

Moneytheism¹

Throughout history we have seen that religion, like most organized human effort, attracts wealth. This same wealth defines, defends and disseminates that church or group. Then, that wealth invariably consumes and destroys it. The term “megachurch,” for example, is commonly associated with great numbers (at least 2000 in weekly congregations) and great wealth.

Pastor Kong Hee, 51, of the City Harvest Church (CHC), Singapore’s leading megachurch, was among the six church leaders who were found guilty on 21 October 2015 of misusing millions of dollars in church funds to bankroll the music career of his wife, Ho Yeow Sun, which he claimed would generate funds for an evangelical “Crossover” Project to bring on more converts. Another pastor criticized this action as being “questionable at the very least.” Former Church members and some pastors also publicly questioned some of the Church practices.

A pastor of a local community church, for example, wrote online that Pastor Kong had disregarded the Biblical proverb, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.” He added that many had “left the faith, backslid, stumbled, or who had been so disillusioned by the whole fiasco.” More bluntly, the pastor tried to serve two masters, but warns the Bible, “You cannot serve both God and money.”²

CHC preaches a “prosperity gospel,” which teaches that one would be rewarded materially and spiritually if one gave financially to God. This sounds familiar: in some ethnic Buddhist groups, we have heard it said, “You can’t take it [money] with you, why not pass it on through us!” Whether we believe in God or not, but when we believe in money more, it is called moneytheism, the worship of wealth.

An ex-CHC male member said that his cell group leaders questioned him about his monthly allowance because they suspected he was “under-contributing” in his tithes and offerings. “At that point in time, I was still a student, but I was driving my dad’s car – I think they felt I was quite well-to-do.” Church members, in other words, were somehow coerced to make regular monetary contributions, often of substantial amounts, when they were perceived as being able to.

¹ This reflection is based on a report by Danson Cheong in the Straits Times, 11 Nov (B2) & 17 Nov (B1), 2015.

² Matthew 6:24.

Another ex-member, who joined CHC at 15 but left after 12 years, wrote in her blog that she was expected to report daily via SMS to a “mentor” on her whereabouts, and was once told that she was spotted watching a movie with a male friend. She mentioned an extreme case when at one meeting, she was told that one of the cell group leaders had sold his car so that he could buy more of Ms Ho’s music albums: “See, our brother, he sacrificed for God.” After all, “What we give to God, God will reward us tenfold,” mentors often told their cell members.

Wealth respects no religion. Although wise individuals may know that the prudent use of wealth can bring significant benefits, most of us may not always be aware of what wealth is really doing to us. This is one of the reasons that the Buddha has made clear rules that monastics – those who have freely renounced the world – should have nothing to do with money, wealth or business.³ Sadly, much of organized Buddhism, especially ethnic Buddhism, has a long history of disobeying the Buddha, presenting Buddhism as a quest for external riches through priestly rituals and assorted simony.⁴

Wealth destroys religion. This was the key reason for the disappearance of Buddhism from India in the early 13th century as a result of Turkish Muslim marauders pillaging it. We also see the disappearance, or significant weakening, of Buddhism wherever it seeks and serves the wealthy and the powerful – Mongolia, China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan (effectively most of Asia, except for south and southeast Asia).⁵

In Buddhism today, too, we still see the tacit lust for money amongst the clerics. Despite the Buddha clearly forbidding monastics from having money or any financial dealings, monastics almost never keep to such a rule, but encourage, even demand, monetary gifts or fees, own businesses or earn salaries. Not surprisingly then, most clerics are richer and own more assets (all tax-free) than their devotees.⁶

What Judge See Kee Oon wrote in his 2015 judgement of Pastor Kong, the architect of the CHC financial scandal, is also true of the Mingyi scandal (2010): both involved misuse of funds and dishonesty. He wrote: “When shrouded under the cloak of invisibility, much like the mythical ring of Gyges, persons in such positions of power have no fear of

³ On the Buddha’s rules against monastics dealing with money, see **Money and Monastics**, [SD 4.19](#), esp (9.3).

⁴ Simony is the sin of buying or selling religious benefits or advantages. It is like paying for prayers and blessings, or for rites to “remove” bad karma, or for rituals to benefit the dead.

⁵ See Reflection, “[Modern monastics?](#)” R93, 2009.

⁶ See Reflection, “[Time for monks to pay income tax?](#)” R215, 2011.

accountability and tend to become their own worst enemies.” The ring of Gyges is mentioned in Plato’s *Republic* as having the power to make its wearer invisible at will.⁷

Judge See added: “It has thus been wisely said that the real tragedy is when men are afraid of the light, and if they choose not to come into the light they do so for fear that their deeds will be exposed, as they surely will in time.”

In 2007-2008, the local daily Straits Times (ST) reported on the police’s Commercial Affairs Department (CAD) investigation of a Chinese Mahayana priest, Shi Mingyi’s misappropriation of funds⁸ meant for the Renci Hospital, a Buddhist charity and second largest charity under the Ministry of Health’s purview. He was found guilty and served 4 months’ jail in 2010.⁹ Yet, to this day, he continues in his robes, unrepentant and unremorseful.¹⁰

All those years (even to this day), the local Buddhist authorities had made no clear public statement denouncing him, or succouring confused or disillusioned Buddhists. One possible explanation is that most of the Buddhists in Singapore are ethnic Chinese deeply rooted in Confucian ethics (respect for elders, for superiors, for authority and for institutions). As in any religion where the robed priesthood is well instituted – what is known as sacerdotalism¹¹ – such as in Roman Catholicism, ethnic Buddhists, too, might have the notion that such priests are above the law and can do no wrong.¹² Or, that it is “bad karma” to even talk bad about others, what more to expose them.

Or, can we say that all this happens for a **reason**? But who gives the reason, and what kind of reasoning do we use? The point is that it is difficult to reason with religion. But reasoning is just a tool, and its morality depends on whose hand or mind is using it.

Notice how almost impossible it is to reason with a religious person, those who are self-absorbed and have no ears for dissent or difference.

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, tr Benjamin Jowlett, 1892 (3rd rev ed), Book 2:358d-361d.

⁸ He was convicted of falsifying accounts and giving an unauthorized “loan” of S\$50,000 to his 33-year-old personal assistant, Raymond Yeung: [ST report](#) Apr 2009.

⁹ See eg ST 20 Feb 2008: H2; also [SD 31.12](#) (3.4.4).

¹⁰ See [ST report](#) 5 May 2015.

¹¹ Sacerdotalism is a false belief that a priest can act as mediators between humans and God, or that a monk or lama or guru, whether through ritual or charisma, can remove our bad karma or in some way alleviate our karmic state.

¹² A significant case of institutionalized silence and global cover-up of child abuse by the Catholic Church has been mentioned in [SD 17.3](#) (2.3). See esp: <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/sex-crimes-and-the-vatican/> & its transcript. Also see [Paedophile priest drama stuns Berlin film fest](#).

We can never really reason with a religious person. If we can, there would probably be no religion.¹³

Or, is it a problem of **faith** that we see such problems? The point is an essential quality in Buddhism. We pride in what we call “wise faith,” that is, not blind faith, but a confidence that arises from proper reasoning and tempered with positive emotions. Hence, even for Buddhists, it is wrong to do something without reason, especially the proper reason. Proper reasoning is based on the notion, simply put, that what we do should be for the greater good of ourself and others.

When we practise charity or giving, for example, it should not be done with blind faith or being coerced to do so (as was often the case with the CHC). We should only give with right understanding and a positive emotion – out of wise faith and for the love of Dharma.

We become good Buddhists by wisely giving to others. True giving means unconditionally accepting the recipient. As Buddhists, we learn to accept ourself as we are, and embrace more people and beings into our lives by showing them lovingkindness, inclusiveness and unconditional acceptance.

Buddhism, then, is not about strengthening racial culture, nor spreading narrow views, nor building temple walls. It is, above all, about breaking down the walls of views, to see ourselves as we really are, and to work with that.¹⁴

We should remember the lessons that the history of religion teach us. A religion arises rooted in its social milieu – if it arose in troubled and warring times, its language and values are likely to be those of war, power, domination and conquest. If it arises from a peaceful and religious milieu, its language and values are likely to be peaceful and spiritual, too.

Happily, history also shows us how concerned people struggle to free learning from the Church and the powerful, so that all may be liberated and educated to live well. The new sciences are now telling us how we tend to measure the world and universe by our own biases. We are now taught to look deeper within our minds and hearts to understand what appears outside.

¹³ Cf “Rational arguments don’t usually work on religious people. Otherwise there would be no religious people.” – Gregory House, MD, “House,” season 4 episode 2 *The Right Stuff*, 2007.

¹⁴ See Reflection “[Be Buddhist, not a Buddhist](#),” R342, 2014.

Surely, then, the time will come when we do not need any labels for religion. After all, earth, water, fire and wind are not religious. The earth and the heavens have no religion. Good and bad are not religions: they are our own thoughts, speech and acts. Surely, the time will come when we would congregate in spiritual houses that teach Love, that teach Compassion, that teach Joy, that teach Peace – these are all naturally good. Then, we would wonder why we ever needed religion at all!

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