

# THE ROLE OF ETHICS AND RELIGION IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## LECTURE I

### The Principles of an Agnostic

#### *The Synthesis of Christianity and Buddhism*

When I was young I attended for nine years a school which was founded by Catholic missionaries and later taught there for over four years. So I became acquainted with Christianity from my childhood and have read a little of the Bible. Later on I went to Europe to further my study and came across other sects of Christianity. I, therefore, have no excuse to say that I know nothing of Christianity. As for Buddhism, I naturally was brought up in a Buddhist family since the day I was born. This is, I guess, the reason, why I am invited here, even without any pretension to religious expertise.

The result of any religious and ethical teaching may be direct and indirect. The direct result is obtained when the students have acquired faith in the ultimate goal of the religion. This, for Christianity is the belief in God, in the new life in communion with God, the embodiment of the Supreme Good, the Ultimate Truth and Perfect Beauty. In Buddhism (I leave out all the sects which worship the Buddha as a mythological god) the final aim is to achieve Nirvana, whereby one can break away from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth which is first and foremost, the cause of all sufferings. Religious teachers aim at inculcating faith; and this is what is meant by the direct result of religious teaching.

The indirect result is not less important; the end is to teach people to do good, to preserve moral codes and not to commit

sinful acts, and so on. This is the ethical part of religious education aiming at the preservation of righteousness, beauty and truth within the human community. Its acceptance would lead the person to inner happiness and enable him to live in peace and happiness with his family, his friends, his colleagues and other members of society,

What I have said is my personal view, looking back at my own religious and ethical education both at home and at school. In assessing its result, I find that I have acquired very little faith, and much more of the ethical principle from my earliest education. I shall attempt to clarify this statement.

### *The Necessity of Faith*

I cannot claim that I have faith in God or Nirvana, because I cannot honestly affirm the existence of God or that Nirvana is the ultimate aim. To be sure, I am not denying the existence of God or Nirvana, either. Metaphysics is not my concern, because it is beyond the realm of human reasoning. This bias might be compared perhaps with colour blindness. I fail to see why it should be a bad thing not to believe in God or Nirvana. If the lack is a mistake, then it is only an individual's mistake, harmless to other people as long as one holds on to moral principles. If God really exists, it is unlikely that He who is infinitely kind would inflict punishment on a non-believer who is a moral person. If there is Nirvana, it is impossible not to eventually attain it simply by doing good. Therefore I conclude that faith can be left alone. Moreover, the preference of rationalism is supported by the Buddha's saying in Kalamasuta:

“Brethren, do not believe things simply because they have passed from mouth to mouth, nor because they come from tradition, nor because they have been rumoured, nor because they are in the textbooks, nor because you have guessed them, nor because you have expected them, nor because you feel that they are so,

nor because they agree with your inclination, nor because they have been said by a reliable person or by a teacher or even by myself. Do not believe anything until you have reasoned it out within yourself and reached clear conclusions."

In fact, I believe that superficial faith, without support of moral principles can do more harm than good. Some people who call themselves Buddhists may go to the monasteries to hear sermons and may offer food to the monks every morning. But if they tell lies, cheat and break other religious rules (sila), they must be considered bad by any standard. Similarly some Christians would not hesitate to commit sins because they believe those sins will be forgiven by confession. They are no better than school children who start practising bribery—that is, promising to give offerings and sacrifices to the gods if the gods will help them pass the examination. I do not believe that this way of treating a religion is right or proper.

The question I would like to discuss in connection with the lecture's topic is whether the lack of faith is an obstacle to the country's development. Briefly my answer is as follows:

- (a) If anyone has no faith but does not break the accepted codes of morality, he still can fully contribute to development.
- (b) The possession of faith as well as a high standard of morality, is of course all the better; perhaps, faith might help the man in every respect.
- (c) Anyone who holds faith without morality constitutes a definite obstacle to development.

It should be perhaps emphasized that what has been said so far in this insitution of religious learning is in no way to be construed as derogatory to the Seminary and its Faculty. My actual objective is to correct some misunderstanding in some educational circles in Thailand which puts too much emphasis on faith, that is superficial faith or hypocritical faith, and which gives too little importance to morality. According to a government slogan, broadcast

on the radio, a person without religion must be a communist or a terrorist. Some school teachers also repeat this theory to their pupils. To me a moral though irreligious person ought to be respected as a good person. I would like also to submit that religious teachers, Buddhist and Christian alike, are contributing greatly towards national development in educating people to have faith and moral principles. If the teaching results in the students' acceptance of both faith and moral precepts, all the better. But, even if faith is lacking, good moral practice among people and their leaders could still do perfectly well.

This suggestion will be further elaborated later on. But first I would like to say something about the ethical benefits which we derive from the Biblical teaching and the Buddhist teaching. In so doing, it is necessary for me to rely heavily on my own experiences and my own opinion resulting from an inseparable mixture of Christian and Buddhist education. Please forgive me for having to talk too much about myself.

### *Personal Ideals*

The ideals or objectives in life are Truth, Beauty and Goodness. I believe this formula comes from Christian teaching. I like it because it is easy to remember and meaningful. Similar ideals can of course be found in Buddhist teaching, but they may be scattered in various places. The merit of a simple formula is that you can refer to it again and again. The Buddhist reference to the Triple Gems—Buddha, Dhama and Sangha, has similar advantages, although it refers to different matters. ¶

Truth, Beauty and Goodness together are important factors in developing any individual as well as the community in order to achieve progress and prosperity.

Truth, "Sacca" in Buddhism, is the principle which everyone ought to seek in the context of everyday life in the quest for spiritual enlightenment, in natural sciences, and in social sciences.

Obviously material progress and better welfare are largely the results of scientific progress. The advancement of science is brought about when man discovers the truth in nature and applies it for the benefit of mankind. Progress in natural science by itself is not enough. It must be supplemented by the truth in social sciences. Together, they will help to maximize the material benefits needed for man living in community. Truth is thus an important factor in development.

Beauty is the food of the mind. Since we differ from animals for the very reason that we do not strive for merely material progress, we must have the satisfaction of the mind as well. Beautiful paintings, pretty persons, attractive landscapes, colourful flowers with nice smells, good speeches, good music, poetry, heroism and human sacrifice are all Beauty just like delicious food, things which appeal to the touch, or extraordinary athletic feats. All these contribute toward the development of the mind and hence the advancement of mankind. They are, therefore, indispensable for national development.

Goodness preserves and regulates the world. In a world of evil, men will exploit each other and harm each other instead of helping one another to improve the community. Both Buddhism and Christianity extensively emphasize this point: first one must distinguish between right and wrong. The Buddhist call it "Hiri-Ottapa" (shame and fear of sin); the Christian refers to it as "conscience". Secondly, there are positive rules of ethics urging man to behave well and to fulfil his duties towards himself, his community, society as a whole and the nation. Goodness is thus an important factor in the development of man and nation.

Truth, Beauty and Goodness, these three ideals of both Christianity and Buddhism, thus form the basic foundation of national development.

### *The Means to the Ideals*

After we have established Truth, Beauty and Goodness as our

guiding principles, the next question is to find the means to attain these ideals.

To answer this question, I find it difficult to satisfy myself with a simple formula from Christianity. This may be due to my own ignorance. I am also not fully satisfied with the Buddhist Eightfold Path—that is Right Views, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood etc., because it does not explicitly explain the meaning of “Right” in this context. Another formula from Buddha’s teaching concerning the four kinds of strength appeals to me more as containing guiding principles for self-development and for national development. They are as follows :

- |                  |                |
|------------------|----------------|
| 1. Panna Bala    | – Wisdom       |
| 2. Viriya Bala   | – Diligence    |
| 3. Anavajja Bala | – Harmlessness |
| 4. Sanghaha Bala | – Solidarity   |

This formula appeals to me for its completeness. Wisdom helps us to decide what is right, what is wrong and what is beautiful. It also points the way to the Ultimate Truth. Yet, wisdom is not enough, if unaccompanied by diligence. Knowledge is rendered useless by neglect and inertia. Again having wisdom and diligence is like having a vehicle with a good engine and an excellent driver. We still need good braking and good steering facilities, in other words, prudence and avoidance of harmful actions. Furthermore, we also need altruism, kindness and generosity towards others in order to lead us to Beauty and Goodness.

This process of mixing Buddhist and Christian teachings is all for my own convenience. I by no means try to urge anybody to follow. My submission is simply that the two moral codes do not conflict: on the contrary they fit each other well. Those fortunate enough to have access to both are all the richer: they have a wider choice. They can pick and choose what appeals to them to make the formulae their own, easy to remember and easy to apply.

### *The Bases of a Good Society*

Although each of us here might have already established some sort of principles of life with the help of Buddhism or Christianity or both and although the precepts of these religions are immortal and applicable to all eventualities, I feel that modern society has its own peculiarities and its own characteristics. General principles, however applicable to the present society, may become vague and misunderstood or be irrelevant to modern problems. Once we have laid a solid foundation for life from the synthesis of both religions, I think we ought to build the superstructure ourselves. For this reason I have attempted to reconstruct some basic social principles along that line for my own use and for presentation to modern students. This method has the advantage of simplicity and direct relevance over the traditional teaching methods. At least we can speak the language that the present day layman can readily understand.

Thus when we ask ourselves what are the bases of a good modern society, my answer will be as follows :

1. Efficiency
2. Freedom
3. Justice
4. Kindness

These four qualities will be discussed in the next lecture. For the moment it suffices to say that Efficiency is related to Truth, attainable through intelligence or wisdom and diligence. Freedom and Justice, like Beauty, are necessary to satisfy the mind of man and to support human dignity: these ideals are reached by an avoidance of harmful actions and by mutual respect. Kindness is the ingredient of Goodness and is fostered by the strength of Sanghaha or solidarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you may justly accuse me of confusion and of putting together bits of everything. But I am sure that at least this is an easily understood way by which each of us could formulate for our own use the necessary guiding principles of life.

## LECTURE II

### The Characteristics of a Good Society and the Principles of Development

#### *A Good Society*

A good and prosperous society is one which is efficient, in which freedom is upheld, justice prevails and kindness among its members reigns.

By efficiency is meant the ability of each individual in the society to do things useful for himself and for others. 'Useful in a material sense' means tending toward a good standard of living; intellectual usefulness consists in the creation of Beauty of various kinds to enrich the mind; moral utility results in profound satisfaction caused by the knowledge that a good deed is being performed. The ability may be innate, or it may be created by education and training. With some measure of original ability, man in society is in a position to accumulate further skill in the forms of tools, machines, know-how, all of which add up to the capital of society. Science and technology progress further and further and the knowledge and experience is passed on from generation to generation. The efficiency of a society can thus be divided into present efficiency and the capacity for the future. The accumulation of knowledge depends on research. A nation is indeed incapable of furthering its knowledge if there is no research, particularly in its universities; or if research activities are conducted in committee meeting where words rather than thoughts prevail. Individual know-how, moreover, if well co-ordinated by good administration adds up to a total ability of the society which is greater than the sum of all without such co-ordination. In short, the efficiency of a society is the factor that makes both society and the individual grow further and further. This is what we call development.

Freedom distinguishes man from non-living objects, machinery

and beasts. Efficiency without freedom would render the society one of puppets. Its capacity to grow would be handicapped. It would lack life and variety. Freedom enables man to choose his own objective and the path toward achieving that objective in life. The difference and variety in tastes and inclinations makes the society more interesting and more complete. Furthermore, when man is moved to do something of his own choice, he will likely do it with enthusiasm; and enthusiasm, according to Buddhist teaching, is the heart of achievement. In the Christian way of thinking, each human being has his own innate dignity endowed by God; and this individual dignity is sacred. Freedom is thus an essential factor in national development both in the Buddhist and Christian senses. Democratic principles, therefore, must be earnestly upheld, not only through lip service. Democracy is often obstructed by greed and by self-importance, leading to the neglect, and sometimes to the destruction, of the other's personal dignity. These obstacles to freedom and democracy are also obstacles to complete national development.

Individuals live together in a society bound by justice. Good results in good, and evil brings about punishment, according to both Buddhist and Christian teachings. Men live together in unison only when they are sure of the prevalence of justice. Envy, jealousy, rivalry are caused by the suspicion that one is unjustly treated; and when that happens, unhappiness emerges, peace disappears. This is true within a society; it is also true of a society of nations. Without justice, there will be chaos, anarchy and war. Justice thus leads to peace which is the basis of development.

Men are born unequal both physically and intellectually: some are intelligent, others not; some are strong and healthy, others crippled. Some of us are adversely affected in one way or another during our lifetime. Some live in a place with all educational facilities, others in the country far from light. When these unequal states are recognized, it is the duty of society to minimize the

discrepancies. Said President Ramon Magsaysay: "To those who have less from birth, the law must give more". This is nothing but kindness. In my opinion, certain doctrines wrongly interpreted are harmful, such as the so-called Law of Karma, which is often used as an excuse for not helping, say, a blind child, under the pretext that the latter must have committed a sin in a past life and thus deserves his punishment. This is obnoxious to the genuine Buddhist teaching. Again, those who enrich themselves by immoral means and who pretend to redeem their sin through "charity" should be condemned by Buddhists and Christians alike. There is no kindness in such charity. The principle of kindness is related to the principle of freedom inasmuch as each human being has his own right and dignity. The weak has a perfect right for consideration by the strong, and that not in the name of charity. Kindness ennobles society. A nation cannot grow through efficiency alone: there must be justice and kindness.

### *Planning for Development*

Planning for development must be done within the framework of the four principles mentioned above: efficiency, freedom, justice and kindness.

Development planning, contrary to prevalent belief, is not the exclusive concern of economists and social scientists. All disciplines of learning including moral learning, are involved. When we want to build a house, the ground must be prepared and the foundation firmly constructed. To do farming, the soil must be enriched, water provided, manpower, storage and transport must be readily available.

Similarly, national development can only succeed when every necessary related factor is ready. Of course, one can always start development anyhow, but the result will be chancy, like sowing seeds on infertile land.

The circumstances favourable to national development can be

listed as follows: (a) there must be peace and good administration; (b) the development objectives must be right; (c) the developing technique must be sound; and (d) there should be sufficient power allowed by the law with proper safeguards against its abuse.

What follows will amplify these four prerequisites.

**(a) PEACE AND ORDER AND GOOD ADMINISTRATION :** Planning for development is to plan national investments in order to produce both short-term and long-term results in the future. Such investments cannot produce results if the nation lacks peace. Farmers in a battlefied can do nothing. Vietnam, Laos, Nigeria and other countries where there is a war on have no means of planning even for a few months ahead, for the simple reason of uncertainty. Wars between nations and world wars are obviously inimical to development planning. Even confrontation and threats to peace, as in the Malaysia-Indonesia conflict can affect economic and social well-being of the nations concerned.

The absence of order need not always be caused by armed conflicts. Whenever administration becomes seriously defective, even though there is no communist subversion, national advancement will be considerably affected. Such a situation has been well described in one of our reading texts for children, *Mulbot Banpakich*. It refers to the city of Savatti, where.

“The courtiers found young girls with pretty faces to perform music at their homes and always indulged in sexual passions. They earned money by greed and gave it to their wives. They neglected the moral code and turned to supersition. They abused their power, cheated their servants and chained them. Litigations were determined by bribery of chicken, pork, rice and fish, irrespective of the rule of law. The crooks were rewarded and given power to inflict pain on others. The just, the devout, the old and the learned were considered idiots and fools. The priests neglected their books and indulged in dancing and singing. The people ignored their wise men’s words and became hooligans.

There were of course a number of good respectable people. But in the city of Savatti nobody was kind to anybody; they were all selfish and opportunists. The strong needed not to buy nor beg: they took what they wanted. The officials swore loyalty and honesty, but their hearts were otherwise. They took what they found, leaving the people full of sorrow. The mighty exploited without mercy."

The evils enumerated are (1) sexual excesses (2) greed (3) superstition (4) corruption (5) injustice in law courts (6) contempt of wisdom and moral principles (7) cruelty and abuse of power (8) officials neglecting their duties.

There are two-fold remedies to such a disorder. One is to endeavour to propagate moral principles effectively among the people and the officials. The other is to concentrate on the leaders in the government. Good leaders will easily be able to lead their subordinates to the right path. Buddha stated this point in the following words: "The leaders must behave morally before society becomes prosperous." He compared human society with a herd of cattle: if the leader goes astray, the whole herd will go astray: the nation can only attain happiness if the leaders adhere to moral principles; for then the people will practise morality.

**(b) DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES :** In common understanding, national development means the increase in people's incomes, welfare, health and education. How to do this will be discussed in the next paragraph. Here I would like to enlarge upon the meanings and objectives of development: for it is most important to be clear on the objectives. The objectives of national development are three-fold:

1. *The growth of income and welfare both present and future.*  
If we invest more; present consumption will be less and vice versa. Hence proper balance must be struck between present and future welfare, and justice must obtain between present and future generations.

2. *The growth must be accompanied by stability.* Stability here is the opposite of fluctuation, in which all kinds of economic, monetary and social problems occur, and which are harmful to development. A government which prefers to print paper money in excessive quantity instead of taxing people will soon encounter inflation, with all the prices hiking fast as the result of too much money chasing too few goods. There will then be uncertainty in all transactions and development is retarded. This situation prevailed in Indonesia a few years ago. Preservation of stability is the concern of those responsible for public finance and banking.
3. *The growth must be equitably spread out.* In Thailand for instance, to look at the national average income does not make sense: the average income of the Central Plain being three times as much as that of the North East. And the result of development may be that the rich get richer, the poor poorer. This is contrary to the principles of justice and kindness. We must therefore aim at investing more for the benefit of the country people and slow down the investment for the rich. This is nothing more than to apply moral principles to economic planning.

**(c) THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS :** The development process has more to do with economic technique than other parts of this lecture. It can however be said that the development process consists in comparing the estimated results of alternative investments and choosing the ones with the highest benefits: it means studying cost ratios. Although economic theory is applied here, it is by no means extraordinary and the administration called for follows the normal pattern i.e. to produce the maximum benefit with minimum investment, and to apply wisdom to prevent waste, even in urgent cases. The normalcy in the application of theory is here underlined. There is no short cut or special theory to the development process. Man can force the mind and behaviour of

his fellow man, but he cannot force natural law or economic theories without disastrous effects.

There are two problems to be considered in this context: first, what is to be done first and what can wait; and, second, how to divide development work between government and individuals.

With limited resources, and limited manpower one cannot do everything at once. Priorities among projects must be set. The high priority projects are those that would be catalytic to others, like manpower and education development. Infra-structure development projects should also enjoy priority, e.g. fiscal and monetary reform, road, transport and port development.

In concentrating on economic development the economist tends to neglect other important fields for development; e.g. education, health and welfare. Beauty ought to be considered an important criterion of development, and hence money must be made available for the arts, literature and music. Research in the universities leading to truth and knowledge should be one of the foremost projects for development.

The issue of government versus private enterprise is a political issue as well as a question of respecting individual rights. Communism and extreme socialism would advocate over-all government control, with the individuals as factors of production; whereas capitalism and liberalism emphasize private initiative with minimum interference by government. Both factions, in my opinion, are wrong and unjust: Communism ignoring individual freedom and Capitalism causing exploitation and widening the social gap. I would prefer the middle way, with government encouraging private initiative, while using fiscal and monetary measures to control them. Government activities must also be extended to basic public utilities for the common benefit of the people.

Similarly, powerful people in the government ought to respect the rights and initiative of lesser members of the society. They should not extend their empire to the detriment of others. The

common farmers, traders, and industrialists must have their place in the sun too. Moral principles are here called for.

**(d) POWER IN DEVELOPMENT :** In the process of development, unusual powers are necessary. In the government circle, with more construction work, more people employed, there must be more public expenditure than in normal cases. The more extensive the development, the more money is involved and the more opportunities there will be for abuses. Rules and regulations are necessary and special attention must be paid to prevent corrupt practices.

When construction work is called for, and if we have money for it, we shall be in a position to get the best quality of goods at the most reasonable cost, provided we have good rules and regulations and provided that the officials concerned are honest. These provisos are hard enough by themselves. But in the case where money is not available, the suppliers will tempt us by offering credit while insisting that we buy their goods, irrespective of the cost. Such deals are inimical to development.

In the process of development, the government has to spend more money than without development. This extra expenditure cannot come entirely from increased taxation: the government must resort to borrowing. In domestic borrowing, care must be taken to prevent inflation, which is usually caused by excessive borrowing from the Central Bank, causing the latter to issue more and more money. Loans out of the savings of private individuals, corporations or private funds are good loans. In external borrowing, the consideration is to prevent foreign debts being in excess of the annual capacity to pay: this latter being based upon the nation's annual export earning capacity. On this matter, our government has been wise enough to observe the above rules, and has assigned the responsibility of supervision to the Executive Committee of the National Economic Development Board and its sub-committee on Government Debts.

I have heard a strange doctrine enunciated on this subject. According to this doctrine, in a developing country like Thailand, it is difficult to prevent corruption; besides, corruption should be allowed because it helps speed up development. This is an obnoxious doctrine advocating a perverse views of development. Even if it were true that corruption speeds up development, would it not be better not to develop at all? A little less material wealth with more happiness is to be preferred. But this perverse doctrine, in fact, has no support from any economic or political or moral theory. The more corruption there is, the less development can be achieved. And once a little corruption is permitted, there will be no end to it. The recent lessons of Indonesia, Ghana and other African states are clear and very instructive.

### LECTURE III

#### The Development of Man

In this last hour, I intend to be short, in order to give an opportunity to the audience to discuss my views or ask questions to clarify certain obscure points. I hope the audience will cooperate with me in this.

But I cannot omit submitting some thought on the most important subject relating to ethics, religion, and development: the subject of man.

The development of man comprises formal education and educational training after school age. This subject deserves full and lengthy treatment, and perhaps could become the theme for another Thompson Memorial lecture series. I shall, however, submit here only a few ideas,

For children of the primary education age group, the government has the obligation of providing full and free schooling. At present, we are failing in this obligation: and this problem is one of the most important items in the national development plan.

As long as we fail our children in literacy promotion, we should feel ashamed, for we have failed them both morally and in terms of overall development.

Some say that we have not enough qualified teachers to man the schools. I disagree entirely with the emphasis on qualification. Primary school teachers need not be highly qualified, what they need is more diligence. The emphasis on higher qualification leads many teachers to learn for their own good instead of concentrating on teaching the children. Supervision of schools is also defective. Negligence in the duties of a teacher is immoral and a drawback to development.

At the moment, secondary education is still not compulsory in Thailand; but the more educated the children, the better for development, as exemplified by Japan. Secondary education for some people is the end of their school days; to them we must endeavour to give some vocational skill for their livelihood. Vocational education development is very important in my view.

Those who leave school after the primary grades or secondary grades still need to be taught further in order to be of more use in the national development process. Out-of-school education and training must seriously be carried out both for the sake of literacy and for the sake of vocational improvement.

University students can be considered elite. They must learn a wide range of subjects, learn to take the responsibility of leaders, and must have a profound knowledge of their own subject.

At whatever level of education, we adults have the obligation of inculcating in our youngsters the knowledge of good and evil and the correct moral values. Sometimes our youth seem to have been misled into believing that drinking, wenching and cheating are the normal behaviour in life. We adults must set them good examples by our own behaviour, thus showing them the right sense of values. Good examples are called for from parents, teachers, and famous public figures. The bad behaviour of children and

youth is always caused by the immorality of adults.

Nowadays, we often complain that school children and students are unruly, disobedient, quarrelsome and inclined to be violent. We can complain; but what are we doing about it? I cannot help feeling that in the long run the best means of solving these problems already exist in Buddhist and Christian teachings—i.e. love, kindness and good example, particularly love. If love prevails between youth and adults, there will be mutual trust and respect. Love is the sacred food for the human race irrespective of our religion, Buddhism or Christianity.

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