

# Chapter Five: Misanthropy in Major World Religions

by William Whitesell

## *Introduction*

For the times in which they arose, the major world religions were powerful civilizing forces that raised moral standards. Hinduism brought respect for life across all species and the ideal of nonviolence. Buddhism articulated the goal of ending human suffering. From Judaism came the Ten Commandments. Christianity brought the gospel of love. And Islam included as one of its pillars, charity for the poor. However, these religions are complex institutions with multifaceted programs of teachings. And in each of them can be found elements that are no longer civilizing influences, but rather impediments to the further humanization of our species. In particular, each of them includes entrenched elements of disrespect for human beings. It is long past time for human society to see these elements for what they are and to become free from them.

The psychological distortions arising from misanthropic elements in organized world religions share some similarities with three other types of unhealthy psychological environments: child abuse, hostage-taking, and cult groups. Let's briefly review the main features of these environments before turning to a discussion of the major religions.

When a child is subjected to chronic abuse at home, the child's thought patterns often come to be characterized by rationalization and minimization of the abuse. Minimization

might involve an attitude such as, “Well, my father whipped me, but he didn’t really draw blood.” Rationalization could involve a view that, “My mother only called me ‘a little shit’ when I deserved it, because I could be really bad.” The latter quote is also an example of a *blame-the-victim* pattern.<sup>1</sup>

In hostage syndrome (also called Stockholm syndrome after a well-publicized case in that city), the hostage—in a prolonged condition of extreme danger—inadvertently learns to reduce anxiety by identifying with the attitudes and cause of the hostage-taker. In an extreme example, some Jews held in Nazi concentration camps over time came to mimic the anti-Semitism of their Nazi guards. A psychological response of this nature is termed *identification with the aggressor*.

In cults, initiates are induced by group pressures and doctrines to drop all other self-images as they learn to identify more exclusively with the group. Members are indoctrinated to believe that the mission of their cult overrides that of all other human institutions. As identification with the group and deference toward authority figures in the cult intensifies, a member’s independence of judgment is submerged. The distortions from the resulting brainwashing and subservience to the leader can lead to such extreme events as the mass murder/suicide in Jonestown, Guyana.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these situations—child abuse, hostage syndrome, and indoctrination by an abusive cult—involves an element of dissociation from oneself as a victim. In the short run, dissociation may be beneficial in preserving a capacity for

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York, Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>Among the vast literature on cults is one short but insightful article written by Philip Zimbardo, a President of the American Psychology Association: “What Messages are Behind Today’s Cults,” *APA Monitor*, May 1997, which is also available at: [www.csj.org/studyindex/studycult/study\\_zimbar.htm](http://www.csj.org/studyindex/studycult/study_zimbar.htm).

action when the alternative may be sinking into a debilitating emotional state. However, over time, dissociation tends to throw out the baby with the bathwater, in that our capacity to access human feeling tends to numb out as we continue to suppress or repress inner hurts. A piece of our humanity is lost as we warp our sense of identity to deny our inner woundedness. And as our compassion for ourselves is gradually lost with such dissociations, our capacity for compassion toward others diminishes as well.

Over the last century, one key step forward in our civilization has been a greater understanding of the psychic damage of abusive patterns of behavior and thought. However, our cultures only muddle forward, incorporating advances in understanding alongside persistent historical tendencies, including continuing strains of brutality. Of course, major world religions do not openly practice obvious forms of child abuse, hostage syndrome, or abusive cult thought reform. Nevertheless, references to extreme examples can help to clarify the thought patterns that may be present in more subtle, and less destructive, but nevertheless pernicious forms. Major world religions continue to have an enormous influence on our culture; the institutionalization of misanthropic attitudes in such religions is a powerful mechanism for the propagation of socially dysfunctional patterns of thought and behavior. Internalization of such teachings within our minds impairs our psychological health with patterns of self-abuse. The application of such thinking toward others limits our capacity for compassion. It is time to take a hard look at the remaining impediments to our humanization in major world religions.

### ***Buddhism***

Let's begin our survey of world religions with Buddhism, which at first glance might seem an unlikely candidate for misanthropic traditions. After all, Buddhism is a dry religion

that doesn't even practice faith in God. So how could cult-like distortions be present in such a religion?

In his effort to end human suffering, Buddha preached two key concepts: reincarnation and karma. He diagnosed the cause of human suffering to be immoral actions by human beings that created karmic conditions bringing suffering to the wrong-doer within her/his life or in her/his lives to come. The concept of karma is a rationalization of suffering at the expense of the victim. It tells a victim, "Whether you know it or not, whether in this lifetime or in some past life, you yourself have created the conditions that have caused this suffering of yours." Or, in other words, "It's your own damn fault." The concept of karma is an intellectual institutionalization of a far-reaching blame-the-victim pattern.

Karma is said to be a natural law of cause and effect, an inherent property of the nature of reality. In a karmic system, no judge determines the fate of defendants and no authority can grant dispensations from its effects. No mercy can be exercised, for the laws of karma are impersonal and automatic. Buddha can't save you. Karmic consequences may be postponed by circumstances at times, but never eliminated.

If a cult leader had organized the world as we know it, and wanted to rationalize suffering *en masse* without taking any responsibility for it, he would be well-advised to invent the concept of karma. No doctrine could be more effective in brainwashing converts to blame themselves for their troubles. Victims have no way of checking on the validity of the doctrine: No memory of moral errors in this life are needed to generate the guilt-trip needed to rationalize one's misery, for it can be attributed to unknown and unknowable events in past lives. And the true cause of any suffering is never bad luck or the behavior of others, it is solely the effects of our own past actions—our own fault.

After having employed the concept of karma, Buddha then had difficulty getting people to recover the natural sense

of compassion and empathy that a human being has toward another. The problem was that the diagnosis of suffering as karma was too pat an answer. Why bother helping relieve the suffering of anyone else? They're just getting what they deserve because of their sins in past lives. Why try to interrupt that inevitable process of inter-temporal justice? These attitudes, which follow directly from the concept of karma, are of course heartless. But if Buddha could not spare indoctrinated followers from an implicit rationalization of the sufferings of others, he at least tried to induce them to avoid behaving with overt indifference. He argued that we should practice compassion, not because our fellow human beings deserved to be relieved from the suffering that came their way, but rather because such practices would help us to get a better deal in our own future lives. By practicing compassion, we would be helping—not those who had to suffer because of their past immoralities, for they would in any case get their just deserts one way or another—but rather ourselves as we gained the merit of good karma from our seemingly compassionate actions.

Heartlessness remains a hidden implication of these aspects of Buddhist doctrine. The fatalism inherent in the concept of karma rationalizes passivity in the face of suffering, undermining motives for social reform. And by teaching people to blame themselves for their troubles, it adds a component of mental self-abuse to their ordeals. In the terms of Transactional Analysis, it is a posture of “I’m not okay” and “You’re not okay.”<sup>3</sup> Indoctrination with such negative underlying self-appraisals is similar to the mental programming endured by cult victims.

Most religions rationalize sacrifices in this life in order to gain benefits in an afterlife, and Buddhism is no exception. Aside from the carry-over of karmic effects into future

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<sup>3</sup>See the work of Eric Berne in *Games People Play, Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*, or at the International Transactional Analysis Association, [www.ataa-net.org](http://www.ataa-net.org).

lifetimes, Buddhism also includes a theme of training to cope with the between-life planes of what Tibetan Buddhists call the Bardo. Other-worldliness of this nature is a vehicle for dissociation from our human identity. Dissociation is also abetted by the Buddhist rejection of the concept of a self. Buddhism teaches that, at the core of our existence, there is no self, no identity at all.

On a more practical level, Buddhism preaches dissociation from one's own will. It argues that desirelessness is the path to elimination of suffering. And the method of reaching desirelessness is not to satisfy desires, but rather to detach from them. This gives rise to another blame-the-victim pattern: we may suffer, not only for our past karma, but also from insufficient "detachment" from our ordinary human desires. Such thoughts can put us at war with our own human nature. And of course, the goals of ending suffering and achieving desirelessness are themselves desires, implying an inherent contradiction in Buddhist doctrine.

### ***Hinduism***

Buddhism originated as a reform movement within Hinduism, and the concepts of karma, reincarnation, and the preaching of detachment from desires are shared by the two traditions. However, Hinduism not only asserts the existence of "God" but also emphasizes the manifold forms in which God, or diverse god-beings, may appear. Also, unlike Buddhism, the Hindu tradition accepts the idea of a self. Nevertheless, Hindu ideology also encourages dissociation in its distinction between the "true self" and the "ego." The true self is said to be eternal and one with God, while the ego, or individual identity, is only a transitory, false self.

Dissociation from our individual, human identity is abetted by the concept of *maya*. The world as we know it is only a dream-like state of illusion, or *maya*. Our desires, and even our suffering, belong only to this realm of *maya*, and

are therefore not truly real. Only the divine plane of existence, which can be accessed in mystical states, has genuine reality. Suffering is therefore rationalized by the doctrine that it doesn't really exist. And if you think you're suffering, you must also endure the humiliation of being considered ignorant, for only those ignorant of divine reality believe that suffering is real. We have only ourselves to blame if we think we're suffering: it just shows that we need to drop the ego and realize our higher self. In other words, dissociation from human identity will end suffering. And compassion for others is again undermined, as their suffering also is not real. Indeed, their very existence as human beings is merely an illusion.

Moving beyond abstract realms to more practical morality, consider the *Bhagavad Gita*, a seminal book of Hinduism dealing with ethical issues. The setting is a battlefield just prior to the onset of hostilities. It is a conversation between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna, who is taken to be an incarnation of God. Arjuna is the leading combatant for the group that initiated the war. But the battle will not take place until and unless Arjuna makes the first move. The dialogue begins with Arjuna asking Krishna if they shouldn't take an alternative path than warfare. After all, Arjuna says, I have many relatives on the other side—why should I kill them?

In the subsequent discussion, Krishna convinces Arjuna that he should begin the war, basically because he—Arjuna—has serious grievances and because he was born into the warrior caste, therefore implying that it is his duty to fight wars. So Arjuna then proceeds to slaughter his relatives.

Obviously, this book is not a good model of conflict resolution. And it carries the message that human life is not to be highly valued. While Hinduism contains a strain of thought that accords respect for life in all its forms, as mentioned above, it places very little weight on the relative value of human life compared with other life forms.

Moreover, Hinduism espouses the idea that God is beyond good and evil. This is a formula that has often been used by tyrants and cult leaders. It teaches that we ordinary people cannot judge such lofty authority figures. If the God, the guru, or the Führer is abusive, we must nevertheless avoid criticism, because it is, after all, the supreme authority. The human faculty of moral judgment is thus suspended, demeaned. And acceptance of the abuses of a leader is the first step toward a deeper involvement in immorality. Pressure to obey the directives of such a leader can lead to participation in a perpetrator role. And rationalization of that activity because the leader is deemed to be beyond good and evil damages the conscience of the obedient cult member.

The *Bhagavad Gita* also undermines the integrity of human conscience through the notion of salvation through devotion, or *bhakti*. Krishna tells Arjuna that the easiest way to reach spiritual fulfillment, which will work even if he can't meet any other standard of behavior, is to become devoted to Krishna himself. This type of thinking leads to the idea that, no matter what evil deeds one may have done, no matter what harm one may have caused to other human beings, as long as one has devotion to a divine being, an incarnation, supreme fulfillments will become available. In other words, morality toward other human beings doesn't matter; the only thing that counts is sucking up to the cult leader (Krishna). Indeed, some Hindu *bhakti* cults have distorted consciences to such an extent that they have been responsible for ritual human sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The People of the Book***

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share the Old Testament as a religious source and also share an image of God as a father figure who sits in judgment of the behavior of human

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<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Dan McDougall, "Indian cult kills children for goddess," *The Observer*, London, March 5, 2006.



beings. Hypothesizing a divine parent figure reflects an important psychological need in human beings. Indeed, some schools of psychology advocate explicit construction of an ideal parent image as an effective means of long-term therapy.<sup>5</sup> In these uses, the ideal parent is a projection of all the qualities that the individual might need in a powerful caretaker. Any gaps in the protection, nurturing, love, or guidance that the individual received in childhood are implicitly fulfilled by the ideal parent construct. The mental image of this parent figure can provide a useful support structure even for the adult personality because of continuing undercurrents from the unfilled needs of childhood.

Although a parent-figure God can help address a psychological need, it has the flaw of doing so through a non-human construct. The need arises because of deficiencies in early caretaking, and a better remedy can be found in human relationships—including friends, spouses, and therapists, if not in parenting itself. Reliance on an otherworldly figure is a displacement of the original interpersonal need, a diversion from the possibility of real fulfillment in human community. It can provide a powerful psychological motive to maintain commitment to a religion, but at the cost of another type of dissociation from our nature as human beings.

### ***Judaism***

The first book of the Torah also brings to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam the doctrine of original sin. According to this teaching, human nature has a fundamental moral flaw. While we are created in the image of God, who is good, we add an element of human willfulness that is bad. This doctrine could be given an alternative name: the original guilt trip. Even before we make our first conscious

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<sup>5</sup>See the work of Albert Pessio at, for instance, [www.pbsp.com/touchact.htm](http://www.pbsp.com/touchact.htm).

decision, there is something wrong with us. In the terms of Transactional Analysis, the posture is one of “You, God, you’re okay, but we humans are not okay.” The concept of original sin is a put-down of humanity. With the notion that human beings are inherently bad in some way, a rationale begins to be constructed for our suffering. A blame-the-victim pattern.

Consider next the story of Abraham. Imagine a human being who is willing to murder his own son at the directive of a power figure. Abraham has so little self respect, so little belief in his own faculty of moral judgment, and so great a fear of, or desire to please, this "God" that he is willing to destroy the human being who is most dear to him. Any leader issuing such a directive and any follower willing to obey it would be seen today as a psychopath. But despite his profound failure of conscience and character, Abraham is the founding role model for three major world religions.

Now take up the story of Moses. "God" tells Moses that to inherit the promised land, he is not to negotiate or purchase land from the existing inhabitants, but rather to drive them out, and in some cases, kill them. And indeed, the initial land acquisitions occur through the conquest of the kingdoms of Sihon and Og where, in the words of Moses, “we utterly destroyed ... the men, women, and children of every city.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, God requires Moses to impose extremely harsh and cruel punishments for transgressions of religious laws. For instance, God tell Moses that a man found gathering sticks on the Sabbath should be stoned to death.<sup>7</sup>

Consider the story of Job, a devout man searching for the reason for his extreme sufferings. Job's friends never waver in their belief that God is the just author of Job's misery. It must be your fault, they tell Job, over and over again. At the end of the story, God appears to Job, and with a great

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<sup>6</sup>*Deuteronomy*, 3.

<sup>7</sup>*Numbers*, 15.

flourish of bluster and chest-beating, asserts that Job has no right to know why he's being tortured. It is a performance only a Machiavelli could respect, but many abusive cult leaders and hostage-takers evidently emulate it. Efforts to excuse "God" from responsibility for suffering and evil represent a major branch of theology called theodicy. And much of the intellectual rationalizations found in that literature would be readily recognized, in a different context, as pathological pandering to an oppressive power figure.

Abraham, Moses, and Job are early role models of three major religions. No wonder members of these religions have a history of trying to destroy each other. They have been taught through ancient traditions that human beings are eligible targets for destruction to serve the will of an alien power.

A further problem with Judaism is the doctrine that the Jews are the people chosen by God to be his suffering servants. This represents a standard formula for a cult leader. Cult members are special, superior to all outsiders, close to the supreme power. However, in part because of their specialness and closeness, they must be willing to endure punishments and abuses at the hands of the central power figure.

Incorporation of the practice of circumcision into the Jewish tradition symbolizes this point. Supposedly, God told Abraham to adopt the practice and promised that the Jews would always survive as long as they continued it. Thus, the cutting of the foreskin and infliction of the same on others meant preserving this contract with the Almighty. Pride in the special group identity overturned compassion and affirmation of one's natural physical inheritance.

## ***Islam***

Though different in many ways from Hinduism, Islam also advocates devotional attitudes that tend to impair the integrity of the natural human conscience. A Muslim is one

who surrenders, but not to any earthly guru or incarnation, rather just to God himself. It is not so much a surrender to God's will, as all that happens must be God's will, but rather to God's pleasure. The highest moral value thus involves abrogation of the human faculty of independent moral judgment in favor of submission to God. But what is God's pleasure? The answer is in the Koran and in the interpretations of the Koran. And there are many human authority figures willing to provide such interpretations. We have seen what comes out of this tradition. The Koran advises amputation of a hand because of even minor acts of theft. It also states, "Slay not the life which Allah has forbidden save with right. Whosoever has slain wrongfully, we have given power unto his heir, but let him not commit excess in slaying."<sup>8</sup> In other words, you can kill people if you are in the right. Premarital sex is met with stoning to death. Assassination is ordered for those practicing freedom of speech deemed to have insulted Islam. Execution is prescribed for converts from Islam to other religions. Suicide bombers are sent, dreaming of Paradise, as they commit atrocities against innocent members of groups thought to have wronged or blocked the empowerment of Muslims. And all of this is done in the name of Allah.

Can submission to the will of another ever be virtuous? It can be expedient, of course, under duress. It can be dutiful, if operating in a hierarchical organization whose objectives are worthy. It may reflect an appropriate measure of humility needed to achieve a group goal coordinated by someone with special expertise. But is surrender to a higher power inherently *virtuous*? Just the opposite, it would seem. Each individual is born with an inherent faculty of moral judgment. Suspending that faculty or failing to exercise it when in the face of an ethical challenge is a moral error. Submission to a power figure is an abrogation of

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<sup>8</sup>Caesar Farah, *Islam* (Sixth Edition, Hauppauge, NY, Barron's Educational Series, 2000) p. 112.

responsibility and an implicit acceptance of the principle that might makes right.

"No," it might be countered, "surrender to God is good because God is good, not just because He is powerful." But it requires a judgment from a human being to decide whether "God" is good. And if we have enough moral capacity to make that judgment, why isn't it more virtuous for us to make our own moral judgments about other choices, rather than follow without deliberation the directions of another, whether that other is "God" or those who purport to speak for God?

### ***Christianity***

Christianity provides the most complete rationalizations of human suffering that have ever been devised. It begins with a massive guilt trip—that Jesus died for our sins. This a colossal failure of logic. Christians ignore the implications of this story for the character of God the Father. Recall, even in the official version, it was God the Father who sent Jesus to earth to suffer.

Suppose you adopted two children, and then managed to have a son of your own. Then suppose the two adopted children misbehaved. Would you bring your children together, inform the adopted ones they misbehaved, and then punish your natural child, explaining that you couldn't possibly forgive the adopted kids unless you punished your innocent natural son? If you behaved like that consistently, a social agency would surely intervene and prosecute you for child abuse. How can Christians believe a story like this and still maintain that their God the Father is just? The logic is ignored because it would be inconvenient to their cult faith.

And what of the virtue of Jesus? In a key moment, just before he was arrested, he asked the Father to take the cup of suffering away. But then he said, "Your will be done, not mine." He surrendered to the will of the Father. And thereby, he became complicit in his own suffering. The children of

abusive parents also often become complicit in their own wounding, but we do not see that as a virtue. Indeed, acceptance of a victim role often leads to development of a perpetrator role later in life, and family patterns of abuse tend to be propagated across generations. Jesus was a role model for passive acceptance of abuse. That is not a healthy role model. Surrender to abuse means suppressing our compassion for ourselves and damaging our capacity for compassion toward others. Jesus would have been a better role model for human beings if he had shown the courage to stand up to the "Father" and shout, "No, we won't willingly agree to our own suffering!"

With the guilt trip in place, however, and the suffering of Jesus front and center, it becomes much easier for Christians to rationalize the suffering of other human beings. One rationale is always a pay-off in the next life, reinforced by the message of the resurrection. The doctrine basically comes down to the idea that life on this earth doesn't really matter except as a test for your placement in the next world. It is a message of other-worldly selfishness, like that embedded in the concept of karma. However, it glorifies suffering itself during this life, as in the saints and the martyrs, as well as in Jesus.

Christianity also invites its adherents to declare war on their own nature, as part of proving themselves in this test of a life. The natural human inclinations toward sexuality, pride of accomplishment, and satisfaction of material desires are at times ridden with guilt in Christian ideologies. Rather than satisfying lower-level desires and then moving on to seek the fulfillment of ever higher aspirations, as is the natural progression, Christianity invites us to arrest our development in order to stay locked in a struggle over whether or not to seek fulfillment of basic aspects of our own nature.<sup>9</sup> These artificial tests impose unnecessary impediments, inner

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<sup>9</sup>See Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York, Van Nostrand, 1968).

struggles, and emotional distress on human beings. They divert us from the true issues of morality, which involve finding the appropriate balance among competing ethical claims.

### ***The Misanthropy of Exclusivism***

One systemic issue cuts across all the major religions: their tendency to exclude each other. Like other social animals, humans adopt a different stance toward members of their own in-group than toward outsiders. But when religion is the basis for defining one's identity group, the differences in behavior toward insiders and outsiders can be profound. A key reason is the authorization of in-group prejudices by a supreme authority figure. Often, religious traditions suggest that God Himself will treat outsiders harshly, thereby providing a negative role model effect. But to the extent that it means more to us to be a Muslim or Hindu or Christian or Buddhist or Jew than it means to be a human being, we are limiting our human identity and our capacity for compassion. The intense in-group prejudices of religions can impair the inherent capacity of a human being to feel empathy for other people.

### ***Conclusion***

Major world religions made important contributions to civilization at the time of their founding. However, they were also imbued with errors of thought and even strains of barbarism that were present in those times. In moral sensibility and understanding of psychological health, the more advanced elements of our cultures today have moved far beyond the limitations of our religious traditions. Religions have institutionalized blame-the-victim patterns and other dysfunctional rationalizations of human suffering, fostered dissociation from human identity, provided severe and tight boundaries for an in-group identity, and impaired

natural empathy and compassion. It is time for humanity to believe in itself more fully and no longer accept the teachings of misanthropic institutions that distort the consciences of our young. It is time to supersede traditions that we have outgrown.

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