

I thought the following might be of some interest to you. I'm quoting from a paper given by Dr. John Fockler to the Akron, Ohio Torch Club on October 2, 2010.

The Torch Club is an organization that fosters high standards, intellectual growth and understanding. It provides an opportunity for persons of different professions and disciplines to meet regularly for interchange of professional knowledge, ideas, opinions, and fellowship.

Some of us, in this congregation, are also members of the local Torch Club.

### ***The Opiate of the People: Was Marx Right?***

**Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, 1843***

***'Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.'***

(I quote Dr. Fockler): "In this, one of his best-known and most often misquoted declarations, Marx compared religion's effects on people to two principal effects of opiate drugs such as opium: their analgesic effect and their intoxicating effect. Karl Marx may have arrived at a cynicism about religion at an early age. Marx's family was originally Jewish. He came from a "long line of rabbis on both sides of his family." Marx's father, however converted to Protestant Christianity, apparently so that he "could pursue his career as a lawyer in the face of Prussia's anti-Jewish laws." This decision must have affected Marx's view of religion and its role in society.

### **What is Religion?**

Religion as institution has a very long history in human society, probably about as long as that society itself. It has taken many forms. It has embraced a single, all-powerful God as well as pantheons of gods. At least one major world religion, Buddhism, is somewhat unclear about whether there is a god at all. It is sometimes claimed, usually by its opponents, that Secular Humanism is a religion. Dictionary.com lists eight definitions for the noun *religion*. The first includes references to "the cause, nature and purpose of the universe." It mentions a ritual and moral code. This is the definition most of us think of first when we think of the major religions practiced in the United States and labelled as such. The sixth of the eight, however, is a much broader one: "something one believes in and follows devotedly; a point or matter of ethics or conscience."

So what are the effects of religion in human affairs? My intent here (I'll remind you that I'm quoting Dr. Fockler) is to address this question as it applies to all religions, rather than to any specific faith. I am not, for these purposes, interested in the truth or lack of truth of any particular religion's tenets or doctrines. I intend to examine how these effects measure up to Marx's characterization of religion.

### **What are Opiates?**

The drug Marx compared to religion, opium, is a derivative of the poppy plant. Opium itself is made from the juice of unripe seed pods. In this raw form, it was in common use for at least six thousand years before the development of several derivatives, including morphine and codeine, and the introduction of heroin, which is synthesized from morphine. Opium has an analgesic effect, the relief of, or insensitivity to, pain. Morphine, the modern derivative, is still in medical use for cases of severe pain. Opium produces a feeling of calm or well-being, and in heavier doses produces narcosis, the "depressed physiological activity leading to stupor," an effect fostering its use as a recreational drug today, generally in the form of heroin. Although some derivatives of opium are not addictive, opium itself, like morphine, codeine (often used as a cough suppressant), and heroin, is highly physically addictive; repeated use produces a physical dependence on the drug. While opiates themselves do not affect judgement or cognition, their addictive nature can lead to a condition in which the need to "feed the monkey" overwhelms all other thoughts and desires.

At the time Marx wrote his famous statement, a tincture of opium in alcohol, known as laudanum, was in common use as an anesthetic and analgesic. Opium was also in common use throughout the world as a recreational drug. The quote suggests that religion offers both relief from the pain of living in what Marx saw as an unjust society and faith in an institution that produces the feeling of well-being or stupefies the common man and pacifies him so that he does not revolt against that injustice. How fair is Marx's characterization?

### **Religion as Analgesic**

Religion - any religion - is a potent defence for the true believer against Hamlet's famous "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." This is its analgesic effect. Most modern world religions promise that their believers will be rewarded with some kind of "afterlife" after death. Christianity and Islam tell their faithful to expect an unearthly heaven or paradise. Hinduism promises that the good man will be reborn on earth in a higher social status, or perhaps even achieve Nirvana, "final release from the cycle of reincarnation attained by extinction of all desires and individual existence." In part because of the promise of a better life to come, religious faith can be a very effective coping mechanism for people who are facing hardship or oppression.

One example of religion's role as a coping mechanism, among many that could be cited, is the role of Christianity among Africa-Americans in the antebellum South. The religious music that comes down to us from those days, the African-American spiritual, returns over and over again to the theme of freedom to come, if not here on Earth, then in the afterlife. "Soon ah will be don' a-wid de troubles ob de worl' , Goin home to live with God."

Some religions declare that earthly suffering is a necessary part of the process leading to salvation. Some have propounded a view that a willingness to accept suffering or even death is a special mark of grace, or God's favour. Religions like Christianity that postulate an afterworld of punishment for unbelievers and wrongdoers also offer the believer the hope for a measure of revenge, that those who have inflicted hurt will receive their comeuppance by and by. Hinduism promises that the evildoer will be reborn in lower

circumstances or perhaps even in some animal life. All of these views serve the purpose of giving the believer the courage to face another day, no matter how hard life may seem.

Religion's analgesic quality also involves a believer's sense of belonging to a community that offers a place to go, ritual to watch and take part in, and a means to exercise one's altruistic impulses. The believer is never alone, but receives reinforcement through being a part of a group of people that validates his or her belief structure. The individual may receive substantive support from the religious community in the form of charity, but even without such material support, just belonging to the community offers important emotional support.

### **Religion as Addictive**

Is religion addictive? Certainly there is no physical addictive property in religion as there is in opiates. On the other hand, some in the scientific community recognize psychological addiction to certain behaviour patterns such as gambling, risk-taking, or sexual activity that likewise have no physically addictive component. Psychological addiction is seen to result from the desire on the part of the addict to produce "a desired mood change." This would indicate that it derives from the intoxicating effect of the object addiction. Even in opiate addiction cases that join physical dependency to a psychological addiction, it seems that there is a fairly wide spread of susceptibility to addiction. How is it that heroin addiction kills many addicts who are unable to stay away from the drug even after repeated treatment, while others, such as musicians James Taylor or Ray Charles, are ultimately able to beat the addiction? Similarly, some people seem completely unable to overcome addiction to tobacco, while others find it possible to do so.

There seems to be a wide spread in susceptibility to "religious addiction" as well. Some people are completely devout believers. Religion is a central pillar to their daily lives. Other people are "Christmas-Easter" Christians, which I would equate to the "social drinker" of alcohol. Still others appear to be completely immune to religious belief. In its most severe form (and admittedly there is an element of judgement in this remark), an addiction to one's particular brand of religion can cause behaviour that, at least to the observer outside the faith, looks irrational. Some of this apparently irrational behaviour is fairly benign, such as a reliance on the scriptures of one's faith for a description of the origins of the universe over the findings of science. "Addiction" to religion, though, can have side effects including narrow-mindedness and extreme intolerance of people who hold beliefs which conflict with the tenets of one's own faith. In this country, such intolerance ranges from denominations that discount the beliefs of other sects whose view of the Bible is less literal than their own to small fringe religious groups that incorporate racial and religious bigotry into their teachings. In extreme cases, as we have seen, religious addiction can lead to irrational behaviour such as crashing planes full of people into office buildings.

### **Religion as Narcotic**

The devout religious believer sometimes trades his independence of thought for an unthinkable adherence to the doctrines of his faith. In this regard, religion can be compared to opium in terms of its narcotic effect. Organized religion often uses sanctions to enforce strict observance of its doctrines, as shown in the practice of the Roman Catholic Church or in institutions of "shunning" which is part of the Amish practice. In the United States, religious believers sometimes use the mechanisms of government in an attempt to force their doctrines on others not of their faith. Attempts to ban abortion or gay marriage are examples. In theocratic societies such as those in the Moslem world that embrace *sharia*, "the law system inspired by the Koran, the Sunna, older Arabic law systems, parallel traditions, and work of Muslim scholars over the first two centuries of Islam," the state enforces absolute compliance with religious doctrine. The "narcotic" doctrine deadens the thinking process. Marx's condemnation of religion based on the pacifying effect its strict dogma tends to have on the common man poses a note of irony. Modern schools of Marxist thought have been every bit as dogmatic as the most fundamentalist religious belief and as ready to sanction non-believers as the Spanish Inquisition.

Although there are sometimes negative side effects to religious attachment, many of the most devout "religious addicts" are inspired by their faith to live lives of service to others or to society at large. At the extreme end of this spectrum are people like Mother Theresa or Albert Schweitzer. In the everyday world, these people may be the hospital volunteer, the adult literacy tutor, the regular blood donor, or the Habit for Humanity builder. In addiction treatment programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, religious belief is a central part of the process of overcoming addiction. The Reverend Doctor Susan Warren Smith, in her paper "*Benedict, Bernard and Bill W: The Legacy of Twelve Step Spirituality*," argued that many of the twelve steps derive from historic principles in Christianity, particularly those characteristic of the monastic movement. In these programs' reliance on spirituality to combat harmful addiction, it might be said they seek, in part, to replace those addictions with benign, or even beneficial, addiction to religion. Note that these programs do not specify any particular brand of faith. It is the positive, even analgesic *quality of religion* that is being utilized here.

### **Promotion of a Moral Code**

One characteristic of nearly all religions that is not shared in any way by opiates is their promotion of some type of moral code. The patient using morphine to combat severe pain is necessarily self-centered to the degree that pain dominates his or her life. Presumably some other, less dangerous form of analgesic would be in use for the victim whose pain is less overwhelming. Self-centeredness reaches its peak in the addict to an opiate. The need to satisfy this addiction becomes the central feature of the addict's life, subordinating all other interests and desires.

By contrast, religious moral codes tend to be outward-focused. Observance of divine law may be the reason given for the code's tenets; some of the commandments may refer to the relationship between the worshiper and the divinity. Such laws often deal with the proper treatment of other people. Most religious moral codes enjoin believers to avoid causing unnecessary harm to others and also call upon them to do positive acts of benefit to others. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Even non-theistic philosophies almost always incorporate moral codes, sometimes implicit rather than explicit. Secular Humanists, for instance, generally embrace a code that calls for acceptance of differences in race, gender or sexual orientation, even though some of these believers are strangely intolerant of practitioners of so-called "mainstream" religious belief. That these philosophies do incorporate moral teachings is one of the stronger arguments for categorizing them as religions. These philosophies also incorporate belief structures that parallel those of so-called "mainstream" religions. Secular Humanists believe, without notable exception, in a creation narrative which includes the "Big Bang" and the evolution of living species through natural selection. That such a belief structure is supported by objective evidence which the creation myths in Genesis lack does not mean that it is any less a matter of faith. In fact, even the denial of the existence of God or gods that is the central point of any atheistic belief structure is itself a point of faith, as there is absolutely no objective evidence *for or against* the existence of a deity or deities. In place of the hope for an afterlife as a reward for correct behaviour, non-theistic philosophies often substitute the ethical principle that it is desirable to leave behind a legacy of benefit to society.

Was Marx was right to characterize religion as "the opium of the people"? That's for each individual to decide. I believe a good case can be made that, in large measure, *he was*, so long as we are careful to keep in mind the full context of the statement. He was correct in noting the parallels between the drug and religion in terms of its addictive nature, its intoxicating effects, and its capacity to alleviate suffering. Religions of any and all types, including non-theistic faiths such as Secular Humanism and several schools of Marxist theory, do indeed create patterns of dependence which parallel narcotic addiction to some degree. In the most devout believers, they can create a mindset of almost blind acceptance of doctrine which approaches intoxication. But religions also provide a relief from some pain of the human condition through their creation of a sense of community and the hope of some sort of reward after death. So to a fairly significant degree, for good or for ill, religion is indeed the opiate of the people."