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An Actual Religion

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by

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An Actual Religion

If one may venture to judge by much that is being said and written and done among thoughtful people today, there has hardly ever been a time when so much interest has been taken in religion—and so little in religions. That is to say: seldom before—in the West at least—has there been such a keen general desire to know what it is that lies behind the superficial appearances of life, and so much indifference toward what current forms of religion officially say lies there. This is a very peculiar state of affairs; but there is a reason for it, as there is for everything.

One might put it roughly by saying that today, in all the more civilised countries of the world, there are fewer infant minds and more grown-up ones than there ever have been before. That is: there are fewer minds that are disposed to accept without question any explanation of life and world offered them upon authority just because it is so offered; and more minds that are simply unable to accept as true whatever is told them on authority only because it is so told them. These grown-up minds possess—for good or ill, according as one chooses to look at it—a keenly developed sense of what is reasonable and probable;

and when they encounter anything in the way of offered explanation that offends this sense, that seems at all suspicious, does not fully satisfy their feeling of probability, they incline to pass it by with something like sorrow and disappointment; sometimes, however, according to difference in temperament, with impatience and contempt. And unfortunately, in what is often set before them as explanation of what this puzzling thing life is all about, there is not a little which, if it does not altogether justify, yet goes a long way towards excusing their disappointment and even their scorn. They ask for actuality, and are given what looks to them very like fairy tales. Why this should be so they do not in the least know, and often in a wistful way wonder at it. Yet the answer to the conundrum is simple.

Religions, in their ultimate sense, may not unfairly be defined as metaphysics prepared for the use of the multitude. They are so many explanations of what lies behind the surface appearances of life that are meant to fit the capacity for understanding of the common mass of men. And just because this is so, they do not provide, and do not attempt to provide, strictly and literally accurate explanations of everything about life and the world. The current religions in their current expositions of the metaphysical of what is beyond or behind the physical appearances of things, choose to

consider themselves as addressing the infant minds that compose the great majority of mankind, and so confine themselves very largely, almost exclusively, to couching their explanations of man and his place in the universe and what is best for him to do there, in forms suited to the infant mind and give very little heed, if any, to meeting the requirements—and they are the quite legitimate requirements—of the grown up minds of the race. In their various pronouncements, in their formulas and dogmas, they present, not the real truth about things, but a set of ideas well within the infant mind's power of grasp and comprehension which, it may be admitted, are by no means ill-adapted to do all that is evidently required of them, that is, to guard the individual against falling very far into serious error. But it has followed, and could not but follow, that when such pabulum thus concocted for infant understandings, is offered to understandings that have attained to some growth, these cannot do much else but reject it, for they at once perceive that it is not really true. Instead of that actual truth about things, which the acuter minds of the present day so ardently crave to possess, they are offered in the current religions of their day and time merely a sophisticated version of the actual truth. That version is so highly sophisticated in many respects that whatever it was that the original truth

was meant to convey is something they find impossible to guess. In their desperate need they are wandering off, many of them, into all sorts of strange byways looking for it, and in their perplexity are much disposed bluntly to dismiss the whole business of religion as nothing but a pack of lies.

Now there is a good deal to be said, and said with respect and reverence, for the original founders of the various religions of the world, in their watering down of metaphysical truth for the consumption of the common man with his but feeble powers of mental digestion, incapable of assimilating and so benefiting from a presentation of pure, undiluted, straight truth. Whether they deliberately pursued this method of dilution and of purpose with forethought, or, as is much more likely, in obedience to an unerring instinct which told them what to do without imparting to them in any clearly conscious fashion the reasons why they should do it, is not known. No Buddhist, at any rate, will wish to condemn off-hand the great prophet of Medina for instance, because he offered the uncivilised Arab tribes to whom he came, an eternal heaven of sensual delight after death, in his attempts, entirely successful, to get them to abandon some of their grosser and more savage ways of life. If in the doctrines he put before them in his pronouncements as to what lies beyond the immediately physical, he

did not take his followers all the way to the goal, at least he took them a good way in the direction of the goal; and that is much, as human men and human affairs go—and his Arabs were very human. A truly great man, and the performer of a truly great work that has left its mark not only on Arabia but on the world, he did what he did as being the best he could do in his peculiar circumstances, with the material with which he had to deal. One might even risk saying that he did as he did just because he could do no otherwise. In a *samsāra* that has no goals to be reached and rested in, but only a direction in which to be ever moving—across toward the other shore—about the most that any man can do for his fellows, is just to start them moving in that direction, fast or slow, according as the strength of wave-cleaving hands and feet will take them.

And yet the fact remains that some provision in the way of straight, unsophisticated, undiluted truth ought to be made for those capable of appreciating and appropriating it, and who do not find anything of the kind they want and need in the current dogmas of the current religions, as these are commonly set forth. To such individuals the consequences of not finding what they want, may well be, if not entirely disastrous, yet for a time seriously retarding to their best welfare. Desperate of finding any satisfactory

solution of their questionings, many of these acuter minds are strongly tempted to plunge recklessly into courses which in their hearts they despise and loathe. Denied the food they crave, the only kind indeed that their minds will tolerate, they are apt to fling themselves in sheer despair of knowing what else to do, upon mere pig's food, and try, of course vainly, to still their hunger with that. A sad, at any rate, a very disconcerting outcome to what might have been so much better—and quite unnecessary.

For provision does exist for such minds as these. There is in the world a religion that is brave enough, bold enough, daring enough, to offer in its teachings, not sophistications, not diluted versions, not humanised elaborations of the truth about man and the world and life, but the plain, straight truth itself. There is a religion that is not in hidden and recondite manner, dissembled or dissembling, but in perfectly honest and straightforward fashion, true. There is a religion that in its tenets is not dark parable, but clear, daylight fact. There is a religion that is not symbolic but actual. There is an actual religion, a religion that deals with actualities and with nothing but actualities, to the utmost limit that these can be dealt with at all in human speech. Beings there are, even as the Master of actuality himself once said, whose eyes are but a little dimmed with the dust of the world, who, failing to

hear this teachings of actuality, only too likely will perish, but coming to hear of that teaching, will be saved from perishing, since it is just what they want and need. In the Dhamma of the Buddha these have all they can ask or want.

Buddhism thus occupies a place by itself among the religions of the world, a position all its own, the position of a religion that presents to men just the truth itself about life, instead of the more or less evasive presentations of it offered elsewhere. So that, from a certain point of view, one might almost be entitled to say that all the other religions of the world are only so many variously modified versions of Buddhism, of the teaching of the Buddha! This idea, however, must not be pushed too far, for more than one of the world's religious systems contain ideas which the Buddha never could have countenanced, and some indeed that are the very opposite of all he taught. And still, to the enquiring, investigating eye that dwells upon them long enough, many of the ideas or dogmas of these other religions, frequently present an interesting appearance of struggling attempts to say, hint at, suggest ideas that are openly and honestly set forth in plain words, in the Buddhadhamma.

One of the most immediately striking of such ideas is that central doctrine of the Buddha to the effect that man as we know him, is not a fixed, substantial entity,

but an expression of an energy, existing literally only from moment to moment—the doctrine called *anatta*. Here the Buddha daringly speaks out the blunt, naked truth which in other religions is only half-spoken, whispered, dimly mooted and, it may not be unpardonable to say, somewhat mutilated, in doctrines of a “reincarnating ego,” as in many religions of the East, or of “original sin,” as in the Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic churches, and the Calvinistically inclined among other Western religious bodies. In these circles with these dogmas, the obvious concern is to accommodate themselves to the common man’s capacity for seizing, understanding the idea of substance, entity, “thing-ness,” much more easily than he is able to lay hold of the idea of a perpetually on-flowing force or energy. These other religions take the continuous flow of the *kamma*-force and conform this, in itself unbroken stream, to the mode of comprehension in which the masses are most facile. One set of religions breaks it up into the notion of an actual entity supposed to pass from form to form like a passenger passing from boat to boat in a long line of the same. Others present it as “guilt” or “sin” coming into the present out of the past, something that ought not to have been, that ought not to be.

And one might say that this is good, not bad, so far as it goes; it does give a glimmering of the actual truth.

Only it does not go far enough, it does not go nearly far enough; it does not give nearly enough of actual fact to satisfy the acute, critical, grown-up mind. For when, as in this case, the idea of the present moment of any living creature being the heir of a past that stretches far beyond and behind the time during which his present mortal body has been in existence, is put before the man merely as connected with a certain alleged historical occurrence, a particular action said to have been done some six thousand years ago, by a couple of human beings, male and female, assumed to be the progenitors of the whole presently existing human race, in a particular geographical locality, a district of Mesopotamia, the "guilt" or "sin" of which deed lies upon the man of today because that couple are his assumed ancestors—when the man of grown-up mind of today is told this, he can only smile (or perhaps sigh) at such a story being supposed by anybody to be a complete explanation, or any explanation at all, of the questions that are troubling him, and turns away to look elsewhere for some account of his own existence and its inborn tendencies, good and bad, that will seem a little more likely and credible, a little more possible of acceptance.

Such explanations these minds can find in the actual religion, the religion called Buddhism, on this and on every question that troubles them. Here wait for them,

not those sophistications of the truth which only weary and repel them, but that of which they are in search, the truth itself. It may be necessary for instance sometimes to tell child-minds that the world was made at a certain point in time out of nothing by the fist of a "creator." just as it is sometimes necessary to tell the child in bodily growth that the doctor brought him his new little brother in a black bag. But the grown-up minds of the race require something more than this sort of "black-baggery" to be given them when they begin to enquire about origins and endings. And on this point also, the Dhamma of the Buddha provides them with that something more; it gives them the plain, unveiled truth of the matter.

It tells them that there is no "world" in the sense in which that word is commonly understood in questions like, "How did the world begin?" and so forth. It tells them that a "world" in the usual sense in which such questions are asked, does not exist. It tells them that there are as many worlds as there are men's heads to carry them, for each man carries a world about with him in his head—the only world he ever knows first-hand from the cradle to the grave—which is distinct from all others existing simultaneously in other heads; and that there, inside these heads the world is being made, has fresh arising, at each succeeding moment of time; as also, at every moment

of time, equally is passing away, coming to an end; thus, is rising and falling every instant as long as the brain that bears it is alive and acting. For, “within this six-foot-long body with all its thinkings and imaginings, I declare unto you, O disciples, lies the world, and the arising of the world, and the passing away of the world.” So spoke, so speaks, the Buddha. As for the world we infer to exist outside our heads, “without perceivable beginning is this *saṃsāra*.”

It may be the opinion of not a few, nay, it certainly will be the opinion of many, upon first hearing it, that the difficulties in the way of accepting this explanation of the “beginning of the world,” are quite as great as those attaching to the former. And to a certain extent it may be granted that they have reason on their side—but it is only to a certain extent, only to the extent that this explanation remains uninvestigated.

For there is one difference between it and the other, and it is a very great difference indeed; greater can hardly be imagined. It is this: the more the particular explanations of current religions on this point are looked into and submitted to rigorous examination, the less and less acceptable, the less and less credible, do they become. But the explanation that the Buddha here provides, difficult and disappointing as it may seem at first, the more it is studied and investigated, the more acceptable and credible does it become, until

finally, when a man has gone far enough in its study and in the development of his mind which will surely follow thereon, it becomes the only explanation he can ever again, even for a moment, think of accepting.

And this is not the only Buddhist teaching of which the like will be found to hold good. The great difference between all Buddhist teachings and the doctrines or dogmas of other religions, lies precisely in this—that the more the former are studied the more satisfying are they found; whereas the more the latter are looked into and in anywise closely scrutinised, the less are they found satisfactory. And the protagonists of the latter frequently—if unintentionally!—show that they are not unaware of this, in the attitude of discouragement and obstruction which they so often adopt towards any attempt to criticise or analyse their dogmas, admonishing and exhorting their followers instead just to “have faith.” Buddhism, in vivid contrast to this, invites, nay, insists that its adherents, to the utmost extent of their capacity to do so, shall test and examine and understand its doctrines, and never accept them on mere trust where testing and trying at all is possible.

To take another point: it may be, doubtless in a way it is, an advantage for the infant mind to be told that “sin is displeasing unto God.” and will be “punished” by ages, or in some cases, by an eternity of terrible

torment in “hell,” since in its practical outcome such a declaration may start the individual travelling in the right direction, so far at least as conduct and behaviour is concerned, even if the soundness of the reason for doing so which he here accepts may be far from readily demonstrable.

But the grown-up mind, by its very constitution, cannot help but question seriously the truth of such a declaration, and will find more credible the statement of the actual religion to the effect that immorality, wrong-doing, at bottom is acute, emphatic self-assertion and because it is this, so long as practised, so long must entail existence in self-assertive, individualised conditions, that is, in a condition of imperfection, and therefore of infelicity; and that if this kind of action is practised continually, then continual also will be existence in conditioned *samsāric* existence with all the infelicity this involves, not unfitly in many instances to be called “hell”; and that this is so, not because any hypothesised superior being has passed orders to that effect, but simply because things are so fashioned that it cannot be otherwise.

Here a pertinacious critic may feel inclined to interject that so far as the probable practical results are concerned, there does not seem much to choose between telling a half-truth that is wholly grasped, and telling a whole-truth that is only half grasped, as

is likely to be the case with this latter explanation of what wrong-doing is. There is, however, the profound difference between the two cases, that the more the half-truth is examined and analysed, the more does the part of it that is dubious come to light; while the more the whole truth is scrutinised and pondered over, the more is its truth perceived, since truth was all its nature to begin with. The believer in half-truths is always in danger, when he becomes aware of the part of them that is not true, of losing his confidence that there is such a thing as truth at all. No such danger threatens the believer in a whole-truth, even if it does happen to be one that he only half comprehends. Fuller knowledge can only bring him fuller faith therein. But fuller knowledge, in the case of the former kind of believer, runs grave risk of stripping him of all his faith. And so here, in the end, the practical outcome also will be different with a difference all in favour of the believer in whole-truths, that is, the believer in the teaching of the Buddha.

Another burning question that occupies the attention, nay forces itself upon the attention of all but the shallowest and most unthinking of human beings, is the question as to the reason for all the suffering, all the manifold infelicity of one kind and another that abounds in the lives of sentient creatures. And here again current religions only half-say, in their vague

phrases about life being a “period of probation,” a “time of trial and testing,” and the like, what is the actual truth; they only admit that life has suffering, has infelicity. The actual religion, on the other hand, the religion that unflinchingly faces actuality and gives it open expression, without palliation or disguise fearlessly declares: “Life, conditional life, does not have but its limitation, imperfection, therefore infelicity, suffering.” By their manner of utterance on this question, current religions suggest, nay, they expressly say, that life of course is infelicitous at the present moment; but at a certain moment in the future, with the supervening of a state called “heaven,” it is going to be entirely and unendingly felicitous, happy. Buddhism, however, setting forth the whole, unadulterated truth on this matter as on all others it touches, says that nowhere whatever, in no heaven, in no conditioned state of any kind can life ever be permanently and everlastingly felicitous, that all heaven-states, in the very nature of life, as life is, can only be temporary; however long enduring they may be, at length they must come to an end. As for that final ending of infelicity that all desire and seek, unshrinking it makes known the blunt truth that this may only be sought beyond life, not anywhere within it. Let a man look as long and as diligently as he may, nowhere among all the waves on *saṃsāra*’s wide sea

will he find one that is not as all the rest, fluid, fleeting, transient; nowhere can he find one that will be solid, that will rest firm beneath his feet.

This actual religion, Buddhism, is the religion that refuses to cheat itself or anybody else. It holds fast by actuality, by what is actual fact, that water is—water, fleeting, flowing, and never anything else however much one might wish that it were so. Without blenching it faces the fact, the actuality, that nowhere at all throughout all the realm of the fleeting will ever be found the firm, and tells men honestly and frankly that it is absolutely useless to look for such a thing there. It tells men that only when they are honest enough with themselves to see and admit that this is so, only when they put from them forever all attempt, all desire even to attempt, to cheat themselves into supposed comforting beliefs that somewhere, somewhere, if only one searches long enough, within the transient will be found an intransient, only when thus sternly, starkly honest with themselves, only then is the way open at last for them to come to know that which is not transient; even as is written: “Having known the utter ending of all that is compounded, then is the unmade known.” But it is only then, and not till then!

And so with flawless logic the Master of actuality bids men turn their eyes away forever from these

shifting, deceitful waters where footing can never be found, and makes the getting beyond life the end and aim of all his teaching. Everything he inculcates in the way of moral precept, all his injunctions as to action. His counsels as to thinking, his instructions as to exercises in super-thought have no other ultimate object but the guiding of mankind from the realm of the fleeting, the unsubstantial, the infelicitous, towards the state of deliverance, utter and complete from all limitation, imperfection, infelicity, suffering, the condition of being freed from all conditions—if such a phrase may be permitted.

But perforce, all phrases, all modes of speech must halt and stumble in the language of the conditioned endeavour to give indication, however remote, of the Unconditioned—of as much of it, that is, as can be dragged through the narrow doorway of a conditioned mind, and given such clothing of speech as such mind is able to give. Here the actual religion, come to the limit of what is possible to say with human tongue, perforce has to stop only because it can go no further. Here at this boundary line of what is possible, confronted by the Unconditioned, it has of necessity to take to the method that other religions adopt by choice in face of the facts of conditioned existence. Here, since it can do nothing else, it gives only hints, inevitably faulty clues to what the ultimate

reality is.

There is nothing, however, of the indirect or defective or faulty in the instructions or recommendations it provides as to how that reality may be approached and finally won. This, all of it, is as clear and direct as ever words can make it; and is repeated over and over again in ever so many different ways, so that none can have the least excuse for mistaking what is meant. There is no jealously closed fist here. Nothing is withheld, nothing kept back that can possibly be of use, to any and every kind of mind. The limited mind and the enlarged mind, the infant mind and the grown-up mind, the simple mind and the profound mind, in the practical instruction as to what is to be done to reach the goal, all alike find what they can grasp and appropriate without any difficulty, whatever the stage of understanding to which they have come. It being merely a matter of their power to put into practice what thus they grasp, whether they arrive soon or late at the realisation of the final truth which all along has been presented to them free from distorting, disguise or dissembling mask or concealing sophistication in the one actual religion of the world, the one religion that is brave enough, bold enough, audacious enough to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about life and all connected therewith—the Dhamma of the

Buddha.

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