

Is Religion “Opium for the People”?



Thoughts
&
Experiences

Religion is like opium for the
people—a dangerous drug
that makes them stupid and
submissive ...

... that's how they saw it



Karl Marx (1818-1883)
and
Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924)



Were they right?



... they were right—
when everything
is upside down.

“I was invited to hold a Bible study in a men’s prison. As I passed through several security areas, the sound of rock music rang louder and louder in my ears. In the chapel about 100 men were dancing and screaming—being cheered on by the ‘gospel preachers.’ The rock music was gospel songs. The men didn’t know who or where they were ...”

– A missionary

Feelings
RULE

The will

SUPPRESSES

Reason



Cool, but ...

Happiness

is a basic need that all people share, and searching for it is one of the basic rights that we have. There's nothing wrong with happy feelings, but when they are given top priority we are no longer able to make an intelligent decision.

“Good feelings” are one of the best advertising agencies—and they are also used in religion.



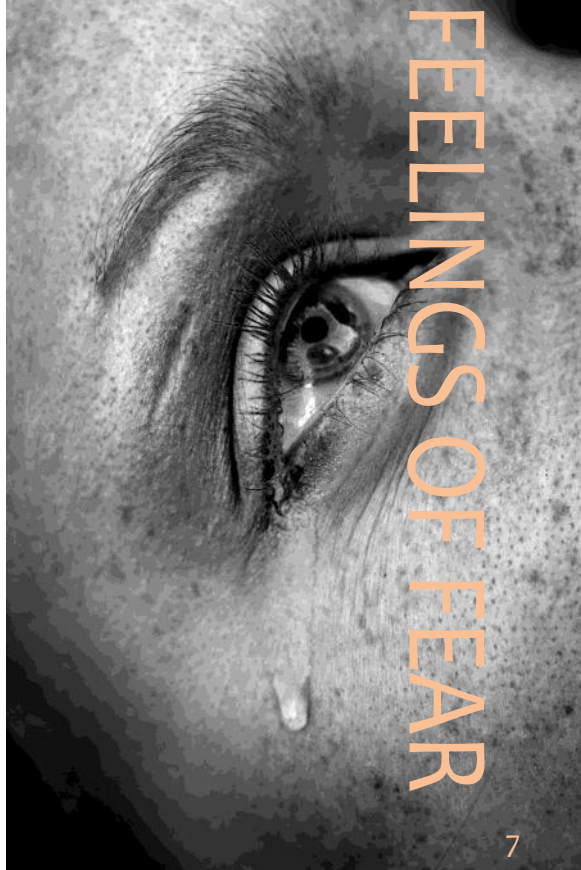
for how long?

Fear

is like a warning system in people that protects them from danger and pain. If we had no fear, we might jump from a tower and risk killing ourselves. Fear is necessary, but when it takes priority we are no longer free.

Religion has always exercised an influence over people through fear, especially unfounded fears that are stirred up by others.

FEELINGS OF FEAR



Feelings of joy or feelings of fear?

Decide for yourself ...

“It was a solemn sermon that touched a sore spot in our lives. Thoughtfully we made our way home. At lunchtime the topic came up again. We quickly saw an application to one or the other weak sheep in the church and discussed the matter lively. Compared with their problems, ours sank into insignificance. The initial shock faded away, and I was happy to think that we were not like that.” – *H.H.*

“I’ve made a big mess again—but it doesn’t matter. It’s not so bad, because it has all been forgiven by God’s grace. And that’s really great.” – *A young person*

“A God who enjoys seeing the rejecters of His grace being tortured and suffering—that’s the idea behind every religious persecution, in the past as well as today. If we don’t obey God voluntarily then we have to learn to fear Him. What kind of eternity will that be?” – *Thoughts of a 17-year-old*

“I was raised in a religious family. But honestly, I only find it easy to live religiously when I am with my parents. At home it’s quite normal to pray and ‘to be good.’ But when I’m with my friends, things are quite different and I am ashamed of my religion. Where does this conflict come from?” – *R.S.*



When feelings rule ...



“That was an awesome weekend, a really high feeling. The church really rocked! Oh, Christopher just e-mailed me that he listened to the songs from the gospel night again and had a great experience. Jesus came very close to him. ‘I am with you until the end of the world,’ He said, and that really drew us close together. Ralf and Kerstin are online now—they got to know each other that night. Later on, we’ll also pray online, using a Webcam of course—that gives a better atmosphere.

“Tonight I sent eleven e-mails and shared words of love with others. I’m so thankful for this crew. That was a cool evening with Jesus. “What bothered me was my mom’s grumbling because I haven’t cleaned up my desk—applications, homework, and so on.” – *A chat*

“Basically, I don’t think much of church or religion. A few weeks ago my grandma died. I really loved her. What happens to a person after death? Where is she now, and how is she? What if she has to suffer for her sins and I could ease her pains by praying for her? I don’t really believe that, but what if it is true? I have to do something—just to be on the safe side.” – *V.A.*

“I have to do everything right, and even more than is required of me. Hard work brings its own reward. Having fun doesn’t fit in right now.” – *A young person*

“If God is love, then He must punish the evil and unrighteousness in the world.” – *A common belief*

“It doesn’t matter whether we survive or not, the soul goes on living forever.” – *A reaction to the global crisis*

“I just want paradise—now and forever. High life without end.” – *A common religious view*

How
is it with **you**
and religion?



Were Marx and Lenin right?



... they were
not right
about true religion

Thoughts out of control

Thinking a lot is part of my job. But the thoughts must also come to rest now and then. However, they often start to wander—sometimes in the wrong direction. Have I been offended or badly treated? Am I really appreciated? My thoughts center more and more on myself. I become more and more important. Everything that happens is related to me; I become more sensitive, and am finally unable to think clearly or speak rationally. It's a terrible vicious circle.

But now, when I notice these thoughts beginning, I pray for God's help and tell myself to stop. I believe that God can change me. At first, I found it difficult to stop, but now I rejoice at how free my thoughts are. They are no longer centered on me. I know that my faith has set me free. – J. S.



Partnership with God

Word of God

Nature's Laws

understanding

rules

the will

directs

feelings


Think intelligently! – Everybody expects a lot of me. My relatives and teachers said that with such good grades I should study something suitable—the best thing would be medicine. Our preacher thinks that’s a good idea as well because as a doctor you can help a lot of people. And God? No doubt He thinks so too. That’s why I began to study medicine, without thinking too much more about it. I wanted to be obedient.

But medical school is torture for me. I keep waiting for God to make me really enthusiastic about the job—but in vain. Honestly, I don’t want to be a doctor! Why don’t I just say so? Do I have to run away before I can do what I want? Why can’t I do what I am good at and enjoy doing? Has God put me into this straight jacket? Or my parents? Or the preacher?

No, I just lacked will power. God and the other people want me to think intelligently. Where can I use the abilities that God has given me and develop them further? Neither my parents, nor the teachers, nor the preacher can tell me that. I have to think for myself. I can’t throw my responsibility onto them just because I’m too lazy to think for myself. Sure, others can make suggestions, but I am the one who can decide—and I must decide! – J.C.S.



Reason



Reason is the ability to think in a careful and structured way; to recognize causes and their results, and to act accordingly. It is the moral power within us. Reason in religion means to make the word of God, together with the laws of nature, the foundation for my decisions.



**Mind power is the power
of the will.**

Faith is trusting in an all-powerful God, in His power to free us, and in His love. He always keeps His word; and through His word He sustains all life. Faith is trusting God—believing that He loves me and knows best what is for my good.

Faith

in religion

It binds reason and faith together. It opens doors to freedom.



Fear of death

I called my great grandmother “Great mama” and I loved her very much. When she died my mother found it hard to explain what had happened because I didn’t understand what death was. I remember standing at the graveside and someone telling me that my great grandma was lying there and she would not come back out again. That was creepy.

When I was a little older and began to understand what death is I developed a real fear of dying myself. I was not always aware of it, but whenever I heard of someone dying, or I attended a funeral, or felt a pain somewhere, this fear would arise. I didn’t tell anybody about it because I imagined they would laugh at me. And I also thought my fears would only get worse if I spoke about them.

Later on, I heard that God’s righteousness does not limit His love and that He does not kill under any circumstances—the life of Jesus on earth was proof of this. That was like a warm ray of sunshine to me and I began to think more about it. It was very clear: Jesus said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” *John 14:9*. Jesus didn’t kill or injure anybody, although He was often provoked or even directly challenged to do so. I understood that God loves me unconditionally and that I can always trust in Him.

This thought took away my fear of death because it is God’s will that I should live. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” *John 11:25*. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” *1 Corinthians 15:55 (NIV)*.

Whenever the fear of death threatened to come up again, it was a help for me to think about the character and power of God. I felt safe, and my fears were replaced by a feeling of security.

I once became so sick that I was actually closer to death than life. And it was this very thought about God’s character that gave me deep peace. I was in so much pain that I could only sleep in the bathtub, and just for a few minutes at a time, but my fear of death was completely gone.

After a few weeks I knew that God would heal me because my “twelve hours” were not yet over. From then on I improved until I was completely restored. – A.D.

Not left alone

When I was thirteen years old my mother unexpectedly developed cancer. Only four months later she died, at the age of thirty-nine, from her incurable disease.

I could not understand the experience that my father and I had to go through at that time.



Many questions went through my mind: Why did this tragedy hit my family? Why did my mother have to die, when she had never smoked or drunk alcohol, and had lived healthily? Why did she die at the very time I needed her most?

I had no answers to these questions. On days when I was alone my time was spent doing things that had no meaning and no aim. I was not interested in studying; I was lazy and only enjoyed sports and computer games. My grades at school dropped dramatically, and if anybody asked me for something I became very aggressive. I had lost sight of the meaning of my life.

I often thought of my mother, who was a believer. I had learned from her that the kind of life I was now living was not

right. I had a bad conscience. I was especially sorry when I treated my schoolmates so badly that some of them ran to the school office crying, or even had to be treated in the hospital. I wanted to act differently. I knew that there was a God in heaven who wanted to give my life a purpose again and make me useful to my fellow beings. And that was exactly what I wanted too. I told God my wish in a simple prayer, and He heard me. *“If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.”* *John 14:14*. I was happy that I could now be a friend to my schoolmates, especially if they were outsiders, because nobody knows what kinds of problems another person may have at home or elsewhere.

It became very clear to me that suffering and death are not agencies in God’s hand with which He personally punishes people. My mother had been faithful to the truth and righteousness until her death, and I thank God for that. He did not leave her alone, and He did not leave me alone either. – M.M.

*“Yea, though I walk
through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear
no evil; for You are with
me; Your rod and Your
staff, they comfort me.”*

Psalm 23:4.

Fear of fate

I was startled out of my sleep in the middle of the night, bathed in sweat. My head was racked with pain. It was the same nightmare again! My parents were dead—both of them, quite suddenly. I couldn't bear the thought! I was still young and needed them. It took a moment before I realized that it was only a dream. I have never understood exactly why that happened so often.

One day, I knelt down and told my heavenly Father everything in prayer: my feelings, my fears, my questions. I read in the Bible: “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” *1 Corinthians 10:13*. I understood that He would take care of me, and of my parents too. Now I had to consciously put away my fears whenever they came up again. God's promise and my decision filled me with peace. It was years later before I realized that these fearful thoughts were no longer bothering me. – H.H.



Hiding

We had always been very proud of our family—we were better, more believing, and more industrious than others. In our discussions we liked to compare ourselves with others, and we always came out on top. But in my teens I suddenly saw weaknesses in my life and I had personal conflicts that did not fit at all into the picture that I had of myself and my family. I kept quiet and hid all this as best I could. I was in the midst of an indescribable battle of putting on a good show to others. I no longer had everything under control and I lost faith in myself. In my helplessness I prayed to God to show me what I should do. It took some time and many painful experiences until I realized that God loves everybody, including me, and has paid an infinite price for me. I found peace and forgiveness, and my life began to change for the better. – P.H.





God as partner

Religion was never a big topic with us at home. We used to pray at mealtimes and sometimes we'd go to church. But I had questions about what was right and why there was so much wrong in the world. As a teenager I searched for answers, and heard the same statements everywhere. "God is love," was one aspect, but "He sometimes has to lash out in order to restrain evil" was the qualifying statement.

At an evangelistic meeting that I attended the minister spoke about Jesus as the Good Shepherd who, in His love, has to use force. His erring sheep keeps running away from Him so, in order to save it from destroying itself, He has to break its legs. Then He carries the sheep in His loving arms until it is well again. In this way the sheep learns to trust and obey Him.

I was shocked. Insecurity and fear crept up within me. Does God exercise such power over me, and others, and force us to do what He wants? But Jesus died for us, and

He prayed for forgiveness for His enemies. That means that He broke His own legs—not mine!

Some time later I heard a sermon about the character of the true followers of Christ—they return good for the evil done to them; they call sin by its right name, but they do not despise anyone who is a prisoner of sin. I was impressed. Could I be like that? It is only because God is like that that He can make me the same: *“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Matthew 5:48.*

The fear of a punishing God, who forces His creatures to comply when they do not do what He wants them to do, was gone. God wants us humans to be just as He is. He wants us to be equal partners. *“I will betroth you to Me forever.” Hosea 2:21.*

He loves us and He wants us to love Him—not to try and appease and flatter Him. A piety that is born of fear, or is practiced for the sake of reward, will never connect us with the freedom-loving God.

God gives every person the freedom to decide—to say yes or no—and He does not punish us for making use of this freedom. At the same time, He warns us against making decisions that will only damage us. He is honest with us, and tells us in advance which seed will lead to which harvest. *“For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” Galatians 6:7.* There are no exceptions to this law, either in nature or in religion. Even God reaps what He sows; therefore there is no trace of force in His love. – U.D.

“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” John 8:32.

An awakening

I first became aware of it at school: “I have to get good grades so that the others will like me. If I do good work, then my mother will love me.” And conversely: “if I am not good at school then I am not worth anything.”

Molded as I was by these feelings, I was ready to do anything that would gain the recognition and love of my mother—even if I had to lie.

As I grew older, the pressure of having to look good in order to be worth anything complemented my fears. I despised my own body and punished myself if I did not conform to the ideal that society demanded. I simply stopped eating. But despite all my

efforts and discipline, my self-esteem fell lower and lower. The result was a continual restlessness, fear, and inhibition.

And what did God think? I imagined He only made demands and condemned people—as I and everyone else did. God is perfect, and He wants me to be as good and selfless as He is. Only then can He accept me. So I tried to be as selfless and good as Jesus was. But it didn’t work. Bad things in me were constantly appearing, even though I didn’t want them to. I put God aside; I ignored and rejected Him. It was a real nightmare.

Later, I moved in with a good friend of mine who lovingly cared for me as a mother would.

At first I only rejected her care. But when I sensed the pain she felt, I suddenly realized what I was doing. I was not the victim, but the culprit! In the same way that she did everything to help me, Jesus was also working on my behalf. He doesn't demand of me that I make myself good, because He is the only one who can make me good. That's what He died for.

I became distinctly aware of the contrast between His love and my distrust. God is not a tyrant! The barrier was broken. I apologized to God, and to the people that I had hurt. Now I saw what God really thought: *"Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving kindness I have drawn you."* *Jeremiah 31:3*. I realize that feelings of fear and doubt may tempt me again. But I will reject them by the power of faith and reason. – R.G.





Chemical reactions

I'm not really a star in chemistry, and I often wonder how much I will retain from all the studying that I do. But today we had a lecture that really hit me.

It was about the second law of thermodynamics. That sounds complicated, but it is really very simple. Briefly, this law states that everything automatically tends to disorder unless energy is applied to prevent this from happening. For example, a nail will naturally rust; but a lot of energy must be applied in order to make the nail rust-free again. It cannot remove the rust by itself.

That made sense, but then I thought,

“What about Darwin and the theory of evolution? Doesn’t that say exactly the opposite? Everything has moved from the lower to the higher, from chaos to order, from unintelligence to intelligence, all by itself!”

I looked around and saw the trash on the floor and thought about my room. Yes, everywhere you look you see that order turns to chaos, and it happens quickly. So how can order arise out of chaos, just like that, and all by itself?

Then I thought about the record of creation. Suddenly it was no longer just a nice story for me. Chaos was in full sway, but an intelligent power—the Creator—specifically

applied energy in order to create order. That was in complete harmony with the second law of thermodynamics.

When I came home, and opened the door to my room, I glanced from one corner to the other and remembered what I had learned at the lecture. No, my room would not get cleaned up by itself! –
E.R.

It works!

Food has always played a big role in my life. As the owner of a pizzeria I was surrounded by it day and night. But it was also my refuge when I became depressed or angry. I calmed my feelings down by eating large quantities of junk food—sometimes until I was sick. Nobody noticed my addiction as long as I did sports. But when I stopped that, my problem became visible.

I tried various diets in order to get my weight under control, but nothing helped. Even the suggestions of the doctors always ended in disaster. I simply couldn't get rid of my excess pounds. And none of the various efforts I made changed my lifestyle, nor

did they give me control over the feelings which drove me to these eating binges. I didn't have a chance. I could not say "stop!"

Crises were continually arising in my life, and I tried again and again to escape this power that ruled over me. But whenever I seemed to gain the victory over one addiction, another would take its place. My feelings drove me to an unhealthy lifestyle.

Temperance

Exercise

Simplicity

Regularity

Healthy common sense

I finally learned some sensible principles about a healthy, natural diet which showed me the connection between cause and effect. It was not a new diet, but a new style of life. I began to plan my meals and pay attention to quality. The exercise of my will power definitely helped me; but I still had a strong desire to satisfy my feelings, which continued to have the mastery over me.

Then I heard the story of a man who wanted to do the right thing in his daily life, but was not able to—just like me. It was the story of Paul. He saw his helplessness and brought it to God. I read on: “**who will deliver me from my slavery?**” (See *Romans 7:24*.) Paul knew what was right, consented to it, put his will on the side of God’s will, and accepted deliverance. That was the key to victory. I did not hesitate, but prayed for the same experience. “**Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.**” *John 8:36*.

And so a new life of collaboration with God began. Now I am happy to eat what I need, and no more. I thank God that He has put my feet on the ground. – A.A.



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Sabbath Rest Advent Church

Waldstraße 37

57520 Dickendorf

Germany

E-Mail: info@sabbath-rest-advent.org

Website: www.sabbath-rest-advent.org