

Pluralistic Dharmacentricity

Richard P. Hayes
Department of Philosophy
University of New Mexico

Paper delivered at
Gurugranth400 Interfaith Conference
Interfaith Perspectives on Justice and Universality:
Textual Precepts Versus Practices
Montréal, Québec
September 20, 2004

Abstract

The practice of Buddhism consists in a commitment to cultivate a range of virtues. If these virtues are taken together, they amount to a commitment to religious pluralism, that is, to the view that no single religion has a monopoly on truth and virtue. Therefore to practice Buddhism is to be open to all other traditions that promote wisdom and other virtues. The nineteenth-century Hindu teacher Swami Vivekananda endorsed religious pluralism and praised the United States as a country that would “march at the vanguard of civilization with the flag of harmony.” The current social and political atmosphere in the United States would probably disappoint Swami Vivekananda, since the influence of the Christian right has led to policies that are not truly pluralistic in spirit. The perennial dilemma for anyone endorsing pluralism is whether one must be open even to those who are hostile to openness. My conclusion is that to anyone committed to pluralism, there is no real choice but to be open to everyone, even if this openness involves risks.

Innumerable are the blind fools, sunk in folly;
Innumerable those living on thievery and dishonesty.
Innumerable the tyrants living by brute force;
Innumerable the violent cutthroats and murderers;
Innumerable those revolving in their own falsehood;
Innumerable the polluted living on filth.
Innumerable the slanderers bearing on their heads their
loads of sin.
The sinner Nānak thus enumerates the evil-doers,
I who am unworthy even once to be made a sacrifice to
You.
All that You will is good, Formless One, abiding in Your
peace.

Japji 18, *Ādi Granth*, cited in Embree, p. 503

1 Dharmacentricity

Being a Buddhist consists in going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Each of these terms is capable of several interpretations, but this is not the place to explore them. Suffice it to say that for many Buddhists, the most important of these three refuges is Dharma, for without that no one would ever be a Buddha—that is, no one would be a person who learns what virtue is and fully masters it so as to teach it to others in word and deed. And without Dharma there would be no Sangha—that is, there would be no community of people who have made progress along the long path from the narrow-minded and hard-hearted habits that make suffering inevitable to the open-minded and warm-hearted habits that make joy possible.

So what is this Dharma that is at the center of the Buddhist concept of going for refuge? The tradition says it is nirvana, that is, the elimination of greed, hatred and delusion. More positively, it is a range of personal virtues that include wisdom and discrimination, the courage to do virtuous actions, intellectual and emotional flexibility, and equanimity. Generally speaking Dharma consists of the resolve to cultivate a healthy mentality to eliminate an unhealthy one and then to act in accordance with that healthy mentality. Given all this, a dharmacentric life is very similar to what Socrates called the examined life or what others call the good life.

One of my contentions is that a truly dharmacentric life necessarily entails a commitment to religious pluralism, as opposed to a narrow adherence to only one religious or philosophical tradition. There is not time here to make a case for this position. Let me simply quote a particularly eloquent expression of the position of which I stand. This expression occurs in a text in the Pali Canon entitled *Sutta Nipāta*:

A person who persists in opinions regards as a waste everything other than that which he regards as best in the world, thinking “it is supreme!” Therefore he fails to get beyond disputes. Then grasping at just that which he sees as commendable to himself in rules of conduct and vows and in what

is seen, heard or thought, he regards everything else as a loss. The experts call that thing a shackle owing to which one considers all else a waste. (Sutta Nipāta 796–799. Translation mine.)

While this passage emphasizes the negative effect of building a prison out of one's own narrow mind, what I wish to emphasize is the positive effect of being free by being open to as many traditions as one can embrace. Let me, therefore, say a little more about pluralism.

2 Pluralism

Pluralism can be described as having a positive attitude toward the fact that there are many realities, or many views about reality. So while religious tolerance might be seen as a begrudging acknowledgment that not everyone agrees about what is true, but that even those who are wrong should be free to express their wrong-headed views, religious pluralism is the celebration of the rich variety of perspectives and spiritual traditions. Throughout history there have been pluralists. In India, for example, one thinks of Guru Nanak and the early Sikh gurus and of the Muslim emperor Akbar, whose court was filled with teachers and scholars from every religious tradition known in India and from every philosophical school. In more recent times one thinks of William James and Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda, in a talk delivered at the Universalist Church in Pasadena, CA on January 28, 1900, made the following observation about religion:

... nothing has brought man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time there is nothing that has brought him more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion. (Vivekananda, 1953, p. 378)

After making this observation about the mixed legacy of religion in human history, Vivekananda then went on to argue that the negative consequences of religion—the fierce hatred, the bitter enmity and the bloody battlefields resulting from religious intolerance—could only be eliminated if human beings strove to develop an attitude of inclusiveness. In summarizing this point he said in that address delivered in 1900:

Our watchword, then, will be acceptance and not exclusion. Not only toleration; for so-called toleration is often blasphemy and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live? I accept all the religions that were in the past and worship with them all; I worship

God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship him. . . . Not only shall I do this, but I shall keep my heart open for all the religions that may come in the future. Is God's book finished? Or is revelation still going on? It is a marvelous book—these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all the other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I shall leave my heart open for all of them. (Vivekananda, 1953, p. 386)

When Swami Vivekananda spoke those words, he was still riding the wave of optimism that he had felt at the World Parliament of Religions that had opened in Chicago on September 11, 1893. In his opening address at that event he had said:

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal. (Vivekananda, 1998, p. 4)

A few days later, in his address on Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda praised the United States and expressed his hopes that that nation would lead the rest of the world to greater religious harmony in a spirit of pluralism. He said:

Hail, Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped her hand in her neighbour's blood, who never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one's neighbours, it has been given to thee to march at the vanguard of civilisation with the flag of harmony. (Vivekananda, 1998, p. 20)

It hardly need be said that the America of the early twenty-first century would evoke less enthusiasm from Swami Vivekananda than the America of the late nineteenth century did. Instead of marching "at the vanguard of civilisation with the flag of harmony," the America of today, especially under the current administration, appears to be joining ranks with opponents to pluralism. It is to the topic of opposition to pluralism in today's world that I now turn.

3 The opposition to pluralism

One need not look very far to find religious movements in the world that do not participate enthusiastically in the spirit of pluralism. Probably no religion in the modern world is without some members within its fold who either resist modernity or reject it altogether. One of the hallmarks of modernity is the cultivation of a willingness to

investigate all things with a mind ready to break free of the confines of dogmas and assumptions and established traditions. Modernity therefore tends to favor a pluralistic attitude, and to reject modernity usually means to reject the trend toward pluralism.

In North America, one of the best-known declarations of opposition to the principles of modernity was articulated at the Niagara Bible Conference in 1878. The range of principles articulated there were eventually distilled in 1910 to five principles that came to be known as the “five fundamentals of the Christian faith.” Those principles were:

1. That the Bible is without error when construed literally;
2. that Jesus Christ was a deity born of a virgin mother;
3. that atonement for human sin was realized through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, who stood as a substitute for all of humanity in paying the wages of sin;
4. that Christ was resurrected in the flesh;
5. and that Jesus Christ will come to this world again in the flesh.

Within another decade, the term “Fundamentalism” came into common use to describe those who accepted these principles. Although the so-called Fundamentalist movement was not limited to any one denomination of Christianity and could therefore be seen as an ecumenical movement of sorts, the Five Fundamentals were clearly exclusively Christian in content and therefore militated against any kind of religious pluralism that would regard religions other than Christianity as fully legitimate. So while the principal concern of the early fundamentalists was no doubt to respond to what they saw as challenges to their faith posed by various kinds of textual scholarship and by the natural sciences, especially biology and geology, a spirit of anti-pluralism inevitably became a part of the package.

Until the last decades of the 20th century, most Christian fundamentalists were not inclined to become involved in politics or in activities aimed at improving the world. The general attitude seems to have been that energy should be spent preparing for the Kingdom of God that would follow the second coming of Christ; until that time, the human race was seen as beyond hope, and any efforts to improve the lot of human beings were destined to fail. In the 1990s, however, a number of fundamentalists began to join forces with various evangelical and Pentecostal Christians to form a movement, found mostly in the United States, that has come to be called the Christian right. During the 1990s the principal concern of the Christian right was to advocate for protecting unborn children from abortion, to oppose the gay rights movement and to preserve what they called “traditional family values,” to advocate in favor of allowing a greater presence of religion into the public sphere and therefore opposing the tendency of the courts to widen the separation of church and state. It has been estimated that the broad coalition known as the Christian right is the largest single voting bloc within the Republican Party. It is not difficult to find evidence of its influence in the formation of the official Republican Party platform for the 2004 elections. Consider, for example, the following

passages in the Republican platform. There are several passages condemning access to abortion. Here are two examples:

Republicans continue to oppose the ideological campaign against participation by the Vatican in United Nations conferences and other activities. The United Nations was created to benefit all peoples and nations, not to promote a radical agenda of social engineering. Any effort to address global social problems must be firmly placed within a context of respect for the fundamental social institutions of marriage and family. We reject any treaty or convention that would contradict these values. For that reason, we support protecting the rights of families in international programs and oppose funding organizations involved in abortion.

Each year more than three million American teenagers contract sexually transmitted diseases, causing emotional harm and serious health consequences, even death. We support efforts to educate teens and parents about the health risks associated with early sexual activity and provide the tools needed to help teens make healthy choices. Abstinence from sexual activity is the only protection that is 100 percent effective against out-of-wedlock pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including sexually transmitted HIV/AIDS. Therefore, we support doubling abstinence education funding. We oppose school-based clinics that provide referrals, counseling, and related services for contraception and abortion.

The official website of the Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives notes that this office has awarded more than fifty grants to projects promoting abstinence as the only strategy for fighting sexual transmitted diseases. So the policy of the Republicans is not only to withdraw funding from agencies that offer counseling on contraception but to provide federal funding to religious agencies that advocate abstinence as the only reliable strategy.

On the matter of marriage, the Republican platform has this to say:

In the federal courts, scores of judges with activist backgrounds in the hard-left now have lifetime tenure. Recent events have made it clear that these judges threaten America's dearest institutions and our very way of life. In some states, activist judges are redefining the institution of marriage. . . . The sound principle of judicial review has turned into an intolerable presumption of judicial supremacy.

We strongly support President Bush's call for a Constitutional amendment that fully protects marriage, and we believe that neither federal nor state judges nor bureaucrats should force states to recognize other living arrangements as equivalent to marriage. . . . We further believe that legal recognition and the accompanying benefits afforded couples should be preserved for that unique and special union of one man and one woman which has historically been called marriage. After more than two centuries of American jurisprudence, and millennia of human experience, a

few judges and local authorities are presuming to change the most fundamental institution of civilization, the union of a man and a woman in marriage. Attempts to redefine marriage in a single state or city could have serious consequences throughout the country, and anything less than a Constitutional amendment, passed by the Congress and ratified by the states, is vulnerable to being overturned by activist judges... President Bush will also vigorously defend the Defense of Marriage Act, which was supported by both parties and passed by 85 votes in the Senate. This common sense law reaffirms the right of states not to recognize same-sex marriages licensed in other states.

President Bush said, "We will not stand for judges who undermine democracy by legislating from the bench and try to remake America by court order."

The concern with homosexuality is not confined to the possibility of recognizing same-sex unions as equivalent to marriage in the realm of social benefits. There is also the matter of fitness for military service, about which the Republican platform says:

We affirm traditional military culture, and we affirm that homosexuality is incompatible with military service.

Finally, on the matter of the eligibility of faith-based organizations to receive federal funding, the Platform says this:

The President established the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the White House to coordinate federal, state, and local efforts to tear down barriers that have prevented religiously affiliated groups from applying for government grants on an equal footing with secular organizations. While the federal government must not promote religious activity, advocate on behalf of any religion, or fund any organization that discriminates on the basis of religion when providing taxpayer-funded services, no organization should be disqualified from receiving federal funds simply because it displays religious symbols, has a statement of faith in its mission statement, or has a religious leader on its board.

All these quotations from the Republican Party platform make it clear that the Christian right is having an impact on domestic policies. But that is not the full extent of their influence. Their influence can also be seen not so much in the actual foreign policies endorsed by the Republicans as in the way these policies are discussed. Consider the following excerpt:

We stand for the freedom and dignity of every human life, in every stage of life. We know that freedom is not America's gift to the world; freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man, woman, and child in the world. And we stand for a hopeful tomorrow that will come from total and complete victory in the War on Terror. These are values worthy of a great nation. And they are values worth fighting for.

In these planks on the party platform one gets a sense that the American influence in the rest of the world is not only benign but somehow divine. And this, we are led to believe, somehow justifies the 1000 American lives and the estimated 20,900 Iraqi lives that have been lost in this war against evil waged by the forces of good who value “the freedom and dignity of every human life.”

The reference to the “total and complete victory in the War on Terror” reminds one of what President Bush said from the pulpit of the National Cathedral in a memorial service a few days after the events of September 11, 2001. On that occasion President Bush said “Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” On the first anniversary of September 11, President Bush alludes to a verse in the Gospel of John when he says “[the] ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. . . . That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it.” In an address on September 11, 2004, the president said that on that day in 2001 “the struggle of good against evil was compressed into a single morning” and he went on to say that “the United States is prepared to stay on the offensive and to pursue the terrorists wherever they train, or sleep, or attempt to set down their roots.”

Many Christians note with alarm the tendency of President Bush and some others in his administration to read theological significance into America’s role in world events. Jim Wallis, an evangelical Christian who is editor-in-chief of *Sojourners Magazine*, writes:

The real theological problem in America today is no longer the Religious Right but the nationalist religion of the Bush administration—one that confuses the identity of the nation with the church, and God’s purposes with the mission of American empire.

America’s foreign policy is more than pre-emptive, it is theologically presumptuous; not only unilateral, but dangerously messianic; not just arrogant, but bordering on the idolatrous and blasphemous. George Bush’s personal faith has prompted a profound self-confidence in his “mission” to fight the “axis of evil,” his “call” to be commander-in-chief in the war against terrorism, and his definition of America’s “responsibility” to “defend the hopes of all mankind.” This is a dangerous mix of bad foreign policy and bad theology.

Another Christian writer, Joe Bageant, grew up in a fundamentalist Christian family in the deep south and turned to a theologically liberal form of Christianity in his adult years. He is a freelance writer who writes mostly about social and political issues. Drawing on his own experiences with his still-fundamentalist relatives and friends in his childhood home he offers an account of the religious politics of the Christian right in an piece entitled “The Covert Kingdom: Thy Will Be Done on Earth as it is in Texas”:

. . . until the advent of the of the new radical Christian influence, I’d certainly never heard The Rapture spoken about in the context of a Texan

being selected by God to prepare its way. Now however, this apocalyptic belief, yearning really, drives an American Christian polity in the service of a grave and unnerving agenda. The pseudo-scriptural has become an apocalyptic game plan for earthly political action: To wit, the messiah can only return to earth after an apocalypse in Israel called Armageddon, which the fundamentalists are promoting with all their power so that The Rapture can take place. The first requirement was establishment of the state of Israel. Done. The next is Israel's occupation of the Middle East as a return of its "Biblical lands," which in the radical Christian scheme of things, means more wars. These Christian conservatives believe peace cannot ever lead to The Rapture, and indeed impedes the 1,000 year Reign of Christ. So anyone promoting peace is an enemy, a tool of Satan, hence the fundamentalist support for any and all wars Middle Eastern, in which their own kids die a death often viewed by Christian parents as a holy martyrdom of its own kind. "He (or she) died protecting this country's Christian values." One hears it over and over from parents of those killed.

4 The paradox of pluralism

The question that arises for me as I reflect on the material that I have just presented is this: What is a Buddhist, or any other religious pluralist, living in or on the same planet with a country that has become so strongly influenced by the concerns of politically and socially conservative Christianity, to make of what is currently taking place? If I were as conservative in my Buddhism as some Christians are in their Christianity, I might well be tempted to follow the example of the Buddha and desist from having any opinions, leaving it to the foolish masses to fight these things out among themselves while I retreated into a dignified silence. There are Buddhists who take such an attitude. I am not among them. So if one is not going to withdraw altogether from the fray, then what kind of stance can one take?

A few moments ago I quoted Joe Bageant's account of the views of the fundamentalist Christians he has lived among. His final statement in that piece ends by describing in more detail the world-view of the Christian right. He then says:

The 2004 elections, regardless of outcome, will not change that. Nor will it necessarily bring ever-tolerant liberals to openly acknowledge what is truly happening in this country, the thing that has been building for a long, long time—a holy war, a covert Christian jihad for control of America and the entire world. Millions of Americans are under the spell of an extraordinarily dangerous mass psychosis.

Pardon me, but religious tolerance be damned. Somebody had to say it.

Earlier we heard why Swami Vivekananda thought that tolerance is often a blasphemy, for it takes an attitude of condescension whereby one agrees to allow someone with an inferior view to express that view. Bageant's "religious tolerance be damned" is clearly

rooted in other considerations, namely, a conviction that the religiously intolerant are so dangerous that they cannot be tolerated. This attitude puts one in the awkward position of being intolerant oneself. While it may sound noble to be intolerant of intolerance, I personally find the business of deciding who can be tolerated and who cannot a potentially dangerous road to go down—if nothing else, it is dangerous to myself. Let me quote just one more plank from the republican Party platform for 2004. It has this to say about “terrorists”:

There is no negotiation with terrorists. No form of therapy or coercion will turn them from their murderous ways. Only total and complete destruction of terrorism will allow freedom to flourish.

What a statement like this suggests is that since it is no good to talk to terrorists or try to reason with them or offer them a means of healing themselves or even to frighten them into submission, the only course left open is to destroy terrorism by destroying terrorists. It is difficult to read this statement as anything other than a recommendation to kill the people whom we have deemed murderers. But if killing others with whom one disagrees is seen as murder by those who agree with them, then surely one can only be seen as a murderer in the eyes of those who agree with those whom one has killed. I can see no end to the process of killing in such a situation. Killing stops only one one stops killing.

Unwilling to run the risk of participating in a chain of incessant killing and revenge, I therefore find myself unwilling to say “religious tolerance be damned.” I am even less unwilling to say “there is no negotiation with terrorists.” The moment one labels others as a terrorists, one is announcing one’s own unwillingness to negotiate with them. The claim that there is no negotiation with terrorists is a statement about oneself, not a fact about others. As for myself, there is no one with whom I am unwilling in principle to negotiate, therefore no one on whom I am willing to pin the ugly label “terrorist.”

What I *am* willing to say instead is what the Buddha is supposed to have said in two verses recorded in *The Dhammapada*:

“He insulted me! He injured me!
He conquered me! He robbed me!”
They who wrap themselves up in such thoughts
Never pacify their hostility.

They who do not wrap themselves up in such thoughts
Do pacify their hostility.

Let us live at ease
Without hatred among those who hate.
In the midst of those people who hate
Let us live without hatred.

References

- Bageant, Joe. 2004. The Covert Kingdom: Thy will be done on earth as it is in Texas. May. <http://www.energygrid.com/society/jb-kingdom.html>.
- Embree, Ainslie T. (ed). 1988. *Sources of Indian Tradition*. Second revised edn. Vol. 1: From the beginning to 1800. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Republican National Platform Committee. 2004 (August 26). *2004 Republican Party Platform: A Safer World and a More Hopeful America*.
- Vivekananda. 1953. *The Yogas and Other Works*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.
- Vivekananda. 1998. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Vol. 1. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama. Mayavati Memorial edition. Twenty-second impression.
- Wallis, Jim. 2003. Dangerous Religion. *Sojourners Magazine*, **32**(5), 20–26.