

The essence of democracy

Two leading Southeast Asian thinkers and human rights activists - Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand and Dr Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia - believe that the age-old teachings of Buddhism and Islam offer a springboard for an alternative politics in the region

'While lack of moral principles has led to a dead end in parliamentary politics in Thailand, Buddhism can still be the basis for political transformation.'

SULAK SIVARAKSA -- Thai Buddhist scholar and social critic 'Islam's fundamental doctrine of one's total submission to the oneness of God is a political action.' DR CHANDRA MUZAFFAR -- Malaysian Muslim scholar and activist

by SANITSUDA EKACHAI

Mention Islam, and the image conjured up by the media is that of sectarian violence and repressive fundamentalist regimes.

Mention Buddhism, and it evokes the picture of the religious recluse who pays no heed to the real world.

Muslim or Buddhist, their governments have not fared well in terms of peace and human rights records. Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Pakistan and political violence. Indonesia and East Timor. Cambodia and the Killing Fields. Sri Lanka and Singhalese-Tamil wars. Burma and its SLORC.

Thailand and its huge sex industry.

All hell has broken loose in the modern world, what with severe environmental degradation, and brutal ethnic wars worldwide which trigger outlandish violations of human rights.

Organised religions, meanwhile, have become synonymous with conservatism.

Many, then, may quickly dismiss the notion that Buddhism and Islam can still offer a way out of the modern world's self-destruction.

But two Southeast Asian thinkers, Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, and Dr Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia, believe otherwise.

Solutions to the modern world's ills, they insist, can be found by going back to the essence of one's religion - and then having the courage to follow one's conscience.

Sulak Sivaraksa, 63, is a Buddhist scholar and an outspoken social critic whose lifelong campaign for human rights in Thailand won him a prestigious Right Livelihood Award, an alternative Nobel Peace Prize, in 1995.

An Indian Malaysian, Dr Chandra Muzaffar, 49, is a well-respected intellectual and activist whose thoughts on society and politics, as well as his human rights campaigns, are deeply influenced by Islam.

The two met recently in Penang for a Buddhist-Muslim dialogue to compare notes on current problems of Muslim and Buddhist countries and ways to foster a more humane politics based on religious teachings.

The meeting was co-organised by the Just World Trust and the Spirit in Education Movement.

Common challenges

It is true that science and technology from the West have greatly improved the people's general quality of life.

It is also true that democracy has institutionalised dissents, allowing different interest groups to voice their concerns through formal channels.

Yet both thinkers are wary of the newly-emerged, environmentally-destructive global religion that comes with Western economic development.

"Consumerism is our common enemy," said Sulak.

Added Chandra: "Development has a genetic code that leads to self-destruction."

The materialistic view that "we are what we buy" is now being intensified by waves of globalisation made possible by information technology that is pressuring both Muslim and Buddhist countries, they said.

This globalisation has also homogenised consumption patterns worldwide in favour of wasteful Western tastes, which has put a severe strain on the environment. Both also see international treaties, such as that on intellectual property rights or the newly-founded World Trade Organisation, as part of the effort to perpetuate the West's economic dominance over the rest of the world.

"Because they know full well that power comes from the monopoly of knowledge and the control of science," said Chandra.

At the heart of globalisation, they agree, is the control of the mass media which spreads the West's notion of a good life around the world as well as its pride and prejudices.

One of the most dangerous values, he said, is the obsession with living in the present moment which promotes hedonistic lifestyles. "It's the idea that only this moment counts, nothing else," he said.

The common threats faced by both Muslim and Buddhist countries may also arise from their similar colonial heritage.

Colonisation brought secularism, which clashes with the Islamic principle of the inseparability of politics and religion.

As in Muslim states, political centralisation and education systems introduced by their Western masters in Buddhist colonies have eroded local cultural roots, which have been replaced by the "look-West" outlook.

Thailand, or Siam as preferred by Sulak, often proudly claims that it has never been colonised. "But in fact, it is culturally and intellectually colonised because the country identifies itself closely with the West," he said.

Common elites

Given the "look-West" obsession, both Buddhist and Muslim countries are infested with an enemy from within - their own ruling elites.

Believing that the market economy is a panacea for all problems, the ruling elites unquestionably adopt economic development through land-clearing and the exploitation of natural resources, often violating the human rights of the indigenous people.

"Capitalism and consumerism have made money the ultimate object of worship in Buddhist countries," said Sulak.

"It is not much different in Muslim countries," said Chandra. "People are busy accumulating wealth and there is a tendency to be fixated on religious forms and legality without following the spirit of the teachings."

Economic growth in unequal, feudal social structures leads to a widening income gap regardless of religion. Both Thailand and Malaysia have very unequal income distribution despite their overall economic success.

Elite interests often lead to widespread corruption and lack of accountability. And when one ethnic group is a lot richer than others, anger often leads to violence. "Sadly, it is often intra-ethnic violence, the product of different religious interpretations," said Chandra.

Amid environmental and political crises, the masses' disillusionment with the Westernised elites who have lost touch with the people have created unrest and political breakdown in many countries, he added.

"We must go back to the essence of democracy which we can find in Islam and Buddhism," recommended Sulak.

Buddhist democracy

Buddhism is essentially against greed, anger, lust and delusion. Its weakness, however, lies in its inability to challenge the state's abuse of power and the popular belief that Buddhism is good only for personal salvation.

"To run the country, people believe capitalism is needed," said Sulak.

Thailand, then, welcomes globalisation with an open arms.

While Buddhism in Thailand still plays a relatively important role in village life, it is losing touch with the urban middle class. "The elite only use Buddhism to maintain their status and power," charged Sulak.

While lack of moral principles has led to a dead end in parliamentary politics in Thailand, Buddhism can still be the basis for political transformation, said Sulak.

The Sangha, or monks' community, as originally established by the Lord Buddha, for example, is essentially a democratic order where seniority is judged by one's years in the monkhood, not age, caste or race.

"The Sangha teaches that everyone can be enlightened, thus it is open to people from all backgrounds," said Sulak.

In Buddha's time, women were also ordained as equals to monks, a revolutionary move even by today's standards.

In addition, the Sangha also embodies the democratic values of elected leaders and regular meetings for consultation, added Sulak.

While modern states stress political centralisation, Buddhism teaches decentralisation, said Sulak. According to the Buddha's original rules, a group of more than four monks can form a Sangha to govern themselves with the Buddhist teachings as their ultimate principles.

"Buddhism also teaches us to empower ourselves by confronting suffering, or else we can never solve our problems honestly," said Sulak.

Believing that real change starts from within, Buddhism teaches that one must begin by cultivating wisdom through one's own rational and analytical reflection (Yonisomanasikara) and through guidance from good friends (Kalayanamittata).

It also teaches non-violence; one must not hurt others or oneself in one's pursuit of change.

Buddhist wisdom suggests that an egalitarian, decentralised system which upholds spirituality and peace can solve suffering, Sulak said.

"Any system without spirituality is due to fail," he added.

Love of God

According to Chandra, Islam's fundamental doctrine of one's total submission to the oneness of God is a political action.

God, he said, embodies all supreme virtues such as justice and compassion. "Subjecting oneself to God then means we must repudiate all other worship, authorities or man-made values - be they states, nationalism, markets, or wealth - including self," he said.

Such faith in the oneness of God requires a genuine Muslim to engage in a personal politics of negating evils and living according to God's virtues.

"To do this, one must have freedom to pursue justice, leading to freedom of association and freedom of expression," said Chandra. "All these elements are necessary for civil political rights."

In addition, Islam's emphasis on the role of an ordinary person to affirm good and forbid evil means Muslims must not be passively led by their rulers and must take an active part in social actions to attain justice.

Islam, he said, also stresses the right of the people to be consulted. And that political legitimacy comes from acceptance from the people.

"Authoritarian regimes, therefore, have no legitimacy in the view of Islam," he said.

According to Chandra, Islam accepts property and the market mechanism as a means to distribute goods and services.

"Islam also believes that rights and responsibilities must be based on ethics, that the distribution must be equitable, and the consumption not extravagant."

In contrast to the image of exclusivity of the Muslims, Chandra said Islam actually celebrates diversity, an important value for an increasingly pluralistic society.

Environmental ethics

In view of the global environmental crises, both Buddhism and Islam teach respect for Nature, a fundamental value for conservation.

Buddhism, for example, teaches the relatedness of all matters and the importance of balance and harmony. It also teaches simplicity to avoid wasting the gifts of Nature.

Interestingly, the spirit of Islam's teachings about Nature are not much different.

According to Mohamed Talhah Idrus of the Muslim Youth Movement of Asia, the Koran compares Nature to the words of God.

"The more you know about Nature, the more you know about God," he said. "For Nature in Islam is God."

In addition, Islam teaches that nothing has been created without a purpose and that the duty of human beings is to be guardians of natural resources for unborn generations. "We can use them, but not waste them, for those who do are the friends of Satan," he explained.

Towards change

"In Islam, politics means service and progress means inner transformation," said Chandra.

"In Buddhism, empowerment comes from confronting our suffering and ourselves," said Sulak.

Although structural overhaul is necessary, both thinkers insist that change must be based on spirituality and non-violence, which must start with individuals.

Each individual's acts will add up to a bigger social momentum that will eventually lead to social change, said Chandra.

Muslims may call it the love of God, and Buddhists may call it the synchronisation of the head with the heart, but the result, they said, is peace and justice which all religions teach.

Are they being too ideal? Are these purist thoughts losing touch with the real world?

Responded Chandra: "We must let our imagination run ahead of reality. That's how we make history."

[Return to the SAAN Home Page](#) [Return to the Buddhism page](#)

© The Post Publishing Public Co., Ltd. All rights reserved 1996
Web Comments: Webmaster

This page added to the SAAN site Feb. 17 1998