

Y7 – Your Delusions & Addictions

Dear: Some of your unavoidable decisions deal with religions. Your initial options are: 1) decide to refuse to recognize that you must make any decisions about religions (and pretend that such a decision isn't a decision!), 2) recognize that you must make some decisions about religions but quickly dismiss such decisions as unimportant (which, given that you commit so much time to your religion, may mean that you'd decide not to be honest with yourself), 3) recognize the need and importance of such decisions and decide to do nothing (i.e., maintain the *status quo*), or 4) decide to change (which would then require that you make more decisions). Whatever you decide will influence others (especially your mother and "the other kids"), but the major influence will be on your own life (and, if appropriate, on the lives of your children and grandchildren). Your decisions won't have much effect on your grandparents, because soon we'll all be dead; then, thankfully, we'll no longer need to worry about the welfare of our grandchildren!

Relative to making decisions, in **Y5** I repeated my suggestion (from **D**) that most of your important decisions will be relatively easy to make ("Yes, do slam on the brakes!" "No, don't use mind-warping drugs!"), while many of your difficult decisions will be unimportant ("You're just splitting hairs!"). Yet, as I tried to illustrate, some important decisions are difficult, with difficulties arising from complexities (e.g., for some purchases), uncertainties (e.g., for some career choices), and/or because the decisions are "value-laden" (e.g., for some decisions dealing with your sexual activities). You may find that your decisions about religions are difficult for all three of those reasons: complexity, uncertainty, and value-laden.

Other people, however, might judge that your decisions about religions are important but simple. For example, almost certainly your mother will consider your decision about Mormonism to be both extremely important ("for the fate of your eternal soul") and simple (obviously you should continue with full participation in the "one true religion"). I, too, consider your decision to be important and simple – *important* because if you don't break free from clerical chains, you'll never reach adulthood, and *simple* because once you've decided to seek knowledge *via* the scientific method, then all supernatural stuff can be immediately dismissed as silly: "NO data, NO supernatural stuff, NO problem."

But what your mother and I think about your decisions are irrelevant; the only relevant question is: What do you think? Consequently, for this chapter my goal is to stimulate you to think about aspects of your decisions about religions that you might otherwise neglect; thereby, I'll be continuing to try to tie up still more "loose ends". Unfortunately, though, because I'll be addressing many different topics, this chapter may seem even more incoherent than usual. In an attempt to add some coherency, I'll try to organize these different topics into the categories (and in the order) "uncertainties", "values", and "complexities", but as you'll soon see when you start to dig into details, the boundaries between those categories have a tendency to collapse. I'll start with "uncertainties".

In the previous chapter, I tried to show you some of the fallacies in "Pascal's Wager", dealing with some uncertainties about religious beliefs. Recall that Pascal attempted to estimate "the expected value" of "belief in god". The "expected value" is defined to be (and reasonably is!) the value multiplied by the probability of the value being realized. Pascal estimated the value of (his) religion's promises (e.g., gaining eternal life in heaven, avoiding hell) and then multiplied that value with his estimate for the probability that his religion (Christianity) is valid. He admitted that the probability of religion's validity might be extremely small (suppose it were 10^{-12}), but upon estimating the value of "eternal bliss" to be enormous (suppose the "current market value" of heaven were $\$10^{24}$), he concluded that the expected value of his "belief" was huge (e.g., with those numbers, $10^{-12} \times \$10^{24} = \$10^{12} = 1$ trillion dollars). He therefore decided to obey the "commandments" of the clerics (which of courses include paying them 10% of his income), considering it to be a "good bet" (by which is meant that the expected value of the outcome is larger than the amount of the wager).

As I tried to show you in the previous chapter, however, Pascal's Wager is a very bad bet. In fact, not only is it a bad bet, it's a classic (maybe even the original) con game. In any con game, the con artists (in this case, the clerics) first attempt to gain the confidence of their potential victims (their "marks"). To gain such confidence, con artists commonly employ pomp and circumstance, as well as a jumble of meaningless words (all of which are well established religious practices). The con artists then offer their marks something fantastic in exchange for pittance – but their marks are to exchange something real (e.g., their money, their freedom to make their own decisions, their "humanness"...) for something imagined (e.g., "death defying" eternal bliss in any of many visions of "heaven").

And let me add (as I've done before) that few con artists have any qualms about perpetrating their frauds, for they know full well that "you can never cheat an honest man." Thus, although some con artists may admit that they, too, are dishonest (but I've never met a cleric who would!), most take pride in demonstrating that at least they're smarter crooks than their marks. As Vauvenargues "argued" (!) in 1746, "Hope deceives more men than cunning does", and as Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle, 1783–1842) said, "Religions are founded on the fear of the many and the cleverness of the few."

In the previous chapter, I tried to show you several reasons why Pascal's Wager is a bad bet. Of those reasons, perhaps the most blatant is that the same "con" can be used (and in fact, is used) to peddle any religion. Thus, even if you "bought into" Pascal's silliness, you wouldn't know whether to then become a "believing" Hindu, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Mormon, or whatever else is peddled. In fact and as I tried to illustrate, the same silliness could be used to try to sell atheism (or at least agnosticism, or at least total disinterest in all god ideas): God put us on Earth to determine those who demonstrate they're capable of thinking for themselves (e.g., according to Mormonism, to run other worlds – but to run other worlds, God needs independent thinkers, not followers); therefore, if people demonstrate that they can be swindled by con-artist clerics, then God wants nothing more to do with them; consequently, the only "sensible bet" is to ignore all ideas about all gods! (I should add, however, that I know of no one who uses that argument to swindle people.)

Viewed mathematically, Pascal's calculation is pointless because his estimate for the probability that any religion is valid is so unreliable it's useless. For example, if the probability of the existence of God is guessed to be 10^{-24} (rather than 10^{-12}), then even if "eternal paradise" is worth $\$10^{24}$, would you wager 10% of your salary for the rest of your life (e.g., \$10,000 per year for 50 years = \$500,000) to get something worth $10^{-24} \times \$10^{24} = \1 ?! And what if the probability for God's existence is 10^{-36} ? Or what if (as I estimated in an earlier chapter) the probability for God's existence is less than 10^{-200} ? And for that matter, would heaven really be worth $\$10^{24}$? Rumor has it not only that "God is dead"; he committed suicide: bored to death with an eternity of omniscience (knowing everything!), he "gave up the ghost"!

* Go to other chapters *via*

As I tried to show you, the only way to win when you're faced with such a bad bet is to refuse to gamble. In the case of all religions, what you "win" (if you refuse to buy into the clerics' con game) is that you get to keep not only your money but also your life: you won't become the clerics' pawn. Many people, however, obviously see "advantages" of buying into the clerics' con game: they avoid making difficult decisions in their lives (like sheep, they prefer to be followers), they shield themselves from thinking about their own death, and they indulge in fantasies that "in the next life", they'll be reunited with dead loved-ones, finally experience justice and security, live in "peace and plenty" (if not luxury), and so on. That is, the prospects of becoming an adult apparently frightens many people (maybe even the majority of people); so, they pay the clerics to alleviate their worries and their fears – to lull them with "good tidings" – to tell them how to live their lives – to provide them with imagined "certainty" in an uncertain reality – permitting them (if fact, encouraging them) to live in a dream world, indulging in fantasies.

To better appreciate the details of the "fantasylands" offered by the clerics of the world (fantasylands not unlike Alice's Wonderland or some Disney fantasyland), you might want to reconsider the [unofficial] advertisements of different religions. Such advertisements, stripped to their essences, are similar to the following.

- You want to fantasize that you're one of "God's chosen people", that your progeny will become "as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the sea-shore", that "all nations on Earth shall pray to be blessed as your descendants are blessed", living in "a land of milk and honey"... well then, okay, sign here to become an official member of the fantasizing Jews, obey our clerics' rules (of course including paying your tithes), and enjoy!
- You want to fantasize that some mighty father made and controls the universe, that his son Jesus loves you, that there's a ghost that flits around and can fill you with a "holy spirit", that when you die you can live with all three of them (in one!) forever in a wonderful place called heaven, where you'll re-unite with your "dearly departed" and finally see that justice will be achieved (hearing and watching your enemies screaming and "gnashing their teeth" in Hell)... well, then, okay, sign here to become an official member of the fantasizing Christians, obey our clerics' rules (of course including paying your tithes), and enjoy!

- You want to fantasize that your religion will become the only religion in the world, that all your enemies (the horrible “unbelievers”) will suffer even worse penalties (in an even more horrendous hell) than the enemies of the Christians, that meanwhile, in your eternal paradise, you’ll finally get some relief from the desert sun, you’ll finally be permitted to drink liquor, you’ll finally achieve wealth, and you (at least you men) will have 72 virgins to stimulate and satisfy all your sexual desires (which were so badly frustrated by polygamy and by warped ideas about sex on Earth)... well then, okay, sign here to become an official member of the fantasizing Muslims, obey our clerics’ rules (of course including paying your tithes), and enjoy!
- You want to fantasize the same as the Christians, and in addition, that Jesus really loves only your group and that when you die, you’ll not only live with your loved ones in a “celestial paradise” but that you’ll get to rule your own world... well then, okay, sign here to become an official member of the fantasizing Mormons, obey our clerics’ rules (of course including paying your tithes), and enjoy!

Thereby, all religions select, sanction, and even “sanctify” (!) an absolutely bizarre set of fantasies in which followers are permitted – in fact, encouraged – in reality, required! – to indulge. If such people were diagnosed by competent psychologists or psychiatrists, I’m essentially certain that the term “delusional” if not “addiction” would appear in the diagnoses.

Others have said similar. For example, in his book *A Criticism of the Hegelian Philosophy of Law*, Karl Marx (1818–1883) wrote:

Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

In his book *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) wrote:

Religion is an illusion, and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.

But both Marx and Freud lived before Walt Disney and company created their fantasylands. Otherwise, they might have written something similar to: after paying their tithes for admission and agreeing to obey all the clerics' rules (a common criteria of all religions!), people are invited and even encouraged to live and work in a religious wonderland, wallowing in hope, egotism, imagined purposefulness, and certainty.

A large part of such "certainty" is derived from the clerics' "moral absolutes". Thus, Dear, if you want values that are certain, if you want moral absolutes, then pay attention to the clerics of the world. They'll give you certainty – although, certainly much of what they preach is wrong! According to them, their "prophets" communicated directly with the big boss, Himself, resulting in "commandments" in the clerics' "holy books" that must be obeyed. In reality, however, their claims that various gods dictated their moral absolutes are silly: the values promoted are just those of the clerics who wrote their various "holy books". Whether they "believe" their claims (i.e., whether they're fools) or they know that they're running a con game (i.e., they're liars) is, for you, almost irrelevant: what's relevant is that, given your indoctrination in religion, almost certainly you'll find that your decisions about religions are "value laden".

But surely you reject many such "moral absolutes". As examples, followers of Moses must agree to specified methods for treating women as chattel (little more than cattle), for selling their daughters into slavery, and for beating their slaves to death. Followers of Jesus must agree to his ideas about loving their enemies and how their enemies are to be tortured for eternity (we're talking, here, about "really tough love"!). Followers of Muhammad must agree on how many wives that each can buy and the going rate for buying another, on how to kill "infidels" (cutting off their heads with swords being the preferred method – for some strange reason using AK-47s and RPGs isn't mentioned in their "holy book", the Quran) and on additional gory details about how infidels will be tortured for eternity. And even though subsequent "prophets" in Mormonism have rescinded his orders, "true followers" of Joseph Smith must agree to practice polygamy, to treat black people as "marked with the curse of Cain", to speed unbelievers on their way to hell (which, according to Smith, really isn't such a bad place), and so on, including to refrain from host of prohibitions against sexual activities that are "an abomination before the Lord".

As I've tried to show you in earlier chapters, there have been – and there continue to be – horrendous consequences of those different “moral absolutes”. Every religious group is at odds with every other religious group, each claiming that the other is following the wrong orders. As Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) wrote in his 1921 book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*:

A religion, even if it calls itself a religion of love, must be hard and unloving to those who do not belong to it.

Thereby, the Ancient Jews killed “the unbelievers” (especially all the “witches” and “idol worshippers”), the Christians killed “the unbelievers” (all “witches”, “pagans”, “heathens”, and of course the Jews), the Muslims killed – and still kill – the “unbelievers” (all “infidels”, including pagans and heathens, plus Jews and Christians, as well as apostates from Islam), the Mormons killed the “unbelievers” (especially the “apostates”, i.e., those who concluded that Joseph Smith was nothing but a con artist), and so on. Voltaire saw it clearly and expressed it succinctly, but maybe a slightly less strident summary would be better: the more that people are willing to believe absurdities, the more likely that they'll commit atrocities.

The “longshoreman” philosopher Eric Hoffer (1902–1983) saw clearly the dangers to the rest of us from “the true believers”:

There is no doubt that, in exchanging a self-centered for a selfless life, we gain enormously in self-esteem. The vanity of the selfless, even those who practice utmost humility, is boundless. When hopes and dreams are loose on the streets, it is well for the timid to lock doors, shutter windows, and lie low until the wrath has passed. For there is often a monstrous incongruity between the hopes, however noble and tender, and the action which follows them... The true believer is everywhere on the march, and both by converting and antagonizing he is shaping the world in his own image.

Meanwhile, for those of us who reject all supernaturalism as silly (and recognize as the only “moral absolute” some version of “use your brain as best you can”), we must muddle through our lives awash in uncertainty. In the past, the unbelievers who rejected all religious con games were so overwhelming outnumbered that they couldn't mount effective defenses. Currently, at least in the West, laws have been promulgated to punish the religious kooks who try to kill us. As for the future, I wouldn't be surprised if, eventually, all “believers” are confined to mental institutions or given counseling and medication to help them overcome their “addiction to

religion”. And I use the words ‘delusion’ and ‘addiction’ with some conviction – and with some concern for you – but whereas ‘addiction’ is a “loaded (emotive) word” (as are ‘delusion’ and ‘trance’), I should probably broach the topic more slowly.

I’ll start with some definitions (from *the Encarta World English Dictionary*):

addiction: **1.** a state of physiological or psychological dependence on a drug liable to have a damaging effect, **2.** a great interest in something to which a lot of time is devoted. *Synonyms:* habit, compulsion, dependence, need, obsession, craving, infatuation.

From that definition for ‘addiction’ (especially from the second meaning), notice that use of the word ‘addiction’ needn’t be ‘pejorative’ (viz., “expressing criticism or disapproval”): people can become addicted to a variety of things and activities, from drugs to getting exercise to “falling in love”, all of which are probably related to stimulation of specific chemicals and chemical reactions in their brains.

delusion: **1.** a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder, **2.** a false or mistaken belief or idea about something. *Synonyms:* illusion, hallucination, vision, mirage, figment of the imagination, fantasy, apparition, image; misunderstanding, misapprehension, false impression, misconception, mistake, aberration; fallacy, myth, superstition.

Notice that in the above definition for ‘delusion’, there is (similar to the case for ‘addiction’) a wide range of meanings, especially associated with the second definition. Thereby, all of us are probably delusional: we all indulge in ‘fantasies’ and we all have ‘misconceptions’.

trance: **1.** a state in which somebody is dazed or stunned or in some other way unaware of the environment and unable to respond to stimuli, **2.** a hypnotic or cataleptic [comatose] state, **3.** a state of rapture or exaltation in which somebody loses consciousness, **4.** the state of apparent semi-unconsciousness that a spiritual medium enters into, allegedly in an attempt to communicate with the dead, **5.** a type of electronic dance music with a repetitive hypnotic beat. *Synonyms:* dream, daze, spell, stupor, reverie, daydream, sleep, abstraction.

Thereby, Dear, it appears that we all have *addictions* of various types, we all engage in *delusions* of various forms, and we all enter into various *trances* (day dreaming, watching TV, listening to music, etc. – even studying).

Let me mention some examples. As I outlined in **A**, when I “meditate” (e.g., to try to relieve some pain or to “look at the pictures”), I enter into a *trance* (blocking out distractions from my environment). Also, I admit that for the past ten years I may have been living with the *delusion* that this book will be of value to you (or to anyone). And your grandmother has substantial evidence that I’m *addicted* to that delusion. Similarly, from the evidence available to you, maybe you’ve concluded that your father is *addicted* to his work (a “workaholic”), that he’s *deluded* about its importance, and that whenever he gets deeply involved in his work, he enters into a *trance*. In addition, maybe you’ve concluded that your mother is *addicted* to her religion, that she’s *deluded* about its validity, and that whenever she engages in praying, reading “sacred scripture”, etc., she enters into a *trance*. And I know certain grandchildren who seem *addicted* to TV, routinely enter into “TV *trances*”, and *delude* themselves into thinking that it’s good for them! I won’t belabor the case of crazy music putting them into *trances*, dancing around the stereo like aborigines around a campfire.

Again, obviously we’re all delusional to some extent: who doesn’t “day dream” or “fantasize”? But most of us have little trouble “snapping out” of our daydreams, fantasies, and similar “trances” – especially if reality imposes! Problems occur, however, when people indulge so completely into their delusions that their perceptions of reality (and their interactions with reality) change, e.g., when another woman divorces her husband because of her delusion that no longer can he accompany her to her ever-ever (or never-never) land in the sky or when another suicide bomber straps on a belt filled with explosives and a mind filled with a delusion of “instant entrance” into a fictitious paradise. For other examples, consider the following article¹ by Marshall Brain.²

¹ Copied from <http://whydoesgodhateamputees.com/your-delusion.htm>.

² Here is some information about Marshall Brain, copied from <http://marshallbrain.com>: “I am best known as the founder of *HowStuffWorks*. I started *HowStuffWorks* as a hobby in 1998 and it has grown to be one of the top Web sites in the country. I am known for the Robotic Nation essays and the book *Manna*. The article “How to make a million dollars” is also very popular. I am known for my book for teenagers entitled *The Teenager’s Guide to the Real World*, now in its eighth printing and selected for the New York Public Library’s prestigious Books for the Teen Age list... I am also known as a member of the Academy of Outstanding Teachers at North Carolina State University, where I taught in the computer science department for 6 years.”

Understanding delusion

by Marshall Brain

Here are several examples that can help you to understand how religion works in our world today.

Example 1

Let's imagine that I tell you the following story:

- There is a man who lives at the North Pole.
- He lives there with his wife and a bunch of elves.
- During the year, he and the elves build toys.
- Then, on Christmas Eve, he loads up a sack with all the toys.
- He puts the sack in his sleigh.
- He hitches up eight (or possibly nine) flying reindeer.
- He then flies from house to house, landing on the rooftops of each one.
- He gets out with his sack and climbs down the chimney.
- He leaves toys for the children of the household.
- He climbs back up the chimney, gets back in his sleigh, and flies to the next house.
- He does this all around the world in one night.
- Then he flies back to the North Pole to repeat the cycle next year.

This, of course, is the story of Santa Claus.

But let's say that I am an adult, and I am your friend, and I reveal to you that I believe that this story is true. I believe it with all my heart. And I try to talk about it with you and convert you to believe it as I do.

What would you think of me? You would think that I am delusional – and rightly so.

Why do you think that I am delusional? It is because you know that Santa is imaginary. The story is a total fairy tale. No matter how much I talk to you about Santa, you are not going to believe that Santa is real. Flying reindeer, for example, are make-believe. The dictionary defines delusion as, "A false belief strongly held in spite of invalidating evidence." That definition fits perfectly.

Since you are my friend, you might try to help me realize that my belief in Santa is delusional. The way that you would try to shake me from my delusion is to ask me some questions. For example, you might say to me:

- "But Marshall, how can the sleigh carry enough toys for everyone in the world?"
I say to you that the sleigh is magical. It has the ability to do this intrinsically.

- “How does Santa get into houses and apartments that don’t have chimneys?” I say that Santa can make chimneys appear, as shown to all of us in the movie The Santa Clause.
- “How does Santa get down the chimney if there’s a fire in the fireplace?” I say that Santa has a special flame-resistant suit, and it cleans itself too.
- “Why doesn’t the security system detect Santa?” Santa is invisible to security systems.
- “How can Santa travel fast enough to visit every child in one night?” Santa is timeless.
- “How can Santa know whether every child has been bad or good?” Santa is omniscient.
- “Why are the toys distributed so unevenly? Why does Santa deliver more toys to rich kids, even if they are bad, than he ever gives to poor kids?” There is no way for us to understand the mysteries of Santa because we are mere mortals, but Santa has his reasons. For example, perhaps poor children would be unable to handle a flood of expensive electronic toys. How would they afford the batteries? So Santa spares them this burden.

These are all quite logical questions that you have asked. I have answered all of them for you. I am wondering why you can’t see what I see, and you are wondering how I can be so insane.

Why didn’t my answers satisfy you? Why do you still know that I am delusional? It is because my answers have done nothing but confirm my delusion. My answers are ridiculous. In order to answer your questions, I invented, completely out of thin air, a magical sleigh, a magical self-cleaning suit, magical chimneys, “timelessness”, and magical invisibility. You don’t believe my answers because you know that I am making this stuff up. The invalidating evidence is voluminous.

Now let me show you another example...

Example 2

Imagine that I tell you the following story:

- I was in my room one night.
- Suddenly, my room became exceedingly bright.
- Next thing I know there is an angel in my room.
- He tells me an amazing story.
- He says that there is a set of ancient golden plates buried in the side of a hill in New York.

- On them are the books of a lost race of Jewish people who inhabited North America.
- These plates bear inscriptions in the foreign language of these people.
- Eventually the angel leads me to the plates and lets me take them home.
- Even though the plates are in a foreign language, the angel helps me to decipher and translate them.
- Then the plates are taken up into heaven, never to be seen again.
- I have the book that I translated from the plates. It tells of amazing things – an entire civilization of Jewish people living here in the United States 2,000 years ago.
- And the resurrected Jesus came and visited these people!
- I also showed the golden plates to a number of real people who are my eye witnesses, and I have their signed attestations that they did, in fact, see and touch the plates before the plates were taken up into heaven.

Now, what would you say to me about this story? Even though I do have a book, in English, that tells the story of this lost Jewish civilization, and even though I do have the signed attestations, what do you think? This story sounds delusional, doesn't it?

You would ask some obvious questions. For example, at the very simplest level, you might ask, "Where are the ruins and artifacts from this Jewish civilization in America?" The book transcribed from the plates talks about millions of Jewish people doing all kinds of things in America. They have horses and oxen and chariots and armor and large cities. What happened to all of this? I answer simply: it is all out there, but we have not found it yet. "Not one city? Not one chariot wheel? Not one helmet?" you ask. No, we haven't found a single bit of evidence, but it is out there somewhere. You ask me dozens of questions like this, and I have answers for them all.

Most people would assume that I am delusional if I told them this story. They would assume that there were no plates and no angel, and that I had written the book myself. Most people would ignore the attestations – having people attest to it means nothing, really. I could have paid the attesters off, or I could have fabricated them. Most people would reject my story without question.

What's interesting is that there are millions of people who actually do believe this story of the angel and the plates and the book and the Jewish people living in North America 2,000 years ago. Those millions of people are members of the Mormon Church, headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. The person who told this incredible story was a man named Joseph Smith, and he lived in the United States in the early 1800s. He told his story, and recorded what he "translated from the plates", in the Book of Mormon.

If you meet a Mormon and ask them about this story, they can spend hours talking to you about it. They can answer every question you have. Yet the 5.99 billion of us who are not Mormons can see with total clarity that the Mormons are delusional. It is

as simple as that. You and I both know with 100% certainty that the Mormon story is no different from the story of Santa. And we are correct in our assessment. The invalidating evidence is voluminous.

Example 3

Imagine that I tell you this story:

- A man was sitting in a cave minding his own business.
- A very bright flash of light appeared.
- A voice spoke out one word: “Read!” The man felt like he was being squeezed to death. This happened several times.
- Then the man asked, “What should I read?”
- The voice said, “Read in the name of your Lord who created humans from a clinging [zygote]. Read for your Lord is the most generous. He taught people by the pen what they didn’t know before.”
- The man ran home to his wife.
- While running home, he saw the huge face of an angel in the sky. The angel told the man that he was to be the messenger of God. The angel also identified himself as Gabriel.
- At home that night, the angel appeared to the man in his dreams.
- Gabriel appeared to the man over and over again. Sometimes it was in dreams, sometimes during the day as “revelations in his heart,” sometimes preceded by a painful ringing in his ears (and then the verses would flow from Gabriel right out of the man), and sometimes Gabriel would appear in the flesh and speak. Scribes wrote down everything the man said.
- Then, one night about 11 years after the first encounter with Gabriel, Gabriel appeared to the man with a magical horse. The man got on the horse, and the horse took him to Jerusalem. Then the winged horse took the man up to the seven layers of heaven. The man was able to actually see heaven and meet and talk with people there. Then Gabriel brought the man back to earth.
- The man proved that he had actually been to Jerusalem on the winged horse by accurately answering questions about buildings and landmarks there.
- The man continued receiving the revelations from Gabriel for 23 years, and then they stopped. All of the revelations were recorded by the scribes in a book which we still have today.

[Source: *Understanding Islam* by Yahiya Emerick, Alpha press, 2002]

What do you make of this story? If you have never heard the story before, you may find it to be nonsensical in the same way that you feel about the stories of the golden plates and Santa. You would especially feel that way once you read the book that was supposedly transcribed from Gabriel, because much of it is opaque. The dreams, the horse, the angel, the ascension, and the appearances of the angel in the flesh – you would dismiss them all because it is all imaginary.

But you need to be careful. This story is the foundation of the Muslim religion, practiced by more than a billion people around the world. The man is named

Muhammad, and the book is the Koran (also spelled Qur'an or Qur'aan). This is the sacred story of the Koran's creation and the revelation of Allah to mankind.

Despite the fact that a billion Muslims profess some level of belief in this story, people outside the Muslim faith consider the story to be imaginary. No [non-Muslim] believes this story because this story is a fairy tale. They consider the Koran to be a book written by a man and nothing more. A winged horse that flew to heaven? That is imaginary – as imaginary as flying reindeer.

If you are a Christian, please take a moment right now to look back at the Mormon and Muslim stories. Why is it so easy for you to look at these stories and see that they are imaginary fairy tales? How do you know, with complete certainty, that Mormons and Muslims are delusional? You know these things for the same reason you know that Santa is imaginary. There is no evidence for any of it. The stories involve magical things like angels and winged horses, hallucinations, dreams. Horses cannot fly – we all know that. And even if they could, where would the horse fly to? The vacuum of space? Or is the horse somehow “dematerialized”... and then “rematerialized” in heaven? If so, those processes are made up too. Every bit of it is imaginary. We all know that.

An unbiased observer can see how imaginary these three stories are. In addition, Muslims can see that Mormons are delusional, Mormons can see that Muslims are delusional, and Christians can see that both Mormons and Muslims are delusional.

One final example

Now let me tell you one final story:

- God inseminated a virgin named Mary, in order to bring his son incarnate into our world.
- Mary and her fiancé, Joseph, had to travel to Bethlehem to register for the census. There Mary gave birth to the Son of God.
- God put a star in the sky to guide people to the baby.
- In a dream God told Joseph to take his family to Egypt. Then God stood by and watched as Herod killed thousands and thousands of babies... in an attempt to kill Jesus.
- As a man, God's son claimed that he was God incarnate: “I am the way, the truth and the life,” he said...
- This man performed many miracles. He healed lots of sick people. He turned water into wine. These miracles prove that he is God.
- But he was eventually given the death sentence and killed by crucifixion.
- His body was placed in a tomb.
- But three days later, the tomb was empty.
- And the man, alive once again but still with his wounds (so anyone who doubted could see them and touch them), appeared to many people in many places.
- Then he ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of God the father almighty...

- Today you can have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. You can pray to this man and he will answer your prayers. He will cure your diseases, rescue you from emergencies, help you make important business and family decisions, comfort you in times of worry and grief, etc.
- This man will also give you eternal life, and if you are good he has a place for you in heaven after you die.
- The reason we know all this is because, after the man died, four people named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote accounts of the man's life. Their written attestations are proof of the veracity of this story.

This, of course, is the story of Jesus. Do you believe this story? If you are a Christian, you probably do. I could ask you questions for hours... and you will have answers for every one of them, in just the same way that I had answers for all of the Santa questions that my friend asked me in Example 1. You cannot understand how anyone could question any of it, because it is so obvious to you.

Here is the thing that I would like to help you understand: The four billion people who are not Christians look at the Christian story in exactly the same way that you look at the Santa story, the Mormon story, and the Muslim story. In other words, there are four billion people who stand outside of the Christian bubble, and they can see reality clearly. The fact is, the Christian story is completely imaginary.

How do the four billion non-Christians know, with complete certainty, that the Christian story is imaginary? Because the Christian story is just like the Santa story, the Mormon story and the Muslim story. There is the magical insemination, the magical star, the magical dreams, the magical miracles, the magical resurrection, the magical ascension and so on. People outside the Christian faith look at the Christian story and note these facts:

- The miracles are supposed to “prove” that Jesus is God, but, predictably, these miracles left behind no tangible evidence for us to examine and scientifically verify today. They all involved faith healings and magic tricks...
- Jesus is resurrected, but, predictably, he does not appear to anyone today...
- Jesus ascended into heaven and answers our prayers, but, predictably, when we pray to him nothing happens. We can statistically analyze prayer and find that prayers are never answered [more frequently than non-prayers]...
- The book where Matthew, Mark, Luke and John make their attestations does exist, but, predictably, it is chock full of problems and contradictions...
- And so on.

In other words, the Christian story is a fairy tale, just like the other three examples we have examined.

Now, [if you are a Christian] look at what is happening inside your mind at this moment. I am using solid, verifiable evidence to show you that the Christian story is imaginary. Your rational mind can see the evidence. Four billion non-Christians would be happy to confirm for you that the Christian story is imaginary. However, if you are a practicing Christian, you can probably feel your “religious mind” overriding both your rational mind and your common sense as we speak. Why? Why were you able to use your common sense to so easily reject the Santa story, the Mormon story and the Muslim story, but when it comes to the Christian story, which is just as imaginary, you are not?

Try, just for a moment, to look at Christianity with the same amount of healthy skepticism that you used when approaching the stories of Santa, Joseph Smith and Muhammad. Use your common sense to ask some very simple questions of yourself:

- Is there any physical evidence that Jesus existed? – No. He left no trace. His body “ascended into heaven.” He wrote nothing down. None of his “miracles” left any permanent evidence. There is, literally, nothing.
- Is there any reason to believe that Jesus actually performed these miracles, or that he rose from the dead, or that he ascended into heaven? – There is no more of a reason to believe this than there is to believe that Joseph Smith found the golden plates hidden in New York, or that Muhammad rode on a magical winged horse to heaven. Probably less of a reason, given that the record of Jesus’ life is 2,000 years old, while that of Joseph Smith is less than 200 years old.
- You mean to tell me that I am supposed to believe this story of Jesus, and there is no proof or evidence to go by beyond a few attestations in the New Testament of a Bible that is provably meaningless? – Yes, you are supposed to believe it. You are supposed to take it on “faith.”

No one (besides little kids) believes in Santa Claus. No one outside the Mormon church believes Joseph Smith’s story. No one outside the Muslim faith believes the story of Muhammad and Gabriel and the winged horse. No one outside the Christian faith believes in Jesus’ divinity, miracles, resurrection, etc.

Therefore, the question I would ask you to consider right now is simple: Why is it that human beings can detect fairy tales with complete certainty when those fairy tales come from other faiths, but they cannot detect the fairy tales that underpin their own faith? Why do they believe their chosen fairy tale with unrelenting passion and reject the others as nonsense? For example:

- Christians know that when the Egyptians built gigantic pyramids and mummified the bodies of their pharaohs, that it was a total waste of time – otherwise Christians would build pyramids.

- Christians know that when the Aztecs carved the heart out of a virgin and ate it, that it accomplished nothing – otherwise Christians would kill virgins.
- Christians know that when Muslims face Mecca to pray, that it is pointless – otherwise Christians would face Mecca when they pray.
- Christians know that when Jews keep meat and dairy products separate, that they are wasting their time – otherwise the cheeseburger would not be an American obsession.

Yet, when Christians look at their own religion, they are for some reason blind. Why? And no, it has nothing to do with the fact that the Christian story is true. Your rational mind knows that with certainty, and so do four billion others. This book, if you will let it, can tell you why.

His on-line book, *Why Does God Hate Amputees* by Marshall Brain, is at <http://whydoesgodhateamputees.com/god-toc.htm>.

So, Dear, an obvious question is: given the huge range of possible addictions, delusions, and trances, when are they “good” and when are they “bad”? And by now, probably equally obvious to you is how I plan to respond to that question (after I would remind you that things are rarely “black vs. white”, i.e., be aware of a full spectrum of possibilities). Also by now, almost surely you’re “sick and tired” of my repeating the same stuff (“Talk about a parrot on a dead branch of knowledge!”). But I plan to do it anyway, Dear, in part to “tie up some loose ends”.

As I’ve written many times, moral value (as with any value) can be measured only relative to some objective. For example, if your goal is to be a successful bank robber, then I expect that there would be a fairly high value in your obtaining a mask (say a 7.2 on a scale of –10 to +10). Fundamental or prime values (“moral values”) can only be measured relative to fundamental or prime goals. Thus, if your prime goal is your dual survival goals, then your fundamental values will include obtaining air, water, food, shelter, etc. As for the moral value of becoming a thief (relative to one’s prime goals), it depends on one’s economic status and prospects: for someone whose prospects seem as good as yours, the value of becoming a thief is very low (maybe a –9.4 on the same scale from –10 to +10), but for someone who’s destitute and without hope, the value of becoming a thief may score a +0.5 or higher (for even if caught, a convicted thief will get “free” room and board in prison).

Therefore, for the common use of the term ‘morality’, I’ve suggested that the morality of any act is a measure of how the act promotes (or hinders) our trio of survival goals, i.e., survival of ourselves, our “families”, and our values. As illustrations, I’ve suggested that the act of using our brains as best we can (which includes testing our hypotheses against the most reliable and relevant data) has a morality of +10 (on a “morality scale” that runs from –10 to +10), and that belief in god (any god) has a morality of somewhere around a –8 (not quite so low as suicide, which surely is a –10).

Consequently, Dear, I hope you see that morality has nothing to do with any gods. Of course, the absence of any relation between morality and gods is rather convenient, because I’ve never found the tiniest shred of data to suggest that gods are anything but primitive ideas, unconstrained by data. Consequently, all ideas about all gods can be ignored – whereas moral values can’t be ignored, because they’re simply judgments (but not necessarily “simple judgments”!) about the values of any act.

Others have said similar. For example, Ayn Rand said: “choosing not to think is the height of immorality.” That is, what distinguishes humans from the rest of the animals is our increased ability to think. Choosing not to think doesn’t distinguish a person as a human; it provides the clerics with one more sheep for their flock. Remember, too, Rand’s inversion of Descartes’ “I think; therefore, I am”. She proposed: “I am; therefore, I’ll think.”³ I agree with her that this hypothesis, and then this choice, is the best of what is human. In contrast, the worst of what is human is to start from the data-less and untestable speculation and then the choice: “God exists; therefore, I’ll obey.”

Either of those two options (to evaluate or to obey) is at the “foundation of one’s mental being”: from each foundation, the rest of your thoughts and actions follow. Between those two options – either to use your mind or to yield it to others – I see no compromise. And unless my proposition that there is no god (or gods) is demonstrated with data to be wrong (for example, I’d be more than willing to listen if one of the gods would like to come to me to explain his or her side of the story!), that is, so long as the only way to accept all the “god-garbage” is to suspend rational thought (i.e., take the crazed thoughts of power-mongering mystics on “faith”), then the

³ See John Galt’s speech, Chapter VII of Part III, of *Atlas Shrugged* (Signet Books, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., New York, 1957)

core-hypothesis that I'll work with is "I exist", and the core-choice that I will make is "to evaluate". And because "thinking" is what best characterizes humans and "not thinking" is the prime characteristic of being dead, I understand why Rand describes this choice as between life and death. Dear: I urge you to yield your mind to nobody (including me!); never suspend evaluating, save when you're sleeping or dead.

There are times, however (and unfortunately), when belief in god had (and even now, still has) quite a high moral value. For example,

- If you lived during the Dark Ages (when the clerics were in control) and you would be tortured and then burned at the stake if you didn't claim that you believed in god, then you'd need to evaluate what would have a greater "value": pretending to believe or continuing to live!
- If you live in a "modern" Muslim country in which the clerics are in control and you'd likely be killed (even by your neighbors) if you don't claim to be "a believer", then the "value" of believing can again be quite high.
- If you live in a community (e.g., of Jewish or Mormon people) in which members help those with similar beliefs but hinder those with opposing beliefs, then again a value judgment would be needed.
- If you live in a family in which belief in god is expected of you by your parents and retributions will occur if you state an opposing belief, then again an evaluation is needed.

Now, Dear, given your life-long experiences, of course I don't expect you to agree with my assessment that the morality of belief in god is a -8 (except under exceptional circumstances, such as those listed above, in which you could be murdered if you didn't agree with the believers). If you had agreed with me, I doubt that I would have had the ambition to write this book!

Also, I should admit that I'm not adamant about assigning the moral value of belief in god as a -8: sometimes when I see people helping each other under the ruse of religion, I think that a more accurate numerical value might be, say, -6 for the value of belief in god. Yet, even then, I'd argue for quite a large negative value, because I'd argue that any recognized benefit of belief in god (such as fellowship, decrease in fear of death, the conception of order in what might otherwise may seem to be chaotic, etc.) could be achieved

more beneficially within groups dedicated to scientific humanism. And at other times, for example when I see the harm that belief in god has done to certain grandchildren, I would argue for assigning the moral value of belief in god to be closer to -9 , and I'd assign the moral value of indoctrinating children in the god idea to be a -9.9 !

Yet, Dear, I'd caution you against saying to your mother that she's immoral. That would be unkind (and pointlessly so), since the word 'immoral' would almost certainly stimulate undesirable emotions in your mother. I would similarly caution you to refrain from repeating the accusatory question that one of your uncles (your mother's brother) addressed to his mother: "How can you be so stupid?" Instead, if ever you are so inclined, then say what you'd really mean, i.e., something similar to: "Mother, from my perspective, it's not clear that you've adequately taken into account all relevant and reliable data, as well as established scientific principles, in the formation of your beliefs. Maybe you've given too much weight to your instinctive desires and to the desires of your parents, and too much credence to untested and in some cases untestable speculations."

That said, let me return to the question posed, namely: given the huge range of possible addictions, delusions, and trances, when are they "good" and when are they "bad" – or more accurately, on a scale of -10 to $+10$, what are their values? I'll display my responses as the following ordered list of "propositions", all of which are summarized by Socrates' statement: "There is only one good, knowledge [or willingness to learn], and one evil, ignorance [or refusal to learn]."

- The prime goal of all life is to continue living; the prime goal of all sane humans is to help humanity solve some of its many problems more intelligently; prime human-values of anything or any activity are therefore judged relative to the prime goal of helping humanity (at least by all who are thereby judged to be sane).
- One's decisions about how best to help humanity depend on one's worldview (i.e., one's view of reality and of one's place within it); worldviews are defined by premisses, especially the premiss about how knowledge can be gained; premisses are generally better if they're based on knowledge about reality; worse if they're based on ignorance.

- Knowledge about reality is obtained better *via* the scientific method than by any type of dogma (derived from “revelations” of some “prophet”, from dreams or hallucinations, from “listening to one’s heart”, etc.); therefore, if any addiction, delusion, or trance is derived from pursuing one’s prime goal with a view of reality constructed *via* the scientific method, then it’s more likely to be “good” than if based on any dogma.

Applying those “propositions”, I’d come to the following assessments.

- I’d judge your father’s “addiction” to his work, his “delusion” that it’s important, and his ability to work in a “trance-like state” (almost oblivious to distractions) to be “good” (maybe an 7.3, on a scale running from –10 to +10; not higher, because he probably works too hard, not allotting sufficient attention to his health and to his family), because his addiction, delusion, and trance are based on a tested method for putting food on the table and a roof over your head (to which you seem to be “addicted”!), while producing results of benefit to humanity.
- I’d judge your mother’s “addiction” to her religion, her “delusion” that it’s important, and her ability to put herself in a trance while doing so (oblivious to distractions) to be a “bad” (probably at least a –7.4 on the same scale, with some “goodness” in that it apparently makes her “feel good”, but even lower than a –7.4 if it leads to your parent’s divorce), because fundamentally, her addiction, delusion, and trance are derived from ignorance, enshrined as religious dogma.⁴
- And convinced as I am that the only sound way to gain knowledge is *via* the scientific method, that this universe is entirely natural, and that my prime goals are my dual survival goals (with the extent of my “family” including at least all humanity), then with that worldview, I’d judge my “addiction” (to working on this book), my “delusion” (that I might be able to help some children), and my “trance” (which blocks out distractions) to be of high value – of course – and, of course, totally without bias! And actually, I wouldn’t be surprised if your grandmother agreed that they were of “high value” (maybe not the 8.8 that I’d give it, but perhaps a 6.6), because my delusions don’t cost much and they keep me out of mischief: out from “under foot” and out of her hair!

⁴ Obviously I wrote that before your parents’ divorce was finalized.

Thereby, Dear, maybe you can see another way to evaluate the values of addictions, delusions, and trances. Thus, if a person's delusions (and maybe associated trances) are used to relieve pain, learn something, help humanity, etc. [e.g., to meditate to relieve pain or to read a book (or watch an entertaining TV program, movie, or some other production) that's informative], then such delusions can be quite valuable (relative, of course, to the person's dual survival goals). On the other hand, if some delusion is mostly an escape from reality, then (unless there's need to relieve some stress), such a delusion can be quite "bad", again relative to the person's dual survival goals.

And still another way to evaluate the "value" of delusions and addictions is to address the questions: who suffers and who benefits? Consistent with our dual survival goals, we don't want the addictions of family members to hurt themselves or other family members (whatever extent we recognize as "family"). As examples, I'm sure you don't want your father to damage his health by working so hard, and I know that your grandmother doesn't want me to work so hard. As another example, you might want to consider who benefits and who suffers from your mother's addiction to religion (especially if it leads to your parents' divorce). More generally, you might want to think about the following comments by Dennis Wier [to which I've added some punctuation and the italics]:⁵

I make an assumption about what is desirable in life, and I should state it explicitly. I assume that *a robust life* is a life of variety and wide options, and that *an impoverished life* is a life with few options and little variety. Life naturally contains limits and limits help to restrain chaos and thus to free a certain kind of energy. Although there are many people of the opinion that all limits are bad, I feel that limits alone are not bad; in fact, limits are necessary to empower creativity. However, certain types of strict limits in life seem to imply the presence of a pathological state or at least delusions about lack of personal power. *There is a delicate balance between the limits which empower personal growth and the limits which crush human spirit.*

One way to find this balance is to realize that within any personal psychological reality there is a set of changing stimuli and response potentials. A behavior is a pair of [a] specific stimulus with its response – and a behavior results in a new stimulus, which joins other stimuli in creating the personal psychological reality. Theoretically, the responses that may exist for a given set of stimuli can be counted.

⁵ Quoted from the article (e.g., at <http://www.trance.ch/pathol.htm>) entitled "Pathological Trance and Addiction" by Dennis R. Wier, Director, The Trance Institute, Bruetten, Switzerland.

The number of such potential responses is often thought of as the ‘richness’ of a person’s life. *A relatively low number of potential responses or options indicates a relatively impoverished reality.*

A healthy, normal psychological life seems to be one in which there is a rich set of stimuli and a rich set of responses. Furthermore, the pattern of behavior tends not to be rigidly repetitive, and this rich variety seems to allow both personal growth and to stimulate others in their own search for variety and richness in life. *On the other hand, an addictive personality could be characterized as one in which there are few responses and the pattern of behavior is generally repetitive.*

Thereby, Dear, maybe you appreciate my frustration when watching you and “the kids” watch another Walt Disney video (for the umpteenth time!) and knowing you’re headed off to Church (for the umpteenth time squared!).

But in defensive response to my criticizing you for watching so much TV, you might charge me with addiction, delusion, and trance, “marching out in the desert every day, repeating the same old stuff, over and over again.” I would, of course, proceed to defend myself, probably mentioning:

1) Look, kid, I start with ‘A’ for ‘awareness’, specifically to avoid any trance, i.e., to get “in touch” with reality, 2) Stripped of applications to specific problems that I might be trying to solve, my scheme takes only 10 to 20 minutes, 3) If it takes longer, it’s because I’m trying to solve some problem, while remembering what I have found from experience to be useful working hypotheses and useful principles and policies for living, and 4) Actually, during the past few years, I haven’t “religiously” followed my scheme – because I find that I’m too busy trying to figure out how to write something for this damn book.

Besides, I might add, look at another difference. Your grandmother has estimated that during the past decade I’ve probably read 1,000 books; I never stopped to count them, but I suspect that it’s closer to 500; I know that I’ve been working hard to understand more stuff; I’m sure that I’ve read at least 10 times more articles than books and on a large variety of topics. For contrast, consider your mother. I wouldn’t be surprised if, during the past decade, she’s re-read her “sacred scripture” 1,000 times – and has read a huge number of articles on the same topic. Then think of Wier’s idea (quoted above) of rich vs. impoverished stimuli, corresponding expanded vs. contracted responses, and resulting empowerment of one’s growth vs. crushing of one’s spirit.

But anyway, this chapter (and this book) isn’t supposed to be about me or your father or your mother and our decisions, but about you and yours – and

my only serious concern is about your possible addiction to religion. Immediately, you might reject not only any suggestion that you're addicted to religion but also that religion can be addictive. If so, Dear, then first, please read the following article entitled "When Religion is an Addiction" by the (enlightened!) cleric, Robert Minor.⁶

I remember hearing popular psychological speaker and writer John Bradshaw say that the "high" one gets from being righteous was similar to the high of cocaine. As both a former monk and addict, he knew the feelings personally.

As the religious right pushes its anti-gay, anti-women's reproductive rights, anti-science, pro-profit agenda nationally and in state capitals across the nation and wins, that high is a sweet fix for the addicted. It gives them a comforting feeling of relief that they're really right, okay, worthwhile, and acceptable.

Like all fixes, though, it doesn't last. So, the addict is driven to seek another and another – another issue, another evil, another paranoid threat to defeat. It can't ever end. Like the need for heavier doses, the causes have to become bigger and more evil in the addict's mind to provide the fix.

This mind-altering fix of righteousness covers their paranoid shame-based feelings about the internal and external dangers stalking them. The victim-role language of their dealers, right-wing religious leaders, feeds it. Like alcoholism and drug addiction, the fix numbs the religious addict against any feelings about how their addiction affects others.

Religion doesn't have to be this way; it can be healing. But what we see in the dominant religious/political right-wing fundamentalism that's driving the debate on most conservative issues (political, social, economic, international) is anything but healthy. It's what addiction specialists call a process addiction, like sex or romance addiction, or workaholism. In an addictive society, such addictions are encouraged.

Like substance addictions, it takes over, dominates life, pushes other issues to the background, tells them how and what to feel to prevent them from facing their real feelings about themselves and life, creates a mythology about the world, protects its "stash," and supports their denial that they have a problem. Addiction specialist Anne Wilson Schaef would say: like all addictions, religious addiction is progressive and fatal.

⁶ Available at http://www.fairnessproject.org/Religious_Addiction.html. This article, © The Fairness Project, February 2, 2005, is part of what's called "The Fairness Project", which was founded by the author of the quoted article, Dr. Robert N. Minor, who "has been Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Kansas, Lawrence for 26 years."

If you're outside the addiction, you've probably wondered about what's going on, what's the dynamic that's driving the right-wing religious agenda that looks so hateful and destructive. Why is it so hard to crack? Why won't evidence or logic work?

If you're an enabler or the addict yourself, the above must sound over the top. You'd prefer to deny or soften the reality of the addiction.

Yet, if we're going to think clearly about the right-wing juggernaut's use of religion, and not function as its enablers, we must realize that we're dealing with an addict. Right-wing political-religious fundamentalism can destroy us too if we're like the dependent spouse who protects, defends, and covers-up for the family drunk.

So, what can we do to protect ourselves, maintain our sanity, promote a healthy alternative, and confront religious addiction? What's the closest thing to an intervention when we're dealing with the advanced, destructive form of religious addiction that's become culturally dominant?

It takes massive inner strength and a good self-concept. There's no place for codependency and the need to be liked or affirmed by the person with the addiction. ALANON [Alcoholics Anonymous] knows that. It requires clarity of purpose, freedom from the need to fix the addict, and doing what maintains one's own health and safety.

Addicts reinforce each other. Fundamentalist religious organizations and media are their supportive co-users. So the person who deals with someone's addiction cannot do it alone. They must have support from others outside the addiction.

You can't argue with an addict. Arguing religion to one so addicted plays into the addictive game. Arguing about the Bible or tradition is like arguing with the alcoholic about whether whiskey or tequila is better for them. It's useless and affirms the addiction.

You can't buy into the addict's view of reality. Addicts cover their addiction with a mythology about the world and with language that mystifies. This means we must never use their language.

Never say, even to reject it or with "so-called" before it: "partial-birth abortion," "gay rights," "intelligent design," "gay marriage," etc. Speak clearly in terms of what you believe it really is. Say "a seldom used late-term procedure," "equal rights for all," "creationist ideology," "marriage equality."

Don't let the addict get you off topic. Addicts love to confuse the issues, get you talking about things that don't challenge their problem. When you do, you further the addiction.

Never argue about whether sexual orientation is a choice. It doesn't matter.

Never argue about sex. Our country is too sick to deal with its sexual problems.

It's okay to affirm that you don't care or these aren't the issues. You don't need to justify your beliefs to a drunk or druggie.

Get your message on target and repeat it. Get support for your message from others so that they're on the same page. Make it short, simple, to the point, and consistent.

Don't nag addicts. Don't speak belligerently or as if you have to defend yourself. Just say: The government and other people have no right to tell someone whom to love.

Don't accept that the addiction needs equal time. Stop debating as if there are two sides. Get over any guilt about a free country requiring you to make space for addictive arguments. You don't have to act as if here are "two sides" to the debate. Addicts and their dealers already have the power of the addiction and addictive communities behind their messages.

Model what it is to be a healthy human being without the addiction. Addicts must see people living outside the addiction, happy, confident, proud, and free from the effects of the disease. In spite of the fact that we're a nation that supports both substance and process addictions so people don't threaten the institutions and values that pursue profits over humanity, live as if that has no ultimate control over you.

Don't believe that you, your friends, children, relationships, hopes, and dreams, are any less valuable or legitimate because they aren't sanctioned by a government, politicians, or religious leaders that are in a coping, rather than healing, mode of life.

Dealing with addictions takes an emotional toll on everyone. Yet, recognizing religious addiction as an addiction demystifies its dynamics and maintains our sanity.

Now, Dear, if the above comments by Minor didn't "phase you", if they "ran off you, like water off a duck's back", then please take care. In your religion, you're continuously bombarded with clerical opinions about various "abominations before the Lord". As a result, you're vulnerable to the same "self-righteous high" that Minor describes (as well as the interconnected "self-loathing low", should you succumb to one of those "abominations", such as masturbation or out-of-wedlock sex or whatever is the clerics' "disflavor of the day"). Consequently, Dear, I would suggest that before you make any decision about your religion, you should give some serious attention to evaluating both the values promoted in your religion and the value to you of continuing to participate in your religion.

* Go to other chapters *via*

At the outset, I should again admit (but again, grudgingly so) that religions can be of some value. For example,

1. Politicians have known for thousands of years that religions are great for controlling “the rabble” – but I’m not nearly so worried about the rabble as I am about the rabble rousers, and not nearly so interested in controlling the rabble as I am in controlling the controllers: the police can usually do a good job controlling the rabble, but as yet, no one (at least in this country) has developed a method to control the damn clerics.
2. Clerics have known for thousand of years that religions are great for lining their pockets – but who controls how much money the clerics are permitted to con from the people? In particular, Dear, do you approve of the President (and current “prophet” or “profit”) of the Mormon Church being allotted a \$1 million per year, tax free, expense account, alone? Also, do you agree that religious institutions should get tax breaks? I sure don’t: in essence, my taxes are higher to pay for the promotion of nonsensical ideas about gods.
3. For who-knows-how-long, people have known that religions provide an invaluable service by creating handy swear words! In that regard, Terry Pratchett (in *Men at Arms*) provided the following assessment:

When you hit your thumb with an eight-pound hammer, it’s nice to be able to blaspheme. It takes a very special and strong-minded kind of atheist to jump up and down and shout, “Oh, random-fluctuations-in-the-space-time-continuum!” or “Aaargh, primitive-and-outmoded-concept on a crutch!”

More seriously, though, it seems clear that, insofar as “people are social animals”, religions can provide a convenient organization of social services, activities, and even political actions. A wonderful case-in-point is the way Martin Luther King used his religious ideas, influences, position, and organization to stimulate people to oppose segregation. And if organized religions would similarly confine their activities, then I (for one) would have no major complaint with them, although even then I would question if theirs was the most efficient, cost-effective, and egalitarian method of providing such organization. I would similarly ask: are team sports, musical activities, services to the poor, hospital administrations, political activities, etc. better run by religious groups or by other institutions?

But whatever is the most defensible answer to that question, there is (as I've harped on in many earlier chapters) the damnable aspect of all organized religions that they pollute useful social functions with defunct science, resulting absurd and in many cases socially damaging purposes, principles, and policies, as well as the (criminal) arrogance that they're conveying not their own (ignorant!) opinions but the opinions of no less than the creator of the universe – although never once is a single shred of reliable data presented to support their outrageous claim.

As a consequence, in their ignorant arrogance, religious people commonly engage in bizarre attempts to connect unrelated concepts. In the case of Mormons, for example, why does a silly idea about who first populated the Americas have anything to do with organizing a choir or dictating people's sexual preferences and behaviors?! If some people want to sing, encourage them; if they want to engage in homosexuality, mind your own business; if some people want to know who first populated the Americas, then do some DNA sampling! But rather than my commenting further on additional stupidities of various religions, I'll try to summarize by quoting what others have concluded:

“Religion is the masterpiece of the art of animal training, for it trains people as to how they shall think.” [Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860)]

“All religions, with their gods, demigods, prophets, messiahs and saints, are the product of the fancy and credulity of men who have not yet reached the full development and complete possession of their intellectual powers.”
[Michael A. Bakunin (1814–1876)]

“So far as religion of the day is concerned, it is a damned fake... Religion is all bunk.” [Thomas Edison (1847–1931)]

“Religion, like poetry, is simply a concerted effort to deny the most obvious realities... [It] deserves no more respect than a pile of garbage... I believe that religion, generally speaking, has been a curse to mankind – that its modest and greatly overestimated services on the ethical side have been more than overcome by the damage it has done to clear and honest thinking.”
[Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956)]

“Religion is the most malevolent of all mind viruses.”
[Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2004), The Onion AV Club interview]

“Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it, you’d have good people doing good things and evil people doing bad things, but for good people to do bad things, it takes religion.” [Steven Weinberg, b. 1933, Nobel Laureate in physics]

Many (if not most) of the worst consequences of religions (when “good people... do bad things”) follow when religious people abandon their judgment. This abandonment is even formally required in the stupid Christian (and Mormon) commandment: “Judge not...”; in all religions, the “faithful followers” are just to “believe” (what the clerics say). Thomas Paine rejected all such clerical demands in the following manner:

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church [viz., Islam], by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish [viz., Muslim] appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.

It is impossible to calculate the moral mischief, if I may so express it, that mental lying has produced in society. When a man has so far corrupted and prostituted the chastity of his mind, as to subscribe his professional belief to things he does not believe, he has prepared himself for the commission of every other crime.

The danger of lying to oneself is well summarized by the Portuguese proverb “He who serves two masters has to lie to one”; thus, if you accept a “supernatural being” as your master, you will lie to yourself.

In an essay ridiculing the career of evangelism, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; 1819–1880) wrote something similar to the above from Paine, but she went even further:

Minds fettered by this doctrine no longer inquire concerning a proposition whether it is attested by sufficient evidence, but whether it accords with Scripture; they do not search for facts as such, but for facts that will bear out their doctrine. It is easy to see that this mental habit blunts not only the perception of truth, but the sense of truthfulness... So long as a belief in propositions is regarded as indispensable to salvation, the pursuit of truth as such is not possible.

In his 1951 book *The True Believer* (which I encourage you to read), Eric Hoffer suggested that people's willingness to suspend judgment (e.g., about the clearly invented balderdash of their creed) is related to an attempt to escape similarly obvious inadequacies in themselves:

There is apparently some connection between dissatisfaction with oneself and a proneness to credulity. The urge to escape our real self is also an urge to escape the rational and the obvious. What Streseman said of the Germans is true of the frustrated in general: "They pray not only for their daily bread, but also for their daily illusion." The rule seems to be that those who find no difficulty in deceiving themselves are easily deceived by others...

The technique of proselytizing mass movements aims to evoke in the faithful the move and frame of mind of a repentant criminal. Self-surrender, which is the source of a mass movements unity and vigor, is a sacrifice, an act of atonement, and clearly no atonement is called for unless there is a poignant sense of sin. To ripen a person for self-sacrifice he must be stripped of his individual identity and distinctness. He must cease to be George, Hans, Ivan, or Tadao – a human atom with an existence bounded by birth and death. The most drastic way to achieve this end is by the complete assimilation of the individual into a collective body. It cures the poignantly frustrated not by conferring on them an absolute truth or by remedying the difficulties and abuses that made their lives miserable, but by freeing them from their ineffectual selves – and it does this by enfolding them and absorbing them into a closely knit and exultant whole.

And once again, Dear, I wish that your education had been more complete – by your having watched more episodes of Star Trek! – so you'd see the connection between what your religion teaches, what Hoffer describes, and the Star Trek's depiction of *the Borg*: "Resistance is futile; you will be assimilated"

In any event, Dear, and in contrast to what your clerics urge, I urge you to be judgmental. If you will judge, I'm certain you'll reach many conclusions similar to the following. Simpletons accept the clerics' science because they can comprehend only simple explanations, e.g., "The sky is blue because that's the way God made it." Others "buy into the con game" out of greed (for eternal bliss), or fear (of eternal torture), or loneliness, and so on. And meanwhile, of course the clerics continue to promote their indoctrinations, they cling to their moldy science, because even those clerics who are not so stupid as to "believe" the silliness they preach are still well-pleased with the power, prestige, and other perks that their con games provide.

Yet, if that were all there was to it, then probably not too many people would care: most people are probably quite willing to let the indoctrinated, the simpletons, the greedy, the fearful, the lonely, and so on, wallow in their ignorance. They see, sadly, that for some poor souls, their religions provide them with almost their only happiness, thinking that they're making progress toward their imaginary goals. Unfortunately for humanity, however, that certainly isn't all there is to it.

The range of consequences of the clerics conning people into "believing" their moldy dogma extends from paying a fraction of one's income to any huckster who claims to know the unknown (and yes, Dear, I know that "knowing the unknown" is illogical, but all who are "religious" are illogical), to the astounding stupidity of tying a belt of explosives around one's waist as a "terrorist suicide bomber" or a "martyr for the Jihad" (with the title you choose depending on where your "allegiance" lies).

And if you wonder how "modern" Muslims could be so stupid as to blow themselves up because some huckster promises them that, thereby, they'll go directly to paradise, then, Dear, please think about the similar stupidity of the Christians who (it's said) willingly went to their death in the Roman Forum to be eaten by lions. In addition, although it seems clear that many "modern" Muslims are still in their version of the Dark Ages, please don't think that there aren't some American Christians who are similarly crazy (check out the modern "Jonestown Massacre" and the behavior of the wackoes at Waco, Texas). But as bad as these "suicides" are (for which the con-artist clerics should be charged with murder), even worse are the tortures, killings, mass murders, and wars that these damnable clerics with their stupid ideas have caused.

You might think "It's best to let individual do what they want – even my grandfather used to say 'if in doubt, let the system go free'." Thereby you might conclude: if your mother and her mother are happy living in their dream world, then let them be. They're happy. But I would disagree, Dear, because their delusions can injure the rest of us. That is, in response to your quoting my "If in doubt, let the system go free", I'd say: "In this case, I have no doubt; therefore, the system shouldn't be free!" That is, one could equally argue: let the Islamic terrorists live in their delusion; they're happy.

The root problem is that such people have abandoned thought. They've chosen to be followers. And as Sam Harris emphasized in his book *The End*

of Faith, there's only a difference in degree, not in kind, between the followers who obediently attend church, say grace at every meal, get on their knees every night to pray to god, etc. (including divorcing their unbelieving husbands) *versus* the obedient followers who strap explosives around their waists and proceed to die for the "jihad".

But all of the above suggestions may be premature if, in reality, you're addicted to your religion. Therefore, Dear, I most strongly encourage you to evaluate your own thoughts and feelings about your religion. Some of the uncertain, value-laden, and complicated questions about your religion, questions that only you can answer, include the following. Are you addicted to religion? If so, what is it about your religion that's addictive? What values does your religion promote? What's the value of your religion to you? What's its cost? Is it worth it? And therefore, what if anything do you plan to do about it; i.e., what's your decision about your religion?

Now, Dear, again, I can't answer such questions for you. *Tuum est!* But maybe I can usefully mention some topics that you might otherwise overlook.

For example, consider the question about your possible addiction to religion. I'd agree if you concluded that it's a tough question for you to answer; I'd disagree if you decided that the question could be dismissed with a quick "No!" I'd point out that only a small percentage of addicts admit to their addictions. Most addicts claim: "I can quit anytime that I want – it's just that, right now, I don't want to." In reality, it's probably better if an objective (or at least "disinterested") person (preferably trained in psychology) makes the "judgment call".

Nonetheless (untrained in psychology and definitely not disinterested!), let me mention what appears to be an "obvious fact", namely, you've developed (i.e., been indoctrinated with) "the habit" of your religion. But what if any "chemicals" (dopamine?) your religion stimulates in your mind, I haven't a clue. I assume (better, "I hope"!) that you haven't "progressed" (retrogressed!) to the point of "grace", "feeling the spirit of the Lord", to begin "speaking in tongues", but does your religion give you a sense of peace and security? Do you "get a rush" when you hear "scripture" read, hymns sung, and "testimonials" given? Do you "get a high" from feeling self-righteous? Whenever reality threatens your illusion, do you reach for another "fix"? If so, Dear, please consider the possibility that you're

“hooked” on your religion, similar to how alcoholics and drug addicts are hooked on their drugs of choice.

Religion undoubtedly makes a lot of people “feel good”. But then, a lot of people (well, at least those who are more enlightened) feel good when savoring a strawberry milkshake or watching a colorful sunrise. Whether any such feel-good experience is addictive seems to be a “judgment call”, apparently depending on what people demonstrate that they’re willing to sacrifice to get another “fix”.

For example, I suspect that most “Westerners” judge Islamic terrorists to be addicted to their religion (willingly sacrificing their lives “for the cause”), but many Muslims apparently disagree. I suspect that most psychologists and psychiatrists would judge your mother and her mother to be addicted to their religion (e.g., willingly sacrificing your parents’ marriage “for the cause”), but probably all “good Mormons” would disagree. My daughter might have concluded that I was addicted to sunrises – until she learned that one can’t walk in the desert during the summer except at dawn! And I suspect that only my wife (your grandmother) would claim that I’m addicted to strawberry milkshakes – probably both because she seems to like to criticize me and because she’s addicted to those horrible chocolate ones (even though neither of us has had either for many years).

But again, as for your possible addiction to religion, I don’t know. Do you relish listening to the message of still another sermon, or similar to me, do you sometimes like listening to them to see just how stupid, how inane, how insane, some people can be?

If your religion makes you “feel good”, Dear, I strongly encourage you to dig deep inside yourself to try to understand your feelings. If there’s a “feel good” component to your religion, maybe it’s a sign of an addiction, but as you can well imagine, there can be many sources of that feeling: doing as your mother and her parents desires, doing what’s familiar, being in the company of people who have become friends, feeling secure in an arrangements you understand, and so on. Only you will be able to assess how much of that “feel good” component is derived from your delusion about “god’s love”, “the promise of eternal life”, feeling “self righteous”, and so on. In any case, Dear, I hope very much that you’ll take the time to try to understand your “feelings” about your religion.

One hint that you might be addicted to religion is if you ask yourself: “Whereas my goal in life is to be happy and whereas my religion makes me happy, then why not continue to practice my religion?” You might further argue with me:

“You keep pushing the ideas that the prime goal of life is to continue and that ‘happineses’ are just signals telling people that they’re successfully pursuing their goals. Therefore, in so far as religious people are happy, it follows they should continue practicing their religions.”

In case you are thinking something similar, Dear, then let me suggest several additional ideas that you’d be well advised to “dig into”, this time with your analysis capabilities.

One idea, which I’ve already mentioned several times, is that people are happy when they’re not necessarily making progress toward their goals but when they think that they’re making progress – and people are easily duped, even by themselves. Thus, many religious people think that they’re making progress toward their goal of eternal life, but no data support their assessment. And if it ever dawned on religious people that their god is actually seeking to identify those humans who can think for themselves (those who aren’t duped by con artists), then the poor people will come to the stark realization that they’re not progressing toward but retrogressing from their fictitious goal of eternal life!

Also, Dear, please realize that an addict might pose similar questions for the case of addiction to any of various drugs, such as nicotine, alcohol, opium, or cocaine: “If my goal is to be happy and if cocaine makes me happy, then why not continue to use cocaine?” In the case of cocaine, though, surely you’d reject the suggestion to use cocaine, because almost certainly you’d become dependent on it, you’d do whatever is necessary to get money to purchase it, it would destroy you mentally and physically, and thereby, it would destroy your life. Therefore, perhaps you conclude that any analogy between practicing your religion and using mind-altering “recreational drugs” is inappropriate.

Yet, let me add, Dear, that I’ve never met a “true believer” (of, in particular, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism) who didn’t exude happiness – and the deeper they were in their religious pits, the happier they seemed to be. But I should add another set of observations: I’ve found similar

“happiness” in intensely religious people as for people on narcotics and other hallucinatory and illegal drugs. In both cases, there seems to be a distinctive appearance to their eyes (glassy?), a manner of holding their head (maybe slightly tilted and maybe with chin slightly protruding), and a propensity for rollicking and sustained speech. All of which reminds me of what Pascal wrote in 1660:

Those who have a lively imagination are a great deal more pleased with themselves than the wise can reasonably be. They look down upon men with haughtiness; they argue with boldness and confidence, others with fear and diffidence; and this gaiety of countenance often gives them the advantage in the opinion of the hearers, such favor have the imaginary wise in the eyes of judges of like nature. Imagination cannot make fools wise; but she can make them happy...

In any event, I think a compelling argument can be made that practicing religion and use of an addictive drug are not different in kind, only in degree. It might even be possible to demonstrate the similarity physiologically: both addictions (from drugs and from religion) may stimulate the same chemical (dopamine?) in the brain, producing pleasing stimuli, encouraging the addict to repeat the process, i.e., they are “chemical equivalents” of a survival signal. The trouble is: such survival signals are bogus. Although nicotine, alcohol, opium, etc. may stimulate the production of the chemical signals “saying” that you’re surviving, yet in reality, the stimulation is derived from something that threatens your survival. Yet humans enjoy survival signal so much, they’ll proceed to slowly kill themselves just to get them! That is, as I’ve written before, such drugs are traitorous survival signals.

Therefore, Dear, if practicing your religion makes you happy, I hope you’ll investigate why – to see if the happiness (the survival signal) is real or traitorous. As George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) wrote:

The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one. The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality.

Further, I hope you’ll identify which of the survival signals are associated with religion and which are mostly cultural (doing as your mother desires, associating with people, being with friends, being in familiar circumstances, judged to be living a “moral life”, and so on). Many of these “cultural survival signals” (although not in the case of “doing as your mother desires”) are available in many other settings (e.g., by joining a “secular

humanist” organization in your neighborhood). But let me add some “cautionary comments” about joining any group.

I trust you agree that an obvious and well-tested hypothesis is that great value (as measured against one’s trio of survival goals) is potentially available for an individual to be associated with certain groups. This recognized value of course explains the formation and continuation of most societies. Also, no doubt you’ve experienced much of value being affiliated with the group known as Mormons, just as other people find value in being affiliated with their religious groups. But, Dear, please be careful to distinguish between the value of associating with a particular group from the value of accepting the group’s ideas. That is, stupid ideas held by the majority in a particular group can negate the value to you of belonging to the group. Thereby, for example, I trust that you wouldn’t choose to join a street gang, the Nazis, a communist group, and similar.

Stated differently, before you decide to join any group, Dear, please evaluate the group’s premisses, purposes, and principles. Thereby, if you had to make the choice, I trust that you would choose to become an American (i.e., that you would agree with the principal that each person “has certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and with the principle that there should be “liberty and justice for all”). For similar reasons, you might choose to become a citizen of France (with its glorious motto of “liberty, equality, and fraternity”) – although their language is a bit of a barrier! And I trust that, in contrast, you’d avoid joining a group that considers its members are “a superior race”, or “God’s chosen people”, or that has a motto such as the Communist’s “from each according to his ability; to each according to his need” – because following such a creed, who determines “need”, save either a dictator or a mob?

That is, Dear, when you consider joining any group, make sure you know what your “signing up” for! If, to get more exercise, you’re considering joining a tennis club or a health club or similar, make sure that an expected part of membership isn’t burning crosses in the yards of black people. If you’re considering joining a group for social activities, make sure that an expected part of membership isn’t having sex with assigned strangers. And if you’re considering joining a religious group in part for the social activities, make sure that an expected part of membership isn’t living your life according to some model of the universe concocted by ignoramuses.

Stated differently, Dear, when making your decisions, please be careful to distinguish “the wheat from the chaff”: do your best to make sure you know what you’re choosing. When you were a child, your parents decided, what clothes you would wear, what toys you could play with, and with what groups you would be affiliated. When you’re an adult, you’ll need to make such decisions for yourself.

One decision that you would be wise to make is to decide if, in Mormonism, you belong to a cult. To test yourself, I recommend that you ask which of the following characteristics of a cult are appropriate descriptors of your religion. The list was prepared by “A. Orange” to judge if Alcoholics Anonymous is a cult.⁷ As you go through the list, assign to each characteristic a value, say from zero (not appropriate) to ten (“right on!”), for your religion – and for comparison, simultaneously assign an appropriate value for each characteristic for the case of science.

1. The Guru is always right
2. You are always wrong
3. No Exit
4. No Graduates
5. Cult-speak
6. Group-think, Suppression of Dissent, and Enforced Conformity in Thinking
7. Irrationality
8. Suspension of disbelief
9. Denigration of competing sects, cults, religions...
10. Personal attacks on critics
11. Insistence that the cult is THE ONLY WAY
12. The cult and its members are special
13. Induction of guilt, and the use of guilt to manipulate cult members
14. Unquestionable Dogma, Sacred Science, and Infallible Ideology
15. Indoctrination of members
16. Appeals to “holy” or “wise” authorities
17. Instant Community
18. Instant Intimacy
19. Surrender To The Cult
20. Giggly wonderfulness and starry-eyed faith
21. Personal testimonies of earlier converts
22. The cult is self-absorbed
23. Dual Purposes, Hidden Agendas, and Ulterior Motives
24. Aggressive Recruiting
25. Deceptive Recruiting

⁷ Copied from http://www.orange-papers.org/orange-cult_q0.html. The homepage of this impressive website is at <http://www.orange-papers.org/menu1.html>.

26. No Humor
27. You Can't Tell The Truth
28. Cloning – you become a clone of the cult leader or other elder cult members
29. You must change your beliefs to conform to the group's beliefs
30. The End Justifies The Means
31. Dishonesty, Deceit, Denial, Falsification, and Rewriting History
32. Different Levels of Truth
33. Newcomers can't think right
34. The Cult Implants Phobias
35. The Cult is Money-Grubbing
36. Confession Sessions
37. A System of Punishments and Rewards
38. An Impossible Superhuman Model of Perfection
39. Mentoring
40. Intrusiveness
41. Disturbed Guru, Mentally Ill Leader
42. Disturbed Members, Mentally Ill Followers
43. Create a sense of powerlessness, covert fear, guilt, and dependency
44. Dispensed existence
45. Ideology Over Experience, Observation, and Logic
46. Keep them unaware that there is an agenda to change them
47. Thought-stopping language; thought-terminating clichés and slogans
48. Mystical Manipulation
49. The guru or the group demands ultra-loyalty and total commitment
50. Demands for Total Faith and Total Trust
51. Members Get No Respect; they get abused
52. Inconsistency; contradictory messages
53. Hierarchical, Authoritarian Power Structure, and Social Castes
54. Front groups, masquerading recruiters, hidden promoters, and disguised propagandists
55. Belief equals truth
56. Use of double-binds
57. The cult leader is not held accountable for his actions
58. Everybody else needs the guru to boss him around, but nobody bosses the guru around
59. The guru criticizes everybody else, but nobody criticizes the guru
60. Dispensed truth and social definition of reality
61. The Guru Is Extra-Special
62. Flexible, shifting morality
63. Separatism
64. Inability to tolerate criticism
65. A Charismatic Leader
66. Calls to Obliterate Self
67. Don't Trust Your Own Mind
68. Don't Feel Your Feelings
69. The cult takes over the individual's decision-making process

70. You Owe The Group
71. We Have The Panacea
72. Progressive Indoctrination and Progressive Commitments
73. Magical, Mystical, Unexplainable Workings
74. Trance-Inducing Practices
75. New Identity – Redefinition of Self – Revision of Personal History
76. Membership Rivalry
77. True Believers
78. Scapegoating and Excommunication
79. Promised Powers or Knowledge
80. It's a con; you don't get the promised goodies
81. Hypocrisy
82. Denial of the truth, reversal of reality, rationalization and denial
83. Seeing Through Tinted Lenses
84. You can't make it without the cult
85. Enemy-making and Devaluing the Outsider
86. The cult wants to own you
87. Channeling or other occult, unchallengeable, sources of information
88. They Make You Dependent On The Group
89. Demands For Compliance With The Group
90. Newcomers Need Fixing
91. Use of the Cognitive Dissonance Technique
92. Grandiose existence. Bombastic, Grandiose Claims
93. Black And White Thinking
94. The use of heavy-duty mind control and rapid conversion techniques
95. Threats of bodily harm or death to someone who leaves the cult
96. Threats of bodily harm or death to someone who criticizes the cult
97. Appropriation of all of the members' worldly wealth
98. Making cult members work long hours for free
99. Total immersion and total isolation
100. Mass suicide.

When I went through the list for the case of science, I found that only a few of the listed characteristics seem appropriate (e.g., #5, “cult speak”, #12, “the cult and its members are special”, #39, “mentoring”). What did you find for your religion?

And yes, Dear, of course I agree that there can be some “value” in affiliating with some religious group – even with a cult. I’m quite confident that the majority of the members of any religious group try to be “good”. Probably most are just doing what their parents taught them to do. Evidence suggests, however, that even more than half of them have less than average intelligence. And I’m afraid that there’s truth in the remark by someone else: “It’s not solely that they [of particular creeds] seek eternal life, it’s that

they want someone to tell them what to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon [or in the case of Muslims, a hot Friday afternoon]!”

But Dear, a huge amount of evidence (from the Inquisitions, the Crusades, the suicide bombings) supports the concept that it can be highly undesirable for people to live their lives in a fantasy world. Let me list some of these “undesirables” (of living in a fantasy world, addicted to religion), which immediately come to mind.

- A substantial portion of your existence and of your ability to insure your own survival (and your family’s) is sacrificed to support your addiction.
- Your psyche is damaged, subsumed by another force. Your uniqueness, your spirit, your volition are subsumed by “the chemical”, which in some sense means that “you” are essentially dead.
- Being another “parrot, on a dead branch of knowledge, endless repeating the same old lines”, your development slows (in some cases, to a stop). You’re locked into a thought system.
- You can become an automaton – a robot – the pawn of some religious leader or bureaucracy. And this bureaucracy will continue to burden you – stomp on your spirit – until you yield to it.
- When you do yield to it, when you do what you’re told, quite likely you will act in ways that are not in your long-term best interests.
- With your actions dictated by “the chemical”, you could cause grave damage to yourself and, more importantly, to others.
- Living a lie, you’ll lose your life: you’ll miss the one opportunity you’ll ever have to live.
- If you ever see what you lost, your regrets could be huge (and even violent).
- Religions are placebos: they may make you feel better, they make you think that your problems are reduced, but it’s all in your mind: in reality, nothing changes – except for the reduction in time and money you have left to find real solutions to your problems.

- For the more intelligent, religious inconsistencies and conflicts with one's own observations can tie such people into horrible double binds, and for those who are intelligent but whose ego isn't strong, the continuous conflict can lead them to mental breakdowns.

And if you think I exaggerate, Dear, then in a later chapter, I'll provide some medical data that substantiate, in particular, the last point listed, and here, I'll quote the following six "axioms" that, from his studies, Eli S. Chesen, M.D. concluded in his book *Religion May Be Hazardous To Your Health*.

AXIOM 1: Religion serves in many ways to impede the development of flexible thinking processes. This ultimately results in adult thinking that is rigid, confined and stereotyped.

AXIOM 2: Rigid, confined and stereotyped religious thinking patterns can be directly contributory to emotional instability. Here it takes the form of a health hazard in a psychiatric sense.

AXIOM 3: Profound lifelong religious indoctrination may assume the form of a punitive conscience in an adult. This serves to stifle the person's conscious recognition of normal drives, [who] is therefore unable to deal with them in times of stress.

AXIOM 4: If a person has a tenuous grasp on reality, highly charged religious happenings may create an illusion of unreality within [the person]. This, in turn, may serve to sever [the person's] weak connection with reality, thus precipitating a psychotic reaction.

AXIOM 5: A pathological effect of religion on a psychotic person is commonly manifested in [the person's] delusional system; that is, biblical [or other "holy book"] material often provides the theme and variations that are the content of a psychotic episode.

AXIOM 6: Religious dictates during youth can place people later in irreversible, unresolvable dilemmas, leading to permanent unhappiness.

I have insufficient experience to vouch that Chesen's conclusions should be called "Axioms"; it would be good if you'd like to dig into relevant data to reach your own decisions; first, though, isn't it time to get some exercise?!