

History tomorrow

[Previously published as fb190411 piya]

Here is a purely imaginative reflection. Suppose, in a thousand years' time, a descendent of ours who married a Centaurian from Alpha Centauri (the nearest star), were to write a social history of earth, what would he write about us today?

Perhaps, he would speak of two basic megacultures: the eastern and the western. The easterners often boast of having become civilized millennia before the west. But this eastern civilization is to this day of basically a **political** nature. Powerful war-lords ruled us. Then, came kings, emperors and potentates. In other words, such a system or mindset is still with us even today.

The East

China produced the oldest historical empires, but to this day, despite its huge population, has not produced any world-class or humane religion or universal philosophy. Whatever the Chinese and the China-rooted cultures (Korea, Japan, Vietnam, etc) live by are mostly pragmatic views, practices, and overwork.

There is only the reality of the powers that rule them; no Asian has really envisioned any kind of Utopia, much less work for such an open, liberated society. Simply put, most Asians would consent to allowing themselves be fixed as the nuts and bolts of a top-down society.

They are willing or resigned to a slavish life from the subtle (religion) to the gross (selling themselves). In huge areas of Asia, even as we comfortably read this reflection, they are millions too poor to even finish college and have to sell themselves. And these are deeply religious societies.

The West, the East

Europe, on the other hand, was a late starter. Western civilization, however, grew and changed to contribute to almost all the global good we have today, from the philosophical to the technological and our lifestyle (we need not mention the bad things here). Europe—ancient Greece, to be specific—produced the roots of most of our philosophy and sports.

Asian systems like Confucianism, Daoism and the Indian religions (including Buddhism), only work well in Asia itself. Indeed, they are what clearly define Asia. To be Confucianist and Daoist is to be Chinese or East Asian. The Indian religions, too, are characteristically Indian. Even Buddhism has often been Asianized to serve as **ethnic** religions, not for attaining nirvana but for the greater glory of race and culture. Aren't we racist then?

The West

Before Christianity was westernized, Europe mostly had down-to-earth belief-systems both pragmatic and celebratory of life. Just as Asian emperors and kings reshaped, even

reinvented, Buddhism for their purposes, western powers redefined Christianity and invented Catholicism in their procrustean beds (the largest one being in Rome).

Even when Christianity was reformed, made more human and palatable to common sense, they could only resuscitate a Frankenstein brought to life by heaven's lightning. Protestant Christianity lacked the Catholic mythology. And mythology is in the lifeblood of all the ancient cultures and religions.

Power

Religion was exploited by the eastern emperors and western kings in about the same way. In time, Rome was able to centralize Christianity, and control all the powers of Europe. And then, the world—and so, there is **colonialism**. Religion still colonizes us.

Religion is power; but knowledge is power, too, which we must gain and use as wisdom for our own humanity and liberation.

Simply put, the sexual excesses of Pope Alexander VI Borgia (1492-1503) and the religious excesses of the monk Savonarola (1452-1498) in Florence, Italy, prepared the sarcophagus for the Roman religion and led to the Reformation in Christianity.

Renaissance

With the Renaissance, came not only the new learning, but also the knowledge and science that liberate the west. The wars for western liberation were knee-deep in the blood of the warring parties. Religion was just an excuse for the battle for territory and power.

If the Pope was thought of God's representative on earth, he had a rival in Louis XIV (reigned 1643-1715), the Sun King of France who had the same idea (thanks to the grooming of his royal mother). The roots of the French Revolution started with Louis and his Versailles palace.

King Henry VIII (reigned 1509-1547) of England could not have a son from his Spanish queen, and thought God had cursed him. He decided to annul the marriage and remarry (he stopped at 8 wives), which the Pope disallowed. So Henry started his own Church, the Anglican or Church of England (1532-34).

Religious wars

Then, there was the devastating 30 Years War (1618-1648), religious violence in Europe (initially between the Catholics and the Protestants), with 8 million casualties (the world's longest and most destructive religious conflict). It was the beginning of the rise of the European spirit against the Church.

Slowly, legislations (beginning with the Edict of Torda, 1568) were made to ensure religious freedom, which means especially freedom from the Roman Church. The Peace of Westphalia, a series of peace treaties signed in 1648, ended the European wars of religion.

The Industrial Revolution

With the end of monarchy in France in 1789, European kings and queens were more careful about their dealings with their own realms. On the bright side, this new freedom allowed the rise of science, technology and the new learning, the fruits of which we enjoy (or are victims of) today. The Buddhism that many of us today follow is, in some way, influenced or arose from all these happenings.

My point is that we must use our freedom to understand the true nature of religion. Understanding and liberation only come to us when we respect and apply self-effort. The freedom we have today to choose a religion or none, or to belong to a Buddhist **ism** (or non-**ism**) or none, has been hard fought at the cost of countless lives.

The path of non-self

It would be utterly foolish and inhuman of us to surrender our body, mind and heart to any teacher or personality or to worship or fear him—this is the absolutist way of the kings and emperors of old. Our body, mind and heart are the trainings-grounds for morality, peace and wisdom. Early Buddhism is the path of **non-self**, we need to be free from even our self.

When we do not value this freedom to work out our own awakening, then we remain slaves to religion, to history and the past. We are already dead even before we are born. The purpose of the Buddha's teaching is to liberate us from history.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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