Buddhism can promote political change but not social change

The Politics of Buddhism

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I am going to argue for two major theses which seek to relate Buddhism to the processes of social and political change. The second thesis also relates the processes of social and political change to each other, a very important linkage in view of the prevailing assumption that government is the major initiator and director of social change.

1. Buddhism is neither a serious obstacle to, nor a strong promoter of, social change.
2. The Buddhist order of monks has been very effective in producing political change, but this has not been translated into social change.

Each of these statements contains two propositions, and this essay will attempt to develop them in the order presented. But I would like first to suggest the general framework in which I develop them.

During the past decade we have been forced to reassess the relationship of religion to politics and social change in the Third World. It is now clear that the secularist assumptions of Western social science, which had consigned this problem to the domain of the esoteric and the inconsequential, are simply inadequate to deal with the social realities of South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America. For, throughout this vast area, religions constitute the core of traditional cultures, and religious designations are meaningful in describing societies—Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Catholic societies. Despite the enormous impact of secularizing forces over the past century and a half, religion remains a major fact to be reckoned with, particularly for those governments seeking to promote social, economic and political modernization and for scholars who are concerned with analyzing these processes.

I begin this essay on Buddhism by placing it in the broader context of the Third World, for the comparative perspective is vital in order to understand the significance of Buddhism itself. The complex of socio-political manifestations of Buddhism differs markedly from those of the other major religious systems, although particular characteristics may also be found in one or more other systems.

I limit myself to South and Southeast Asia in order to focus on Theravada (sometimes called Hinayana) Buddhism, although some references will be made to South Vietnam, where the Mahayana Buddhist tradition predominates. I will not here analyze the much more complex interactions of Mahayana Buddhism with society in China, Japan and Korea. Even in the Theravada world there are important historical differences, primarily between Burma and Ceylon on one hand, which experienced the traumatic disruption of Western imperialism, and Thailand on the other, in which the major institutional forms (semi-divine monarchy and state-regulated monastic order) have survived and undergone only gradual change.

Buddhism is not a serious obstacle to social change. Institutionally and doctrinally it presents far fewer problems to the modernizers than traditional Hinduism or Islam. This is quite clear from the experience of the past two decades in South and Southeast Asia. From Rammohan Roy in the early nineteenth century to Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, Hindu reformers have struggled to separate caste from religion, and the battle is far from won. Despite all of the secularizing forces at work in modern India, the basic assumptions of a sacred, hierarchical society remain strong, particularly in village society. And if the modern legislative state has actively intervened to radically change Hindu marriage, divorce and inheritance laws, it has still had to function within a framework which recognizes religion as the basic source of law in such matters.
In the Muslim countries the legislative state has bypassed the Islamic law in many respects, yet still the basic assumption of a sacral society ordered by God cannot be challenged directly. The ideological conflict continues to manifest itself whenever the issue of polygamy is debated. In Pakistan in 1896 the proposals to reform family law were vehemently attacked by a learned traditional scholar who declared: ‘In Islam the provisions of the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah, be they in the form of basic principles or individual laws, are authoritative and final for all occasions and for all epochs between the time of revelation and doomsday.’

Governments of the Buddhist countries of South and Southeast Asia have not encountered resistance to change derived from static religious notions of how society should be constituted. There is no Buddhist law or social structure. In part this reflects the origins of Buddhism as a doctrine of individual spiritual liberation enunciated in the sixth century B.C. in a society which had already developed elaborate religious answers to the major questions of social organization, law and political theory. The Buddhist’s opposition to Brahmanical dominance and his essential egalitarianism represented a powerful critique of that society, but he did not go beyond this to prescribe an alternative sacral society.

In part the historical explanation may lie in the fact that Buddhism’s remarkable organizational skills were turned inward—toward the development of the Sangha, the order of monks. One-third of the Buddhist canon is concerned with the regulation of the monastic life. While the Hindu and Muslim writers of the great law texts were concerned with the divine ordering of an entire society, the Buddhist monks devoted themselves to the details of ecclesiastical organization and monastic self-regulation.

The moral conduct of the laity was to be guided by the simple Five Precepts, and a distinctively Buddhist structure of society was never formulated. In terms of structure, traditional Buddhist societies were essentially secular. Although this statement should be qualified by noting certain peculiarities of the situation in Ceylon, the generalization is valid, strikingly so in the comparative context suggested above.

There are thus no important Buddhist structural features to inhibit social change. But what of the value system of Buddhism? The points usually made in this connection are that the ideals of the monkhood—self-denial, renunciation of the world and low valuation of material things—militate against positive attitudes toward economic development. At this point the ultimate conflict between Buddhism and modernization appears to be real, but in practical terms the problem may not be serious. There is, after all, the basic distinction between monk and layman, and it is not expected that the latter’s values, any more than his conduct, should correspond to the former’s. In fact, in all Buddhist societies the wealthy are honored, for they build monasteries and pagodas and thus acquire religious merit. They can become monks or even attain Buddhahood in future existences!

Buddhism is not a strong promoter of social change. This statement is, in part, simply the other side of the same coin. That is, Buddhism’s relative unconcern with the problems of society, both doctrinally and institutionally, is an asset to the modernizer when he surveys the probable sources of resistance to change but a liability when he surveys the resources available for the formulation of a positive ideology of social change.

I do not regard it as a criticism of Buddhism to state that it has not thus far developed a convincing social ethic to support modernization and is unlikely to do so in the future. This is simply a fact and a prediction. Each of the great religious systems has evolved along its own lines, and it would be the height of presumption for anyone outside a system to prescribe its proper course.

It is true that some influential Western-educated Buddhist laymen decry the religion’s lack of doctrinal engagement with the sociopolitical reality. C. D. S. Siriwardane of Ceylon pointed to Buddhism’s monastic orientation as responsible for this situation: ‘If Buddhism is to survive, it must take its place in society and its principles must influence the changes that are going on. Yet it is clear that within the last century or two Buddhism has contributed little to the social changes that have gone on around us . . . Buddhism . . . must cease to be purely a monastic religion, and it must provide the solutions for the questions that interest people today.’

This concern is voiced only by a minority of even the Western-educated laity. The leading international journals of Buddhism provide the reader with detailed expositions of classical doctrines relating to the path of individual salvation. Spiritual individualism is at the heart of the quest for Nirvana, and in the Buddhist belief system social concerns are marginal at best. A revered Thai monk made the point clearly in an address to the World Fellowship of Buddhists: ‘What we need to do is create interest in what is known as the heart of Buddhism; that is, working directly toward the elimination of each individual’s defilements . . . Preaching morality for the benefit of society and the state . . . is less meaningful than self-practice and individual endeavor.’

It is the essentially ahistorical orientation of Buddhist doctrine which makes it difficult for the modernist interpreters to relate it meaningfully to the historical process of change and modernization. Buddhism teaches a cyclical theory of history, and the historical figure of Gautama Buddha is positioned
among the 550 Buddhas who preceded him and the many who continue to follow as innumerable worlds are created and destroyed. From this perspective, how does one convincingly attach much religious significance to the course of human events which take place on one small planet of one universe in what amounts to a mere instant of time?

Throughout the Third World today the word which symbolizes change to most people is socialism. Whatever its ideological content, the word socialism suggests the end of a long history of exploitation of the masses. In its Marxist form, ultimate meaning is attached to the masses' inevitable victory in the class struggle. Marxism, based in part on a linear, biblical view of history, shares basic assumptions with Christianity and Islam. Thus it is not surprising that Catholic and Islamic versions of socialism have had a considerable impact in their respective areas of cultural dominance. Islamic socialism is a notion that has long been debated in Indonesia and is of considerable importance in the contemporary Middle East.

The Buddhist interpreters emphasize the egalitarianism of their tradition as motivation to bring about social change, but its connection to the historical process is tenuous. Ahiharism Buddhism is not easily related to the struggle for justice of men in history. Thus it is no accident that Buddhists who espouse Marxism are often content to show only that the two belief systems are not irreconcilable, or that they are complementary because they address themselves to totally different problems. A Burmese cabinet minister writing in 1951 assigned them to completely separate spheres of life. "Marxist theory deals with mundane affairs and seeks to satisfy material needs in life. Buddhist philosophy, however, deals with the solution of spiritual matters with a view to seek spiritual satisfaction in life and liberation from this mundane world." Buddhism, in other words, contains no implications, much less direction, for the course of social change because this is not its function.

The Buddhist order of monks (Sangha) has been very effective in producing political change. In dramatic contradiction to what the doctrinal tenets of Buddhism would lead us to expect, in Burma, Ceylon and South Vietnam the monks have emerged as powerful political activists. The contradiction is flagrant because it is precisely the monks who are expected to take the quest for Nirvana most seriously, avoiding all worldly pleasures and passions in the effort to achieve the extinction of desire. In fact, the political activity of monks has always been condemned as spiritually harmful and contrary to the monastic code by the most venerated senior members of the Sangha. But the disapproval of the elders has generally had little effect.

The phenomenon of the political monk in Burma and Ceylon must be traced to the breakdown of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and consequently of monastic discipline, during the period of British rule. Before 1886 Upper Burma was ruled by a Buddhist monarch whose most important role was that of Defender of the Faith and patron and protector of the Sangha. The king appointed the Primate of the monastic order, and the bishops and abbots below him were arranged in a precise hierarchical structure. Ecclesiastical courts disciplined or expelled monks found guilty of serious breaches of the code, but it was the temporal ruler who ultimately enforced the sanctions. The British refusal to continue the tradition of governmental appointment and support of the ecclesiastical hierarchy led to the rapid decline of monastic discipline.

This failure of the British to support the traditional religious establishment soon worked to their disadvantage, for monks freed from the constraints of monastic discipline did not hesitate to oppose actively the infidel government ruling over them. The first great figure of Burmese nationalism, in the 1920's, was U Ottama, a Buddhist monk. Participating in nationalistic politics, the monks, while technically violating the monastic code, could rationalize their conduct by a plausible argument: they were engaged in a struggle to restore Buddhism to its rightful place in society. U Ottama told his village audiences that individual spiritual liberation (Nirvana) would be impossible until political liberation (self-rule) was achieved.

The monks brought important weapons and armor of their own into the political arena. The high prestige of the yellow robe may be gauged by the formula which the devout layman intones daily: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Doctrine, I take refuge in the Sangha." The monastic order is indeed an object of worship, a fact never doubted by anyone who has witnessed a layman's act of obeisance as he prostrates himself before a monk. The monks had organization, another prerequisite of political effectiveness. In the cities' large monasteries were occupied by as many as eight hundred monks who could be readily mobilized for a political demonstration. And every village had a monastery with at least one or two monks.

Above all, as a once-influential traditional élite that had been thrust into the background by the forces of colonialism and modernization, the monks had a powerful motive to stage a comeback via politics or any other means. Although the British government could ban political parties or other secular organizations, it could not attempt to regulate the Sangha without exposing itself to the charge that it was persecuting Buddhism. Some political monks were imprisoned, but the great majority of them functioned with impunity.

The last and decisive phase of Burmese nationalism, resulting in independence in 1948, was led by
of the majority—the Buddhist religion, the Sinhalese language, the dress of the common man. In the 1958 elections he obtained massive support from the United Monks Front, which had been organized by the very political monk, Ven. M. Buddhakakkita, who was also a vice president of Bandaranaike's political party.

Bandaranaike's overwhelming electoral victory meant that there were political debts to be paid, and the United Monks Front received a considerable share of the power won. The political monks were able to dispense patronage, including cabinet posts, and were consulted on day-to-day policy decisions. Buddhakakkita's projects even extended to the creation of a shipping company to handle the large imports of rice into Ceylon. When he and the Prime Minister fell out, the government shipping contract was awarded to another company and the breach between the two men was complete and unbridgeable. Bandaranaike was assassinated by a monk in 1959; Buddhakakkita was later convicted and imprisoned as the arch-conspirator who had engineered the plot.

The Ceylonese monks' political activities were suspended for some time thereafter but have been revived periodically since then. Mrs. Bandaranaike's inclusion of several Marxists in her cabinet in 1964 precipitated a crisis in which Sangha opposition to the government became very intense and very effective, contributing to the fall of her government. She, of course, came back to power in 1970.

Against the background of these developments in Burma and Ceylon, the emergence of political monks in South Vietnam in 1963 was hardly surprising. The Buddhist crisis erupted over the government's refusal to permit the public display of the Buddhist flag, but there were far more serious grievances of long standing. Unlike the situation in the Theravada Buddhist countries, the Mahayana Buddhism of Vietnam was fragmented by important sectarian differences. Led by the monks, fourteen Mahayana sects came together to form the United Buddhist Church to oppose the Catholic Diem dictatorship.

In the cities the pagodas became the main centers of the anti-Diem agitation as thousands of laymen and was secular and Marxist in orientation. After independence, however, with U Nu's state-sponsored religious revival, the monks once again came into political prominence. Numerous associations of monks campaigned actively for U Nu in the 1960 elections, impressed by his pledge to make Buddhism the state religion. The pledge was redeemed the following year by an amendment to the constitution, but U Nu, with an eye to the alienated religious minorities, then sought to reassure them by a very mild constitutional amendment to guarantee their rights. The monks were unanimously hostile to this effort, and several hundred of them threw up a picket line around the parliament building on the day of the crucial vote. U Nu outwitted the monks and got his constitutional amendment, but he also won the angry denunciations of an alienated monkhood that felt betrayed. The complete withdrawal of Sangha support from U Nu was a significant factor in the situation which facilitated the military takeover in March, 1962.

In Ceylon the political monks played some role in the development of anti-British nationalism, but the most dramatic events came after independence. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, an astute politician who perceived the vulnerability of the highly anglicized elite in a day of mass-participation politics, identified himself with the cultural symbols
The Diem regime's increasingly repressive measures failed to bring the Buddhists under control and resulted in the withdrawal of American support, paving the way for the military coup of November 1, 1963. The downfall of Diem, however, was not the end of the remarkable display of the political monks' effectiveness. In succeeding years two other South Vietnamese governments were toppled as a result of agitations launched and directed by the monks.

The political change produced by the Buddhist monks has not been translated into social change. The monks excel in agitational politics. Their most successful interventions in politics have been those in which a plausible enemy of Buddhism has been identified—a European imperialist government, a Westernized indigenous élite, a Catholic dictator. Faced with situations such as these, the monks utilize their high social prestige, organizational skill and capacity for symbol manipulation in an impressive and politically effective manner. Their ability to mobilize the masses in such situations is not matched by any other clerical group in the Third World.

Precisely at the point when their agitational politics succeed, however, when the enemy of Buddhism has been overthrown, a serious problem presents itself to the political monks. Within reach of real power, the monk cannot openly grasp it. At least thus far there has been no monk-premier or monk-president. The formal norms of the Sangha, however bent in practice, could not be totally disregarded. To assume political office the monk would have to renounce the yellow robe and become a layman, but this would cut him off from the very source of his political effectiveness! The monks, then, must be satisfied with a relationship that enables them to influence those who actually wield power. At least in the cases I have considered here these relationships have been highly unstable; erstwhile political friends and allies have easily become enemies, and hence enemies of Buddhism, leading to another round of agitational politics.

The heightened general prestige and influence of the Sangha itself is perhaps the most important consequence of victories over enemies of Buddhism. Indeed, the restoration of an alienated traditional élite to a place of honor in society may have been the primary object of intervention in politics. Powerful individuals such as Buddharakkhita, of course, have had the opportunity to fulfill private ambitions which had little or nothing to do with Buddhism. But there is a deeper problem concerned with the use of political influence.

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After the South Vietnamese monks had overthrown their third government, a group of Western journalists asked the Venerable Tri Quang, the leading political monk, what his program was. What policies did he want instituted? What was his blueprint, or at least rough guideline, for the future development of Vietnamese society? Long accustomed to the studied vagueness of politicians' answers to such questions, the foreign correspondents were still impressed at how very, very vague Tri Quang's response was. He had been so strongly opposed to three previous governments that he had contributed very significantly to their overthrow, yet he seemed unable to articulate even general principles for the government that was to succeed them.

This brings us back to proposition two. Buddhism is not a strong promoter of social change because it has little in the way of ideological resources to provide guidelines for restructuring society. In point of fact, both in Burma and in Ceylon governments strongly committed to the promotion of Buddhism did little in terms of social change which was in any way connected with Buddhism. Aside from purely symbolic gestures (e.g., Buddha images in government buildings), the explicitly Buddhist policies instituted in both countries were: (1) substitution of poya days (the Buddhist sabbath, based on the lunar calendar) for Sunday holidays, and (2) intensified efforts to enforce prohibition (abstinence from alcohol is one of the Five Precepts). In short, the Buddhist "social ethic" in practice resembled that of the Bible Belt fundamentalist; sabbath laws and prohibition virtually exhausted the subject.

I believe that the four propositions presented are sound generalizations based on what we know of Buddhist societies in South and Southeast Asia. At this point it may be appropriate to hazard some personal evaluative statements and speculation about the future. I consider the first proposition, that Buddhism is not a serious obstacle to social change, as by far the most important. Strikingly secular and modern in many respects, Buddhist societies have been and will be spared at least some of the trauma of the more rigidly structured traditional societies. I am not terribly concerned about the second proposition, that Buddhism is not a strong promoter of social change. My guess is that the real contribution of religious ethics to the processes of modernization throughout the Third World will turn out to be minor and marginal, though I would be pleased if events should prove me wrong.

The political effectiveness of the Buddhist monks, as pointed to in the third proposition, is probably a fleeting phenomenon. The influence of the political monks may already have peaked, but in any case the multifaceted process of secularization will continue to erode their authority, in religion as well as in politics. And lastly, their disinclination or inability to translate political influence into a dynamic impetus for social change will probably continue to hold true for whatever limited future the political monks have in store for them.