

# **Epicureanism as the spiritual essence or 'religion' of an entire community**

**Post by “Peter Konstans” of October 3, 2023 at 7:31 AM**

This is a very interesting discussion and there is much to discuss here. For now I will focus on the claim that Epicureanism is about 'living your life to the fullest instead of being a victim on the cross'. This ignores the fact that 'living your life to the fullest' was not the easiest thing to do in antiquity. Epicurus taught that what is good is easy to attain in stark contrast to moralists who always tend to exalt what is hard. In antiquity indulging yourself in luxuries and being socio-economically privileged was basically the same thing. You guys must have noticed this trend where exposure of the masses to infotainment that the likes of Mary Beard peddle has made people so infatuated with the Roman Empire that they report thinking of it every day. Vaclav Smil, a zero-nonsense scholar who has studied the economy of antiquity would use hard numbers to remind those people that the material circumstances of the period that the majority had to endure (even free people, not just slaves) actually resembled those of the very poorest countries in today's third world. Acquiring privilege in such an environment didn't mean going to college and becoming a successful businessman but seeking political patronage and inevitably getting involved in nasty political conflicts which easily turned lethal. Things could not have been more different today. We can afford to indulge in all sorts of luxuries and excesses like fine dining and drugs without acquiring high social status. And unlike us Epicurus flourished in violent times where there was not much room for our jokes. Today we demonstrate on the streets and congratulate ourselves for 'fighting' valorously and even teenagers are taken seriously as social reformers and visionaries. When the ancient Epicureans rejected luxury they automatically and unambiguously rejected political ambition since you didn't get to have the one without the other. If you oppose luxury you have to embrace minimalism and if you are skeptical toward political ambitions you have to embrace the modesty of a life with limited public exposure within the confines of a small community of friends. Epicurus argued that this is the key to the happy life and this is not an abstract ideal. There is in fact ample empirical evidence showing he was correct. That's how we observe people in the so called 'blue zones' living. That's how Daniel Everett who spent many years with the Amazonian Piraha and was left with no doubt that they are the 'happiest people in the world' also observed them living. These groups tend to be both strict minimalists and sensuous hedonists and no contradiction is involved. While being minimalist, they are still far more sensuous than the typical person in our societies could fathom and they do not shy away from alcohol or carnal play at all. But being a sensuous hedonist doesn't exclusively have to involve eating, drinking and sexing. David Buettner describes a happy family in Singapore where a woman kisses the hand of her husband every morning. Superficially that seems like a deplorable expression of submission but it's rather a highly sensual gesture that Epicurus would have approved as a manifestation of legitimate hedonism serving to please her husband and remind them both every day of the tender commitment binding them together. John Gottman

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3359-epicureanism-as-the-spiritual-essence-or-religion-of-an-entire-community/?postID=26300#post26300>

reports how a therapist advised an unhappy couple to arrange a mud fight in the garden. They were shocked to hear that and thought the therapist was an idiot but they tried it out, they had a blast and it saved their marriage. So something like a mud fight or a hand kiss can also be legitimate expressions of hedonism that are not on our pleasure radar because our radar is not a very advanced model. So Epicurus was well aware that the full spectrum of hedonism contained more than just indulging yourself in drinking bouts and the like and urged people to pay attention to the full spectrum. That's one of the reasons why his definition of pleasure was misunderstood as idiosyncratic. He tried to convince people of simple pleasures that were as of yet unknown to them and to which they couldn't relate. Now I would like to say something about the 'victims'. In the protestant world there is no monastic tradition but here where I live it still survives and even non-believers admire the anachorites' genuine commitment to their faith. It would never cross my mind to put a Nietzschean mask on and call Christian monks 'life-denying victims'. These people lead lives that they obviously enjoy sincerely and deeply. They talk in a manner that radiates mental stability, tranquility and confidence, all rare qualities that Epicurus would have liked. They also have qualities that Epicurus would have hated like torturing themselves with arduous physical trials (like hauling heavy loads of timber across mountains and enduring extreme fasting) in the pursuit of receiving the grace of holiness (glorification aka doxasmos) by God. But there is no doubt that they enjoy what they do and when asked they affirm unreservedly that their life is a life of pleasure, not of sacrifice. And they are aware that there is a huge difference between them and ordinary Christians who are steeped in genuine spiritual misery. They tell us that the religious motivations of ordinary Christians are as worldly and indifferent to the love of Christ as those that motivated the pagan masses in antiquity and they are in fact quite right. Ordinary Christians pray and go to church so that God likes them and blesses them with a happy life. They want their businesses to stay afloat, they want to enjoy a good income and be shielded from poverty, they want their bodies to be shielded from sickness and decay and they want their brood to have a good education, a good job and a good partner so that they can feel proud in the envious eyes of society. And when all is said and done they want a cozy afterlife. It's exactly those kind of stupid attitudes and fixations with all their unpleasant behavioral complexes and neuroses that Epicurus sought to banish. There is here an actual affinity between unorthodox elements in Judaism (from where Christianity emerged) and Epicureanism. They are both goaded by similar revulsions, intentions and motivations. Both wanted to empower man and bring him closer to a blissful divine-like state. But they went about this differently. Epicureanism sought to banish the gods from human life completely and elevate man to a blissful status by training him to be a proper and dedicated hedonist. Radical Judaism sought to limit God to his role as a judge who will only reveal himself in the apocalypse. Until then they wanted to focus on training people to use all their energy to secure god's grace in order to receive a favorable judgement and become divine beings themselves when the day of judgement comes. Interestingly, Epicurus was also thought of as a sort of judge personally monitoring your progress as a hedonist. The advice 'do everything as if Epicurus is watching' is parallel with 'do everything as if God is watching'.