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The Hedonic Covenant and Humanity's True Emancipation

By Hiram Crespo, editor.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. No one but ourselves can free our minds.
– Bob Marley, Redemption Song

The Catholic world is celebrating its Holy Week in commemoration of the betrayal, trial crucifixion and supposed resurrection of Jesus: a time for reflection and for avoiding red meats.

To those of us who lack supernatural beliefs, the narrative of how Jesus was executed serves as another warning against state and religion having an adulterous relationship: the priests (whom Jesus berated in Matthew 23, calling them vipers and hypocrites) convinced the Roman powers that he was a seditious rebel, and Pontius Pilates washed his hands saying "*I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your responsibility!*".

The Roman Empire expressed no animosity against him, and merely mocked the apparent imperial pretensions of a man who had no army to stand against Rome. If there hadn't been a religious political power in Judea, Jesus would have lived.

But most Christians believe that Jesus came to Earth on a suicide mission and that his entire ordeal had been pre-determined. They don't see a narrative that would warn us against theocracy, or against the political power of corrupt, evil and fanatical priests of false doctrine. They see a sacred narrative where a human sacrifice (of an innocent man) was meant to atone for the crimes of all of humanity.

Christian belief in the atonement of Jesus is fundamental to their doctrine of redemption. They believe that God is of such nature that he took pleasure in human sacrifice, in the immolation of a sacrificial victim; that he was appeased by the sacrifice of an innocent preacher 2,000 years ago. Epicurus would have indicted this doctrine as a most heinous form of blasphemy.

They also believe that Adam was a historical man whose fall (under the seduction of a woman, who was seduced by a talking snake) opened Pandora's box: all evils that fell upon us were a result of this initial *disobedience*. The

disobedience, says the Bible, consisted of eating of the fruit of knowledge. Knowledge – not violence, not oppression, not suffering, not treachery or murder, not ignorance but knowledge – is the primal evil.

... And blind obedience to a God that is to be appeased by human agony, who is not happy to see our pleasure but is satisfied only to see our pain, and the undeserved punishment of an innocent man at that, THAT is virtue according to this false view. There is so much wrong with this so-called “redemptive” narrative, that we must stop here and recollect our thoughts.

Most Christians never stop to consider the many long-term spiritual repercussions of such a belief system. Their God, they say, is a God of history, and what better place to start seeing the fruits of this creed than in the history books. After all, Jesus said “by their fruits you will know them”. What were the fruits of the full blossoming of Christian faith?

When Christians took over the entire culture, knowledge and science were banned, a totalitarian regime controlled the thought-processes of everyone under the Roman crown and replaced it with its own official myth, books were burnt, and we entered a thousand-year period of misery, filth, disease, superstition, hysteria and torture that we now know as the Dark Ages.

In [the Perils of Alienation](#) I mention one of the other spiritual diseases that we inherited from Pauline Christianity: a hatred for and denial of the body, of the natural self.

Now, I grew up Catholic and, while there are many well-meaning Christians and Catholics who exhibit a beautiful character, I must begin discussing the notion of redemption by noting the many false opinions and the unhealthy worldview that has done great spiritual damage to humanity over the centuries. We still live with vestiges of the Dark Ages all around us.

This is a very important matter if humanity is to shake off the evil legacy of false religion, and maybe even reassess the narrative of Jesus in light of the insights born from this process. Jesus does not belong only to the false priests and prophets: he belongs to all of humanity, he was one of us, and the narrative of religious tyranny that underlies his life story must also be told.

1. Firstly, we Epicureans believe if there is a God, he would not exist outside of nature (because no-thing exists outside of nature). If it's not in nature and it can't be studied with our senses, it's not real. In what way can an invisible, unfathomable God be said to exist? That's non-being. That's non-reality.
2. Also, if there is a God, he would not take pleasure in animal or human sacrifices, much less would he take pleasure in the immolation of the innocent and without blemish. Such an entity would be evil and not be worthy of worship. Anyone who tells you that he (or his God) needs to see his own son, or anyone else for that matter, flogged and bleeding to death while hanging from a stick in order to forgive your debts or your crimes against others, is simply insane and sadistic. This is not the product of healthy minds. The murder of Jesus, if it took place, was an evil act perpetrated by a corrupt empire under pressure from a fanatical religious mob.
3. There is absolutely no reason why an innocent man should pay for the sins of the guilty, much less for all of humanity's sins. There is no reason to call this justice, or ethics, or redemption, or to dignify it by any other similar term. Men are responsible for their own actions. Guilty men should, ideally, atone themselves for their crimes by engaging in non-violent conflict resolution and by living wholesome, productive, pleasant lives.
4. Adam and Eve are mythical constructs, not historical persons. The Earth was not created 6,000 years ago, but emerged more than 4.5 billion years ago, and humanity has been around for tens of thousands of years. If we go by DNA evidence, the mitochondrial Eve lived over one million years ago in Africa while the Y-chromosome Adam lived about 60,000 years ago. The currently accepted theory is that they both lived in Africa. Therefore, there is no need to atone for their imaginary disobedience.
5. Parthogenesis only happens in reptiles. Mary was not a virgin, and she was not the first or the only 16-year-old girl who had a child whose father's identity was unknown. That happens everyday. It's not a miracle.

6. Men do not resurrect after they die, at least not after the brain has lacked oxygen for so long that neurons have died. This is not likely to have happened.
7. A separate issue from the likelihood of virgin births and resurrections is the moral problem posed by the insistence that, in order to be a moral or ethical person, one has to be gullible enough to believe these supernatural claims. This is a serious distortion of the moral compass of mortals. A person can be good and experience a healthy, happy, productive, pleasant existence without these beliefs. There is no reason to tie credulity with morals in this manner.
8. Knowledge is not an act of disobedience. In fact, the study of the nature of things, to us, is a necessary foundation required to know anything with any certainty. All good and useful medicine and technology build on the foundation of previously attained knowledge. There is no possibility of progress, of diminishing human misery, or of increasing our quality of life without knowledge. Knowledge is so fundamental to who we are that it's in the name of our species: *homo sapiens* translates as the hominid of wisdom. The belief that knowledge is evil is, literally, dehumanizing.
9. There absolutely is no reason to hate or deny our physicality. The human body, the flesh, is not a source of shame or of sin. All things in nature are composed of smaller things, down to the smallest components, and the things that comprise us are necessary parts of who we are. We can not have healthy compassion for other mortals or even self-respect without embracing our flesh and being considerate towards the natural needs that emerge from our natural selves.
10. Having said all of this, I realize that many of us have some attachment to Jesus for different reasons, whether we see him as a historical figure or a culture hero. We grew up hearing about him, celebrating his nativity, etc. Even if we're severely critical of the many false views attached to Jesus, some of us feel that he's part of our cultural legacy and that he has continued significance. Thomas Jefferson believed that the altruistic and social-justice-focused teachings of Jesus supplemented Epicurean doctrine. For a proper Epicurean and naturalist approach to this very important and much-beloved figure, please read [the Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth](#).

It's unfortunate that so much had to be addressed before we could properly approach the subject of redemption, of liberation of humans from suffering based on an accurate assessment of the nature of things. But here we are, on the other side of the Dark Ages, and a vast majority of Christendom still holds on to these harmful superstitions and to what Jefferson called the heresy of immaterialism.

Jesus said he worshiped the God of the living, and I'd like to think that if he had seen the scandal and the confusion that emerged from his life he would have advised us not that we can die for each other, but that we can live for ourselves and for each other. Death is no-thing. Life, on the other hand, is the only thing worthy of being considered sacred.

The Hedonic Covenant

Philosophy offers redemption from barbarism, from a pre-civilized existence, from savagery, and from a life of needless suffering. This requires the rule of law. It calls for the means of legal systems, of rules that people agree to live by and uphold.

We believe that all laws, all notions of justice, are man-made. Our laws, ideally, should be fashioned in order to serve humanity (although a strong case can be made for laws protecting the other species). In this sense, we reject the notion of a Holy Law in favor of a Wholesome Law.

The immediate repercussion of the hedonic covenant is that there are no divine Law-givers, no Law set in stone forever; that we are responsible for the rules by which we choose to live, individually and collectively; and that therefore our laws should be inspired by visions of the most pleasant life we can imagine.

Jesus said we should love others as we love ourselves. Epicurus' teaching on social justice focuses on the social contract where people agree to "not harm or be harmed", to cooperate and to solve conflicts non-violently. The social contract is a tool meant to ensure safety and peace.

The greatest fruit of justice is peace of mind. – Epicurus

Later hedonist thinkers have expanded the doctrine of the social contract, calling instead for a comprehensive hedonic covenant that seeks the maximizing of pleasures and minimizing of pain for all concerned. Michel Onfre defined his *utilitarian hedonism* in these terms.

The social contract is Epicurus' variety of the golden rule, but it really merely serves as the minimal common denominator required for civilized friendship, and indeed for civilization itself. At most, it can serve as the foundation for secular non-violent ethics and politics, for choosing cooperation over competition in the pursuit of a truly humane civilization that is not founded on predatory or oppressive relations; one where individuals can flourish and attain the most pleasant existence potentially available to them.

Non-violent conflict resolution theory and practice prominently emerged in instances where entire societies needed a revolution and violence was seen as inevitable. In both the civil rights struggle in the US and India's independence struggle, the boycott was effectively utilized to transform society: here, the ethics of conscious consumption, also advocated by Epicurus, was of great utility to, and inseparable from, non-violent politics.

If we weave our higher societal concerns and values more fully into our hedonic calculus and practice conscious consumption, the potential for a radical transformation of civilization could slowly blossom and help to materialize our progressively more humane ideals. By voting with our money, we can punish wrongdoers and reward the righteous at a grassroots level. Companies that treat their workers inhumanely or that otherwise engage in unethical, abusive practices may have power over politicians, but that power is derived from the consumer. If the consumer removes his support, the company loses power.

In other words, **when we consistently support those who maximize pleasure and minimize pain for all concerned, everyone (but the oppressor) wins.** This does not require violence. In human society all members need to participate in the economy, in the exchange of services and goods. There are non-violent forms of coercion that can be implemented through conscious consumption in order to advance the happiest, most prosperous, peace-loving society.

Through fiscal support, we can encourage good and discourage evil in a free and non-violent society. If someone doing trade decides to shift its method of operation to one is that not objectionable, then we can again engage them in trade. The punitive and vengeful attitudes that permeate our justice system have thoroughly distorted our points of reference. Justice and law exist not to punish people but to facilitate a pleasant existence. This does not mean that it's wrong or useless to punish, but that the initial point of reference is not punitive, that the goal is not punishment. Observe the absence of punitive impulse in the Epicurean justice discourse:

Laws are made for the sake of the wise, not to prevent them from inflicting wrong but to secure them from suffering it. – Epicurus

In the current state of international policy, the tyranny of Manonism has to a great extent replaced religious tyranny. Big money and big corporations have begun to enjoy rule over even elected governments and have access to the law-creating mechanisms. In the US, we even have a law that declares that corporations are people, although they can't be physically put in jail when they commit crimes and have no ability to feel guilt. Everybody knows that corporations are not people. People are people. Instead of creating laws for the sake of our

humanity, hedonist laws for the sake of avoiding suffering and maximizing pleasure, we are now dehumanizing ourselves by creating laws based on false opinion for the sake of big money and big corporations.

Epicurus is as relevant as ever. His ethical contractarianism serves as the foundation for our legal system, but few people today consider the roots of our traditions and the original purposes and uses of our systems of justice and law. Like a seed whose flourishing is arrested from time to time but continues over the long term, the social contract can be a much more dynamic and revolutionary doctrine than it's ever been given credit for. It can help to deal with concrete, contemporary moral problems, facilitate fair trade, protect self-sufficiency and civil liberties, and fight tyranny.

In a philosophy of free men, we are not redeemed from the evils of knowledge by blind obedience: instead, we are delivered from servitude by prudence.