

## Chapter 24

### Outlook for Future

#### Religion and Science

Some scholars suggest that religious beliefs are on the wane. This observation is partially attested by the decreasing number of people attending churches. These scholars manifest that religions are being secularized. Many believe that the decline of religion is unavoidable, because humans are losing interest in religion during this stage of human history. Conversely, several scholars consider this decline good news. In their view, the relinquishment of religion will lead people to abandon primitive beliefs and customs and to embrace more advanced beliefs and customs.<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 1, the author prompts everyone to seriously think about the question of “what is religion” from a neutral position. The author offers a new definition of religion. This definition demonstrates that there is no distinction between primitivism and civilization with respect to religious beliefs. Buddhism believes in causes and effects. Science neither rejects nor testifies the veracity of the law of causation. Catholics believes that God created earth six thousand years ago, a proposition that has been negated by scientists. The theory that Earth began from the Big Bang has been supported by scientific

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Beverley Clack and Brian R. Clack, *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 172.

proofs. Catholics have had to alter their wrong views accordingly. But their faith in the eternal creator can be neither attested nor rejected by current science.

We could scrutinize the contradiction between Buddhism and science through examining the distinction between “conditioned phenomena” and “unconditioned phenomena” stated in the Diamond Sutra. Things that arise and cease are called “conditioned phenomena.” The beginningless and endless conditions are called “unconditioned phenomena.” Human intelligence is capable of studying and comprehending conditioned phenomena, but it can only make conjectures about unconditioned phenomena. The Buddha in the *Diamond Sutra* points out that “all sages and highly respected scholars are different in one aspect, and that is the way they understand or appreciate the permanent nature of eternity”. We realize from this selection that different religions maintain different views on their understanding of the eternal or permanent state. It is impossible for them to reach any conclusions or consensus.

Catholics believe that God could manifest himself as his son, Jesus Christ. This is completely different from the Islamic doctrine of Allah, the one and only God. Humans cannot really make any judgment on unconditioned phenomena, or the so-called eternal or immutable world.

That being the case, religious believers shall keep searching for the Truth. We cannot behave pompously and assume that we have found the Truth. With a humble attitude, followers of different religions will be able to understand that we share the same interest in pursuing the Truth. For this reason, world

peace is not far away.

Religious theories need to be reasonable and compatible with science. We should neither blindly follow nor reject religion that is not negated by science. Science is able to attest conditioned phenomena. It explores the rules of the myriad things in the universe, including the origins of life and celestial bodies. These rules can be called Laws of Nature. Throughout history, humans have continually made new discoveries, which improve the quality of our lives. Undoubtedly, scientific exploration will generate more and more knowledge. It is noticeable, however, that science does not involve in the realm of unconditioned phenomena.

Some religious believers take “faith” as the foundation of a religion. When studying the scientific value of “faith,” we ought to discern whether the subject is “conditioned phenomena” or not. If our faith in “conditioned phenomena” contradicts scientific knowledge, then science will have an advantage. In the past, the present, and the future, this will always be the case. However, when our scientific project involves “unconditioned phenomena,” namely, eternal conditions, we have no experience to draw any conclusions. No one is able to provide a clear answer to even the most basic question: is there anything that is eternal. I consider that freedom of belief shall not be banned amongst legitimate religions, for it is the core of religious freedom. Human wisdom lacks the ability to testify about “unconditioned phenomena.”

## Religion and Harmony

Generally speaking, religion has made a minor contribution to world peace. I use the term “minor” to describe the relationship between religion and peace, because all the religions teach us to admire benevolence and religious main stream thinking does not encourage hatred or strife. However, some religions are exclusive to pagans and hostile to the harmonious ideal of multiculturalism. There is a particular reason why we are less optimistic today compared with the situation a few centuries back when we evaluate religion as an institution to promote peace. (See Appendix - Buddhism: Diamond Sutra and World Peace)

Religion has always played a significant role in politics. And yet, the role of religion has experienced a radical change from the place it had in the past to where it is in the present. Since the introduction of democracy into our political system, there has been a radical change in the structure of society. Democracy in this book refers to the usual political mechanism through which elections are used to choose a country's leaders.

During pre-democratic times, a society consists of two classes, the ruling and the ruled. Typically, the ruling class managed to consolidate their power and maintain social stability through religion.

In an electoral system, a new ruler and ruling group might appear after every election. Consequently, we understand that there is a new social class in the world, which can be called the “rulers-to-be.” Members of this new class are composed of

members of various parties and voters. They are inclined to believe that religion might be able to help them seize political power. A new situation emerges. Because of the emerging new class, we have to ascribe a new “value” to religion that will allow it to take a new role to shape the world. If we expect to solve regional turbulence on earth, we have to consider the consequences brought by the new situation.

The West has been trying to impose the voting system on all the countries in the world. In some countries, voters are comprised of people with different ethnic identities and religions. Ambitious candidates would definitely try hard to woo voters from their own ethnic group who share their religious attitudes. Under such circumstance, ethnic and religious boundaries become sharp. To promote their position, candidates tend to adopt strong attitudes to denounce their opponents. As a result, condemnations, struggles, and deceit would surge. Theoretically, electoral competitions could still be healthy; but it is often not the case in reality. Obviously, the loser and his supporters would not only lose their personal interests, but feel despondent. Accordingly, hatred and antagonism would emerge. The cause behind this hatred is exactly the discriminative mind that Buddhism has asked people to avoid.

Therefore, today’s worldly problem is not about the lack of conversations between religions, nor is it about differences between cultural rituals and traditions. The issue at stake is the elimination of hatred. Political and religious thinkers in this world should figure out how to eliminate the hatred brought by our political systems, and how to prevent religions from being used for ulterior motives. Here I do not intend to go deeper into

this issue, as this is a book about religions and societies rather than about the pros and cons of political systems.

Dialogues between different religious leaders could benefit from the construction of a harmonious society. Provided that they reach a consensus and understand that they belong to a community of common destiny, they could speak up the true causes of afflictions for the world. Furthermore, they could devise plans to end these sufferings. If that is the case, then religious leaders could play a vital role in resolving worldly problems.

### **What can Buddhist teachings do to promote peace?**

Many people believe that Buddhism is helpful in promoting peace, but they rarely engage in any detailed discussion about what Buddhism can do. In fact, if we understand the core values of Buddhism, the answer will come up. We could investigate international affairs from a Buddhist perspective, pointing out what went wrong and why it happened.

The Buddha's teachings continue to be relevant today. Now let us analyze some major world events occurred during the last two hundred years. We will arrange them in a chronological order:

#### **The colonial war launched by the British government**

The First Opium War in 1841 represents a typical case of selfishness. When George Elliot, the chief commander of a British fleet in the Far East ordered military attacks against

Chinese people, he was probably thinking in his head that “If your country bans highly profitable opium (which has been labeled as a kind of narcotic drugs in today’s world) from freely circulating amongst your people, then your government is against the rules of international free trade. You cannot blame me for punishing you with gunboats.” His motive was “greed.” I mention this case not to place blame on any government or people, but to show that humans share the same weaknesses. In today’s world, I suggest that we not focus on condemning any particular government or group of people. Instead, we should endeavour to search for the solution to compelling problems.

### **The two world wars, and especially WWII**

Colonialism in the nineteenth century seized ill-gotten gains. Nazi Germany and Japan imitated other colonial powers to expand their territories and seize resources from other countries. From a Buddhist point of view, this is also avarice.

### **Political structuring of the Middle East after WWII**

Israel was founded in 1946. Its establishment was fine, but the Western superpowers did not help Palestinians establish a similar political structure, nor did they fully consider the interests of Palestinians. This situation in effect made this region very dangerous. Buddhism pursues equality, and Buddhists see unreasonable political structures and ethnic strife as resulting from the “discriminative mind.” The fact that a number of rulers in the world have adopted discriminative policies towards their own citizens as well as foreigners, afflictions keep surging throughout today’s world.

### **The former Soviet Union's dominance over other countries in the name of "Communism"**

The former Soviet Union utilized the system of Communism to control many Eastern European countries during 1946 and 1989, revealing its desire to dominate other countries with its ideology. Buddhism sees this as "avarice" and "delusion." Such desire resulted in the arms race between two superpowers, creating an immensely intense situation in the world. Along with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the crisis finally diminished.

Today, any national leader's indulgence in "craving, aversion, and ignorance" would trigger crisis. If the leader happens to lead a state with nuclear power, then the precariousness of the crisis will draw serious attention. The interests here fall not only on the personal but also on partisan and even national realms. If a political leader's decision making is mixed with craving, aversion, and ignorance, then a crisis will be unavoidable.

### **Terrorism**

What are terrorists thinking? They might think that they and their compatriots are being persecuted, that their beliefs are being suppressed, or that their people being abused. With this in mind, they feel impelled to retaliate against persecutors of these wrongs. They wrongly believe they are righteous in launching terrorist attacks. Resentment ignites their retaliations; delusion makes them indiscriminately slaughter innocent civilians.



To many, this is probably the main causes of terrorism. The real situation is, however, more complex. More importantly, blind faith can lead people to misappropriate God's will, to kill "enemies," and to sacrifice themselves. This is the true cause of terrorism.

Unquestionably, faith could generate matchless power. Counter-violence is unable to tackle this sort of power. The author proposes that we ought to fully comprehend religion, provide opportunities for believers of different religions to communicate with each other, and learn to accept the correct ways to be modern adults in a modern society. This is the real solution to terrorism.

### **Discussions on the relationship between Buddhism and peace**

Through the abovementioned historical examples, we can see how to use Buddhism to investigate complex international affairs of the present day. Indeed, Buddhist theories could contribute to the issue of peace.

Some might question whether it is possible for contemporary people to abandon craving, aversion, and ignorance, even for a short period of time. But if people cannot distance themselves from the afflictions brought by the three poisons, the world will continually face crises. Indeed, civilizations would be at risk for extinction.

Chapter 3 has addressed the similarities and differences between Buddhism and other religions. In any case, Buddhists

will not accept the idea that there is a creator of the universe, who as the supreme god asks its disciples to kill their enemies and sacrifice their own lives. In this regard, Buddhism is markedly different from other religions. The author hopes that people will make an accurate judgment on this point, understand what religions are, and earnestly discuss the ways in which religions could formulate a harmonious society.

Another reason why Buddhism could promote world peace lies in the theory of “one unity perception.” In Chapter 18, we have explored the enlightening subject of “one unity perception”. Buddhism considers that we ought to see the universe and the matters within as one unity. Every one of us is a part of that unity. This concept gives us sufficient reason to protect the natural environment and not kill other forms of life.

Except for Buddhism that encompasses “all sentient beings”, it seems no other religion has talked about protecting other life forms or nature. Scientists have sent out warnings that we are speeding up our journey to the end of world, because we have failed to respect our environment. Global warming and its consequences are an imminent threat. We all know that environmental problems will not be resolved without international collaboration. Since we are able to collaborate on environmental issues, we could see that many other issues are open to international cooperation, through which we could foster a harmonious society.

In his book, Professor Damien Keown expresses the urge for “a systematic updating of the intellectual foundations of the religion [Buddhism] so as to allow a clear and consistent set of

teachings on modern issues to emerge”.<sup>2</sup> He indicates that Buddhism lacks what he calls a logical foundation. If readers agree with the argument I outlined in Chapter 2 (that restoring the intrinsic nature to remove craving, aversion and ignorance is one of the two main ideas of Buddhism), then we could say that Buddhism has already provided a clear answer to contemporary problems. As long as humans are able to distance themselves from craving, aversion, ignorance, discrimination, attachment, and delusion, problems will be readily resolved.

Religions have never existed as some sort of static entity. The majority of the widely recognized religions in this world have existed for over a thousand years. These religions have been and will continue to interact with and have an impact on cultures.

In the river of history, the ruling class has been accustomed to relying on particular religions to consolidate its authority. In this sense, religions have played an indispensable role in the formation of human history. However, as I have explained above in my discussion of the contemporary development of democratic elections, the role of religion has become much more complex. Religions can be readily manipulated by political adventurists for their own purposes. Ambitious politicians often utilize different religions to foster the discriminative mind. Some favor and even encourage non-violent resistance. However, I consider that any form of antagonism is discomforting and perilous.

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<sup>2</sup> Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123.

We need to acknowledge that any form of antagonism is destructive to constructing a harmonious world. Rationally speaking, we know that if growing dissension spirals out of control, violent conflicts will occur. Leaders of developed countries should not underestimate the wisdom of people from developing countries. Human wisdom is neither predictable nor suppressible. Today, as humans build and possess knowledge to make weapons of massive destruction, including biochemical weapons, conflicts between nations have become even more dangerous. Buddhist theories teach us to abandon discrimination, attachment, and delusion. Without discrimination, there will be no hatred or opposition. If enmity passes down from generations to generations, then their mutual retributions will finally result in an unavoidable catastrophe, according to the principle of cause and effect. We know that such a catastrophe is unavoidable, but we are not sure what will be the trigger.

In today's world where science is flourishing, I feel sad that leaders and scholars have not been able to utilize the "conditioned phenomena" and "unconditioned phenomena" in Buddhism. As long as we understand that followers of different religions are searching for the eternal Truth ("unconditioned phenomena"), then we will be able to dissolve the discriminative mind that estranges people from one another. This is one of the key messages of this book.

## **How would humans in the future see Buddhism?**

How would the future world understand and receive Buddhism? We could respond to this question from three aspects: the individual, other religions, and the government.

### **1. Individual**

When analyzing the reason why an individual believes a certain religion, we might discover correlated factors. Whether an individual follows a religion or not is largely dependent upon:

- 1) the views of one's family members, friends, and other community members;
- 2) the position of the government, regardless of whether it favors or disapproves of the religion;
- 3) the consequences from a materialistic point of view of joining or not joining a religion;
- 4) access to knowing the religion;
- 5) requirements of local laws.

On the one hand, an individualistic view about religion will have a limited impact on its dissemination. On the other hand, external factors play a far more important role in how individuals choose a religion.

In the future, it is likely that Buddhism, or at least its logical basis, will be better understood by people in the world. Because Buddhism is not contradictory to the so-called theory of evolution and other forms of scientific knowledge, we have sufficient reasons to believe that

Buddhism will be regarded as a religion that is logical and compatible to science.

## 2. Other Religions

Whether a religious doctrine is reasonable does not depend on the population of its followers, although many think that the popularity of a particular religion suggests that it is correct. Because of such perceptions, believers of some religion might even disparage other religions. For example, Buddhism is accused of idolatry.

Observing their doctrines, we find that other religions hardly tolerate Buddhism. This position may be very hard to change. Both Islam and Catholicism have firmly made their stance. The first of the Ten Commandments clearly states that “I Am The Lord Thy God. Thou Shalt Not Have strange gods Before Me.” In this regard, Buddhism holds a more tolerant view. I will give some examples to illustrate this point.

Two selections from the *Diamond Sutra* are especially useful here. The first selection is from Section 17. It says: “The Realized One has preached that all dharmas are Buddha-dharmas”.<sup>3</sup> The second selection is found at the end of Section 8. It states that “The so-called dharmas of a Buddha are not dharmas of a Buddha.”<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 6 has made it clear that all dharmas could be the

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<sup>3</sup> 金剛經第 17 分: “故如來說: 一切法皆是佛法。”

<sup>4</sup> 金剛經第 8 分: “所謂佛法者, 即非佛法。”

Buddha-dharma. In other words, there are numerous ways of cultivation.

According to my understanding, we could use a relatively simple way to explain the last selection from Section 8, “The so-called dharmas of a Buddha are not dharmas of a Buddha”. As Buddhism has revealed, the awakened know that everything encountered is illusory.

Nonetheless, in order for those who are unenlightened to understand what is benevolent and what is not, we usually refer to those benevolent behaviours as the “Buddha-dharma” or the “Buddha-way.” Let us put it this way: we are using the concept of Buddha-dharma to promulgate ways to help others attain enlightenment. “Buddha-dharma” is merely a term to guide people towards benevolence. Other terms can be used to describe benevolent behaviour. We shall not care about the label as much as about the real motivation.

When we observe cultivators of other religions teaching their followers benevolence according to their own methods, there is no need for us to criticize them or blame them for not exploring the Buddha-way.

In this sense, Buddhism leads us to take a tolerant attitude that benefits harmonious relations. This is beneficial to constructing a harmonious society that incorporates the perspectives of different religions. Buddhism welcomes intra-religious debates. Its disciples should not feel threatened in the least by other religious theories.

### 3. Government

The methods and attitudes of different governments vary in how they deal with religious activities. These governments can be divided into three categories:

- 1) completely secular governments;
- 2) governments that combines politics and religion;
- 3) governments that are neither completely secularized nor religionized.

The Chinese government belongs to the first type. It provides a political system that recognizes religious freedom and treats major religions equally. But religious activities are governed by one important restriction: no institute or individual can use religion as an instrument to challenge or affect national politics. The rights and obligations of domestic affairs belong to the government, and cannot be compromised. The government has exclusive power to do what it considers beneficial to promoting societal harmony and stability. For instance, foreign institutes such as the Vatican cannot appoint any bishop in China.

Chinese culture emphasizes harmony, encouraging people to “study the underlying principle to acquire knowledge.” Around two thousand years ago, Buddhism was already brought to China from India. Likewise, Islam was well received upon its arrival into China during the ninth century. Similarly, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) introduced Catholicism to China. Chinese culture is not against people with different views, and always advocates the idea that



people with different opinions should be able to live harmoniously. It is said that “Gentlemen seek harmony but not uniformity<sup>5</sup>.”

Some critics of China might say: Communism opposes religion. When did the Chinese government alter this cardinal principle? As an intellectual who lives abroad, I think the situation was radically changed when a pivotal party meeting was held in December 1978. At that time, the Chinese Communist Party established the principle of “seeking truth from facts.” If practical experience shows that people need religious support, then people are free to believe in religions. Therefore, in today’s China, we recognize that the government fully supports religious freedom and offers all legitimate religions equal treatment.

Some Middle Eastern countries in certain periods belong to the second type. Rulers of these governments did not allow any religion but Islam.

Many Western countries belong to the third type. In these countries, people enjoy the freedom of belief. The people in these countries are mainly Protestants. Protestantism originated in Britain. Most American citizens are Protestants. The U.S. government would probably not question a religious designation made by a British bishop. But if some religious leader from a Middle Eastern country designates someone as the administrative authority of

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<sup>5</sup> 君子和而不同.

Islam on American soil and promotes Islam in the U.S., we can hardly imagine how the U.S. government would respond.

What would the future be? Would governments reject or accept certain religions in a more assertive fashion? Would there be any new type of government, aside from the aforementioned ones? Would there be any freedom of religion anymore? Would religious “beliefs” and “activities” be treated differently? Would governmental or civilian organizations conduct any illegal and unwholesome activities in the name of “freedom of religion”? Answers to these questions can only be tested through time.

After examining different governmental policies towards religion, let us go back to exploring the future development of Buddhism. Every government cares about the contribution of religion to society. Buddhist practitioners should learn from the social-welfare initiatives of Catholic and Protestant churches.

More and more people are dedicated to supporting charities through running not-for-profit Buddhist organizations. Successful examples include “Dharma Drum Mountain” founded by Master Sheng Yen, “Fo Guang Shan Monastery” founded by Master Hsing Yun, and “Tzu Chi Foundation” founded by Master Cheng Yen. These organizations deserve our deep reverence. I consider that the government should grant incentives through promulgation of regulations to encourage people to contribute to society in accordance with guidelines.

For certain reasons, the role of monasteries has experienced fundamental changes, especially in China. Many monasteries with historic value need repairs. Subsidized by government, some of these monasteries have been refurbished and turned into popular tourist sites, which still accommodate and support nuns and monks. These monasteries might still function in the future.

Looking into the future, with the convenience brought by information technology, earnest believers of Buddhism just need to establish some small-scale “religious learning centres” with lower infrastructure costs to achieve the same goal of the monasteries. Consequently, a new era of promoting and studying Buddhism will come. These centres could utilize advanced information technology to provide video lectures to practitioners, a move which would be beneficial to promote Mahayana Buddhism, which is considered one of the cultural pillars in China.

The author thinks there is no reason to limit secular practitioners from teaching Buddhism to the masses. Buddhism should emulate other professions by introducing some forms of certification in our society. Buddhist authorities should have a way to ensure the quality of the knowledge and cultivation of Buddhist teachers. Qualified teachers would be expected to be familiar with other religions as well. These teachers shall also enjoy the freedom of common family life. Likewise, missionaries of any other religion should also have some basic knowledge about the five legitimate religions in China.

When studying Buddhist theories, we ought to remember that there is no need to discriminate against any other religion. Preferably we should try to understand other religions and learn to make comparisons between different beliefs. This opens the door to grasping the truth.

In order to realize these outlooks in China or in other parts of the world, I encourage people in modern society to have some basic comprehension of Buddhism. This is the precisely the goal of this book.