

## Buddhist Attitude to Religious Fundamentalism

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### Introduction

One of the often asked questions is whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. On this issue what Venerable Walpola Rahula says is that labeling Buddhism either as a religion or a philosophy is “of little importance” (What the Buddha Taught (1974), p. 05). Buddhism, as further noted by him, is “a way of life” (What the Buddha Taught, p. 81). Being a way of life, it deals with two things, namely, suffering (dukkha) and its complete cessation (dukkha-nirodha) (Anurādhasutta of the Saṃyuttanikāya). The former refers to the present human predicament whereas the latter, to its cessation. These two teachings are important when we deal with religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism is “synonymous with bigotry, unthinking adherence, narrow-mindedness, and fanaticism” (Umesh Bhatt, Religious Fundamentalism and Human Rights (2005), p. 9). According to Y. Karunadasa, it “embraces all religious phenomena and movements that emerge as a reaction against some kind of perceived danger, as, for instance, the marginalization of religion due to the onset of science and technology” (Early Buddhist Teachings (2018), p. 172). It is recognized as a threat to human rights. It threatens, as a source of violence, “freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom to freely choose, change and discard one’s religion, and the right to life” (Religious Fundamentalism and Human Rights, p. 9). When taken in this sense, it can be interpreted as a source of suffering (dukkha) as it perpetuates inordinate situations such as intolerance, violence and even holy wars whereas, the second one, i.e., cessation of suffering (dukkha-nirodha), leads to the eradication of these situations once and for all. The present paper examines how Buddhism explains the origins of religious fundamentalism and its cessation drawing materials specifically from the discourses contained in the Suttapiṭaka.

Discussion

Religious fundamentalism, as Y. Karunadasa observes, arises due to dogmatic adherence to one’s own religion as, “this alone is true, all else is false”

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(*idameva saccaṃ moghamaññaṃ*) (Early Buddhist Teachings, p. 172). This refers to the belief that what one believes, in the sense of a faith, is true but, what others upheld, according to their own faith, is empty. This is nothing but the dogmatic adherence to one's own faith (*sandiṭṭhiraṅga*) while disparaging the faith of others. One's own faith is elevated to the highest level due to conceit (*māna*), whereas faith of others is disparaged due to hatred (*dosa*). Those who elevate their faith in this manner assert that he who knows as they know, understands the doctrine but the one, who scorns what they believe in, does not know the doctrine (The *Cūḷavyūhasutta* of the *Suttanipāta*).

Obsessive adherence to views in the sense of a religion makes one gets entangled in disputes. Such disputes incite one to disparage the followers of other religions calling them as fools and unskilled ones, and praise not only their own religion but also its followers. According to the Buddha, those who enter into disputes among themselves holding firmly to their own dogmatic views are all fools (The *Cūḷavyūhasutta*). It is because if they attain purification by their own views adhered to dogmatically, and become intellects, experts and wise, then no one among them can be called a fool or an unskilled one. Therefore, what is professed by them cannot be taken as the ultimate truth as it leads to conflicting and disputation situations such as intolerance, fanaticism, indoctrination and militant piety.

According to the Buddha, there are no two truths. What is meant by this is that only one truth exists in the world. Peculiarity of this one truth is that the sages, who attain it, do not enter into dispute with others. Those, who do not attain it, advocate different truths. They speak of true (*saccaṃ*) and false (*musā*) applying logical reasoning to what they dogmatically adhered to. Establishing themselves firmly on what is seen, heard, on ascetic practices and vows, and what is experienced, they call others fools and unskilled. In this way, they go beyond the limits of the truth. As a result, they get maddened with conceit. Being maddened with conceit, they themselves think that they are accomplished and anoint themselves as the perfected ones. They all point their fingers at themselves declaring that purification can be attained only by following the path they teach but, not by the path taught by others (The *Cūḷavyūhasutta*). However, Buddhist analysis is that the one who is stuck in this mud of moral depravity cannot pullout another who is bogged down in the same predicament. Hence, one should first come out of the mud to serve the others stuck in the mud. When this statement, contained in the *Sallekhasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, is interpreted in relation to our topic, it becomes evident that those who dogmatically adhere to their own faith while disparaging the faith of others are similar to the ones who are stuck in the mud. They cannot help each other as they are all stuck in the boggy mud of religious fundamentalism. Therefore, first they should come out of the mud to

serve others who are in the same pitiful predicament.

One of the important questions that arises in this context is whether Buddhism is a religion in the sense of a view (*diṭṭhi*) to be grasped dogmatically. Answer to this question is to be seen in the *Alagaddūpamasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* in which the Buddha states that, “monks, I teach you dhamma comparing to a raft. It is not for grasping but for crossing” the ocean of moral depravity. What this means is that the teaching of the Buddha itself is not something to be grasped dogmatically. It is only to use as a device to achieve the goal, Nibbana. The one who attains Nibbana knows that dogmatic adherence to one’s own religion is the source of dispute in the world. Hence, he/she, having abandoned all resolutions, the mainsprings of dogmatic adherence to religions, does not enter into disputes with the others.

### **Conclusion**

What is clear from the above discussion is that Buddhism traces the mainsprings of religious fundamentalism to the dogmatic adherence to one’s own religion as, “this alone is true and all else is false.” Buddhism does not endorse this depraved mentality as it is rooted both in conceit (*māna*) and hatred (*dosa*). What is rooted on these two unwholesome mentalities become the source of suffering leading to inter-religious and intra-religious violence in the world. Hence, Buddhism endorses the eradication of them once and for all. Further, Buddhism is not a religion in the sense of a faith that is to be dogmatically adhered to. As a religion, it teaches the eradication of all views, including this depraved view itself and thereby leading to the realization of Nibbana, a state freed from all dogmatic views.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Fundamentalism, Intolerance, Violence, Nibbana