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## **BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON PLURALISM AND PUBLIC SPHERE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the concept of pluralism in Theravada tradition. Its main purpose is to discuss an idea proposed by Pinit Ratanakul, who tends to portray Buddhism as an inclusive religion, while this paper argues that such an inclusivism of Buddhism has limitations. In contrast, Buddhism also reflects some senses of exclusivism in order to confirm its truth claim. This aspect is always overlooked because scholars seem to interpret their religions to promote the trend of world peace but in a narrow way, until various parts of the scriptures have been ignored. Methodologically, textual analysis has been applied in this paper by scrutinizing the Buddhist texts both primary and secondary sources, as well as some contemporary issues. Collected data are examined through concepts of religious pluralism and the public sphere in post-secular societies. It found that though Buddhism has limitations according to inclusivist views, it can be interpreted to promote pluralism well especially in modern and post-modern societies that religious tolerance is interpreted to serve the freedom of speech in the democratic system. This paper also argues that we cannot talk about religious pluralism without referring to freedom of speech in the public sphere.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism, exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, public sphere

### **INTRODUCTION**

Religion as a way of life has to involve people's problems in many aspects. At least during the second world war, Dalai Lama, a Tibetan spiritual leader who also migrated to India in 1959 due to the Chinese cultural revolution, and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk who migrated to Europe in 1966 due to the communist party, are examples of Buddhist icons who interpreted Buddhism to promote world peace. Various books written by them dedicate a lot of intention to peace such as "An appeal to the world: The way to peace in a time of division" by the Dalai Lama (2017) and "Peace is every step: The path of mindfulness in everyday life" by Thich Nhat Hanh (2010). What is interesting is that those books are designed for non-Buddhists or non-religious readers as well. However, peace in their interpretation reflects spiritual dimensions only, while political conflicts, that directly relate to their lives, are less referred to, though they always claim their traditions as "socially engaged Buddhism". Probably, this is not odd on the ground that they have been growing up in the monastic life, whose daily activities mostly immerse with religious teachings. Nonetheless, their concept about peace is quite similar to the way what has been discussed in Southeast Asian countries, where democracy is in crisis. Generally speaking, they always suggest that solutions must arise from individual changes, while socio-political structures are abandoned. This point occurs when people try to

dramatize or stereotype their religions or religious leaders as supremely perfect in a non-liberal perspective.

Indonesia and Thailand are examples for this claim. Religious freedom is quite limited because the governments use religions to control people, of course in the name of support. “Unity in Diversity” and “Seeking the Sameness, Hiding the Differences” are religious visions of those countries in order to confirm that though they promote diversity, people have no right to criticize, question, or talk about the different views that have been perceived by the state as anti-solidarity or anti-state security. As a result, blasphemy laws are often adopted (Epafras, Kaunang, and Asri, 2019, pp. 226-227). This point has been raised here to argue that based on the state’s control, religious interpretations in these countries tend to be in line with authoritarian governments, in which religious freedom or freedom of speech should be limited to maintain the national peace, though many scholars also pay attention to the small religious groups and indigenous people. In addition, it can be said that the interpretation of religion cannot be separated from politics and cultural practices in each country.

This paper is organized into two parts. (1) *Is Buddhism Inclusivism or Exclusivism?*: discusses a current issue that Buddhism, Theravada in particular, is interpreted in different ways. Of course, this paper argues that both inclusivism and exclusivism can be found in Buddhist texts that are probably because the non-theistic form of Buddhism opens up an opportunity to other faiths to confirm their truth claims as well. However, Buddhism also has its own criteria for its followers to be confident that Buddhism is the best way to gain eternal peace or happiness. (2) *Buddhist Perspectives on Public Sphere*: elucidates various ways the Buddha responded to other religions at that time. Case studies will show that the Buddha strongly promoted religious freedom as found in Habermas’ and Taylor’s ideas. However, this aspect has not been seen by Buddhist scholars, Pinit Ratanakul in particular, because of some stereotypes and political context. These two topics are emphasized because religious pluralism, this paper argues, cannot be discussed without referring to the public sphere, in practice. It said, being pluralist needs not only self-criticism or tolerance in a personal sphere, but, as a member of the diverse society, it also must be able to express individuals’ ideas (both agreed and disagreed) with other people in non-violent ways.

### **Is Buddhism Inclusivism or Exclusivism?**

Kalama Sutta in Anguttara Nikaya is always quoted to show an open-mindedness of Buddhism. The Buddha, when he was asked by Kalama villagers, did not say that Buddhism is the only religion that should be practiced, in contrast, he provided ten criteria to prove such a belief by themselves as follows.

“[d]on't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' — then you should enter & remain in them” (AN 3.65).

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In this respect, Buddhism is appreciated as a humanist and inclusivist doctrine especially when we look at the last criteria, not simply believe just because that guy is our teacher. This goes against theistic religions, in which faith in the prophet is strongly required. In addition, according to the Buddhist idea, the Buddha is an ordinary person who developed himself to the highest level, in terms of moral, spiritual, and intellectual aspects until he can understand the truth (suffering and happiness or Samsara and Nirvana). Therefore, the Buddha's position is not monopolized to a person, but anyone who trains him/herself can reach that point. However, the way to Buddhahood is not that easy. So, it is available to those who are full of effort and wisdom, while most of the people, especially in Theravada, are taught to become followers who practice what has been guided by the Buddha.

Nonetheless, both Buddhas and their followers will free from suffering or reach the state of Nirvana by only one way, understand *Three Characteristics of Nature* (Tilakkhana in Pali); changing, suffering, and non-self (AN 3.134) and must practice the *Noble Eightfold Path* (Ariya Magga in Pali); right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (SN 45.8). Simply put, not all religions will lead to the highest happiness, according to Buddhism, but only a doctrine that teaches *Three Characteristics of Nature* and the *Noble Eightfold Path*. Strictly speaking, only Buddhism is the way to Nirvana, during the Buddha's time. In this regard, exclusivism can also be found in Buddhism.

The story of blind men and an elephant is popular when discussing different views and interpretations of religion. This story is also found in Buddhist scripture named *Tittha Sutta* (Ud 6.4) when the king (Buddha in the previous life) commands the blind people to touch some parts of an elephant and then they declare it in different forms, based on their personal experiences. Of course, this story has been told to warn religious believers not to attach in any doctrine on the ground that they probably see the truth from only one side. However, Schmidt-Leukel (2017, p. 73) is right in saying that such kind of metaphor actually reflects exclusivism because while the Buddha told other people not to attach in their old beliefs, but the Buddha himself is the king who could see an elephant from all sides. Therefore, people should believe him, a good eyesight person, while other religious teachers are the blinds.

Inclusivism in many cases can lead to reductionist methods especially when one religious follower interprets other religions in his own way. The case of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu who tried to interpret Christianity from Buddhist perspectives is interesting. His aim is probably to generate inter-religious peace between Buddhists and Christians in Thailand (Ratanakul, 2014, p. 10). In the book, *Christian Bible and Buddhist Scripture* (1986, pp. 37-38), Buddhadasa viewed the life and teachings of Jesus as compassionate as the Buddha, while Jesus's main teaching can be compared to the concept of non-self in Buddhism. This kind of interpretation is reductionist because Christianity can be easily understood through the Buddhist view, though we do cannot be sure that Christian scholars agree with it or not. More importantly, it also reveals that Christianity is true as long as it is in line with Buddhist teaching, while Buddhism would not be interpreted in line with the concept of God or heaven in Christianity, by Buddhadasa. In addition, Pinit Ratanakul appreciated Buddhadasa without looking at a number of Buddhadasa's works that are dedicated to condemning indigenous beliefs. It can be said that Buddhadasa may accept other world religions as true, according to

his selective interpretations, but he seemed not to compromise with folk religions that he viewed as superstition or blind faith. Therefore, to claim that Buddhadasa promoted pluralism is problematic, based on this critique.

Notably, Buddhist teaching can be categorized into two levels; worldly (*lokiya* in Pali) and beyond worldly (*lokuttara*). Of course, God, heaven, and hell are perceived as worldly aspects in Buddhism on the ground that those places are not eternal but contemporary places for reward and punishment as long as a person still reincarnates in this *Samsara*. As a result, the only one way to free oneself from this worldly chain, he or she must develop full wisdom and meditation to see the truth of nature. So, Buddhism has no problem with other religions as long as such and such religions still guide people in good karmic ways (Jayatilleke, 1991, pp. 26-30). Strictly speaking, to follow Islam by helping the poor and gain heaven after death is acceptable and also corresponding to Buddhism in the worldly level (AN 6.37). Of course, the Buddha always criticized the concept of God in theistic Hinduism, however, it can be compromised, while religions that do not believe in Karma, like the teaching of Ajita Kesakambala and Purana Kassapa, is unacceptable for Buddhism (SN 44.9).

Chalermwut Wijit provides a useful definition of pluralism in his research project, *Religious Pluralism in Theravada Buddhism*. According to Wijit (2020, p. 151), Buddhism can be seen as pluralistic in many aspects. Nonetheless, pluralism does not necessarily signify acceptability without condition. That said, the Buddha can accept that some religions are true, but not necessarily equal to Buddhism. This idea is realistic in the sense that all religions happen because they believe that other previous religions are not the best way. In addition, religious founders also claim that they know the truth more than others. Therefore, to accept that other religions are good as equal as (or better than) one own religion is nonsense that is because the main role of religions is truth claim. The next section will discuss how religious followers should argue, criticize, or even condemn other beliefs in the public sphere in peaceful ways, in Buddhist perspectives.

### **Buddhist Perspectives on Public Sphere**

This section deals with Buddhist pluralism in the public sphere to show how the Buddha negotiated with other religions. Pinit Ratanakul tended to dramatize Buddhism as a perfect and peaceful religion until he ignored some other texts in the scriptures themselves. For example, he mentioned that the Buddha never criticized other religions, because everything in Buddhism (good or bad) is interconnected (Ratanakul, 2014, p. 6). This idea is actually from Mahayana (known as *Sunyata*), while he claims since the very beginning that he bases the writing on Theravada tradition. In Theravada itself, in the first sermon named *Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion* (*Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*), the Buddha starts his teaching by criticizing (probably condemning) Hinduism that such and such practices are non-sense, vulgar, common, useless, practiced by the non-noble (while Buddhist monks are also called the noble ones) and so forth (SN 56.11).

In fact, the Buddha and his followers, like Sariputta who debated with Kundalakesi (Dh.Sahassavagga. 8), often debated with ascetics from different beliefs (religions), until they could convert many people to Buddhism. It should be kept in mind that Buddhism is a new

religion that occurred in the context of Hinduism, so it must convince people who believed in the mainstream Hindu teaching, as already mentioned. Therefore, to claim that the Buddha did also not convert others, in order to claim peacefulness and inclusivism, is quite wrong. So, to be loyal to the scriptures and some undesirable examples, Buddhists have to admit those kinds of behaviors and strategies conducted by the Buddha since the early period. However, this does not mean that Buddhism has no tolerance or pluralism, this paper argues that the Buddhist ways of responding to other religions can be found in another way, that is more fascinating.

Peace and pluralism in Buddhist perspectives do not refer to the state of being silent and accepting without rejection. On the contrary, the Buddha encouraged his followers to debate. In Brahmajala Sutta, the Buddha mentioned that “if others speak in dispraise of the Buddha, or in dispraise of his teaching, or in dispraise of the Sangha, you should unravel what is false and point it out as false, saying: For such and such a reason this is false, this is untrue, there is no such thing in us, this is not found among us” (DN 1). Of course, using the ruth words is not supported because Buddhism emphasizes the compassionate mind, but in many cases, it is used by the Buddha himself, as an example from the first sermon. It can be said that Buddhism allows criticism and condemnation but not physical violence in all cases. That means such kind of behavior is not considered intolerant or non-pluralistic.

A case study that should be discussed here is Devadatta, one of the Buddha’s followers who criticizes the Buddha’s teaching, until he proposed that his teaching is more valid in leading the practitioners to Nirvana. The reaction from the Buddha, in this case, is interesting on the ground that though the Buddha has close relationships with several kings, because before becoming a monk, he was a prince, but he never used this connection or political power to eradicate those who disagree or condemn him / his religion. On the contrary, he chose to debate, explain, condemn, and allow people, including Devadatta, to practice what they believed. It can be said that the Buddha tried not to employ political power to force people to follow his way or even to prevent those who want to destroy his religion. Probably, he viewed religion as personal freedom. However, Buddhism does not perceive condemnation and criticism in a negative way, as long as it does not employ political power to force people or conduct physical violations.

Tolerance in Buddhism means the ability to be patient when other people question or criticize our beliefs, and the courage to discuss or criticize what he or she disagrees with. It is not a motto used to prevent people to criticize one own beliefs, as often found in non-liberal countries. This is corresponding to John Rawls’s Liberty Principle, in which “liberals have simply extended *the principle of tolerance to other controversial questions* about the 'meaning, value and purpose of human life'” (Italicized by the author) (Kymlicka, 2003, p. 155). Jayatileke Kulatissa, a Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar, stated that there is no concept of pluralism in Theravada on the ground that its way to Nirvana is available for Buddhism only. However, he proposed that Buddhism has a “critical tolerance” in the sense that though it always disagrees with other beliefs, its solution is to criticize (Flanagan, 2013, p. 214). Of course, criticism is also viewed as from the angry mind, but it is not always true. People in discussing cultures are familiar with it, meanwhile other societies like Southeast Asian countries view it as impolite and a cause of conflict. This is a reason why freedom of speech in these countries should be limited and punished by the state. Debate is also promoted by Ahmadiya in Indonesia when it



faced religious conflicts, with the Council of Muslim Scholars (MUI) for example (Burhani (2014, p. 665). Nonetheless, MUI preferred to deal with political power by announcing the Fatwa and allowing fundamentalists to destroy Ahmadiya center.

The case of Jesus should also be discussed here. Jesus seemed to promote freedom of speech as well. He did not fear to spoke something different from other beliefs to confirm his own truth, unfortunately, he taught in a society that there was no freedom of speech, until he was finally killed by the state's power. It needs to be admitted that we cannot teach religion without referring or criticizing other beliefs. Logically, in order to claim that A is the best, we also have to explain why B, C, and D, are not good enough. Therefore, we cannot avoid criticism especially in the diverse society. What more important is to be tolerant when we are criticized and respond in non-violent ways.

Thai culture of criticism and freedom of speech, especially in the religious sphere, is changing in a positive way, while the blasphemy law has not been adopted for a decade. In fact, the young generation (and some other older generation) freely criticize religious issues in their daily activities, mostly on the online platforms. To encourage people to discuss their religions in the public sphere is really useful in terms of paving the way to learning to be tolerant. Various inter-religious dialogue groups on Facebook are always active and vivid. However, many organizations, like the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), Mahidol University, still promote inter-faith peace in the old way. Religious issues have not been raised in their seminar or mini-meeting, though they recognize that one of the contemporary conflicts in Thailand is also from religions or religious discrimination (Buaban, 2020, p. 139). So, it can be assumed that IHRP members also view religious debate as negative. Nowadays, IHRP also runs various programs to cultivate religious peace, one of them is to invite Imams and monks to talk about the good relationships on Facebook Live. This program is believed to inspire Muslims and Buddhists to live together with peace (Narkurairattana & Arya, 2021, pp. 500-501). In this regard, not only Pinit Ratanakul, but many other Asian scholars also perceive freedom of speech as a taboo, of course, self-criticism is acceptable, but to criticize other religions in the public sphere should be prohibited. This stereotype is probably a reason that makes Ratanakul interpret Buddhism that way.

The case of Samuel Paty, a French teacher who was murdered in October 2020, is always discussed to point out some weaknesses of religious freedom in the public sphere in a secular society. Of course, Secularism in France is quite odd in prohibiting full-face veils in public areas since 2011. That is abnormal because secularism in this case has been used to violate Muslim women, though the state argues with the reason of national security. However, Paty's case is important in confirming freedom of speech, not only criticizing Islam, but also other religions, are seen as individuals' right to express whatever they believe (BBC, 2021). This is corresponding to the democratic system and secularism in the sense that the state will not intervene individual's expression as long as it does not lead to physical violence. That is why the French court did not punish Paty's action. Unfortunately, unsecularized people chose the violent way to deal with the problem, which he perceived as insulting his religion, Islam. Interestingly, a number of Muslims argued that Paty should have religious tolerance (by not criticizing Islam), while the murder's action was not viewed as intolerant.

Religious freedom can be in line with liberal democracy, in which the state must

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maintain neutrality by not oppressing any religious group and also not supporting any religious group. This means that people are treated as citizens who have equal rights in practicing according to their own beliefs. However, Jürgen Habermas argues that secularism tends to marginalize religion until it causes some conflicts, so he proposes “post-secularism” to fill that gap. According to Habermas and Charles Taylor, religious and non-religious persons should have a place in the public sphere to argue or discuss. That said, the law should not marginalize religious ideas but it should pass the discussion among both religious and non-religious committees. Notably, while Habermas suggests that religious followers have to use secular vocabularies and secular reasons to discuss with other people in the public sphere, Tylor argues that it is not necessary to do so. Religious words and ideas must be allowed as equal as secular words and reasons are allowed. The main point is that those groups have a chance to discuss and pass the law with the feeling of participation (Spohn, 2015, pp. 125-126).

## CONCLUSION

Having argued with Pinit Ratanakul, this paper proposes that Buddhism contains both inclusivism and exclusivism. It clearly reveals that when the Buddha provided some criteria to prove his teaching, Buddhism tends to be very open, probably due to its non-theistic religion. On the contrary, when those scriptures have been analyzed, their discourses come up oppositely. That means Buddhism is full of exclusivism in terms of condemning and criticizing other beliefs. The first sermon of the Buddha who criticized Hinduism and promoted the core idea of Buddhism is an example. However, it does not necessarily mean that there is no pluralism in Buddhism, under the condition that pluralism does not signify the state of acceptability of truth in other religions in the level as one own religion. In this regard, Buddhism can tolerate any religion that emphasizes karmic actions; doing good things will produce good results.

Nonetheless, pluralism in the Buddhist perspective is in line with religious freedom in post-secular societies as suggested by Habermas and Tylor. Religious tolerance or critical tolerance was promoted by the Buddha himself on the ground that to criticize or debate with people from other religions is a way to gain new knowledge, investigate others’ as well as one own belief. In addition, discussing in the public sphere provides an opportunity to be tolerant when we are facing different faiths. This aspect is always overlooked because scholars seem to interpret their religions to promote the trend of world peace in a narrow way, corresponding to non-liberal politics, until various parts of the scriptures have been ignored. Most importantly, it should be admitted that religious pluralism cannot come true without freedom of speech in the public sphere, where people from different religions have freedom to speak what they believe or not believe and they gradually learn to be tolerant and respond to other faiths in the peaceful ways.

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