



Human Rights and Buddhism: A Social Injustice Perspective

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Abstract

Many religions across the globe and throughout history are well documented for human rights violations, both as victims of as well as being the perpetrators—from witch hunts to terrorism. Buddhism and the question of human rights violations however, seems to be an undeveloped issue that needs to be further explored. Through qualitative research, this article discusses some of the most horrifying human rights abuses relating to Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddhism; Human rights; Human rights abuses

Introduction

Human rights in the modern world is a relatively new concept, brought into a collective conscience and awareness by the inception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 (Lai., 1981, 37; Schmidt-Leukel., 2006, 34). The necessity for the charter arose after World War II, where some of the worst human rights abuses and injustices occurred on a mass scale. Interestingly however, what is defined as human rights in the charter has for centuries been the foundation of Buddhism in practice – in its most basic sense the philosophies are to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings, to live and let live, to not cause harm to others or to the self as well as to accomplish enlightenment through deep meditative practices as well as living a sparing lifestyle (Hayden., 2001, 287; Keown., 1994, 25). Buddhism is only practiced by six percent of the world's population and has its main predominance in Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Bhutan and Mongolia with smaller groups globally (Macionis & Plummer., 2012, 666; Ferraro., 2001, 320). However, even though Buddhism could be considered one of the more peaceful religions whose principles resonate with the UDHR, just like all religions there have been those persecuted severely for their beliefs and those who in turn have been the persecutors (Ledgerwood & Un., 2010, 531; Kittel., 2011, 910). Having previously explored what Buddhism as a religion and its philosophies mean, this essay will now explore human rights injustices that have been perpetuated by Buddhists and to Buddhists.

Falun Gong Practitioners of China

Falun Gong is said to be a branch of Buddhism, both religions share the principles of truth, compassion and tolerance as well as abstaining from substance abuse; anything that is considered a pollutant to the body (Savitz., 2013; Penny., 2005, 35). In China, Falun Gong Practitioners are despised as their beliefs are in direct contrast to the mostly atheist, self-interested Chinese Communist Parties (CCP) capitalist interests (Savitz., 2013; Macioni and Plummer., 2011, 666). The CCP views Falun Gong as a threat to the legitimacy of the current regime which is still very much Maoist whose opinion is that socialism and religion are incompatible and a dissident force that could potentially threaten and undermine government authority which is why Chinese governments try to quickly quash any such movements (Petit, Ford & Jain., 2008., 168; Noakes & Ford., 2015, 659-660). So despised is the Falun Gong movement by the CCP, practitioners that are involved in peaceful protests are arrested and arbitrarily incarcerated for their spiritual beliefs. Whilst this persecution is a human rights injustice in itself, a worse fate has befallen tens of thousands (if not more) Falun Gong Practitioners (Savitz 2013). Brought to the attention by human rights lawyer David Matas, is the fact that the incarcerated Falun Gong Practitioners are victims of organ harvesting, often while still alive and without anaesthetic. This is a well organised operation with at least 712 medical institutes in China involved in procuring organs for wealthy clients in need of transplants and involves professional surgeons to harvest the organs (Samuels., 2016). According to the documentary *Red Reign*, the hospitals that are involved in organ procurement have access to a data base that can match up a client's blood type to an incarcerated Falun Gong Practitioner whose death is then timed to coincide with the client's transplant date (Savitz., 2013; Samuels., 2016). The bodies afterwards are then incinerated to remove evidence (Aubusson., 2015). The wife of a brain surgeon reported that her husband had removed more than 2000 corneas from Falun Gong Practitioners while they were still alive and just as horrifically another reported witnessing a woman having her chest cut open and having her organs removed one by one whilst also alive (Savitz., 2013; Aubusson., 2015). It is estimated that in China more than 60,000 to 100,000 transplants are performed every year to a wealthy international client base, though Chinese officials only admit to 10,000 per year (Samuels., 2016).

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is another religion that Chinese governments past and present have tried to annihilate. In 1950, Chinese forces attacked and occupied Tibet claiming that Tibet was one of China's provinces (Petit, Ford & Jain., 2008, 167). As is the case with Falun Gong, Tibetan Buddhism is viewed as socialist, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) still had its foundations in the CCP that believed Tibetan Buddhism was a threat to China's authoritarian rule (Petit, Ford & Jain., 2008, 168). Occupation by China's Red forces was met with conflict from tribes and revolutionaries in which the Red commander asked the Dalai Lama to send Tibetan troops to deal with the skirmish's (Time., 1959). Upon refusal, the commander sent a note directly to the Dalai Lama demanding the he come to the communist headquarters alone without his entourage (Latson., 2015; Time., 1959). This caused outrage and suspicion in the Lhasa community, stores of hidden arms were distributed to the populace and monks were priming themselves for death to protect their reverent leader, thousands surrounded the Lamas potala palace in protest (Latson., 2015; Time., 1959). The Dalai Lama was urged by senior monks to leave the country, he dressed as a soldier and fled over the 17,000-foot mountain pass to neighbouring India, accompanied by his mother, siblings, state officials and cavalymen with rifles (Time., 1959). Two days later, on the 19th of March 1959, the Red forces attacked killing 1000's of monks, nuns, civilians and pilgrims in Lhasa as well as decimating the monasteries, three days into the fighting did the Red army realise the Lama had escaped (Petit, Ford & Jain., 2008, 169; Latson., 2015; Time., 1959).

Whilst the Lama and 80,000 of his followers reside peacefully in Dharamsala India, Tibetan Buddhists continue to be persecuted, suffer cultural genocide and have their religion controlled by the

Chinese (Murphy., 2008). Monks and nuns are to denounce the Dalai Lama as their religious leader (anyone found to have his picture are subject to punishment) as well as accept that Tibet is a province of China and not an independent state (Petit, Ford & Jain., 2008, 169). This is part of a compulsory curriculum that nuns and monks participate in called the Patriotic Works Teams, an initiative of propaganda from the Chinese government. The PRC are also limiting the amount of Senior Buddhist leaders that are appointed preferring to get CCP supporters into the Buddhism hierarchy. It should be noted that the senior monks are responsible for searching for and recognising reincarnated religion figures such as the Dalai Lama. There has been controversy after the Dalai Lama recognised a boy as the eleventh reincarnation of the Panchen Lama (the second rank after the Dalai Lama), the boy and his family were then taken into custody by the Chinese authorities and the PRC announces a boy of their choice to be the Panchen Lama (Petit, Ford & Jain., 2008, 170).

Riots and protests have been part of Tibetan society since Chinese occupation due to the oppressive Chinese regime and deterioration of Tibetan culture. Most protests are only small and are disbanded quickly though in 1988 and then twenty years later in 2008 bigger protests occurred resulting in violence. In 1988, twenty monks in Lhasa emerged from a temple and walked clockwise around carrying a small Tibetan flag and at times chanting, as they walked they arrived at the Chinese business sector which saw the arrival of police. Much to the horror of those witnessing, the monks were beaten profusely before being placed in police vehicles for arrest (Ackerly., 1988: 45). Three days later these events repeated, only this time 100's of supporters were following the monks and the police were armed with assault rifles. The Tibetan supporters threw rocks at the police while the police open fired into the crowd, the Tibetans retaliated by setting the station and police vehicles on fire. Its estimated that at least ten Tibetans were killed including one child and many injuries from bullets (Ackerly., 1988, 45). In 2008, widespread across the country Tibetan unrest erupted again that led to violent protests, the loss of lives and a mass of destruction to 848 shops, 120 buildings and 84 vehicles, costing an estimated 300 million yuan in Lhasa alone. Some articles cite monks as being the cause of the March 14 (the date of uprisings since 1959) uprising where as others state that it is Tibetan youths who have never known a free Tibetan society, though their actions are supported by older citizens and monks (Murphy., 2008; Guo., 2009, 62).

Buddhists in Vietnam

In Buddhism, there is an obligation to have a duty of care to others, to not cause harm to others but this obligation also extends to the self (Kelly., 2011, 301). As aforementioned pollutants of the body such as drinking, smoking and other substances are not considered to be the practicing of Buddhists way, the same also is true of self-harm and suicide (Kelly., 2011, 305). However, Buddhist monks and nuns have used varying methods of self-immolation as a method of political protest. In Vietnam, in 1963 a monk named Thich Quang Duc, protesting the persecution of Buddhists and the destruction of Buddhist lives and religious properties by the Catholic led government, set fire to himself at an intersection. This led to an on-going movement of other Buddhist monks and nuns self-immolating, sparking condemnation and protests towards the then President Diem from within Vietnam and the global community who were also condemning the Vietnam War (Ferraro., 2001, 320). After Diem's downfall by an army coup, some twenty thousand monks and nuns were released from their unjustified incarceration (Kelly., 2011, 310;). What is concerning is that Thich Quang Duc has set a precedent for people of many religious backgrounds to self-immolate in protest, especially with fire. It is estimated from the year since to 2002 that there have been 800 fatal acts of self-immolation which conflicts with most religious beliefs including the Buddhist principles of non-violence of the self and the harm of trauma to others that witnessed Thich Quang Duc's horrific demise (Kelly., 2011, 310).

Pol Pot and Cambodia

Cambodia for centuries has been deeply Buddhist, in the 1960's it was estimated the country had 65,000 monks and novices with 3,369 monasteries (Keyes., 1990). In 1975, after five years of civil war the totalitarian Khmer Rouge government took control of the country by capturing the capital, Phnom Penh (BBC 2014; Robertson & Feingold., 1990; Kent., 2011, 405). During the years spent living in the jungle leader Pol Pot was influenced by the remote hill tribes who lived self-sufficiently, they had no uses for currency and were largely unaffected by the Buddhist religion. Inspired by this, the communist regime emptied the cities and forced people to move to regional areas to live the same communal lifestyles, to achieve an 'agrarian utopia' but Pol Pot was also determined to annihilate Buddhism from the now named Kampuchea (Cambodia) culture (Keyes., 1990; BBC 2014). Monks and novices to Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were parasites surviving off the lifeblood of the people and in the four years of the Khmer's rule it is estimated there less than 100 monks and novices left living, the majority of them living in exile in neighbouring Vietnam (Keyes., 1990). For those that survived the exodus from their monasteries, they were forced to disrobe and forbidden to engage in any way with Buddhism, a third of the monasteries were desecrated along with any Buddha images. Year zero, as the Khmer Rouge named it, was an attempt to destroy all remnants of a past society to establish a new world order, Buddhism being 1000's of years old was a link to the old-world order, annihilating the religion and its practitioners was central to a new order (Keyes., 1990; Robertson & Feingold., 1990). A Khmer Rouge slogan is "To keep you, is no benefit, to kill you is no loss" (Feingold n.d). By 1979, when Vietnamese troops seized Phnom Penh and displaced the Khmer Rouge with a new government, nearly 2 million people had died from starvation, over-working, disease and execution (Kent., 2011, 406). Under the new government of Heng Samrin, one of the first undertakings was to re-establish Buddhism and by 1982 Cambodia had well over 2000 monks and novices again, two thirds of the monasteries were restored and Buddhists were again allowed to engage in their religious activities and festivals (Keyes., 1990). Despite being amongst one of the world's worst human atrocities of the twentieth century, a human rights dialogue was not introduced in Cambodia until 1991, after the Paris Peace Agreement (PPA) was signed and the United Nations (UN) in its role as mediator used national media campaigns to deliver human rights concepts to Cambodian citizens (Ledgerwood & Un., 2003, 531).

Myanmar

Whilst Buddhists have been on the receiving end of human rights abuses, there have also been instances where Buddhists have been the perpetrators of violence. Myanmar, a country where the military and the Buddhist nationalist movement holds more sway over the country than its Buddhist leader Aung San Suu Kyi (Peng., 2017, 1). In recent years conflicts have arisen against the minority Rohingya people who are Muslim. The Buddhist monks of the nationalist movement are said to have been the virulent perpetrators of anti-Muslim sentiments, and backed by the country's military. In 2013 the monks are alleged to have steered rioters to destroy the Muslim neighbourhoods by razing them to the ground with fire and caused the deaths of forty Muslims (Peng., 2017, 2). In the last year and a half violence has escalated between the Burmese Buddhists and the Muslims after the assassination of nine police officers in the Muslim populace area of the Rakhine state. Retaliation from the Buddhists has been an increase in the rape of women and the murdering of unarmed men and is deemed by many to be genocide comparable to Bosnia and Rwanda (Peng 2017., 1; Fisher., 2017). Leader and practicing Buddhist Aung San Suu Kyi has come under some criticism due to her silence on the issue and her inability to quell the violence. There is speculation that Suu Kyi's lack of engagement on the issue of violence against the Rohingya's because she risks estrangement from the Buddhist nationalists and the military, both politically powerful players in the Myanmar constituency; the Buddhist nationalists hold considerable authority in legislations and the military hold considerable authority over the country, without the latter's cooperation Suu Kyi cannot hope to address the human rights abuses faced by the Rohingya (Peng., 2017, 3-4). On the other

hand however, other sources speculate that the Suu Kyi government is starting to have the vestiges of former authoritarian rule. Journalists and media outlets that criticise the government or Suu Kyi results in prison sentences as do peaceful protests. These oppressive laws that prevent freedom of speech are a far cry from the democracy the Suu Kyi allegedly established at her inauguration as leader (Fisher., 2017; Kittel., 2011, 916).

Sri Lanka

Simultaneously in 2013, Muslims in Sri Lanka have been the target of religious hate by Buddhist extremists. It is quoted that for centuries Sri Lanka has been a multi-religious country that has been tolerant of other faiths but in recent years a Sinhala Buddhist spokesperson has been somewhat vocal with hate speeches directed towards the ten percent of Muslims that make up the population (Abeyratne., 2013). The continual inciting of a rhetoric of hate and intolerance towards Muslims has eventually led to violent attacks with gas bombs and riots led by Buddhists, including monks (Bukhari & Haq., 2013; Bastians & Harris., 2014). Shops, peoples' homes, prayer houses and mosques have been set on fire and lives, mostly Muslim, have been lost and it is claimed that the authorities stand back and watch until it is over (Bastians & Harris., 2014). The main perpetrators are a group called Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) which means Buddhist force, they have also attacked Christian Evangelical churches across the country also citing that the reason for the attacks is because they are converting Buddhists to the Christian faith. Muslims however seem to be at the centre of BBS' hatred and whilst larger conflicts have not abounded since 2014, tensions surely remain (Stratford., 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, to have cited every single breach of the UDHR in each case as was intended this essay would have become too convoluted. Buddhists have been subjected to some of the worst persecutions because of their spiritual beliefs but have also in fewer instances subjected others to persecution for their spiritual beliefs. In the instances of Falun Gong Practitioners and Tibetan Buddhists, Chinese governments have attempted and continue to attempt to quash or control religious practices fearing it as a social movement with the potential to mobilise in great numbers to undermine the controlling powers (Murphy., 2008; Noakes & Ford., 2015, 660; Petit, Ford & Jain., 2008, 168). In Cambodia, Buddhist monks were specifically targeted for their threat to Khmer Rouge's new world order and for Pol Pot's belief that they were parasites that only existed because of the hard work of others (Keyes., 1990). Self-harm in the form of self-immolation as a method of political protest is not an advocated act of Buddhist religions though some individual monks and nuns, in the face of extremes and injustice have violently ended their lives (Kelly., 2011, 310). Despite Buddhism being a religion that its philosophies are to alleviate suffering and not cause harm to others, the monks in Myanmar and Sri Lanka seem to have had their religious teachings absorbed by religious hatred and have committed multiple human rights violations (Peng., 2017, 1; Fisher., 2017). In an increasingly violent world where multiple social problems continue to divide the populace, including racist rhetoric from governments, people having human rights can be near impossible in some circumstances, as long as there is greed, hatred and an unequal distribution of power and resources in the world, Buddhist or not, human rights violations will likely worsen.

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