

Thoughts in Captivity

by Anonymous

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." --
Proverbs 3:5

"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."
--Proverbs 16:25

"Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ..." --2 Corinthians 10:5

Let us try a hypothetical exercise.

Imagine, for a moment, that you wanted to create a memetic virus - a belief or system of beliefs of your choosing that would spread from person to person, instill its targets with specific thoughts or opinions of your choosing, and be almost impossible to eradicate once it had taken root in a mind. Why anyone would want to do such a thing is not really important for the purposes of this exercise, but there could be many reasons. Perhaps you were after personal gain and wanted to foster a belief system that would convince people to give their money and possessions to you. Perhaps you were an aspiring tyrant striving for the unquestioning obedience of the populace. Perhaps you were a political or military leader seeking to create the perfect army of fanatically dedicated and loyal soldiers. None of that truly matters. The question is, how could you create such a virus? How could you craft a system of beliefs that would inspire this reaction?

The first thing you would need to do would be to find a way to insinuate your virus into a mind - to convince people to accept your new ideology. True viruses work by surrounding their 'payload' of genetic material with a protein coat that disguises them as innocuous substances. When the virus comes in contact with a cell, the protein shell is able to successfully dock with the cell membrane's receptors, like a key fitting into a lock. Once this has happened, the virus is able to penetrate the membrane and inject its own DNA into the nucleus of the cell.

The same principle holds true here. To convince people to accept your memetic virus into their minds, you must disguise it as something innocuous, even something beneficial. Without a doubt, the best way to do this would be to convince people that the belief system you are offering them is good for them - that positive results will accrue if they accept it. The most rational way to do this would be to promise them a reward of some sort: money, fame, power, attractive members of the opposite sex, and so on. But that's needlessly complicated. Why not just go for the jugular? All these things are routes to

pleasure, so let's just set them aside and promise your adherents pleasure in its pure form, undiluted happiness and bliss. That seems simple enough.

However, there is a problem with this. If you promise people a reward you can't deliver, and then don't deliver, they will realize that your ideology is false and abandon it. How can we avoid this? The logical answer is to make the reward proposition a perpetually moving target: keep promising them that they'll get it if they work a little bit harder, do a little bit more for you. That way, if they don't get the reward you can move the blame from yourself to them, and they'll have to believe you. But there will always be sharp-eyed skeptics who'll want to see examples of people who have gotten this reward, just to prove it exists. So, as a final twist, let's move the reward to a place where no one can verify or disprove the fact of its awarding. Like... after death! That's the ticket! We now have a nicely unfalsifiable proposition. No one will ever be able to show evidence that you were wrong.

The second problem is transmission. You may be able to sway a few people into believing you, but you can't spend all your time evangelizing. The logical solution is to add to the forming memetic virus a suite of beliefs that cause the newly converted themselves to want to spread it to others. Since we already have the reward proposition, that next step is a simple one. Convince your acolytes that it is beneficial to them - that it will increase their own reward further - to spread the good news to everyone they know. Better yet, phrase it in a more selfless form: convince them that they should convert other people for those own people's good. That way everyone can enjoy the reward they've already been promised.

You now have your vector - a means by which the memetic virus can be spread from host to host. True viruses work in a similar way: they invade the cell, conquer its DNA, and in effect give the cellular machinery the message "make more copies of me." Your ideology is now poised to multiply in similarly explosive fashion. There's just one problem left.

Medical science has defenses against viruses and other pathogens: antibiotics, vaccines, and so on. Yet viruses have their own counter-defenses; they can mutate and so gain immunity to the substances designed to kill them. How can we make our memetic virus immune to a cure?

The answer, once again, is marvelously simple. Add to your virus another suite of beliefs. These ones will convince the infected that questioning the virus is wrong. Teach them that doubt is evil, that skepticism is to be set aside, that critical thought is to be avoided. Teach them that even a rational examination of their own beliefs will put them in serious jeopardy of losing their promised reward, and that instead, blind faith is essential. Trust me, your message will go. Don't think for yourself. Don't research. Believe what I tell you. Obey me and believe that I am always right. In this way, you will never give skepticism a chance to take root; you can cut doubt off at the pass.

Your memetic virus is now ready to go. There are a few conceivable changes you could enact to make it even more effective: for example, you could balance the promised

reward with a promise of punishment for those who stray, to ensure even stronger obedience among your believers. You could add that those who are not infected are in dire jeopardy of this punishment, to increase the urgency and effectiveness of its transmission. You could insert an instruction to believers to infect children as early as possible, before a strong 'immune system' of critical thinking skills can form. You could add rules and doctrines to create an entire culture based around this virus, so people grow up without ever being exposed to possible counteragents. But by and large, what we have now will suffice. Insert the 'payload' of whatever specific beliefs you wish it to instill, release it on an unsuspecting populace, and the rest is history.

Of course, virtually every reader will by now have realized where this is going. Religion is precisely such a memetic virus. I am not necessarily claiming that religion was invented for any of the reasons described above. I am claiming that religion is the textbook example of a system of thought designed to stifle critical thinking and keep its adherents enslaved to doctrine. If you wanted to invent a system to hold people in mental thrall, you couldn't do any better than the belief systems we already have.

An example may prove my point.

It is axiomatic that truth cannot contradict truth. In other words, a doctrine that is true should have nothing to fear from even the most rigorous critical analysis, because if it is correct, it will inevitably be borne out by the evidence. Therefore, it is only logical that any religion that really believes in its own truth should instruct its followers to question it at every opportunity. It should dare them to try to prove it wrong.

However, this is not the case. With only a few, very rare exceptions, almost all religions teach their members not to question or doubt, but to conform. In fact, many teach that doubt and skepticism are downright evil. If you have doubts, the message goes, suppress them. If you feel skepticism, stifle it. If you find yourself about to question, go pray for relief from the evil temptations of reason. If you think critically, you are putting yourself at dire risk of endless, horrible punishment.

Why is this?

Why do so many religions try so hard to suppress skepticism and doubt? Shouldn't a true doctrine welcome critical scrutiny? Shouldn't it welcome the hard questions? If you are so confident that you are right, why are you afraid to prove it?

Of course, the answer is obvious. As described above in the example of the memetic virus, the best way to shelter a falsehood is to discourage doubt and threaten those who ask inconvenient questions. In many religions, including the Judeo-Christian tradition, this has come to its logical conclusion in the figure of Satan.

Satan is the avatar of knowledge and critical thinking; he is the personification of doubt. In the fable of the Garden of Eden, Satan is the one who encourages Adam and Eve to question God, and as a result gets humanity kicked out of Paradise and condemned to

lives of toil and suffering. The message here is rather obvious. This moral reappears in the story of Satan's temptation of Jesus. If you are the Son of God, he urges Christ, prove it; do miracles, display your powers, give us some evidence. Jesus refuses, admonishing the Devil that one should not try to put God to the test. Again, the message here has all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. If you feel doubt, or if someone asks you for proof, that is the voice of Satan seeking to lead you into confusion and error. No matter how reasonable he seems, no matter how convincing he sounds, you must ignore him, at peril of your immortal soul.

This tradition of discouraging doubt and encouraging ignorance and blind faith is again seen in John Milton's classic *Paradise Lost*, with its unforgettable portrait of Lucifer the fallen angel, expelled from glory for questioning God's absolute authority, railing against his maker and proclaiming that he would rather reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. But the most compelling and frightening (for believers) thing about this Satan is that he makes sense. Many of his arguments against God seem reasonable, even persuasive - why should he get all the power, why should everyone have to do what he says? Is it because might makes right? But, again, the same theme recurs. No matter how much sense Satan makes, he is the father of lies, the prince of deceivers, and he has nothing in mind for you but evil. No matter how compelling his arguments seem, you must not listen to him. You must ignore everything he says.

This theme is seen once again in the Bible quotes at the beginning of this essay. They all say the same thing: trust God, believe in God, obey God (or at least his representatives here on Earth); think only the thoughts he wants you to think, believe only the things he wants you to believe; and above all, do not question. Do not rely on your own ability for critical thought (the one he created you with). What you think may seem right to you, but the result of choosing your own path is death.

Why do so many religions say this? Bizarrely, the Christian religion claims that God's existence is self-evident in nature, and yet that same religion instructs its followers not to investigate this for themselves on pain of eternal torture. Why is knowledge a sin? Why were we instructed not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil - why was God trying to keep us naive and obedient? (As Frank Zappa put it, "God is the smartest and he doesn't want any competition... get smart and I'll fuck you over, sayeth the Lord.") Is healthy doubt really the alluring whisper of Satan, or is religion a massive mind-control scheme, brainwashing its followers to keep them from thinking for themselves? I know which answer fundamentalists will instantly jump for, but again I remind readers that truth cannot contradict truth. If your religion is correct, it should have nothing to fear from the evidence. It should have nothing to fear from doubt.

Furthermore, religion has set itself up to encourage the compartmentalization of the human mind. Authors who write fantasy, science fiction or other imaginative genres are familiar with the concept of "suspension of disbelief", wherein a reader must set aside his knowledge of how reality ordinarily works and enter the story on its own terms. Readers of sword-and-sorcery fantasy must temporarily forget that magic doesn't really exist.

Science fiction fans must accept the author's terms for what technology of the future will be capable of. If one does not do this, the story will seem ridiculous and implausible.

Religion is the same way. Everyone knows that miracles of the sort described in the Bible don't really happen. Everyone knows, at some level, that three-days-dead people don't come back to life; that human beings require two parents to be conceived; that shrubbery doesn't speak, seas don't spontaneously part and rivers don't turn into blood; and that God never, ever, makes the sort of dramatic manifestations he is so commonly credited with in the Bible. Everyone knows these things, and it is good for them that they do, because in a world run entirely by miracles nothing could ever get done. We would have no reason to believe that our prior experiences would be any guide in helping us predict the future. We need the regularities of natural law to create patterns we can recognize and learn from, and most of us do operate under the presumption that the way things worked yesterday is a reasonably good guide to the way they will work tomorrow.

Nevertheless, religion violates this rule. When a theist picks up their Bible, they suspend their disbelief and switch to the "religion compartment" of their brain. Suddenly, all rules of logic and evidence are set aside, and anything goes. Snakes and burning bushes that talk? People who walk on water? Prophets who receive revelation from angels? Loving, merciful deities who order the brutal, bloody massacre of thousands or millions? No problem! It's religion. Everything is allowed. It doesn't have to make sense.

When the theist sets the Bible down, they revert to their "everyday mode" - with a slight difference. Most of us suspend our disbelief purely for the purposes of the story; when we set the latest fantasy novel down, we don't rush out to cast spells or invoke demons. We know that it's just fiction. Yet the theists continue to believe, on some level, that things like this can actually happen. In a sense, their suspension-of-disbelief mechanism is stuck in the "on" position. They actually believe this stuff - though, again, the compartmentalization of their mind and the knowledge that miracles don't really happen allows them to function in the real world.

This is yet another reason why religion is a mechanism of mind control, and it also explains why people who are intelligent and rational in every other respect often completely lose it when the topic of God comes up. They have switched to the "religion" compartment of their brains. In this mode of thought, no arguments can convince them, no evidence can sway them, because in this mode of thought things are not required to make sense. Maybe it's God testing my faith; maybe it's Satan tempting me. Who knows? Who cares? All bets are off. But when dealing with anything else - including the holy books of other faiths - they are in "logical" mode and can rationally examine them and describe the faults therein. It is only dealing with their own religion that prompts the suspension of disbelief and logic.

In addition, religion's self-perpetuating, unfalsifiable nature allows it to tighten its grip on the minds of believers. Prayer is the quintessential example of this. Whenever a theist says a prayer, one of two things can happen - what they prayed for will happen, or it won't. If it doesn't, they are rarely disappointed. They merely assume God is teaching

them patience, or is working to bring about a greater good, or is just holding off for mysterious unknowable reasons of his own. On the other hand, if the prayer is apparently granted (with the millions that are said every day, it would be surprising if a few did not come true just by chance), they rejoice at this latest incontrovertible proof of God's existence and beneficence. It's a proposition that can't fail: if the prayer is granted, it's the will of God; if it's not granted, it's also the will of God. Nothing counts as evidence against their belief. Religion is, by its nature, designed to be impervious to any imaginable disproof.

To further immunize itself against logic and reason, religion has adopted a particularly insidious idea: that of indoctrinating the young, converting them at an early age. For example, there are organizations such as the "Good News Club" that specifically target elementary school-aged children for evangelism. It is no coincidence that they do this: children at this age still lack the ability to tell fantasy apart from reality, as well as being especially prone to unquestioning acceptance of whatever authority figures tell them. And once they are converted, of course, the other mechanisms detailed above help religion to tighten its hold on their minds; the longer they have believed for, the less likely they are to eventually deconvert, especially if it is the way they have always been brought up and know no other. If proselytizers had any confidence in the soundness of their doctrine, they would not need to brainwash the young, but could afford to wait until someone was of an age and mental state to consider the evidence rationally to present their case. Instead, they do not do this: they target the young, the lonely, the bereaved, and others who are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable.

It is worth noting that this last tactic is also one of the common techniques of a cult: ambush the vulnerable, break down their defenses with a flood of propaganda, give them encouragement and affirmation if they are swayed, and finally, cause them to disconnect from everyone outside the cult so they will no longer have a life if they leave it. These are classic brainwashing techniques, and thus it is no surprise that they are frequently employed by religions as well as cults. In fact, the difference between the two is only a matter of size - a religion is a large, socially acceptable cult. There is no other difference between them. Like cults, some religions are benign, but many others are radical and dangerous. Like cults, religions can convince people to abandon everything they used to be and sign away their possessions and lives to distant authority figures. Like cults, religions often threaten dire punishment on those who leave, or wage psychological warfare on their enemies. And like cults, religions can brainwash people into believing the most absurd and illogical things. Really, how are stories of snakes talking or men coming back from the dead any less ridiculous than stories about UFOs hiding in comets' tails, other than that more people have a preconceived bias in favor of one than in favor of the other?

The branding of skepticism and critical thinking as evil and dangerous; the suppression of free thought and logic; the compartmentalization of the human mind; the use of self-perpetuating and unfalsifiable doctrines; the targeting of the young for evangelism; and the same brainwashing techniques commonly employed by cults. All these practices and more reveal religion for what it is: a memetic virus, a system of brainwashing actively

designed to stifle free inquiry, discourage doubt and keep minds under control and obedient. In contrast to atheism, religion teaches that there are such things as forbidden questions, that we should passively accept the decrees of authority, and that it is right and good to censor inconvenient knowledge and "dangerous" truths.

If the point is not yet proven, one final example may help drive it home. Consider the initial response of many fundamentalists to an atheist - the one that comes even before the typical straw-man mischaracterizations of their opponent's position, even before the arguments from authority, circular reasoning and other logical fallacies. Can anyone doubt that it often takes the response of an angry, incredulous denunciation - knee-jerk outrage that, in essence, reduces to, "You're not allowed to say things like that!"

Why is this, one wonders? Could it be that the fundamentalists are so deeply brainwashed that they are no longer able even to conceive of the possibility of people who think differently than they do? Could it be that they are threatened and incensed by the mere existence of people who do not agree with them? Or could it simply be that they are unable to tolerate opposing viewpoints? (Just think: Why is there even such a concept as blasphemy?) All of these speak eloquently to the status of religion as a mind-control tool.

Doubtless, sadly, there are some who are so thoroughly indoctrinated that deconversion is no longer even a possibility for them. Their minds are permanently trapped in the shackles of theism; they are enslaved and glad to be so, and they will probably be that way until they die. But there are also many believers whose minds still have at least some capacity for free thought. It is these people whom atheists must target - if not necessarily to convert them, to at least get them to understand that we exist, that we are people like everyone else, and that we have good reasons for thinking as we do. It is these people who still have the spark of freedom that we can and must encourage - because religion, in the end, is a method of mind control, and it cannot survive forever in the presence of critical thought.

But all of the above is just my opinion. I could be wrong.