

BUDDHISM AND THE ISSUE OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Y. KARUNADASA

“Religious Fundamentalism” embraces all religious phenomena and movements that emerge as a reaction against some kind of danger, as for instance, the marginalization of religion, due to the onset of science and technology. According to, *“Fundamentalisms Comprehended: An Anthology of Articles”*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (University of Chicago Press, 2004), some of the basic ingredients that go to make religious fundamentalism are as follows:

- *Ultra-orthodoxy: the recognition of the absolute inerrancy of the religious scriptures.

- *Ultra-orthopraxis: the attempt to practice the religious life, based almost on a literal, rather than on a hermeneutical interpretation of rules and regulations laid down in the religious scriptures

- *Exclusivism

- *Militant piety

- *Fanaticism

Exclusivism the Root Cause of Fundamentalism

There can be many reasons for the emergence of religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, we can identify exclusivism as its root cause. Other kinds of fundamentalism, as for instance, those arising in relation to one’s own race, nationality, ethnicity, or political ideology also have exclusivism as their root cause.

How the Buddha defines Exclusivism

The most precise, and therefore, the most acceptable definition of exclusivism can be found in the teachings of the Buddha. Exclusivism, as defined by the Buddha, is the attitude of mind that manifests in relation to one’s own view, as “This alone is true, all else is false” (*idam eva saccam, mogham annam*) (*Majjhimanikaya*, PTS, II 170). This kind of dogmatic and exclusivist assertion is due to what is called “*sanditthi-raga*”, i.e. “infatuation with the rightness of one’s own view/dogma/ideology.” Another Buddhist expression, with a similar connotation, is “*idam-saccabhinivesa*”. This means “adherence to one’s own view, while asserting this alone is the truth”. All such categorical assertions in respect of one’s own religion or ideology lead to what Buddhism calls “tenaciously grasping views” (*ditthi-paramasa*). (*Dighanikaya*, PTS, III 230; *Samyuttanikaya*, PTS, V 59; *Dhammasangani*, PTS 1498).

Attachment to Views, whether they are Right or Wrong:

An attitude of mind, driven by exclusivism, can easily provide a fertile ground for bigotry and intolerance, indoctrination and unethical conversion, militant piety and persecution, interpersonal conflicts and acts of terrorism. From the Buddhist perspective, dogmatic attachment to views and ideologies, whether they

are true or false, is very much more detrimental and fraught with more danger than our greedy attachment to material objects. A good example for this is today's fast-growing "industry" of suicide-bombing. A person committing suicide-bombing is prepared to sacrifice his own life for the sake of the ideological agenda he is pursuing. Inter-religious and intra-religious wars, often referred to by the misnomer "holy wars", are another case in point.

How Buddhism Looks at Views:

For Buddhism, a view is only a means to an end, a guide for goal-oriented action. In his well-known Discourse on the Parable of the Raft (Kullupama), the Buddha says that his teachings are not for the purpose of grasping, but for the purpose of crossing over: to cross over from the hither shore of Samsara to the thither shore of Nibbana. The Dhamma taught by the Buddha has only relative value, relative to the realization of the goal. As one Chinese Buddhist saying goes, the Dhamma is like a finger pointing to the moon. If we focus our attention only on the finger we cannot see the moon. Nor can we see the moon without looking at the finger, either.

Buddhism and Pluralism

The "Dhamma" or What the Buddha Taught is not actuality. It is a description of actuality. It can be presented in many ways, adopting many perspectives. It can also be communicated through many dialects and languages. This could be described as Buddhist Pluralism. Pluralism is the direct opposite of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is the attempt to reduce everything into an unalterable monolithic structure, with no alternative possibilities permitted. We can even argue that pluralism is the direct opposite of fundamentalism. Where there is pluralism, there cannot be fundamentalism.

Buddhist Cosmic Pluralism

The Buddhist view of the world/universe is not confined to our earthly existence. Nowhere does Buddhism assert that earth is the centre of the universe. Buddhism recognizes the vastness of space and the immensity of time. In one Buddhist discourse, we read:

"As far as these suns and moons revolve shedding their light in space, so far extends the thousand-fold world system. In it are a thousand suns, a thousand moons, thousands of earths, and thousands of heavenly worlds. This is said to be the thousand-fold minor world-system. A thousand times such a thousand-fold minor world-system is the twice-a-thousand-middling world-system. A thousand times such a twice-a-thousand middling world-system is the thrice-a-thousand major world system. (Anguttaranikaya, PTS, I, 227-28, IV, 59-60).

These world-systems are never static. They are either in the process of expansion (vivattamana), or in the process of contraction (samvattamana). The cosmic processes take immensely long periods of time. They are measured in terms of aeons (kappa).

Pluralism and the Concept of Buddha:

The Buddha did not attribute his teachings to a divine source, nor did he claim to be a reformer of an earlier teaching. The best way to describe the Buddha is to describe him as a discoverer. From the Buddhist perspective, therefore, what really matters is not the historicity of the discoverer (the Buddha), but the veracity and validity of the discovery (the Dhamma). The veracity and validity of the Dhamma does not depend on the historicity of the Buddha, just as much as the validity of scientific discoveries does not depend on the historicity of those who discovered them. If the Buddha is a discoverer, this also means that to be a Buddha is not the monopoly of one individual being. This is why Buddhism admits that there had been many Buddha's in the remote past and there will be many Buddha's in the distant future. When we consider the immensity of time and the vastness of space with billions of galactic systems within it, and with the possibility of many kinds of living beings inhabiting them, to speak of only one Buddha for all time and all space is, to say the least, extremely parochial.

Buddhist Doctrinal Pluralism

What the Buddha taught has given rise to a colossal number of doctrines and doctrinal interpretations, which we find incorporated in three main Buddhist traditions: Theravada in South Asia, Vajrayana in North Asia, and Mahayana in East Asia. The presence of many doctrinal interpretations does not necessarily mean that they have deviated from the original teachings. Rather, they could be understood in the light of the saying, what is true can be restated in different ways. In this connection, it is interesting to remember here that the criterion of what is and what is not the Dhamma, is not textual, but pragmatic: what leads to the cessation of passion, aversion, and delusion is the Dhamma. What leads away from it is not the Dhamma.

Buddhist Scriptural Pluralism

Buddhist scriptural pluralism is equally colossal. There are in fact four main Buddhist Canons: the Pali Buddhist Canon, the Chinese Buddhist Canon, the Tibetan Buddhist Canon, and the Mongolian Buddhist Canon. They are not translations into four different languages of one and the same Buddhist Canon, although of course, they have many commonalities as well as differences.

Buddhist Cultural Pluralism

When it comes to religious culture, Buddhism could be the most pluralistic religion in the world. To whichever country Buddhism was introduced, Buddhism did not level down its cultural diversity to create a mono-culture. The Buddhist culture of China is different from the Buddhist culture of Japan, and both from that of Thailand, or that of Myanmar, or Sri Lanka. Because Buddhism promotes cultural pluralism, therefore Buddhism does not become a culture-bound religion. Just as a bird can fly from place to place leaving behind its cage, even so Buddhism can fly from one country to another say, from Hong Kong to America, leaving behind its cultural paraphernalia.

Buddhist Social Pluralism

Another area where we find many instances of pluralism is in the Buddhist attitude to society. As a religion Buddhism does not interfere with people's ways of living by imposing on them unnecessary

restrictions. We never hear of a 'Buddhist Dress', 'Buddhist Food', or 'Buddhist Medicine', laid down as valid for all times and climes. For, these are things that change from place to place and from time to time, depending on the progress of our knowledge.

This situation is true when it comes to marriage, too. There are many forms of marriage, monogamy, polygamy, polyandry, and so on. Today, in the modern world the legally recognized practice is mostly monogamy. Nevertheless, nowhere does Buddhism say that other forms of marriage are immoral. The form of marriage too could change from time to time, from place to place. If it changes, then there is no problem for Buddhism. For Buddhism marriage is only a social institution. It is something entirely mundane, not a religious "sacrament". Nor does Buddhism say that marriage is an indissoluble bond. If two married partners are incompatible, they can certainly divorce, provided, of course they follow the laws of the country as enacted for such situations.

Buddhism has no prohibitions against birth control. If a married couple decides to practice contraception to prevent children being born, that is entirely their private business. They are not committing anything that is morally evil. Nor will the Buddhist Monastic Order, whether Theravada, Vajrayana, or Mahayana will ever promulgate an edict condemning, and prohibiting such acts.

Abortion is, of course, a different matter. Since abortion involves taking of life, it goes against the First Precept. However, in our opinion, abortion can be condoned in cases of serious health hazard, if abortion is the lesser evil. It is instructive for us to remember here two things: one is that according to Buddhism what really matters is the intention/volition (*cetana*). It is in fact intention/volition that the Buddha has identified as *kamma*. The other thing is that in following morality, Buddhists are not expected to do so by absolutely grasping moral precepts (*aparamattham*) (*Samyuttanikaya*, PTS, I 49). In other words, one should be, not "*silamaya*", "virtue-made", but "*silavanta*", "virtuous".

Pluralism in the Buddhist Monastic Order

We can find pluralism in the Buddhist Monastic organization as well. The Monastic Order is not a pyramid-like organization, exhibiting an ascending hierarchical order, where at the top presides a supreme head. It is not centralized, but decentralized. The principle of organization is not perpendicular and vertical, but parallel and horizontal. This situation allows for diversity within the Buddhist Monastic Community. It is in fact this characteristic that makes it strongly resilient.

The Unity and Oneness of the Humankind

Where Buddhism avoids pluralism is only perhaps when it comes to emphasize the unity and oneness of the human kind. The Buddha categorically rejected the Brahmanical social hierarchy, based on four castes. Among several Buddhist arguments against the caste system, one of the most persuasive is the biological (*jatimaya*) argument. It begins by saying that different kinds of species, such as the ants, worms, the birds, the four-footed animals have different biological differences. But when it comes to human beings, we cannot notice such biological differences:

“Not as regards their hair”, says the Buddha, “not as regards their head, ears, mouth, nose, lips, or brows; nor as regards their neck, shoulders, belly, back, hip, breast, anus, or genitals, nor as regards their hands, feet, palms, nails, and calves are there any biological (jatimaya) differences between two human beings”. (Vasettha Sutta in Suttanipata and in Majjhimanikaya).

Biological Argument in another Form

Addressing a Brahmin called Assalayana, who believed in the superiority of the Brahmana caste, the Buddha questions him:

“What do you think, Assalayana? Suppose a mare were to be mated with a male donkey, and a foal were to be born as the result. Should the foal be called a horse after the mother or a donkey after the father?”

Assalayana answers: “It is a mule, Master Gotama, since it does not belong to either kind”.

Here too we find the biological argument. If the mule is biologically different from the mare and the donkey, this is because it is the offspring of the mare and the donkey, who are also biologically different.

However, if a so-called high caste Brahmana woman were to marry a so-called low caste man, and if they were to beget a child, surely the child would not be biologically different from the two parents, who begot him.

The Biological Argument by Asvaghosa:

The biological argument was also presented by Asvaghosa, the Buddhist Sage Poet, in his Vajrasuci (1st century (Common Era)).

The doctrine of the four castes is altogether false. All men are of one caste. Wonderful! You affirm that all men proceeded from one person, i.e. Brahma, the Creator God; how then can there be a fourfold inseparable diversity among them. If I have four sons by one wife, the four sons, having one father and one mother must all be essentially alike. Know too that distinctions of race among beings are broadly marked by differences of conformations and organizations, Thus, the foot of the elephant is very different from that of the horse; that of the tiger unlike that of the deer; and so of the rest, and by that single diagnosis we learn that those animals belong to very different races. But I never heard that the foot of a Ksatriya (a person from the Warrior Caste) is different from that of a Brahmin (a person from the Priestly Caste), or that of a Sudra (a person from the Menial Caste). All men are formed alike, and are clearly of one race (H. H. Wilson, Indian Caste System, London, 1877, 302-303).

Prejudices based on Race (jati) and Caste (gotta):

The recognition of the unity and oneness of the human kind is the foundation for the practice of all spiritual life. Those who are “bound by racial prejudices” (jati-vada-vinibbaddha) as well as those who are “bound by caste-prejudices” (gotta-vada-vinibbaddha), says the Buddha, “have strayed far from the way of salvation” (araka anuttaraya vijja-carana-sampadaya: Suttanipata, verse 104). The outcaste, as described by the Buddha, is not one who is born in a particular caste, but “one who hardens his heart by

virtue of his birth in a particular caste” (jati-tthaddha), or by virtue of his wealth (dhana-tthaddha), or caste (gotta-tthaddha), and despises his neighbor (sam natim atimanneti). (Suttanipata, verse 104).

The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions

The Buddha refers to all other religious teachers as “kammavadino”, i.e., those who uphold the moral life, those who maintain that the society should have a moral foundation. Accordingly, the Buddha recognized in no uncertain terms the right of all religions to exist, not only in different times and at different places, but more importantly, in the same time and at the same place. In this connection we would like to draw the readers’ attention to two instances only, although there are many more.

The first we find in the Upali Discourse of the Buddhist Canon. As recorded here, one day, Upali, a well-known disciple of Nigantha Nataputta, the founder of Jaina religion, had a long debate with the Buddha on the subject of kamma. At the end of the debate, Upali was convinced that the Buddha was right. He told the Buddha that he wanted to become a disciple of the Buddha. Then the Buddha told him: “You have been a long-standing disciple of Nigantha Nataputta. It is proper for such well-known people like you to investigate thoroughly before you make a decision”. Eventually, however, Upali became a disciple of the Buddha. Then the Buddha told him: “House-holder, your family has long supported Nigantha Nataputta, therefore, it is proper for such well-known people like you to investigate thoroughly before you make a decision. Eventually, however, Upali became a disciple of the Buddha. Then the Buddha told him: “House-holder, your family has long supported Nigantha Nataputta. You should, therefore, continue to provide him and his followers with alms and other material benefits, when they come to your home.”

The second instance we find in the Buddha’s well-known admonition to Sigala, the house-holder. “Here the Buddha tells Sigala that it is his duty to minister all Samanas and Brahmanas in five ways: by lovable deeds, by lovable words, by lovable thoughts, by keeping open house for them, and by supplying their material needs”. What is important to remember here is that the two words Samanas and Brahmanas mean all religious teachers and practitioners, whether they are Buddhist or otherwise.

The Four Kinds of Religion

When it comes to other religions, the Buddha mentions Four Kinds:

A religion based on Divine Revelation or Tradition (anussava)

A religion based on the Claimed Omniscience of its Founder (sabbannuta)

A religion based on Logical and Metaphysical speculation (takka-vimamsa)

A religion based on Pragmatism, with a Skeptical or Agnostic Foundation (amaravikkhepa)

It is most instructive to note here that the Buddha does not say that any of these four religions is “false” (miccha-ditthi). As a matter of fact, the Buddha refers to all these four religions as “Brahmacariyavasa” (Practice of Higher Life), a term used in referring to Buddhism as well. However, according to the

Buddha's assessment, none of these religions are satisfactory or, consoling (anassasika): (Sandaka Sutta in Majjhimanikaya).

Buddhist Psychology of Ideologies

The attitude of the Buddha in relation to other religions has to be understood, in what we would like to introduce as the Buddhist Psychology of Ideologies. The rationale behind this kind of "psychology" is that our desires and expectations have a direct impact on what we choose to believe in. We find this idea clearly articulated in the Buddhist formula of "dependent arising", where one of the causal statements is, 'with desire as condition is clinging' (tanha-paccaya upadanam). This clinging is fourfold, clinging to sense-pleasures (kamupadana), clinging to rites and rituals (silabbatupadana), clinging to metaphysical views (ditthupadana), and clinging to soul-theories (attavadupadana). We need to concern here only with the latter two. What both mean is that if we believe in metaphysical as well as soul-theories, it is because we are impelled to believe in them by our own innate desires. When it comes to ideological positions, Buddhism seeks to diagnose their origin by delving deep into their psychological mainsprings.

How Buddhism sets itself aloof from Other Religious Views

It is in the context of Buddhist psychology of ideologies that we need to understand how the Buddha responds to non-Buddhist theoretical views. Nowhere does this become evident as in the very first discourse of the Pali Buddhist Canon, where we find enumerated some sixty-two religious and philosophical views current at the time. None of these views are rejected as false. Instead what the Buddha says is how these views arise and why these views prevail entirely due to psychological reasons and, more importantly, how these views can be transcended by eliminating their psychological mainsprings. This in brief is how Buddhism sets itself aloof from other religious views without condemning any of them as false.

Is the Dhamma, Taught by the Buddha, too, a View?

The Dhamma, too, is a view. But it is a view to eliminate all other views, including the Dhamma itself as a view. This is the message conveyed to us by the Buddha's comparison of the Dhamma to a raft, a raft to go from the hither shore of Samsara to the thither shore of Nibbana. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is not to have a view, but to view things as they really are. When Vacchotta, the itinerant philosopher, asked the Buddha: "Venerable Good Gotama, do you have any view", the Buddha replied, "I have not come to any view (ditthin ca anupagatam), but I have viewed (ditthan ca Tathagatena). When one has seen things as they actually are, then all views come to an end. What we call a view is a "perspective" or a "particular way of looking". "A particular way of looking", is not to see things as they actually are. When we have a "particular way of looking", we see what we want to see, not what is actually there.

Can there be Emancipation outside Buddhism.

In answering this question, we need to mention here that the Buddha is the one who discovers the truth, but not the one who has a monopoly of the truth. This leaves open the possibility for others to discover

the truth for themselves. The Buddhist idea of “Individual Buddha” (Pacceka-Buddha), one who discovers the truth for oneself, is a clear admission of this fact.

As a matter of fact, in the Suttanipata of the Buddhist Canon, the Buddha says:

“I do not say that all other Samanas and Brahmanas are sunk in birth and decay.” (Na’ham sabbe samana-brahmanase jati-jaraya nivuta ti brumi: Suttanipata, verse 1082).

“Samana-Brahmana” is the expression used by the Buddha to mean all religious teachers and practitioners, not necessarily the followers of the Buddha. This is a clear assertion, on the part of the Buddha, of the possibility of emancipation outside Buddhism.

However, this statement should not be understood as a blanket certificate issued by the Buddha to validate all other religions. The possibility of emancipation outside Buddhism does not mean that Buddhism values all religions alike, and considers them equally true. What the above statement clearly demonstrates is that what the Buddha had discovered and realized, others too can discover and realize for themselves. No more; No less.

Buddhism and Inclusivism

Nowhere does Buddhism assert that what is good and noble, is confined to Buddhism. In this connection, there is this saying, which we find in an early Buddhist Discourse, as well as in a Mahayana text, “Whatever is said by the Buddha is well-said; whatever is well said is said by the Buddha”. The first part of this saying is clear enough to require any clarification. It is the second part that appears rather intriguing. What it actually means is that if there is anything well-said, no matter by whom, no matter when, no matter where, if it accords with what the Buddha said, it is also said by the Buddha. Accordingly, if there is anything “well-said” in the sacred scriptures of all other religions, or for that matter, even in the non-religious secular works, all that can be subsumed under the “Word of the Buddha”.

In concluding this discussion on Buddhism and the Issue of Religious Fundamentalism, we would like to refer here to two edicts issued by the Buddhist King of ancient India. These two edicts, as the reader will notice, shed much light on how harmony and concord between different religions can be established.

Harmony between Religions

Beloved –of- the –Gods, King Piyadasi (King Asoka), honors both ascetics and the house-holders of all religions, and he honors them with gifts and honors of various kinds. But Beloved-of- the-Gods, King Piyadasi does not value gifts and honors as much as he values this – that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one’s own religion, or condemning the religions of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honor other religions for this reason. By so doing one’s own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one’s own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought ‘Let me glorify my own

religion', only harms his own religion. Therefore cordial contact between religions is good. One should listen to and respect the other doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

(Edict issued in 256 before the Common Era)

Conquest by Dhamma: the Highest Conquest:

Now it is conquest by Dhamma that Beloved-of-the-Gods considers to be the best conquest, and the conquest by Dhamma has been won here, on the borders, even 600 yojanas away, where the Greek King Antiochos rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas, and Alexander rule, likewise in the south among the Cholas, the Pandyas, and as far as Tamraparni (Sri Lanka). Here in the king's domain, among the Greeks, the Kambojas (Persians), the Nabhakas, the Nabhapampkits, the Bhojas, the Pitinikas, the Andhras, and the Palidas, everywhere people are following Beloved-of-the-God's instructions in the Dhamma. Even where Beloved-of-the-God's envoys have not been, these people too, having heard of the practice of Dhamma and the ordinances and instructions in Dhamma given by the Beloved-of-the Gods, are following it and will continue to do so. This conquest has been won everywhere, and it gives me great joy –the joy which only conquest by Dhamma can give.

(Edict issued in 250 before the Common Era).