

I-B

MODERNISM AND MODERNISATION IN BUDDHISM

R.J. Zwi Werblowsky

Professor of Comparative Religion
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Jerusalem, Israel

The Sixth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
San Francisco, November 25-27, 1977

MODERNISM AND MODERNISATION IN BUDDHISM

by

R.J. Zwi Werblowsky

i

In the short space at our disposal we must forego the preliminary exercise -- essential though it may be -- of examining and defining the notoriously unclear terms 'modernity', 'modernisation' and 'modernism'. Let us therefore simply take it for granted, somewhat naively and uncritically, that we are all living in a cultural climate characterised as 'modernity'; that processes are at work leading traditional, post-traditional and so-called "pre-modern" societies to this state of modernity; that these processes are generally subsumed under the name 'modernisation'; and that religious movements trying to reformulate their traditions in the light of what they hold to be modernity are described as 'modernist'. Hence the expression modernism, first applied to certain tendencies in 19th century western Catholicism (and solemnly condemned by papal authority), was subsequently applied also to similar movements (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist etc.) elsewhere. A few preliminary observations of a general nature are, however, unavoidable.

1. Whatever the criteria selected for defining, diagnosing, and measuring modernity and modernisation (e.g., the indexical, typological, world-acculturative or evolutionary methods; criteria of rationalisation, diffusion of secular-rational norms, degrees of self-sustaining growth, increase in mobility, decreasing importance of ascriptive status, urbanisation, industrialisation, changes in the proportions of primary, secondary and tertiary occupations etc.),

we are -- especially in the religious sphere -- primarily concerned with what Robert Bellah has called the "modernisation of the soul". This is a process far more difficult to describe than the other forms and levels of modernisation.

2. Modernisation is often held to be closely related (whether in a relationship of cause, or effect, or both, is a question that need not detain us here) to "secularisation". Both terms are vague and in need of more precise analysis. There is a wide range of responses: the euphoric celebration of "secular theology" as the true because "modern" fulfilment of the Christian gospel; apologetic attempts to show that the "modernist" interpretation of a religion can handle and successfully overcome the challenges and dangers of secularism; the view that secularism, as an essential element of modernity, will combine with the latter to abolish religion; anti-modernist reaction as the only way to preserve religion from the poison of secularism, and so on. The spectrum is wide and each religious civilisation exhibits its specific range of responses.

3. The terminology used becomes further complicated by the fact that it also has ideological functions and at times even serves ideological purposes. The words 'modern' and 'secular' are therefore not simply scientific, descriptive terms (in which case one could discuss whether they were adequate or happily chosen), but more often than not serve as slogans and even battle-cries in ideological warfare and hence are used with a different value-weighting by different protagonists in the debate.

4. Both modernisation and secularisation have often been equated with "westernisation". Whilst this simple and uncritical identification is undoubtedly wrong, there certainly is a relationship and few observers would deny that the impact of the West (especially since the 19th century) and its colonial, military, economic and cultural expansion served as an important catalyst. The responses to western influence assumed a great variety of forms: adoption, imitation and emulation, enculturation, outright rejection and repudiation, selective adaptation and assimilation, and even such complex phenomena as outward repudiation of what was actually being adopted or the claim that the values which the "West" had brought (to the extent that they were any good at all) were "in reality" identical with those taught since time immemorial by one's own religion and culture. They merely had been (temporarily) forgotten as a result of historical decadence (caused, of course, by the western intrusion), and were now being re-discovered. At any rate it is important to keep in mind the strength of the anti-western affects operating in many "Third World" modernisation processes. Quite apart from analytical sociological reasons, these affects also lend subjective weight to the claim that modernisation and westernisation are not the same.

5. The rejection of the simplistic equation modernisation = westernisation (notwithstanding the undeniable and decisive role of western influence in every modernisation process) leads to a further differentiation. In their excess of joy at the discovery of "modernity" as an historical and sociological category,

scholars at first believed that the concept was unequivocal and clear-cut. Modernisation processes everywhere would of necessity converge on one and the same type or model of modernity (probably the western one). This theory of convergence has by now been abandoned. Modernisation takes place within the context of specific cultural traditions and by way of mobilisation of their specific resources, amongst which we should also count their specific symbol systems. We must, therefore, look in the various societies and cultures for the "possibility of the development of parameters of modernity differing from the ones developed in Europe" (S.N. Eisenstadt). The current attitude has found expression in such dicta as e.g. that in order to understand modernisation processes in contemporary North Africa you had better read Ibn Khaldun rather than Max Weber. This statement, like every good epigram, is undoubtedly a deliberate exaggeration, but it well illustrates the present trends in sociological thinking on the subject.

ii

Having cleared the ground, as it were, as regards the general problem and the terminologies generated by it, we may now turn to our immediate subject: Buddhism. In the limited space at our disposal we shall have to neglect the Mahayana forms of Buddhism where matters are very different in view of the diversity of historical and social realities as well as of doctrinal presuppositions. But Theravada Buddhism too is an elusive entity. Political, social,

economic and cultural modernisation processes have taken place in many Buddhist countries and societies (as distinct from "Buddhism" as an abstract entity), and contemporary scholarship is in an unusually advantageous position. A great deal of comparative material has accumulated as a result of detailed studies of Buddhism in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma, Thailand, Vietnam (which has Mahayana as well as Theravada Buddhists) and elsewhere, including the quantitatively insignificant but sociologically interesting so-called revival of Buddhism in India. Moreover we also benefit from the accumulated results of different types of research that are now available and can be co-ordinated and synthesized. The impressive achievements of the classical methods of historico-philological scholarship, with their emphasis on Buddhist philosophy and doctrine, can now be supplemented by work bearing on social and political theory and history as well as by intensive anthropological field-work. Those who read English only have the work of the Rhys-Davids, the translated Stcherbatsky, and the writings of e.g., Conze, Thomas and (more recently) Kalupahana for the philosophical and doctrinal history. This type of work can now be supplemented by the anthropological research of E.M. Mendelson and Spiro (Burma); Obeyesekere, Yalman and Gombrich (Ceylon); Tambiah (Thailand) and many others (Leach, Nash). For political and social theory as well as recent developments we have the work of Nash, D.C. Smith, W. King, and Sarkisyanz's important study of Burma. H. Bechert's impressive 3-volume magnum opus is available in German only, though many shorter papers and articles have been published in English.

Buddhism made an increasing impact on the West since the 19th century -- whether it was correctly understood and interpreted by the enthusiastic recipients of the gospel is irrelevant to our present purpose. Germany (Schopenhauer!), England and France became centres not only of Buddhological scholarship but also of fascinated attention to the message. Not only chairs for Pali and Buddhist studies were established but also "Buddhist Societies" and the like. This fact is of crucial importance, because the "feedback" from the West to Asia played a considerable role in the development of Buddhist modernism. It must suffice here merely to mention the names Alexandra David-Neel (incidentally the first, to the best of my knowledge, to have coined and used the term "Buddhist modernism"), the Anagarika Dharmapala, the Bhikkhu Ashoka (=Gordon Douglas), the Ven. Nyanatiloka and the Ven. Nyanaponika (both originally Germans). As late as 1973 the Buddhist Government of Sri Lanka commemorated the 66th anniversary of the death of Colonel Olcott (whose career was not limited to the theosophical movement but extended also to Buddhism) as a formal state occasion. There was a striking contrast, until the more recent period, between the contempt felt and voiced by the majority of Christian missionaries (who were the "experts" on the spot and compared their "advanced" civilisation with the "superstitions" and "magical beliefs" of the native populations among whom they worked) on the one hand, and the more bookish and élitist enthusiasm for the Buddha's message, derived mainly from literary sources, on the part of the distant

admirers on the other. Since then the role of the foreigner-on-the-spot has been taken over by the anthropologists (supposedly more "value free" than missionaries), the missionaries themselves have become more "ecumenical" and "dialogual", and an increasing number of westerners have been ordained into the Sangha.

The preceding parenthesis regarding contacts with the West and the at times profound ambivalence accompanying these contacts is more germane to our subject than may appear at first sight. It caused Buddhist modernism to adopt an at times excessively apologetic attitude -- and apologetics very often take the form of ^a counter-offensive and compensatory aggressiveness. After all, Buddhists had been exposed to a great deal of denigration e.g. the charge that Buddhist "love" was essentially self-love and selfishness (a statement, by the way, which no Buddhist child brought up on the jataka stories would ever be able to understand). In the circumstances one takes note of criticisms and allegedly negative descriptions, and then proceeds to show that these are biased and wrong and that, in fact, Buddhism not only exhibits all the virtues which it was said to lack but that it possessed them to an even greater degree than the civilisations (or religions) of the critics. It is no discourtesy to Buddhist modernism to say that it is a reaction not only to a new objective (political, economic etc.) situation but also to a profound alienation on the part of an educated élite that had lost its traditional roots and had to re-discover them in a struggle with themselves as well as with the dominant "alien" culture. Thus it is not surprising to learn that

the Buddha had "anticipated the UNESCO Charter by 2500 years" or that the Sangha "is the oldest democratic institution in the world". (In fact, some rules of procedure laid down in the Vinaya resemble certain parliamentary procedures). It is important to remember that Buddhism encountered western civilisation when the latter was riding high on the wave of "progress" and presented itself as "scientific" (sometimes in the crudest forms of 19th century materialism). This gave some modernist writers a chance to emphasise the basic "materialism" of Buddhist metaphysics (there is no abiding spiritual essence or substance, only fleeting, momentary combinations of transitory "elements" tied together in accordance with certain laws of causality). Others would stress the spiritual challenges and promise of Buddhism (liberation from suffering and from ego-hood) over and against the poverty of modern western materialism. The watchword, repeated in ever so many forms and variations, was that Buddhism was the only truly "scientific" religion, especially since the difficulties under which western theistic religions were labouring could be shown to be non-existent within the framework of canonical scriptural doctrine (and by resolutely ignoring all forms of folk-Buddhism!). Indeed, by shutting one's eyes to the diverse forms of popular (animistic-magic) Buddhism, one could argue that western religions, and Christianity in particular, were but a farrago of unscientific superstitions, supernaturalism and the like, accepted on the basis of blind faith. Buddhism, on the other hand, was based on knowledge and insight, and did not suffer from the embarrassments of supernaturalism, revelation, and a personal God. As an "atheistic religion" (and not merely a philosophy), it lacked precisely

all those features at which the modern mind boggled; yet it taught not only a lofty morality but also a way to salvation. Demanding maximum effort and mental discipline from its devotees, it was not only a scientific but also a humanistic religion with a noble record of tolerance. And it enabled man to encounter Transcendence (i.e., that which is beyond our human conceptualisations of Being and Non-Being) and to experience a spiritual dimension of life without having to swallow the anthropomorphisms and supernaturalisms in theology, psychology and ontology that mark the crisis of western religion.

Of course Buddhist villagers and farmers and ordinary folk were rarely obsessed with nirvana. They lived ordinary lives of joys and sorrows, desiring good harvests, if possible wealth (to live more comfortably and, above all, to be able to perform works of merit), and many children. They feared poverty, sickness and death. And they hoped for a better re-incarnation after death. Buddhism thus had evolved a two-tier religiosity: one for the virtuosi (i.e., the ideal monks) and one for the "householders". The latter would hardly have understood the learned disquisitions of western scholars who proclaimed that Buddhism was other-worldly and pessimistic. But when the western interpreters challenged the self-respect and pride of "identity" of the Buddhist intellectuals, the latter hit back in modernist terms. Christopher Dawson in his Gifford Lectures still accused Buddhism of sacrificing material reality to a one-sided, exclusive spirituality and hence of being

incapable of cultural creation and dynamism. Buddhist modernism replied that it was Christianity that was other-worldly whereas Buddhism sought "the meaning of life in life itself" (Malalasekera). The professional student may raise his eyebrows in amazement and wonder whether modernist overreaction had not gone too far. But since the ideologies called "modern" (including the modern Christian theologies) seem to put a premium on this-worldiness, Buddhist modernism did not intend to lag behind and stand as a symbol of world-negation or -- even worse -- serve as a religion for cop-outs. The western sub-culture of the disaffected and alienated has provided ample evidence that this fear was not unfounded. Hence, according to the modernists, Buddhism was not only liberal and democratic (see above) but also socialist. A few extreme and revolutionary ideologists took up the afore-mentioned notion of Buddhist materialism and arrived at a theory of Buddhist Marxism. Buddha was a proto-Marx and Ashoka a proto-Lenin. Nirvana was nothing but the ideal, just and classless society. Other and more sensible Buddhist socialists held this view to be a fatal aberration. Marxism, as one modernist writer put it, was "a leaf taken out from the book of Buddhism, [but] a leaf torn out and misread". But all modernists agreed that Buddhism was a social gospel. "A reborn Buddhism....would be a social religion" because the Buddha was not only a religious reformer, launching a revolt in the brahminic temple; he was also a social rebel. Professional historians may feel that the historical Buddha (of whom we know very little at best) was socially and politically a rather conservative figure, but the modernist's need

of social "relevance" makes him take a different approach. No doubt there is something about the Buddhist attitude to life that seems to be incompatible with capitalism and the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. Already Max Weber had noted the greater economic effectiveness of Hindu over Theravada social ethic. Buddhist "indifference", according to Weber, was incompatible with interest in this world, and Buddhist values were an obstacle to purely economic goals of rational accumulation, investment and wealth. The doctrine of karma can also be an obstacle to rational long-term planning and reform. After the malaria epidemic of 1935 a Ceylonese politician defended himself by arguing: "The people are suffering for their karma. A government cannot alter one's karma". Needless to say that this disingenuous remark drew angry protest from the modernists. Whether Buddhist economic ethic is really a relevant factor in the difficulties encountered on the road to development by Burma, Sri Lanka or (in a very different manner) Thailand, is outside the scope of the present paper.

Most Buddhist countries -- whether countries where Buddhism plays a dominant role as the State Religion (Sri Lanka, Thailand) or such where Buddhism, once the State Religion, has been deprived of its role but the majority of the population remains, at least for the time being, Buddhist (as e.g., Burma) -- belong to what is generally called the Third World. We have already briefly touched on the question of the relationship -- if any -- between these countries' development problems and Buddhist economic ethics (viz. the complex of economic motivations as shaped by Buddhist culture). But the history of these countries in the modern age

has been determined also by another factor: politics in the widest sense, by which I mean the struggle for liberation, independence and de-colonisation as well as the political and social power struggles after independence. Unlike Judaism and Islam (to take extreme examples, and avoiding comparison with the geographically and culturally closer and more germane case of Hinduism), Buddhism can be said to have started out without a political doctrine. It certainly possessed no theory for legitimating political power.

Yet in due course there arose Buddhist kingdoms and "polities", and a Buddhist political ethos did develop. (Needless to add that Buddhist kingdoms were, for the greater part of their history, at each other's throats and carrying on wars, much like Christian kingdoms. Wars are evidently not a monopolistic invention of the of the wicked colonialist West). Limitations of space preclude a discussion of the Ashokan paradigm and its offshoots, except for briefly noting the fact that a Buddhist concept of state, polity and society did emerge and that this concept exhibits an interesting complementarity i.e. unity in duality. It presupposes the distinction between the "supra-mundane" aims and legitimations of Buddhism (ideally represented by the Sangha), and the "mundane" requirements of an ordinary Buddhist life. It was the duty of the state to uphold the basic social ideals and values of Buddhism (justice, compassion, care for the suffering and for public well-being in general) and, in a profounder sense, to foster the "supra[~]mundane" values by protecting -- and at times this meant supervising, reforming and 'cleaning up' -- the Sangha. A synthesis, or if you are less

enthusiastic: a compromise, had thus been developed in which a Buddhist polity could combine a sense of Buddhist responsibility towards the world with the Buddhist ideal of total renunciation.

The continuity of this synthesis was shattered by western colonialism and the years of colonial domination. The organic link between state -- in absolute value terms inferior to the Sangha, but in both theory and fact responsible for its purity -- and Buddhism was broken. The result was two-sided. On the one hand the revival of modern Buddhism is, to a large extent, a lay phenomenon. It was initiated by "laymen", many of whom had re-discovered their native Buddhism from which they had been alienated as a result of colonial educational influences. But the re-discovery too was due, to a large extent, to western interest in, and appreciation of Buddhism. On the other hand the Sangha had become more independent or, if you want, more unruly. It had developed political commitments, loyalties and vested interests, but the traditional mechanisms for supervising it and holding it in check had been destroyed. (Burma and the fate of U Nu's experiment in Buddhist socialism may serve as an example).

This may be the point at which a word about the phenomenon of the "political monks" may be appropriate. A Buddhist upasaka is surely not supposed to withdraw from the world. On the contrary, he is supposed to be in the world and to support the Sangha who, in their turn, are definitely expected to renounce the world. Their master and exemplar, the Buddha, was after all a world-conqueror precisely because he was a world-renouncer. My present concern is not with the political role of the Sangha as a whole, or with meddling

and power-hungry individual monks or temple-establishments, but with the fact that monks played a decisive part in anti-colonial liberation movements. The political activity of Buddhist monks in Vietnam is still fresh in everybody's memory. Even more relevant to our immediate purpose is the evaluation of the political activity of monks by some modernists. The Chief Abbot of the Malwatta Vihara, in his enthusiastic Foreword to one of the most vehemently polemical documents of modernism (D.C. Wijayawardhana's The Revolt in the Temple, 1953) proudly and unhesitatingly praised the political role of the Sangha, adding that monks were meant to be not mediators (an obvious dig at the Catholic Church and its priests) "but only [sic!] leaders". Dr. Walpola Rahula's writings seem to reflect the same attitude. This is a far cry from the admission made to me several years ago by a Vietnamese bhikkhu to the effect that situations may arise in which a monk felt in conscience bound to engage in politics, "but then he should disrobe first".

Buddhist modernism, not unlike its Christian counterpart, thus seems to embrace a political theology. But in terms of the Buddhist tradition it is caught in a permanent conflict -- some would prefer to call it dialectic -- with other authoritative elements of that tradition. Buddhism is a universal religion of salvation, yet it is closely associated with contemporary nationalisms. In addition to these more theoretical questions, modernity and the demands generated by it (such as long-term planning, scientific experimental research, pest controls and hygienic measures) often

clash with tradition. For example most modern Buddhists argue that birth-control is legitimate as long as no actual life is destroyed but new life is merely prevented from arising. But Buddhist medical and biological students have qualms about killing mice and rats and guinea-pigs in research laboratories, and Buddhist agricultural and health experts have real problems of conscience when it comes to pest-control and insecticides. Responsibility for the world -- not only for humans but for all sentient beings -- can draw legitimation from Buddhist sources, but its practical application comes into conflict with ever so many rules and deeply ingrained patterns. The concept of a Buddhist polity has historical antecedents which could be fruitful also in the modern situation but which also generate problems that can lead, as recent history has shown, to serious and even total breakdowns. The complementarity Sangha-laity may offer a paradigm for a more differentiated and realistic approach to a unified yet double-tiered value system, but this paradigm is endangered by the fact that the Sangha itself is still struggling to define its role, or rather to re-define its part in the dialectic -- essential to Buddhism -- between total renunciation on the one hand, and responsible contribution to a changing world on the other. Whether the Thai experiment of using monks for the implementation of (limited modernisation programmes -- often quite simply national programmes in the interests of the state -- can be called a success, and if so then by what criteria, is still a debatable point. There is, of course, also the possibility of total separation of religion

(both Sangha and laity) and polity, but in such a way that everyone brings his sense of Buddhist values to the task in hand. It would be the Buddhist equivalent to what in neo-Protestant terminology might be called the Barthian approach. It is a perfectly legitimate Buddhist possibility, as long as it does not degenerate into a Third World version of primitive Machiavellism of the kind expounded to me recently by a Burmese diplomat: religion is something which the masses should fervently hold, but of which the leadership must be free.

Whether "modernism" can help religious traditions survive modernity, adapt to it or adapt it, we are not yet able to say at the present stage. There are problems with which all religions are faced. But Buddhism, at least theoretically, has resources to cope with the questions of modern man that many other traditions lack and which give it a relevance and superiority which many modernist writers have emphasised though their exaggerations have all but obfuscated their main point. But the distance from theory to practice is long, as Buddhists themselves know only too well.

R.J. Zwi Werblowsky

NOTE

I have dealt more fully with the problems discussed in this paper in my book Beyond Tradition and Modernity: Changing Religions in a Changing World (London, 1976). On the problem of modernisation in general see ibid., pp.1-20; on Buddhism, ibid., pp.92-100 and 127-8. To the bibliography given there, several more recent relevant titles should be added e.g., H. Dumoulin and D.C. Maraldo (eds.), Buddhism in the Modern World, 1976; S.J. Tambiah, World Conqueror and World Renouncer, 1976; H. Bechert, Weltflucht oder Weltveränderung: Antworten des Buddhistischen Modernismus auf Fragen unserer Zeit, 1976.