

THE BUDDHIST TOLERANCE: A REQUIREMENT OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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I. Introduction

From the beginning of 2015, the whole world was disheveled by a brutal beheading of two Japanese hostages—Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa, whose apparent killing were shown in a video released by Islamic State¹ militants. After news, many people were appalled by the fact that a Holocaust-equivalent human rights violation is still happening in this era. Now IS has become synonymous with viciousness, and its brutal tactics² have sparked fear and outrage across the world.

Reflecting on the past, history proves that most world religions have adopted violence, in the shape of crusades, or holy wars, to serve their ends. Many people who have undergone fear and violence for the last century were pinning their hopes on possibility of peaceful life in a new millennium, although many are not convinced their hopes would come true. Unfortunately, horrible terror broke out in the first year of the twentieth century too. While the fear and anxiety that swept the country after 9-11 attacks have subsided for most Americans, hundreds of thousands continue to suffer psychic wounds from that horrific day. Perhaps the trauma that devastated New York on 9-11 attacks has permanently embedded the fear of terrorism in our minds. Simultaneously, it was also a tragic watershed which turned American Muslims from ordinary citizens into objects of suspicion and discrimination overnight.

Religion, as defined by Durkheim, is the most fundamental social institution, its basic function is to integrate individuals into society and produce sentiments of unity, belonging and common purpose. But, most religions individually proclaim that they alone are orthodoxy,

¹ Islamic State (IS) is a radical Islamist group that has seized large swathes of territory in eastern Syria and across northern and western Iraq.

² Beheadings, crucifixions, stonings, massacres, burying victims alive and religious and ethnic cleansing, mass killings and abductions of members of religious and ethnic minorities and so forth.

their own scriptures are the absolute inerrant one, and the rules and regulations are laid down in their scriptures.

While ‘interfaith dialogue’ and action have taken place for many centuries, owing to this kind of exclusivist assertion, deep-rooted conflicts between different faith groups still remain being unsolved in some regions. Moreover manifestation of attachment to religious rite and ritual (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*), occasionally, leads to affairs of bloodshed like internecine warfare.

Now and before everything else, we need to note the Buddhist attitude to other religions. Because deep-rooted conflicts still remain here and there regardless interfaith or intra-faith dialogue. As Jayatilleke pointed out, the Buddhist attitude to other religions has from its very inception been one of critical tolerance (Jayatilleke, 1975:1). Historically, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the world for the purpose of propagation and dissemination. This is also same within sects of Buddhism. Buddhism adopted a non-dogmatic attitude. It avoids absolutism and dogmatic fanaticism (*idam-saccābhinivesa*). The Buddha clarified what is ‘right view’ (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) and ‘wrong view’ (*miccha-diṭṭhi*) or pseudo-religion (*abrahmacariya-vāsa*). He says that any religion is true to the extent to which it would incorporate the Noble Eightfold Path and one should examine reality dispassionately without being led by desire (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*) or fear (*bhaya*). Throughout the Buddhist Scriptures, we may find a righteous way of higher life for the sake of collegial peace, tolerance and mutual understanding in certain dialogical situations.

II. Religious Conflict: An Inveterate Disease of Human Society

1. Religion and Its Function

Nobody knows when humans first acquired religion. Nevertheless, we agree that religion is a vital part of human societies—as “the belief in spiritual beings” (Tylor, 2010); as a “system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1993); and as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to

sacred things” (Durkheim, 1965). In the words of Durkheim, religion differs from private belief in that it is something eminently social (Durkheim, 1965:10), and it is the most fundamental social institution, and its basic function is to integrate individuals into society and produce sentiments of unity, belonging, and common purpose. When some religions claim their orthodoxy, it is clear that those peremptory assertions may have given rise to ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘exclusivism’.

2. Religious Fundamentalism

According to Marsden, ‘Fundamentalism’ can be defined as the demand for a strict adherence to certain theological doctrines, in reaction against Modernist theology (Marsden, 1980). The origin of the term may be found in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*³. The essays were written to affirm conservative Protestant beliefs, especially those of the Reformed tradition, and defend against ideas deemed inimical to them. Actually, the resurgence of fundamentalist religion was a reaction to the social and intellectual revolution of the time—variously referred to as ‘the Jazz Age’, ‘the era of excess’, ‘the Roaring Twenties’. Hence, fundamentalism began to hold the exclusivism as part of religious movement in America. From this point of view, religious fundamentalism may include ‘ultra-orthodoxy’, ‘ultra-orthopraxis’, ‘exclusivism’, ‘militant piety’, and even ‘fanaticism’ (Martin & Appleby, 1995).

3. Inconvenient History of Religion

As known well, last centuries were stained with all of wars, violence and conflicts at national and international levels. Especially, inter-religious or intra-religious wars, what is called ‘holy wars’ are another brutal face of religion: The Crusades were a series of religion-driven military campaigns waged by much of Christian Europe against external and internal opponents. It originally had the goal of recapturing Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Muslim rule and was launched in response to a call from the Eastern Byzantine Empire for help against the expansion of the Muslim Seljuk Turks into Anatolia. In 1095, Pope Urban II proclaimed the first crusade, which was a military campaign, to restore Christian access to the holy places in and near Jerusalem, and the Second Crusade was the second major

³ This book is a set of 90 essays were written by 64 different authors, representing most of the major Protestant Christian denominations, published from 1910 to 1915 (Marsden, 1980:118).

European military campaign to forcibly bring Christianity to the Muslim world. When the Crusades were all over, the Holy Land remained in Muslims' hands. Christianity and Islam were both ready to employ violence in order to achieve their ends by the name of God.

Passed few centuries, on September 11, 2001, two jetliners were crashed into the World Trade Center in New York. Approximately 3,000 people, including the hijackers, died in the terrorist attacks. The tragic affair was both the cause and result of new conflicts—civilization and religion—which the current U.S. administration has failed to properly deal with, plunging both America and the rest of the world into painful, unnecessary chaos and insecurity. Following the 9·11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. has increased security measures and had temporarily stopped admitting new countries to the Visa Waiver Program. On one side, some films—containing very strong images that are offensive to Muslims—accuse the Quran of causing terrorist acts such as the 9·11 attacks; on the other side, Saad Eddin, Egyptian American sociologist, claimed the 9·11 attacks were a tragic watershed which turned American Muslims from ordinary citizens into objects of suspicion and discrimination overnight. Such violence cannot be justified by any excuse or under any pretext even though it may be holy war or invisible war of retaliation.

4. Attachment to Rite and Ritual

Many religions may have organized behaviors, clergy, a definition of what constitutes adherence or membership, holy places, and scriptures. Also, the practice of a religion may include rites and rituals. Unlike Buddhism⁴, some religions set into people's ways of living by imposing strict regulations and restrictions on them.

We can find the forbidden clauses about foods and intoxicants in Bible (Leviticus, 11) and Qu'ran (2:173; 5:9; 6: 145; 16:115). The obligation for Muslim women to cover their heads was made part of Islamic law (Qu'ran, 24:1). By the way, these religious regulations occasionally have been crashed with the Constitution of the countries in which they live and are given rise to social friction such as 'Hijab affair' in France and 'Dhabīḥah'⁵ .

Extremism leads to extremism. For example, after declaring the revival of a lofty Germany, Adolf Hitler banned mixing blood with Jews and orchestrated the murders of six million Jews

⁴ In the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, the Buddha advised to the young layman Sigālaka on morality and pointed out meaningless rituals.

⁵ the prescribed method of ritual slaughter of all animals.

in the Holocaust based on the book, which said German tribes banned marriage with other tribes. After the war, haunted by its Nazi nightmare, Germany has strictly cracked down on anti-constitutional political parties and organizations with extreme ideas under the motto—“We cannot give freedom to the enemies of freedom!”

Today, for the Europeans, ‘Islamist threat’ or ‘Islamophobia’ become far more complex than a war on terrorism. Even when one Western European leader after another admitted their failures in multicultural experiments, people in the rest of the world could hardly imagine the seeds of enmity and hostility between fundamental elements of different races and religions had been sown so deeply and widely.

5. Inter-faith Dialogue for Co-Existence

Inter-faith dialogue involves promoting understanding between different religions or beliefs to increase acceptance of others. Therefore, interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions. The history of interfaith dialogue⁶ is as long as religion itself. Interfaith dialogue and action have taken place for many centuries from the period of the Emperor Akbar the Great to today.

Since the twentieth Century, the dialogue started to take place between the Abrahamic faiths—Christianity, Judaism, Islam. ‘The interfaith movement’ gathered interest in the 1960’s. In 1965, the Roman Catholic Church issued the Vatican II document ‘Nostra Aetate’, instituting major policy changes in the Catholic Church’s policy towards non-Christian religions. In the late 1960’s, interfaith groups such as the ‘Clergy And Laity Concerned’ (CALC) joined around civil rights issues for African-Americans and later were often vocal in their opposition to the Vietnam War.

In 2001, the Interfaith Center of New York’s mission became increasingly centered on providing assistance to immigrant and disenfranchised communities. New programs were launched that responded to the needs of these constituents, combining practical information about establishing civic connections and information about other religions with insight about common social concerns. In 2007, Muslims expanded their message—“A Common Word Between Us and You”, 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals unanimously came together for the first time since the days of the Prophets to declare the common ground

⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/interfaith_dialogue.

between Christianity and Islam. In 2008, through the collaboration of The Hebrew Union College and Omar Foundation, the University of Southern California ‘Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement’ was established. A historic interfaith dialogue conference, in 2008, was initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to solve world problems through concord instead of conflict, attending by religious leaders of different faiths. The Dalai Lama inaugurated an interfaith “World Religions-Dialogue and Symphony” conference convened by Hindu preacher Morari Bapu in 2009. This conference explored ways and means to deal with the discord among major religions.

In spite of these interfaith efforts, deep-rooted relations between Muslims and Jews, Sunnis and Shiites of inter-Muslim remain quite difficult in the Middle East. Also, religious conflicts—Protestants vs. Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, Muslims vs. Serbian Orthodox Christians in Kosovo, Aboriginals, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in India, Christians and Muslims in the Southern Philippine Islands, etc.—have exacerbated at internal levels. As a driving force, hence, religious intolerance embraces many of the world armed conflicts and centers of social unrest.

As Hans Küng mentioned, “there will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions” (Musser & Sunderland, 2005:1). Religious tolerance based on the morality, first and the foremost, should be required in dialogical situations.

III. Tolerance and the Buddhist Attitude to other Religions

Buddhism has been open to other religions. Historically, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the world for the purpose of introducing their religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace. Jayatilleke’s opportune remarks are quotable when he commented as follow; “Not a drop of blood has been shed throughout the ages in the propagation and dissemination of Buddhism in the many lands to which it spread; religious wars either between the schools of Buddhism or against other religions have been unheard of.” (Jayatilleke, 1975: 1). As mentioned in introduction, the Buddhist attitude to other religions has from its very inception been one of critical tolerance, and this is the reason why now we should note the Buddhist tolerance.

1. What is tolerance?

Originally, tolerance (*tolérance*) refers to willingness to accept behaviour and beliefs which are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them. In Buddhism, tolerance (*titikkhā*) is a synonym with patience (*khanti*) as the highest sacrifice⁷. In the same manner, religious intolerance may be a driving force behind many conflicts and unrest. The Buddha tells us what is the true religious tolerance: “If anyone should speak in disparagement of me, of the dhamma or of the Sangha, you should not be angry, resentful or upset on that account. If you were to be angry or displeased at such disparagement, that would only be a hindrance (*nīvaraṇa*) to you.”⁸

2. The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions

(1) To View

Buddhism avoids absolutism and dogmatism. Some religious leaders explain and elucidate their own doctrines but disparage, denigrate, deride, and denounce the doctrines of others. They have individually established themselves in their own system of thought firmly maintaining their stand therein⁹: “This alone is truth, anything else is wrong” (*idaṃ-saccābhinivesa*)¹⁰. If one who does not acknowledge another’s teaching becomes a fool, a beast, a dull-witted man, then all of them are fools, extremely dull-witted, for all of them abide by their dogmatic views.¹¹ Even the Dhamma, teachings of the Buddha, is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over not for the purpose of grasping¹².

(2) To Human Equality

The social discrimination has been everywhere for a long time. At the Buddha’s times, Buddhism went against the idea of the strict Indian social class system called caste. The caste system is opposed in Assalāyana Sutta, Aggañña Sutta, Madhura Sutta. The brahmins openly claim their superiority: “Brahmins are the highest caste, those of any other cast are inferior;

⁷ D ii49; DA ii478: “khanti paramaṃ tapo titikkhā”.

⁸ D i3.

⁹ Stn. 892.

¹⁰ M ii169.

¹¹ Stn. 880.

¹² M i134; M i260

brahmins are the fairest caste, those of any other caste are dark; only brahmins are purified, not non-brahmins; brahmins alone are the sons of Brahmā, the offspring of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.”¹³ But, the Buddha says the brahmins prescribe it “without the consent of other recluses and brahmins.”¹⁴ All men are born equal. “The difference among men is said to be in their designation.”¹⁵ “Not by birth is one an outcaste, not by birth is one a brāhmaṇa, by deed is one an outcaste, by deed is one a brāhmaṇa.”¹⁶

(3) To Heresy and Heretics

In fact, there are no words such as ‘heresy’ and ‘heretic’ in Buddhism. The Pāli term ‘*titthiyā*’ was mistranslated as ‘heretics’ in the English Buddhist Scriptures. This incorrect translation has been derived from the theistic perspectives, including orthodoxy and exclusivism. Accurately, *titthiyā* means ‘an adherent of another sect’, and it is often meant as ‘other, not the same, different, another, somebody else’ (*añña*). ‘*Titthiyāsāvaka*’ refers to a follower of a heretic teacher.

While brahmins spit their contempt at the Buddhist monks such as ‘shaven ascetics’ (*muṇḍaka*), ‘menials’ (*ibbha*), ‘dark fellow’ (*kiṇha*), ‘offspring of the kinsman’s feet’ (*bandhu-pada-pacca*)¹⁷, the Buddha admired brahmins and other religious teachers. Even when Upāli want to become a disciple of the Buddha, then the Buddha advised him: “Investigate thoroughly, householder. Your family has long supported the Nigaṇṭhas and you should consider that alms should be given to them when they come.”¹⁸

(4) To Violence

The Buddha rejects any kind of violence because life is dear to all. “All tremble at nod, all fear death; Comparing oneself with others, One should neither strike nor cause others to strike.”¹⁹ All tremble at violence because all fear death. From violence taken upon oneself

¹³ M ii148

¹⁴ M ii178.

¹⁵ Stn. 611.

¹⁶ Stn. 136.

¹⁷ D i90; D iii81; M i334; M ii177; S iv117.

¹⁸ M i379.

¹⁹ Dh. 129.

fear has arisen²⁰. War and conflict spring from sensual desires (*kāmarāga*)²¹. In life, there is not eternal winner, no everlasting loser. Victory breeds hatred, the defeated live in pain.²² Comparing oneself with others in such terms as “Just as I am so are they, just as they are so am I”, one should neither kill nor cause others to kill.²³

IV. Conclusion

Life is dear to all. ‘Co-existence’ is mankind’s only alternative in Nuclear Age. Freedom and equality are common values of human society. Sadly, IS has become synonymous with viciousness. Its brutal tactics have sparked fear and outrage across the world. With car bombs, assassinations, massacres, kidnapping, for instance, Islamists have posted hundreds of their own propaganda videos extolling the virtues of jihad, terrorism etc. Necessary for what, we can’t help but ask.

In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI weighed in on the delicate issue of rapport between Islam and the West. He said that violence, embodied in the Muslim idea of jihad, or holy war, is contrary to reason and God’s plan. Subsequently, “when we have learned to recognize the pathologies and life-threatening diseases associated with religion and reason, and the ways that God’s image can be destroyed by hatred and fanaticism, it is important to state clearly the God in whom we believe”, he said.

What kinds of political, ideological and religious causes could not justify abominable massacre of innocent victims. For the sake of co-existence, keeping collegial peace, tolerance and mutual understanding is the tasks assigned to all of us. The essence of religions—‘love’ of Christianity, ‘the five moral rules in human relations’ of Confucianism, ‘harmlessness’(*avihimsa*) in Hinduism, ‘brotherhood’ of Islam, ‘religious equal’ of Zoroastrianism—are universally applicable teachings. We all must collegiately endeavor to get world peace, through interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding based on religious ethics.

²⁰ Stn. 935.

²¹ M i83-90.

²² Dhp. 201

²³ Stn. 705

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