

What are the psychological drivers of religious history?

When the Buddha became "Enlightened" he realised that what is important about human beings is their ethical intentions. These are the grounds of karma in Buddhism. And he realised too that everything we call a "thing" is in reality a cascade of causal processes. Same goes for human beings: there is no enduring self or soul.

Come forward ten centuries, and Buddhism had spread right across Asia, to China, Tibet, Korea and Japan. There were many schools, priesthoods, mythologies, wisdom-teachings; and among them, cults of many Buddhas and celestial bodhisattvas. One of these, the Buddha Amit?bha, had made a pledge in a previous life that he would not enter Buddhahood unless he could be sure that anyone, no matter how ignorant, weak or sinful, would at once, when they called on him, be reborn in his Pure Land, the realm of joy.

In the 12th century CE, in Japan, the cult of Amit?bha was brought centre-stage by a priest named H?nen. He became convinced that all efforts to reach Enlightenment were futile; one's own strength was inadequate; one's only hope lay in Amit?bha's abundant, generous and inexhaustible love. H?nen's Pure Land school became the largest Buddhist denomination in Japan.

How could this happen? H?nen's rebirth in the realm of joy, achieved by no merit or effort of one's own, seemed like the inversion of the Buddha's Enlightenment, achieved after years of dedicated work and study, meditation and learning. Do these two things belong in the same religion at all?

Using insights from psychoanalysis and the philosophy of Martin Buber and Levinas, I suggest in this paper that the Buddha's Enlightenment was always in need of what H?nen discovered, the experience not just of love but of "being loved" – the passive experience. People who have had that experience can focus on the pursuit of wisdom; but for those who have not, or who have no convincing memory of it, "Enlightenment" can seem as it did to H?nen, intellectual and remote. And to say there is no self is fine for those with a robust sense of self-identity – but it's no good, it may even be damaging, for those who are diffident or self-doubting, depressed or schizoid.

I use this history to reflect on the evolution of healthy religious understanding, and what the psychological needs are that drive it, over many centuries, to provide a solution to deep longings of this kind. No surprise that the development can get de-railed, but when it doesn't get de-railed, there are recognisable forces at work that keep it on track.

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