

Buddhism and Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Winston Churchill gave us a definition of democracy that indicates the difficulty of dealing with it. In his witty way, he reminded an audience 'It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government – except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.'¹ This statement of Churchill alerts us to the fact that democracy has both negative and positive aspects. When we discuss democracy and Buddhism, it is essential to explore some of the history of the concept of democracy as well as the ways in which this approach to government has been applied to societies. Much of what we say about democracy has a particular history. For example, the concept of human rights is based on common law tradition of England. Such an idea goes back to the ancient feudal system in England and to the subsequent legal decisions. In other words, aspects of social life found under the umbrella of democracy are the product of historical processes. These histories make it difficult to reach a logical conclusion about human rights based on certain universal principles. When we make comparisons between democracy and Buddhism, we are faced with the decision of how much we look at the historical developments rather than asserting that the comparison works at the level of certain timeless absolutes.

An understanding of the history of democracy involves the ways in which communities have been defined. It does not take long to discover that there has probably never been a universal democracy in the sense of a nation in which everyone has the rights of participation. Even in Buddhist texts, where we find ancient accounts of voting rights among the monastics, the community involved in these rights did not include all of the followers of the tradition. The 19th century British system of government prided itself on Parliament and citizen participation. At the same time, this government had an enormous empire ruled from London, an empire that was in many places composed of people who had little or no say in their laws. A contemporary of Churchill's youth, Lord Curzon speaking at the University of Calcutta in 1902 enraged the local populace by stating that democracy was not suited to Indians.² They lacked, he intoned, the required concepts of justice, equity, and truth. While the colonials in the audience may have agreed, the locals were enraged by such condescension. The words of Lord Curzon implied that while democracy might be the best of the list of forms of government, he did not consider it possible for everyone to practice it. Therefore, even though he represented what was called a democratic kingdom, he could exclude the Indians from the community and justify his belief that colonial rule, rather than universal democracy, was necessary for the good of the world. We find in these comments the idea that justice and truth were not considered by Lord Curzon to be universal. They belonged to the cultural sphere of England as ethnic accomplishments.

The history of American democracy is also filled with stumbles along the path toward defining the community of those who had the power to rule. American colonists were seeking to have political separation from London, Paris, and Spain because they were not included in the halls of power in Europe. In 1641, the General Assembly of Rhode Island, the only one of the original colonies to be founded as a

secular one, ruled that the government was to be a democracy with the power vested in the “free” citizens who would be the ones to make the laws and enforce them.³ This became the early definition of democracy. Note that even then democracy was not defined as a universal one, since only “free” citizens could participate. Slaves had been landed in 1620 in Virginia and the use of slavery would give problems to the fledgling nation for centuries to come.⁴ Those who were legally defined as slaves or in some cases indentured servants were not to be included in the participation of making and enforcing the laws. The community of those who could vote did not include half the population who were women, nor those who lacked the prerequisite of land ownership. When we look at the laws that were made by the “free” citizens of the 17th century, we can understand why the leaders in the following century tried to protect the minority interests from the tyranny that could be imposed by the majority. This problem was nowhere more urgent than in the sphere of religious practice and acceptance. While, the usual narrative of this country praises separation of church and state; reality was quite the opposite. The colonies were closely tied to religion and it was woven into the very fabric of the political laws and legal system. Religious freedom was not a hallmark of the colonial period. In what we may call “British America,” the Protestants and the Church of England represented groups that had rejected the authority of the Pope. They did not have a substitute supreme leader. Thus, the form of Christianity that was brought to the eastern shores of the continent was a republican form of religion. The Spanish colonials, especially in Florida and later the Southwest, represented an entirely different tradition, as did the religious practices of the missionaries who came with the French trappers following the rivers and lakes. Neither the French nor Spanish missionaries would play a significant role in the type of government being conceived and established by the British and Protestant Americans. That is a government, in which politics and Christianity became bonded, a state that still exists in our laws and social policies.

For example in Connecticut in the mid 17th century, the legislature passed the penal laws which started with the statement “Whosoever shall worship any other God than the Lord shall surely be put to death.” They also included rules based on the Hebrew Bible that determined death for the offenses of blasphemy, sorcery, adultery, rape, or unfilial acts of an outrageous nature. Tocqueville, the Frenchman who studied the 19th century Americans could say of these law codes “The consequence was, that the punishment of death was never more frequently prescribed by statute, and never more rarely enforced.”⁵ It was sufficient to state the principles in the law but people were not anxious to kill all those in the community who violated them. The exception to this was the killing of women (and a few men) who were thought to be witches. Religion can be used in ways that violate the rights of those who are not inside the accepted norm. Tocqueville also recounts that he was an eyewitness to a trial in New York where the evidence of one man was excluded because he stated that he did not believe in the existence of God or the immortality of the soul.

Massachusetts showed a similar lack of respect for freedom of religious practice. In 1644, they banished the Anabaptists from the colony and in 1656 turned their legal system against the Quakers. The law starts with the preamble “Whereas, an accursed race of heretics called Quakers has sprung up...” In the following clauses of the law, there was a fine for all captains of ships who brought Quakers to Massachusetts’ shores. If they managed to land, it was prescribed that they be whipped and imprisoned with hard labor. Any Quakers who tried to defend their faith

against these proscriptions were to be fined, imprisoned and driven out. Perhaps an even harsher law was directed toward Catholic priests. If one should return to the colony after having been once driven out, then the law called for the death penalty⁶.

These early laws remind us that democracy in the early period of British America was defined by each community and in the area of religion there was no universal acceptance of all practices and faiths. Nevertheless, religion helped to shape the very nature of the new nation and still plays a major, if sometimes contentious, role in determining the laws that are enacted. We struggle, as a nation, with these problems of religion and state. James Madison, one of the great leaders of the new nation of the United States held to the idea that religion can only serve its purpose in our society when it is free from political control, and he formulated the doctrine of the separation of church and state found in the Bill of Rights.

Tocqueville's visit and observations of American Democracy are still studied with interest because he was in many ways the first person to look at America from an ethnological or anthropological approach. He traveled far and wide and made observations that are still valuable to us. He saw the problems of a nation that had survived a fierce and destructive civil war. His journey exposed him to life in the cities as well as the frontiers at the edge of the territory of European settlers. He saw the problems faced by the disparate groups that were spread out across the prairies, mountains and river valleys. Perhaps his great contribution came from his conclusions about why the nation could survive and thrive. He tried to identify those elements that allowed the American democracy to work. One of the most important items in his list was education. Americans had set up public schools in even the most remote sites and from this effort, Tocqueville could see the constructive results. Even in the decision to provide education, the early records of the American democracy are filled with references to the religion. Consider the preamble to the legislation establishing schools in Connecticut:

"Whereas, Satan, the enemy of mankind, finds his strongest weapons in the ignorance of men, and whereas it is important that the wisdom of our fathers shall not remain buried in their tombs, and whereas the education of children is one of the prime concerns of the state, with the aid of the Lord...."

It was for religious reasons that the governing bodies established schools and required that children be sent to them. The importance of education tied to a religious pattern of belief, overrode all other obligations. The government could, and still can, remove children from parents if they are not sent to school. We have forgotten that some of the first laws in the land about education were written to defeat Satan, the enemy of mankind. Tocqueville was very insightful when he said "in America, religion is the road to knowledge and the observance of the divine law leads man to civil freedom."

From this we can see that the Americans and British of the 19th and 20th centuries believed that the divine law known to them through Protestant Christianity was the way to civil freedom. It would be impossible to trace the origins of Lord Curzon's "justice, equity, and truth" without Biblical reference.

In addition to education, Tocqueville noted that the role of civic associations across America were at the core of the emerging democracy. He observed,

"Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition, are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types--religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America."

Recently, scholars have returned to this theme of civic associations in American life and democracy. Prof. Robert Putnam of Harvard University has borrowed a phrase from James Coleman, "social capital." By this is meant the benefits that accrue from the work of citizens who join together. American history has been intertwined with these associations. Putnam has studied what he calls the "disappearance of civic America." He refers to the decline in membership of many of the associations that once were popular across the nation. The Masons are one such group that is experiencing a significant drop in the number of active members and as a result they are less able to support projects dedicated to assisting children with major medical problems.⁷

Early in the 20th century, as one example, the National Congress of Mothers was active, and from it developed the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the mothers' pensions which were the forerunners of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Because of the effort from the women who helped formed the National Congress of Mothers, the federal government set up the Children's Bureau to work for maternal and infant health. These benefits we now see in the Social Security Act. The American Legion, made up of veterans of military actions, played a key role in putting pressure on Congress to enact laws to help the millions of men returning from World War II. Among these laws was the GI Bill which provided funding for college education. Many of those men and women who took advantage of the GI Bill were from families that had never been able to have college training. This remains the largest government support program for higher education. Our social welfare legislation has been in many ways constructed from the needs expressed at the grassroots level of society. From these examples, we can see that Tocqueville was correct in saying that the voluntary associations in America have been essential to the structure of the democracy of the nation. While some scholars deny the assertion of Putnam that "civic America" is disappearing, it is obvious that many of the groups that made great contributions in the past are no longer at the level of strength they enjoyed decades ago.

The two aspects of American life, public education and civic associations are closely related. Research supports the assertion that the better educated citizens are more likely to be the major support for the groups that produce "social capital." Persons with more education tend to be more trusting and more open to joining with others in the use of their skills and resources, in part because of the attitudes acquired from school. While Americans are often said to be fully committed to individualism, there is the other very important aspect of having relationships with one another that are productive and essential to contemporary life. Because American society is receiving more education than in past, we should expect to have more participation in associations and thus it may be that education will be the future source of energy for the production of "social capital."

In the 20th century, Robert Bellah has described a particular religious tradition which he has called “civic religion.”⁸ This is to be distinguished from “common religion” such as Protestant Christianity that characterized the early democracy of British America. Leroy S. Rouser states:

So far at least, we have had a workable civil religion providing a "binding ingredient" for American cultural diversity. American civil religion is that transcendent loyalty to the values and purposes of American civilization that makes a community out of an individualistic and culturally diverse people.⁹

For some scholars, Abraham Lincoln was one of the early founders of the “civic” religion of the U.S. It was he who spoke for those who saw the Civil War as the moment in the history of the nation when the concept of the nobility of death for America’s sake, came into existence. At his famous speech at the battlefield in Gettysburg, Lincoln gave those words that remain deeply moving. When he said “that these dead shall not have died in vain” he implied “That government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Those words gave substance to the “civil religion” in which the goals of American life came to have precedence over the ties to the former European homelands. Thus, it was Lincoln who helped to give Americans their own identity. “Civil religion” in America faces a strong test in whether it can survive during an age of pluralism. There are many questions that we face today. Does “civil religion” required a “common religion” as the base on which it rests? There can be no doubt that American civil religion differs from America’s *common* religion, for there is no institutional basis for “civil religion.” Until recently, America was a Protestant Christian nation, and Protestant Christianity, while always separate from the state, was the dominant religious institution in the states. From time to time, we can see the missionary spirit in American civil religion, but this is not without problems. Does the “civil religion” of America provide the basis for such a practice in other nations? “Civil religion” is what we share with others about our national purpose and this is why it is referred to as a religious activity.

What does this mean for Buddhism and democracy? If we accept that democracy must be nurtured with “social capital” coming from the citizens and dependent upon education of those citizens, there are many ways in which Buddhism can interact with democracy. The growing associations of Buddhists across the nation are similar to what Tocqueville described a century and more ago. Buddhist groups can be a significant and important part of a democratic society. The multicultural environment, especially in our cities and in states such as California, must be shown to be a viable one for the “civil religion” of America. Buddhism, as one of the alternatives to the “common religion” of the past, has the opportunity to prove that democracy can thrive with diversity. If democracy can find its greatest support in civic associations and education backed with a transcendent view of purpose and meaning, all of these are possible for Buddhism. American Buddhists will need to support education, not just for professional gain, but for training needed in the moral and social spheres.

If we explore the relationship of Buddhism to democracy, it opens the issue of how we understand the ancient texts and the modern applications. One position is to state that Buddhists were democratic from the very first and represented an early form of the rights of all people without reference to family, status, or ethnic origins. And yet, when we look at Buddhism in the world of the 20th century, it was strongly focused on

ethnicity. There was little interchange between Korean Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Newari Buddhism, or Pure Land sects of Japan. It is the globalization developments that have forced us all to try to deal with the redefinition of "community." The long process of creating the global "village" has exposed differences that are crucial to the identity of each of the cultural and social communities. If there is a "melting pot" which destroys the very essence of the ethnic heritage, then there is the question of how the resulting community can serve the needs of individuals and groups.

In order to deal with democracy, Buddhist leaders need to be aware of the history of the movement whether in ancient history, global developments, or local expressions. The history shows us that democracy has not always supported positions which some would call "universal absolutes." Therefore, the study of Buddhism and democracy must be fully grounded in the history of both. Only then can there be an effective Buddhist strategy to define the relationship to democracy within the context that includes both "civil" and "common" religions. The task of understanding something as complicated as American democracy and Buddhism is going to be difficult. On the other hand, it is important for America to discover that religious variations can be a productive part of the "civil religion" that is needed in an age of globalization.

Notes

¹ This is often quoted, but the exact source for the statement seems to be unknown.

² "Staging the Empire" Ian Buruma in *New York Review of Books*, December 18, 2003. p.56.

³ For example, the constitution of Rhode Island was based on the following: 'Our charter gives us power to govern ourselves, and such other as come among us; and by such a form of civil government as by the voluntary consent, etc., shall be found most suitable to our estate and condition; It is agreed by this present **Assembly** thus incorporate, and by this present act declared, that the form of government established in Providence

⁴ See W.E.H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* Vol. IV, Chapter 5. 1878 for an early account of the origins of the slave trade.

⁵ These are discussed in detail in L. Siedentop, *Tocqueville*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁶ The work of Hubert Bancroft concerning these matters appeared in *The Native Races* first published in 1883 and included in *The Great Republic by the Master Histories* edited by Charles Morris, New York: R. S. Belches Co. 1902.

⁷ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community I* New York: Simon Shuster, 2000. and also his *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*, New York: Oxford, 2002. For James Coleman see *Becoming Adult in a Changing Society* Paris: OECD, 1985.

⁸ The two volumes by Robert Bellah that touch on this topic are *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* New York: Seabury Press. 1975 and (with Phillip E. Hammond), *Varieties of Civil Religion* San Francisco: Harper. 1980.

⁹ His works include *Civil Religion and Political Theology* Notre Dame: University Press. 1986 and *Religious Pluralism* Notre Dame: University Press, 1984. See also his article "Civil Religion, Cultural Diversity, and American Civilization" in *American Scholar* Spring, 1999.