

MATERIALISM IS AT WAR WITH RELIGION

By Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda Nayaka Thero

Materialists maintain that there is no moral resultant of thoughts or actions nor any past or future state of man as a thinking, self-determining entity; man comes into existence merely as the result of material causes, and passes away again into annihilation just like any other material object. Religion, according to them, was invented solely to reconcile the depressed classes to their fate by giving them the delusive hope of a better life beyond the grave. A historical study of the development of religion in all its forms and phases from prehistoric times, however, shows the unscientific nature of this hypothesis; but the theory, as it is at present held by them, does no longer deserve to be considered scientific; it has become a political dogma, precisely on par with the Nazi pseudo-scientific theory of racial superiority.

Materialism, then directs all its attention to the present sphere of existence; man's hope and all his being cannot extend any further beyond the brief spell of his physical existence on this planet. Any system of religion or philosophy therefore must be false if it asserts the importance of moral values or gives promise of a spiritual evolution or a spiritual happiness for living beings.

This creed of Nihilism is one of the systems of false theorising exposed and refuted by the Buddha where the Teacher dealt with the philosophies current in India of His day. Essentially, Dialectical Materialism has nothing new to offer. It stands for retrogression in human thought and it is this fact that must be known and taken into account in choosing between the Buddhist way of life and that sponsored by materialists.

Today, however, there are strong anti-religious ideas prevalent in the world which constitutes a threat to the spiritual life. The world is in the grip of materialistic ideologies based upon the natural laws and principles revealed by science, and there is no religion scientific or rationalistic enough to combat these ideas, except Buddhism. It is vitally important that we should find out how Buddhism stands in relation to the scientific beliefs of the present day, because there is every indication that Western materialism is invading Asia, hitherto the stronghold of spiritual life, and that it is doing so to the detriment of Buddhist civilisation and culture. The strength of materialism, with its great appeal to the modern rationalistic outlook formed by the technical and mechanical advances of civilisation, is a direct result of scientific progress. People all over the world have come to regard civilisation as being the same

things as material progress, and they measure the advance of civilisation by the amount of purely material benefit it can show. The present trend of world events reveals this view to be a fallacy, but there are few people farsighted enough to acknowledge the fact, and because of the prevalence of this quite erroneous idea there is now a great conflict between the religious mode of thought represented by the great moral and spiritual creeds of former days, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, and the modern skeptical disbelief in everything of higher spiritual nature, which goes by the name of "materialism". That conflict is growing day by day, and it has come to assume a political as well as an intellectual aspect, since materialism is now powerfully represented as a political ideology, which sets up Dialectical Materialism as its "religion" and is striving to abolish all other forms of belief from the world.

The Chief reason why materialism has grown to be so powerful an influence in the modern world is because, as we shall see, science has proved so many of the doctrines of religion to be unacceptable, so that nowadays there are very few educated and intelligent people who can wholeheartedly subscribe to them. Those who do still hold to their faith have been forced by the advance of knowledge to alter and modify their ideas a great deal from the original doctrines taught by their religion. Some religions, to give the most striking example from the scientifically - progressive West, have had to admit that many of their beliefs were wrong. They have had, within the last century or so, to retract from their position with respect to many of their principal dogmas. Yet some of these beliefs were at one time held to be so essential as articles of faith that people were excommunicated for refusing to believe them. From the nature of some of these primitive beliefs of these religions it is clear that the founders of some religion were not endowed with any deeper insight into the real laws of the universe than the most ignorant of their contemporaries, and that therefore their claim to be directly inspired by God is not supported by any evidence whatever.

Apart from the theoretical aspect of the question there is also the all—important political side. Materialism is at war with religion partly because in the past certain forms of State religions have been used as instruments for terrorising the people with threats to eternal damnation in order to keep them in submission to authority. At the same time it has, under such regimes, been employed as a means of keeping the depressed and ignorant peasantry contented with their unfortunate position in this world by promising them happiness in heaven. But this has never been universally true by any means, for in many countries religion has gone side by side with social progress, where it has been in conflict with science.

There is no reason to believe that either of them had studied Buddhism or any other Oriental religion, or that they took any interest in Asiatic social problems. They were essentially European revolutionaries with a Western materialistic outlook, and with no interest in, or sympathy for, the needs of Asian people. Their successors, who have made their anti-religious slogan into a kind of religious dogma, now use it to attack all religions indiscriminately.

So far, we must admit that the first round in the fight between materialism and Western religious ideas goes to materialism; and the evidence of a concrete scientific nature appears to be on the side of the materialist. Religion can call nothing to its aid but a body of traditional belief of legends and primitive lore backed up by wild and conflicting doctrines taught by rival mystical systems each of which maintains that its own view is correct and all the others false. The modern educated man pays no attention to these claims; to him they are mere fairy tale relics of a past age belonging to the infancy of human thought. All the benefits that have come to humanity, he points out, have come from materialistic science, the work of human hands and brains, not the gift by any god. It is man himself who has raised his status from savagery to civilisation; it is man who has harnessed the laws of nature for his benefit, and similarly it is he who has introduced the concepts of mercy, charity and justice into the world by a slow and painful process of development, not by any divine inspiration. It cannot be long before every obsolete religious idea is swept away before the advance of knowledge, and rationalism will come to take the place of blind faith.

This kind of thing may pass as truth with simple undeveloped minds but it will not do for those who test everything by the highest standards of reason. To present it for the serious consideration of a modern educated man is an affront to his intelligence.

This is a viewpoint that simply cannot be ignored; it is strong, too firmly grounded in factual knowledge and experience to be brushed aside. Unless religion can answer it, there is no hope for the survival of spiritual values.

The supernatural foundation of religion is no longer capable of supporting ethical systems in the modern world. Buddhism is the religion that supplies the rationalistic element that the twentieth century demands for any belief in spiritual values.

It has been found that progress in the material sense is not necessarily accompanied by growth of wisdom or deeper understanding of spiritual values. Mankind now has command of tremendous material forces, but does not know how to use this power for beneficial ends. Instead, the tendency of man is still

to employ whatever knowledge he has gained in the oppression and destruction of his fellows. The madness of greeds for possessions and for power, points a finger not towards perfection but towards self-destruction, and the gifts of science are only being used to hasten humanity on the fatal road. As H. G. Wells, once firm believer in evolution through knowledge, pointed out shortly before his death as a disillusioned man, the human being is like a clever monkey, possessing dangerous toys, which it does not know how to handle safely, or how to put to a good and constructive purpose. Man's spiritual growth has not kept pace with his increased command of technical knowledge and he is like a lunatic loose in a power-house.

Freedom of selection between right and wrong, between ignorance and knowledge, implies the highest degree of personal responsibility. Under the influence of materialism, humanity is rapidly losing sight of spiritual values and is choosing the path of darkness and ignorance. What is needed today is a return to the Wisdom of the past, which is also the highest wisdom of the future - the wisdom that belongs to all ages and all the races of mankind. Without that there can be no lasting peace or certainly of progress for individuals or nations.