

Religiopathy

Ills and issues rooted in being religious
[Previously published as fb201205 piya]

[This is one reflection I was very hesitant to post. I thought it may irritate you. Think of me as a wet blanket, useful when there is a fire ...]

Professor Chong Siow Ann of the Institute of Mental Health, Singapore, wrote a sobering article on “Politics, psychopathy and the duty to warn” in the Straits Times (5 Dec 2020: A36). He was writing with special concern about a certain American President that mental health professionals in the US had unanimously diagnosed as being a “psychopath.” Hence, I am moved to write a reflection based on the Professor’s revealing paper.

I have little interest in politics except where it is in some way connected with my interest in how religion shapes society and the individual, or vice versa. In this case, I am struck by the close parallels of what the good Professor describes of a really bad President, that we can actually replace “President” with “Professional Buddhist,” and describe the situation with remarkable precision and truth. After all, this is easy to understand when politics and religion are about power or narcissism rather than learning and change.

Karmic imprint

There is a school of thought, notes the news article, called neurophilosophy (the philosophy of neuroscience) that views our conscience not as “a theological entity thoughtfully parked in us by a divine being,” but rather as a brain construct shaped by human evolution over millennia to enable humans to live socially together and thrive. This is, in fact, a popular idea of seeing Buddhism in the light of “evolutionary psychology” (or the psychology of evolution), such as in Robert Wright’s popular *Why Buddhism is True* (2017).

The Professor mentions the hypothesis that pathological behaviour may arise from one’s genes. In other words, this is Nature at work. Informed Buddhists are more likely to think of this as some kind of “karmic imprint” inherited from our own past deeds. Anyway, notes the Professor, if psychopathy has been long imprinted in the brain, it would greatly diminish the odds of effective treatment, especially for adult psychopaths. From our knowledge of the Buddha’s ministry, we would, of course, recall that he healed even a serial killer.

To warn, to protect

We will however limit our reflection to **religiopathy**. In many significant ways, religion is a serious source of pathology in an individual and a crowd. A religion, for example, may compel its believer to behead others who belittle their founder, and feel righteously justified in doing so. Or a fundamentalist religious crowd may vote en bloc for a pathological candidate to be President without consideration of issues beyond their tribe.

The question now is whether we have such religiopaths in Buddhism: those who uphold exclusive sectarian views and are capable of violence against their detractors. I’m sure there

are, but to identify anyone dead or alive would invite the wrath of that religiopath's admirers and followers. Moreover, it is not our purpose here to do so, but rather, as the Professor soberly reminds us: it is our duty **to warn and to protect** others of such pathology.

Behaviour pattern

In Malaysia and Singapore, fortunately we almost do not see any trace of religious psychopathology. However, we may have a serious situation of religious **sociopathy**, simply put, a self-centred, even narcissistic, view that only oneself and those one admires are right, everyone else, especially "deviants" and those different, are wrong.

Here again, we are not talking about individuals, but about **patterns of behaviour**. (Also note that I'm not using these terms in any technical way, but merely as convenient words to express my concerns of the current Buddhist situation here, and as a reminder and warning to us.)

Buddhist sociopathy is best or rather worst seen in a Leader or Teacher who only sees himself or his Guru as right, and where followers are intoxicated with their Leader or Teacher as "the best." This is less about Buddhist teachings, but simply the idea of the Buddhopath (a convenient portmanteau for Buddhist sociopath) who feels entitled in some way, that he already knows Buddhism, and has nothing more to learn. This is significantly helped by the fact that he has the means (usually wealth, social status, or charisma) of projecting himself as some kind of Leader.

World saving?

The Buddhopath not only thinks that he has the final say in what IS Buddhism, but he has grand plans for widespread influence, conversion and salvation. We often hear of Buddhist Gurus promoting "World Peace," even "transferring merits" (like goods) to "all beings," and so on, when they are themselves unenlightened, and quirrier and nastier than any of us laity are. Sadly, such Buddhopaths also have a profound hate (usually disguised or displaced) towards those they see as detractors or different. They tend to be supersweet.

For those of us who are new to Buddhism or mere followers, it is virtually impossible to detect signs or symptoms of Buddhopathy. Moreover, warns the Professor, many of them are "**successful psychopaths**" who manage to stay within the confines of the law and respectability. In fact, they are adept in exploiting, manipulating and conning the system and the public: nothing is sacred to them. For this reason, too, they are called sociopaths or psychopaths.

Social distancing

The Professor tells us it is crucial that we know how to identify a psychopath (or sociopath, including a Buddhopath) before it is too late, and guard against their inherent deceptiveness. It is best to keep as much distance as possible or to part company as soon as possible, since any attempts to break free can sometimes provoke vicious retaliations. The Professor

closes his article by wisely reminding us that we “have a duty to warn and a duty to protect the public.”

When we know something is wrong and remain silent, our near and dear ones may suffer; they will ask us: “You knew, but why did you not warn us?”

R734 Revisioning Buddhism 307

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2021