

NATIONALISM, RELIGION AND IDEOLOGY

By Dr. Walpola Rahula

There is a dualism in man, nature and the universe – the positive and the negative, the good and the evil, day and night (the ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ in Taoism) – and this dualism exists even in emptiness or the void.

Thus, whether nationalism, patriotism, religion and ideologies are virtues, or seem to be virtues, depends upon one’s development. This brings to mind a popular Zen saying – “Before you study Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; while you are studying Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers; but once you have had enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers again rivers.” Not clear at first sight! And this is what it is, or seems to be.

Dr. Walpola Rahula poses an interesting question here. “Can patriotism, nationalism or religion ever develop into this level of regarding all nations and cultures with the same kind of love, affection and respect?” Man being what he is – a dualistic creature, I think we can only hope so.

The article below is good food for thought. It was the speech delivered at the Convocation of the University of Kelaniya Sri Lanka by Dr. Rahula himself in his capacity as Chancellor of the University. He is known internationally as an eminent Buddhist scholar and author. His articles and writings have appeared in almost every issue of the “Voice of Buddhism”.

Ed

What virtues Nationalism, Patriotism, Religion and Ideologies seem to be! When are they ever questioned? They seem to be eternal verities on which all our lives are hinged. Nevertheless, when misconceived and wrongly grasped, they become the source of communal riots, religious conflicts, regional or racial fights and international wars.

Now look again and you will see that a person has to be born somewhere or other in this world. When men and women are born, they inherit automatically a country, a nationality, a religion, a political creed or ideology, a language, a social group or a caste. They choose not one of these things as preferable to another. One could say that all these circumstances are accidental.

But a person gets attached to these things through his idea of self, his selfish egoism, and behaves as if he had, out of premeditation, selected them as best for himself. He identifies himself with these things and takes refuge in them. Without them he is nothing; he feels empty and helpless. So in order to protect himself, in order to shield himself, even to make himself important, he begins to glorify them, to extol them and to worship them.

If someone gets up in public and says of himself or herself, ‘I am great, I am noble, I am excellent’, very likely that person will become a butt of justifiable ridicule. But if such a person declares in public that his or her nation, race or religion is noble, great and excellent which is also a way of self-glorification – that person is likely to be looked up to by far too many people as a nationalist and a patriot. The meanness and pettiness of such speakers can be cloaked under the guise of patriotism and nationalism.

The Romans, whose legal system is still studied by students of law in Sri Lanka, had an adage:

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori

“It is a fine and fitting thing to die for one’s fatherland.” Such impressive and seductive dicta as these have led people to violence and war, though it has often been pointed out that it is much harder to **live** for one’s country than to die for it.

No one suggests that any person should ignore or disregard his or her own country or nationality or religion. The enigma inherent in patriotism, nationalism and all such commitments is: Where should one draw the line? Patriotism means to be **for** one’s own country; nationalism means to be **for** one’s own nation. There is nothing reprehensible in that; it seems a good thing. But very soon to be **for** one thing is to be **against** something else. To be **for** one’s own country or nation should not mean to be **against** another person’s country or nation. Rather, one should be **for** the other person’s country or nation just as one is **for** one’s own country or nation. A person who has no love for the country or nation of others will not in reality love properly his own country or nation.

We can learn an important lesson from Buddhist ethics here. In the cultivation and development of loving-kindness (**metta**) for all living beings, one begins by loving oneself, which is the first and easiest step. To love oneself does not mean at all to hate others. When we love ourselves wisely and rightly, then we try to abstain from all kinds of evil and follow the path of righteousness. Then we are not in conflict with ourselves and society, and we are in harmony with ourselves and with the world around us. The next step for the person who

cultivates **metta** is to love those near and dear to him, which is also easy. The third stage is to love one's acquaintances – not very difficult either. The fourth and last stage is to love one's enemies; this is very difficult but possible now with one's moral and spiritual development and experience. When loving-kindness is fully and perfectly developed in a person, he or she, does not see a difference between himself/herself, his/her dear ones, his/her acquaintance and enemies. This is not just a fantasy; it is a state of reality which a human being can achieve and attain.

Can patriotism, nationalism or religion ever develop into this level of regarding all nations and cultures with the same kind of love, affection and respect? Perhaps people like Mahatma Gandhi or even Ananda K. Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka were patriots or nationalists who loved and respected all other nations and cultures while loving their own nation, country and culture.

One has to have discernment, and this requires careful thought. In all these cases it is better to reflect and not to lump people into categories. To categorize is to separate into distinct and different units and when that is done one cannot see the whole of life which is a continuous process, an interaction. To categorize is to see in fragments. This obstructs seeing the whole. This is true of all things – nature, beauty, or humanity.

There are extremely few people in this world who have deliberately chosen one particular religion after a careful study of the various religious systems. The vast majority of us stick to the religion into which we are born. Just because I am born into a religion, is it right or is it fair for me to say that my religion is the only true religion and that all others are false? Can there be anything more petty-minded or narrow-minded than such a conclusion as this? Simply because I was born a Buddhist, is it right for me to say that Buddhism is the only true religion and that all others are false? If I were born a Christian, should I therefore say that Christianity is the only true religion and that all other religions are false? Or if I had been born a Hindu or a Muslim, should I then say that this religion alone is true and all others are false? Devotion to one's own religion is one thing, and can be a good thing; but devotion to our own religion should never blind us and lead us to condemn other religions.

As the great Buddhist Emperor Asoka of India aptly said, nearly two thousand three hundred years ago: 'One should not honour only one's own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honour others' religions for this or that reason. So doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honours his own religion and condemns other religions, does so indeed through devotion

to his own religion thinking: “I will glorify my own religion.” But on the contrary, in doing so he injures his own religion more gravely. So **concord is good. Let all listen**, and be willing to listen to doctrines professed by others. (Rock edict XII)

In this context it should be mentioned that fanatic and uncritical adherence to any ideology – political, economic or social – is an evil of the same class as religious or national bigotry. These are all views, opinions, theories (**ditthi**) to which people tend to hold fast blindly, with attachment, saying: “This alone is true and right, others are false and wrong.” (**idam eva saccam, mogham aññam**).

What the Buddha says with regard to all such ideologies and views is very much to the point: ‘To be attached to one thing (to a certain view or ideology) and to look down upon other things (views or ideologies) as inferior – this the wise men call a fetter’ (**Suttanipata**, verse 798). So humanity is in fetters, in bondage.

This is not to advocate anarchy or chaos. This only invites us to investigate and understand reality, to see things as they are, without deceiving ourselves with our own fantasies, with our own mental projections. Seeing things as they are can never produce chaos or anarchy; it can only produce discipline, order, harmony and peace. We tend to be frightened of reality and to close our eyes to it. We prefer to see things as we want to see them and not as they are.

Therefore, you young people, after your years of training in a university and now on the threshold of new careers, should test all things. Use your knowledge to try to see things as they are. Do not accept what I say, or what anyone else says, because they or I may be regarded as the voice of authority. There is no good reason why anyone should accept anything unless that one has, to the best of one’s ability and knowledge, investigated and proved it.

I am sure that everyone at this convocation wishes you young people careers of useful and satisfying work, useful and satisfying to yourselves and to all who seek the good of society in general.