

# **"BUDDHISM" AND TOLERANCE FOR DIVERSITY OF RELIGION AND BELIEF**

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At the risk of oversimplification, I would like to propose that each of the world's great religions consists of two main aspects, namely that of universal love, which is altruistic and selfless on the one hand, and a tribal, institutionalized, or egocentric factor on the other. If we are not careful, our religion can become very fundamentalistic and intolerant, and we will find ourselves believing that we are the only ones on the true and righteous path to salvation, while all others are merely misguided souls. It is a great temptation to compete with other religions and rationalize that ours is better rather than to work towards peaceful co-existence and cooperation.

Unfortunately, some religions are still hunting for converts using crass and destructive ideologies. I'd like to quote a passage from *Overseas Missionary Fellowship* (August-September, 1987). The article is called "Finding True Freedom in Thailand":

For ninety-nine percent of the Thais, bondage to demons brings the greatest fear.... This is true for animistic tribesmen, prosperous merchants, enlightened graduates or stolid farmers... revealed in conversation, TV soap operas, adornments to

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people's person or property.... Nothing and no one has been able to remove permanently the inner anxiety that man, in manipulating the spiritual forces, can also become their victim.

The conclusion you are led to, if you read the article, is that the Thais must be saved by Christian missionaries, or that as a tribe, they must be saved by US aid! I feel that people who stick with religions or ideologies such as these either are or become unable to respect other people, especially the poor, who may be proud of their religions and are no less advanced spiritually than these would-be evangelists.

Indeed tribalism in itself should not be a derogatory term, but when a world religion or superpower becomes tribal, it can easily degenerate into hypocrisy and arrogance and can even lead to racism, as one can see clearly in South Africa and elsewhere.

However, if we concentrate on the religious aspects of universal love, we shall all become more humble, tolerant and truly respectful of other beings--not only human, but animal, and all natural phenomena as well. From this, our social and economic development will be nonviolent. We will not be cruel to fellow human beings or to mother earth. Nor will we plunder our natural resources in the name of progress. Forests will be saved, rivers will be free of pollution. And we will realize that development can only occur at a pace at which humans and other beings matter.

In order to get rid of tribalism in religious institutions, nationalism, and even consumerism and capitalism, the faithful have to practice their religion with universal love. While we act individually and locally, we must think globally, so that selfishness can slowly become selflessness. Only then can one respect other religions and ideologies wholeheartedly. Although you may not agree entirely with those of different views and

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beliefs, you can certainly respect them. Even if they are your oppressors you need not hate them because that hatred is also harmful to you. Instead of hating an oppressor one should try to understand the oppressive system and try one's best to change it with the help of good friends who want to help one to overcome suffering and obstacles in the way of cultural and spiritual development--as well as social and economic development. If these four aspects of development; the cultural, spiritual, social and economic, could be integrated, then there could be real human development.

Unfortunately, over the past two centuries, universal love in world religions has declined so much that merely institutional religions seem to be, on the whole, the norm. Most churches tolerate or support the political status quo no matter how oppressive the present regimes may be. (There are of course exceptions). And since the rise of capitalism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism and Hinduism seem to cater to the rich, while religious leaders pay lip service to the poor. At best, they offer some social welfare to the needy, but there have not been enough prophetic voices to transform the social and economic order to be more just and peaceful for all humankind. The rate of child malnutrition is on the rise, as is prostitution and sex tourism as well as militarism, materialism and consumerism. Some religious leaders have tried to work with secular leaders to made the world a more meaningful and peaceful place but so far we have been unable to establish widespread basic changes which would ensure basic human rights for all and protect people from political and religious exploitation. Tibet, Burma and Bangladesh may be extreme cases, but such suffering, to lesser degrees, exists everywhere. And as well, the lack of food, shelter, clothing and medicine for the majority of people in many countries is appalling--not to mention the suffering caused by polluted air and water.

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Indeed the rise of the secular intellectual has been a key factor in shaping the modern world. Seen through the long perspective of history it is in many ways a new phenomenon. It is true that in their earlier incarnations as priests, scribes and soothsayers, intellectuals have guided society from the very beginning; however, their moral and ideological innovations were limited by the canons of external authority and by the inheritance of tradition. They were not, and could not be, free spirits, or adventurers of the mind.

With the decline of priestly power since the eighteenth century, a new kind of mentor emerged to fill the vacuum and capture the ear of society. The secular intellectual might be a deist, a skeptic or an atheist. But they have been just as ready as any pontiff or presbyter to tell humankind how to conduct its affairs. They have proclaimed, from the start, a special devotion to the interests of humanity and an evangelical duty to advance them by their teaching. And they have brought to their self-appointed task a far more radical approach than their clerical predecessors as they have felt themselves bound by no corpus of revealed religion. The collective wisdom of the past, the legacy of tradition, and the prescriptive codes of ancestral experience existed to be selectively followed or wholly rejected as his own good sense might decide.

For the first time in human history, and with growing confidence and audacity, people have arisen and claimed that they could diagnose the ills of society and cure them with their own intellects: moreover, that they could devise formulae that, if followed, would not only change the structure of society, but the fundamental habits of human beings for the better. Unlike their sacerdotal predecessors, they were not servants and interpreters of the gods but substitutes. Their hero was Prometheus who stole the celestial fire and brought it to earth.

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One of the most marked characteristics of the new secular intellectuals has been the relish with which they have scrutinized religion and its protagonists.

The intellectuals have examined how far these great systems of faith have aided or harmed humanity and to what extent these secular popes and pastors have lived up to their precepts, of purity and truthfulness, and of charity and benevolence. The verdicts they have pronounced on both churches and clergy have been harsh.

Over the last two centuries, the influence of religion has continued to decline and secular intellectuals have played an ever-growing role in shaping our attitudes and institutions. Yet when examining the records of these great intellectuals who have shaped the world since the French and Russian revolution right through to the cultural revolution in China and the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, I have come to the sad conclusion that the secular high priests, too, have all failed us--whether he be a Rousseau, Karl Marx, Tolstoy, Brecht, Bertrand Russell or Mao Tse-Tung.

In particular, if we focus on their moral and judgmental credentials as intellectuals fit to tell humankind how to conduct itself, the way these secular intellectuals ran their own lives, and their relationships with family, friends and associates were, on the whole, appalling--not to mention their sexual and financial dealings.

One must also ask whether they told us the truth, and how their systems stood up to the test of time and praxis. Indeed it seems that they all contributed so much to the suffering of humankind, although it is also true that they may have helped to create some beautiful literature and sharpened our way of thinking somewhat.

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In my opinion, the secular gods failed because they too became intolerant and arrogant. In many cases, ideas and the direction of humanity became more important to them than the individual men and women they encountered. They too lacked the commitment of personal transformation, although Tolstoy tried but failed. Yet he had a direct positive influence on Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

As a Thai, I regard my national hero, Phya Anuman Rajadon, whose centenary was recognized by UNESCO last year, as more important than the world's leading intellectuals, even though he was not as well-known, nor a great genius. He was so humble and so selfless that he regarded himself as an ordinary man who had time to respect everyone, and encouraged others to be better than he. Yet, he could live in, explore and preserve his national culture, as well as integrate it meaningfully with those of our neighbours. I feel that if we know our limits and respect others we will usually not go wrong. We should develop individually and socially by understanding and appreciating our cultures--including our spiritual traditions and then economic development will not result in such a wide gap between the rich and the poor, with neither the rich nor the poor being happy.

Although Buddhism with a capital "B" can be tribal in a very negative sense and can legitimize dictatorial regimes or immoral multinational corporations, if we were to direct our efforts towards universal love, we could spell it with a small "b". Thus we should try to follow the Buddha, as our Christian friends try to follow Christ and our Muslim friends submit their egos entirely to God.

The first law of buddhism with a small "b" should read like this, "Do not be idolatrous about, or bound to, any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought

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are guiding means; they are not absolute truths" (The First Tiep Hien Precept).

This would certainly be in sharp contrast to the dogmatic teachings of quite a number of secular intellectuals who contributed to revolutions, upheavals and human sufferings in the past.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, writes: "If you have a gun, you can shoot one, two, three, five people, but if you have an ideology and stick to it, thinking it is the absolute truth, you can kill millions.... Peace can only be achieved when we are not attached to a view, when we are free from fanaticism." The more you understand this and try to practice it, the more you will appreciate the importance of a diversity of religions and beliefs.

If we are truly of good will, then to unite those of different views we must not avoid contact with suffering, but find ways to be with those who suffer. We must also avoid accumulating wealth while millions are hungry. These may not be high ideals but if we practice them it may result in a consciousness of and a precedent for social justice and peace work. However, in order to do so with awareness, we should, in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, "not lose ourselves in dispersion and in our surroundings." We should "learn to practice breathing in order to regain composure of the body and mind, to practice mindfulness, and to develop concentration and understanding." This approach to development is nondualistic, in that one must be peace to make peace in the world.

We should stress the continuity of "inner" and "outer," calling the world our "large self" so that we become it actively and care for it.

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I hope this concept will help guide us in our work on social justice and peace issues and will challenge each person to examine his or her behavior in relation to the needs of the larger community while freeing him or her from limiting patterns. I believe this concept is relevant to the growth of mind, spirit and body--the whole of human development.

To me, in order to build understanding and respect between people of diverse religions or beliefs, one needs an alternative to living by ideology. Socially engaged spirituality must be free from the bondage of ideology. As one person put it: "The greatest religious problem today is how to be both a mystic and a militant; in other words, how to combine the search for an expansion of inner awareness with effective social action, and how to find one's true identity in both."