

Dangerous Illusions: How Religion Deprives Us of Happiness by Vitaly Malkin

I like the way the book reminds us that we should welcome and invite criticism for our views as it shows we are being taken seriously. It recognises that views and ideas have consequences and that to take a view seriously is to take the person seriously as well. In that spirit I want to highlight what I think is best and most profound in this book.

Quote: It is the pursuit of illusions that has founded the religions which exert their influence on half of humanity and founded or destroyed the vastest empires. It is not in the pursuit of truth, but in that of error that humanity has expended the most efforts.

Comment: Food for thought! It is natural for error to be always under threat for the truth is there and cannot be changed. So naturally it will need a lot of support and enablers to have any measure of success. And that success cannot last forever. Every Church has its closet and unofficial but none the less real ex-members.

Quote: The vast majority of trends in ancient philosophy endowed reason alone with the ability to impart knowledge to men and to provide a practical guide to a successful and happy earthly existence.

Knowledge was limited by the material world around Man and was considered the highest authority in settling all questions pertaining to human life, being commensurable with the body; the body and mind are indivisible and die at the same time. Reason emanates from the body, which is why a mind never struggles against the body and its instincts and needs.

Comment: The mind does struggle against bodily instinct and needs only if it is convinced they are somehow bad! Reason affects the body.

Quote: In Antiquity, reason was placed higher than ethics and was itself a source of ethical standards. Reason fulfilled the role of Man's personal 'higher judge' and helped him to create an individual scale of values and morality.

Comment: Your eyesight is a higher judge than you for you cannot do anything about seeing something. In the same way reason is a higher judge. So what do some people need God for?

Quote: In the Ancient World, reason used the consequent knowledge to improve everyone's quality of life and create a system of values. Reason was naturally attuned to the real world; it was inclined towards independent critical analysis. It demanded objective proof for everything and was ontologically opposed to mystical experiences, murky traditions and miracles. Unlike reason, religion is guided not by the world as it really is, but by the blind faith in truths dictated by the Sacred Scripture.

Comment: Revelation from God or indeed any person who witnesses something is by definition not inclined to independent analysis. It is other factors that make examination possible. And they are not always there.

Quote: Job never doubted God's almighty power (especially after losing all his property and children in a single moment); he simply wanted to be sure of God's moral stance and the existence of divine justice. His despair led him to abandon his faith in the justice of God. God's answer took the form of a long and eloquent list of all His achievements in creating a perfect world and a demonstration of the signs of His might.

Comment: In other words, God wants you to be impressed rather than informed. It is a cruel way to treat somebody who wants an answer. It is God saying, "Look away from the evil and at my great accomplishments" when you ask him why there is so much evil and suffering during his watch (not to mention his making terrible diseases!). That is not facing the problem but ignoring it and being wilfully blind and biased.

Quote: Pagan religions never required Man to dedicate himself wholly to his deity. Moreover, it was unclear to which deity one should have dedicated his life to, since there were so many gods that even remembering their names was a real problem.

Comment: Could be one way to define an idol - something you don't give very much thought to or sacrifice to. God would be an idol to most Christians in that sense. Some say he is an idol to all of them! So why is it an idol then? Surely in a consumerist society shopping is an idol? The answer is that the idols that we have in mind are called Gods and only worshipped when the person wants something. Pagans were willing to sacrifice babies and animals to their gods for they didn't want to be too devoted themselves!

Quote about theories that have two sources - a divine source of good and a divine source of evil:

Both these worlds have always been there but never mixed. They are engaged in a constant battle between themselves; their powers are equally matched so that Goodness can never vanquish Evil, which is indestructible and therefore invincible.

Comment: If evil is invincible then the vile person becoming good is proof only that you can flit back and forth from either side but is not evidence that evil is eradicable. It is evidence that it makes no real difference - it is still half and half.

Believers in God are motivated to worship and obey him simply by how they think they see his hand around them fixing evil and so on. The hidden assumption is that progress is always happening. In reality progress is not a steady stream. It spurts. People progress and then new problems arise that destroy that progress. Technological progress has resulted in people becoming more objectified and lonely for person to person relationships are replaced by social media.

It's a bad belief for it is wrong and it is also harmful.

Quote: Thomas [Aquinas] didn't believe that evil could exist on its own; rather, for him, evil was a corruption of grace and an abuse of free will. People are responsible for their own sins and they cause evil to appear in the world. Although God doesn't wish for evil, He nevertheless has a moral basis for allowing it to exist as without it the universe would be less complete. Suffering has a positive value because it reminds people of the evil in the world and highlights the contrast between Heaven and Earth.

Comment: To say that evil is a parasite and good that is in the wrong place and time is to say it is not a thing or power. It cannot really exist. Evil is just a different good - it is 95% good when 100% is possible. To condemn it then is difficult and looks harsh. That is one reason why those who say they have nothing personal against sinners for sinning are lying. They are passive aggressive.

If God needs evil then he has to wish for it in a sense. If we think he needs it then we have to wish for it in a sense too! Why God-botherers are seen as snow white is beyond me!

Quote: [Peter] Kreeft describes the Scriptures as a history of the love for God – the same love which is the answer to all our problems and the key to the fulfilment of all our desires. He is not very interested in other forms of love, because the love for God alone is stronger than evil, suffering, and death.

Comment: So love is not cherished for being love or just being good but because of what good you can get out of it. And to say the Bible is a love story is outrageous when you consider all the violence demanded by his God and Jesus' own vindictive temperament.

[Theodicy means an explanation for why God can let somebody be led into evil or hurt and why he creates killer diseases] Quote: In *Christ and Horrors*, Adams states that theodicy isn't needed at all: 'My own view is that talk of theodicy – of justifying the ways of God to humankind – is misleading, because God has no obligations to creatures and hence no need to justify divine actions to us.'

Comment: The logic is that God is not like a human being but is the creator of all and so when he makes all things he owes nobody an explanation for what he does.

The error is that this logic thinks it proves that God needs to have no obligation but he could still take on one. It does not prove he has no obligation to tell us why we suffer. It is us who suffer not him and that to me suggests that he does have an obligation. Surely God is not going to act like a cold judge who cares about duties not people?

Suppose it is true that he has no duty or obligation to tell us why we suffer.

I have no obligation to show you why your maths is wrong but I can still do it. And it does not change the fact that I should. A strict obligation being absent does not mean there are other obligations that arise. If I strictly speaking do not owe you your money for you told me to keep it I may be obligated by compassion to return it to you if you need it for a vital doctor's appointment.

If we are made in the image of God then he can have obligations to creatures. We are supposed to be adopted children for goodness sake. God cannot ask for a relationship with us and not make adjustments so that he can be on our level reasonably well. So if there are not enough obligations on his part he has to make them.

Quote: What theodicy gave to humanity is hard to say. I find the whole question of theodicy senseless; rather than fighting the evil in the world, it consumes enormous resources in presenting arguments exonerating God from any blame for it.

Comment: Christians see doing good as theodicy - they say it shows God wants us to battle evil. Theodicy is not just theory but theory in action.

Theodicy is there even when not explicitly stated. When a Christian who does not think of why God may allow evil to happen does something for another that is theodicy.

Quote: Philosopher and reform rabbi Emile Fackenheim is convinced that Jews shouldn't renounce God because of the Holocaust, because that would mean that Hitler had won. Fackenheim maintains that God never left his people.

Comment: That would be a passive aggressive approach! And if it is hinting that loss of faith is bad how could it be bad if the Jews are right that they were abandoned? Don't infantilise them by declaring that it is good for them to think God's hand was over them when it was not.

Quote: Through His [Jesus'] own death, He redeemed the sins of humanity, including the original sin, the biggest sin of all. Isn't a believer's offer of voluntary suffering a worthy response to this gift?

Comment: That is exactly what Christianity says. It makes sin a bigger concern than suffering. That is

warped. If morality is not about relieving suffering it is just rules and self-righteousness!

You can offer involuntary suffering too which is as good as makes it voluntary! In that sense for the Christian involuntary suffering does not exist.

It is the atheist's worst nightmare to imagine a faith that not only makes excuses for suffering but celebrates it!

Quote: According to Ambrose of Milan, our tribulations are a sign of God's favour. He punishes us here on earth, just as a caring father should, in order to exalt us in Heaven. Therefore we must rejoice at this and weep bitterly when trials and suffering are not visited upon us.

Comment: That proves how manipulative Christianity is. How - for it panders to how people think they are too wonderful to suffer even partly because God is punishing them and giving them justice. Justice however is a two-way street. It is selfishness and egotistical to think it should be all rewards. Jesus himself tried to "reassure" people that their suffering was not necessarily about God punishing them. The Gospel of John has him saying a man's disability was not down to the man's own sin or his parent's sin. We have proven that people are following not Christianity but a sanitised cultural entity with Christian seasoning.

Quotes: Buddhism clearly emphasises a religious lifestyle, which is placed above secularism. A secular lifestyle is clearly a concession to those who are weak of body, will, and spirit. Otherwise, where would all these Buddhist monks come from?...Buddhism regards all suffering as a type of evil that has nothing to do with sinfulness or morality and which must be eliminated from one's life.

Comment: But Christianity says that religious life with God is incomparable with anything else especially secularism! It too must be making cynical and hypocritical concessions as well!! Suffering in Buddhism matches the secular view. It is wise.

This brings us to our next quote:

Maslow said in Motivation and Personality that 'basic needs must be satisfied, otherwise we get sick'. I tend to believe him: that all the people living a full life are mentally healthy, while those who call on us to restrain ourselves painfully for the sake of 'attaining spiritual perfection' are sick. Man is sacred and his pleasures are, too.

Comment: That speaks for itself.

Quote: Contemporary theodicy. It tries to justify God by stressing his weaknesses. Even if God loves us, he is not all-mighty and cannot defend us from Evil. This God doesn't deserve our veneration and is as useless as his religion. Both cases give me the criminal thought that either God simply doesn't exist or we considerably exaggerate his significance. We live alongside an ignorant, immoral, and powerless God. Placing your hope in such a God is useless.

Comment: In other words, God is really worshipped not for his perfect heart but for his power. It is what you might get out of him not him that you care about.

Religious psychologists feel that if you don't believe in a God who one day will fix the universe and wipe out evil and sin and suffering then you may believe in a weaker God who needs you to lift arms and fight for him. They point out that there can be no peace where there is no war against evil.

The same problem can exist with an almighty and infinitely powerful God who for some reason will not

act against evil. He cannot act not because he does not have the power he does. He cannot act for reasons other than all that. Such a God of endless power who cannot use it to destroy evil now is not really different from one that just does not have endless power.

The fact remains that a God who has to tolerate evil people or evil gives a reason to fight.

Quote: If we just want God for he gives us real hope that together with him we will vanquish evil then we don't want him for his own sake. Why can't a weak creator be worshipped just as a mighty one for it is not his fault his powers are limited? What kind of theofascism is this?

Comment: Good!

Quote: I see no reason to justify God in the face of the evil in the world. I have always thought that this task is beyond anyone; how can a weak man, whose ability to think is highly limited, justify God? Is God really unable to justify Himself? To give us some sort of sign? Besides, any God who needs our justification and defence doesn't merit being called God – this is no God at all. I leave this justification to those who desire to believe in the supernatural.

Comment: Rubbish! God can inspire man to find the answer or just tell us. Christian theodicy theorists think their ideas are a response to prayers for guidance. We only need a plausible answer not necessarily the right one.

Quote: Moderation is not bad because too much can be as bad as too little; it can be harmful to humans. Desires can never be fully satisfied ...

Comment: Too much or too little is bad which is why we need moderation but we also need it to avoid the disappoint that too much or too little will give us in their own distinctive ways. Whether too much is as bad as too little depends on what it is! It depends on the circumstances. Desires not being fully realised should teach you maturity. It leads to better happiness in the long run.

Quote: Secular asceticism does not have as its goal the subordination of the body to the spiritual; it never separates body and spirit and considers the person as an indivisible whole. Secular asceticism is about exercising self-control and willpower, freeing oneself from the influence of short-term emotions and moods and casting off the fleeting, useless, and empty.

Comment: The empty should mean God for loving God does not put bread on the table or keep meat on the bones.