spread them to the masses of people who are unaware of the true nature of religion. Little wonder that an outraged group have proclaimed, “Religion is a lie, which some people accept dishonestly and promulgate mendaciously.” But religion is not a lie; rather, the blame is on the opportunists who lie to the ignorant masses, and on the other hand, on those among their audience who take advantage of this two-edged sword as far as they can fathom. Human beings are conceived by their own thoughts and would become whom they think to be. Our interpretation of things changes as we age and gain experience over the years. As such, I’m certain that if any of the mature followers of religions were to read their scripture in their mother tongue, they would be transformed according to their new understanding. Religion remains unchanged, but man’s understanding can change.

The times are over when you were told, “You don’t need to know things for yourself to be religious: just do what the cantor is doing!” Or as an old proverb went, **“Look at your mom’s hands, and dance as she does!”** The world slowly realizes today that religion was given to humankind for them to understand things and to act on their own, rather than to imitate others and other people’s understanding. Religion wasn’t meant to approve of big imitators and pretenders, neither to support their claims of leadership, nor to earn them false respect. As the **Talmud** says, “Greatness is an attribute that is given to those who evade it, and not to those who run after it.”

Individual people are not the targets. A wrong idea should be fought back by offering a better culture in its stead. The Iranian Dr. Arani used to say, “My point is that the river of history is a holy shining stream that pours into the sea of evolution. Let us be among those droplets that reach the sea, rather than those stay behind on the brinks, and get dirty and musty.” Let’s wipe the wrong inherited information off of the minds of the coming generation to help them lead better lives as they achieve a better understanding of things.

As the **Psalms** read, “God does not reveal Himself in full force, but He appears to each person according to their capacity and understanding.” Or as the Persian poet **Sanaee** said,

You who don’t know the burnt and the fire:

Love is meant to *come*, not to be acquired.

Indeed, before we can be impressed by something, we need to have the talent, knowledge, merit, earned rights and mental preparation, which are required to enable us to obtain the correct information, and thenceforth, to make the correct decisions.

You take from the Eternal Grace as much as you can.

When your vase is so small, why blame it on the sea?

After all, **to each his own, that is, each person will understand things to the extent of their capacity.** When someone wrongly interprets religion or any other matter, the blame is not on the book; rather, the person’s own faults have dictated the first step of a mistake. As the poet **Rumi** said,

Oh, you, a copy of the Divine letter!

You, the mirror of the royal glory!

Nothing in the world rests outside of you:

What you wish, ask of yourself, for it is you.

If only the world heeded what's been attributed to **Mahatma Gandhi**, "When a man drowns, he dies—whether he drowns in a pool or in the sea, in lies or in sins, in jubilation, power, ignorance, denial, jealousy, frugality, or revenge. Let's be careful not to drown."

To Be Human, it's a religion in itself, alas, with few followers!

The misled people surprise us, but the real surprise comes from the obvious faults that are left unrecognized. For thousands of years, the world has suffered the bitter consequences of religious misdirection, but it has chosen to forgive the faults of religion for its beauties. The Internet alone, however, has made a vast difference. Even as it has made it possible for the forces of regression to broadcast their voices ever more eloquently to millions of people around the world and to stir agitation, it has also revealed the ugliness of it all ever more bluntly. The problem remains that while a minority of inciters remain active, a majority of reasonable minds have kept silent with indifference. Here, a striking aphorism comes to my mind: **"The waves decide for the ship that has lost control to the storm."**

With each passing day, the inciters establish themselves more strongly in every family, city and country that is not ruled by reason and law; they take hostage the peace of the families, as well as science, civilization and security; and they wreak havoc before the passive eyes of an idle world. **Take a look around.** The Internet has opened countless eyes and ears, has made tongues ever more eloquent, and has lifted the borders; yet, the inherited self-censor is yet to be vanished. Whereas a poet said,

To seal the mouth silent when the moment calls for your voice,

It's to hide the sword behind the shield at the heat of the battle.

The greatest fear of the civilized world today, besides concerns over access to the nuclear weapons, is the possibility of lost codes and a hacked Internet, that is, a cyber war launched by the forces of incitement. But our multitude of fears will vanish the day our species learns to replace the word *God* encountered anywhere with its synonym, *Justice*. Thus, we find the *Holy Torah* demand, among its many commands, that "all of the commandments must be practiced based on fairness and justice." It's a fine point that by itself, as with the Human Rights Code,

could bring balance to the practice of the commandments. Sadly, however, although all of the three monotheistic religions approve of the *Holy Torah*, no listening ears are there to be found.

One freezing winter night, a villager arrives in the big city for the first time in his life. To escape the hunger and the cold, he takes refuge in a mosque. The caretaker allows him to spend the night in the mosque. Around midnight, badly starved, the man gropes the darkness in search of food, when his hands come upon a soft and fat solid object. He roughly examines the object in the dark, and before he can see it or know what it is, he begins to swallow it in bites. Come morning, the caretaker realizes that the holy book has disappeared from the mosque. He asks the simpleton, “Where’s the book?!” The simpleton asks, “What is a *book*?” The caretaker explains, “The thing that sat right over there!” The simpleton replies, “That thing was what I *ate* for dinner! Tell me what it means to say *a book*?”

It’s as if the word has gulped the book yet continues to search for it and expects such unprepared people to realize its beneficial commandments.

We need courage, a courage that rises from virtue and helps us reach sound conclusions based on the entire range of the story of religion. As the poet said,

**At the heart of every tale, hides a seed
Of meaning for who can see the nuance.**

How could anyone believe that the same God who endowed us with the gifts of intellect and logic, Himself meant us to stop applying reason and to submit instead to blind imitation of some textbooks?! **Hillel the Sage** told us around 2000 years ago, “When a religious matter appears to be in conflict with science, follow the science.” Likewise, the Persian **Al-Razi** said, “When in doubt, take side with reason.” Bigotry means to be blind.

**We’ve learned in the tempestuous sea of our fate, that
We ought to salvage our clothes from the angry waves.**

Indeed, it’s a prerequisite of religious practice to understand religion, and not to act it out of imitation; neither were we meant to make idols of people and worship them, nor to break standing idols only to fall and worship the flat tombstones. Misplaced aid and applause have the more encouraged the imitators. Take a look around. Gone is the season for the philosophy of “privacy within the walls of my home”. Nowadays, as the brain-washed humanoids are exported

around the globe, true safety is gone everywhere. Left to itself, the world will soon witness the many problems rising from mass migrations and the cohabitation of “the doves and the crows”; and we’re bound to face severe reactions from the wounded children of today as they grow into the rebellious youth of the coming generations of the refugees.

As **Gandhi** said in an attributed quote, “If you don’t dare to tell the truth, at least don’t applaud for those who pronounce unjust words.” Enough of our shy political correctness.

A salamander or a butterfly, you be what you want!

But when set out to make amends, do it with your whole heart.

The number one problem in today’s world is ignorance. There’s an ongoing war between ignorance and civilization, the ignorance which has roots in teaching the kind of superstition that is attributed to the religion. Surprisingly, the self-proclaimed religious advocates, who appear in the guise of “saviors more caring than mothers”, are deluded to think that they’re solving the problems and helping the religion to survive, even as they continue to teach and prescribe the very such nonsense!

The Iranian poet laureate **Shahriar** wrote an extremely beautiful poem in which he addressed the incompetence of the religious advocates by drawing on the parable of two trees: the fruitful walnut, which provides the wood for the pulpits, and the fruitless sycamore, from which the gallows are made. We read,

A pulpit bitterly mocked the sycamore,

“What do you boast of, you fruitless tree?

Oh, aren’t you the shame of trees, so that

They made the gallows of your lumber?”

The brave sycamore stormed back at the pulpit,

As it warned, “If your pulpit was of any use,

Then people wouldn’t end up on my gallows!”

If what the religious teachers and advocates did were useful or effective, the history of religions wouldn’t be so terribly stained with blood, and the followers’ minds wouldn’t be so contaminated with hatred towards those who thought differently. Let’s now take a brief look at a shameful corner of the tainted history of religions, according to a summary excerpt attributed to **Bertrand Russell**. The author says, and I paraphrase from a Persian source:

“In the 14th century, plague spread throughout Europe. The Church took it as a sign of Jewish sins, and thus, 12,000 Jews were burned alive in several places, including Strasbourg and Bavaria, and the rest of the people were killed by the plague. [Notice the earlier roots of the Holocaust.]

“Until the 16th century, for far too long, the surgeons couldn’t dissect (or do related surgery on) human bodies, because the Popes believed that if they did, then the person’s limbs and organs wouldn’t be able to find one another at the Resurrection! Thus, thousands of people died because of this Papal decision, lest their body parts be lost at the Resurrection!

“In the 17th century, it was claimed that touching the bones of a Florentine Saint of earlier centuries would cure illnesses. A biologist discovered accidentally that the bones belonged to a goat; yet the dried and dusty bones continued to work out their miracles!”

The author continues, and I paraphrase, “The greatest enemy of man’s happiness and freedom is a blind defense of the wrong ideas and beliefs.” At the least, let’s not applaud such nonsense; rather, let’s learn from the troubles that befell the others.

**A bird wouldn’t dive for a seed
If he sees another bird entrapped.
Learn from the troubles that befall the others,
So that others won’t be learning from yours.**

Man is born ignorant. The global community ought to make sure that children won’t be made stupid by the wrong education. It wouldn’t matter if a stupid person kisses you; but that day may never come when a young person is made stupid by the wrong kiss or by a mistaken thought. Let’s try and erase vacuous inherited thoughts from the minds of the youth, so that they can lead better lives today and tomorrow. Let’s make sure that their minds are brought up to speed with the contemporary world thought, and that our past negligence will be made up for by their vision and insight.

To download copies of Norman Gabay’s essays and other writings in English and Persian, including his book *An Invitation to Reason*, as well as *The Glossary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect* (similar to the dialects of the Jews of Hamedan, Isfahan and Shiraz), please visit the following website: www.BabaNouri.com.