

## Universalist claims and natural truths

Source: **(Bhojjhaṅga) Pariyāya Sutta (S 46.52, SD 62.6a)**, The Buddhist faith of non-Buddhist,<sup>1</sup> translated by Piya Tan © 2010, 2024.

### 1.3.1 Religious assimilation

**1.3.1.1 Religion**, especially organized religion, starts off by first claiming to offer some kind of saving grace or secret knowledge of life and the world, revealed by some higher power to the chosen. Religious prophets and theologians then construct and consolidate their power by conditioning the minds and lives of followers to a set of authorized facts and rules of a very exclusive (or private) reality. Followers are conditioned to believe so that they will accept all this as true and follow without question.

Historically, a single religion or family of religions tended to dominate a particular country, culture or region which shared a common or overlapping history. Over time, as contact with other societies grew, so did religions encounter with one another, and each had to contend with challenging new truths and world-views. New teachings and mythology were then adapted and adopted into the local religion.

**1.3.1.2** Assimilating teachings from other religions is common even today, especially in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when, for example, Catholics and other religionists took up Buddhist meditation—especially the breath meditation and lovingkindness meditation—in droves. Within a decade of such an adoption, we begin to hear of such meditation labeled as “Christian meditation” and so on.

Religious teachers often feel inspired to borrow or plagiarize teachings, presenting them as their own, and, depending on their power or charisma, followers believe them or have to pay them lip service. Take, for example, the witty anecdotes of the Sufi Mullah Nasruddin<sup>2</sup> (1208-1285); the Mullah’s stories are so witty and humorous that astute (but unimaginative) religious preachers, writers and leaders often use such stories as if they were their own, that is, not citing their source.

**1.3.1.3** After all, almost every religion has some kind of notion that whatever is well spoken comes from God, their God, and whatever good they do is, openly or subtly, in the service of and for the good of their God. In this sense, when religion places God above human, it makes religion a glorified and sanctimonious dehumanizing system. Those who define God or speak “for God,” not only have control over believers, but they commit the most atrocious inhuman acts in the name of God.

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<sup>1</sup> This theme is taken from the title of R **Gethin**, “The Buddhist faith of non-Buddhists: From dual belonging to dual attachments,” in (edd) G D’Costa & R Thompson, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, objections, explorations*, London: Routledge, 2016:179-195 (ch 10).

<sup>2</sup> Mullah Nasruddin (1208-1285; variants incl Nasreddin or Nasreddin Hodja, Khoja Nasriddin) is a character in Muslim folklore from Bukhara to China, and a hero of humorous short stories and satirical anecdotes: Sara Hunziker, “Humour in Folklore Rewind: Nasreddin Hoca’s humorous and moralist anecdotes,” in (edd) M-L Dumitru Oancea & R Mihaila, *Myth, Symbol, and Ritual: Elucidatory Paths to the Fantastic Unreality 3*, Univ of Bucharest, Jan 2019:357-361; S Attardo (ed), *Ency of Humor Studies*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014:108 f.

History and politics have repeatedly shown that the worst evils are those done in the name of religion. When a religion has considerable power, it will, as a rule, have no compunction about excluding, punishing, even destroying others, whether singly or en masse. Not only is there no salvation outside the tribe or Church, there is also neither love nor goodness outside.

How religious followers answer the question, “**What is the worst evil or sin in your religion?**” the most common answer will likely reflect whether the religion is exclusivist or universal. A God-religion believer is likely to answer: “Not believing in God,” or “Taking God’s name in vain.” Some Buddhists may answer that suffering is the worst evil. But then the superstitious are likely to give the same answer. Clearly, then, “suffering” has a different sense for each of the two. An informed Buddhist is likely to answer, “The worst evil in Buddhism is ignorance or lack of wisdom.”

A zealous God-believer might retort that human wisdom is foolishness in God’s eye. What can we say to a person who claims to be “foolish” and yet pronounces a seemingly almighty truth?

**1.3.1.4** The world religions—unlike Buddhism—are, as a rule, centred on beliefs of an external Agency (some kind of God) that is neither historical nor verifiable except by their own Scriptures interpreted by only their leaders. Hence, there is a total reliance on **faith**, sophistry and authoritarian power. The most effective ways to counter such authoritarian religions is a good education system based on empirical verification and political freedom guided by such an education—and of course a just socioeconomic system.

Religion, as a rule, is “**future superstition**” that must be left in the past. Humankind will only progress and divinity evolve among humans when religion is understood to be at best a private delusion that should not be imposed on others or be a part of the public domain. In fact, this is what has been happening slowly and *naturally* over the last few centuries as human society progresses.

### **1.3.2 Natural goodness**

Ironically, all that is **naturally good in religion** can be found in any organized religion or in almost any faith. We often hear quips like “all religions teach good.” While this is more wishful thinking or uninformed quixotic pietism, there is some truth in that most religions, at some point, teach, even practise, some common good.

The question however remains whether the good done in the name of religion is more of a strategy to convert others or to present a publicity façade merely to benefit the religion. It is well known that the more power-based a religion is, the more it takes advantage of its followers, and often the victims are simply powerless to defend themselves, while the religious leaders and perpetrators keep their unholy silence.<sup>3</sup>

The humanitarian quality of a religion is, as a rule, the extent to which it is willing and able to actually care for others in their hour of need. In fact, our human society is so globalized with a predominance of peace, better communication, more open education, and a universal sense of

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<sup>3</sup> On child molestation by the Church, see SD 39.1 (7.3.4.2, 7.3.4.4); SD 40a.8 (5.5.4); SD 60.1e (13.13.2 (9) (iii)); SD 64.17 (10).

economic progress that religions, too, are becoming more open to one another for the sake of our common welfare.

We will here briefly explore the nature of this “common and natural good” in religions in general, and how we can imbibe and practise such good no matter what religion we follow (or if we have no religion). In sharing such common ground, what are the effects it may have on us as followers of a particular religion? Indeed, what would become of religion when such commonality and freedom are more universally accepted? Can we mix practices from different religions? Can we follow two or more religions at a time? This overarching theme is, of course, **religious pluralism**. [SD 62.6b]

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