Buddhism, Politics, and Statecraft

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Buddhism viewed generically as a broad church is a religio-philosophical system which presents a world view. This understanding of Buddhism, it is argued, among other considerations, has a bearing on church and state relations. In exploring aspects of religion and statecraft, the Paper adopts a historical-doctrinal viewpoints rather than one based on popular Buddhism, i.e., the day to day practice viewed historically. The social and political philosophy manifested in matters of governance was framed within a spirit of humanism markedly evident in the Edicts of the famed Indian Emperor Asoka. In many respects Buddhist ideals of statecraft embodying principles and practices such as the rule of law, deliberative democracy, procedures of governance and the social policies of the Asokan welfare state bear a striking similarity to Enlightenment values in Europe. This remarkable consequence of East-West dichotomies, the paper concludes, may create the space for a civilizational dialogue, not a 'clash of civilizations.'

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I. Introduction

The practice of politics has been closely interwoven with other activities in social and political institutions. Politics, as a specific type of human activity, is based on a form of association pertaining to the 'accumulation, organization and marshalling of power to govern and control the principal institutions of society' (Harris 1989a: 1). In this sense, politics, as having a bearing on the science of government or the theory and practice of statecraft, has long been associated with the 'Abrahamic faiths'—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—which regard the goal of salvation as a matter of revelation. These theistic faiths identify the affirmation of a God as 'a supreme being or an individual transcendent to the world [and suggests] that human authenticity is authorized by [an] ultimate reality' (Gamwell 1995: 31).

Historically the Abrahamic faiths, according to the religious tenets of each particular faith, have been predisposed to influence the mundane world including the political and social order in different ways (Arjomand 1993). They have sought to 'reconstruct the mundane world ... acccording to the appropriate transcendental vision' (Eisenstad 1993: 15). In the case of Christianity, it was only with the advent of modernity in the age of imperialism and industrialization that 'secularization' or the separation of church and state since the 18th century has been taken for granted in the western world. But, given the changing pattern of church-state relations in recent times, Berger, a long time advocate of 'secularisation theory,' now argues that 'modernity does not have to be inimical to religion' (Berger 2005).

But, how does Buddhism, often characterized as an 'other worldly religion with 'a gnostic distaste for the worldly order' (Harris1989b) fare on the broad question of religion and state relations? Before endeavouring to answer this we need to pose a prior question which revolves around the often debated question whether Buddhism, being non-theistic, should be classified as a 'religion.' The idea of a 'religion' is generally associated with a comprehensive set of beliefs and concepts about the nature of the ultimate reality that gives meaning and purpose to the lives of those who adhere to a

particular faith.

On these grounds, it could be well argued that Buddhism too warrants being identified as a religion. For instance, the Buddhist notion of the supreme state of Nirvana—the ultimate to be achieved as the goal of salvation provides a spiritual dimension for the individual i.e., a particular self-understanding in terms of a larger transcendental reality. Buddhism is distinctive as a religion in that it sought to sanction or authorise the day to day life of an individual without positing a 'personal god' or a transcendent/supreme being. This understanding of Buddhism as a 'religion' also entertains a Durkheimian sense of the 'sacred' and the 'experience of the sacred' in a manner different to the theistic religions (Ling 1973; Kolakwaski 1982).

Buddhism, however, is best characterised as a metaphysical/philosophical or a religio-philosophical system which presents a total view of the world and man's place in it, including a prescription for the ordering of human affairs. However, in considering the socio-cultural dimensions of Buddhism, we need to acknowledge that from its earliest days of origin in India, Buddhism has proved to be remarkably flexible and adaptable to different social and geographical environments. Historically, this 'tolerance and liberality of its thought' (Pratt 1928 quoted in Jayatilleke 1967) accounts in part for the three Great Traditions of Buddhism or Schools'[1]—*Theravada*, *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana*. It is perhaps nowhere better evident than in the present day with the emergence of New Buddhism and 'Western Buddhism' (Batchelor 1994; Brazier 1999), as well as the Dalit Buddhist movement (*Navayana*) in India inspired by Ambedkar, following the mass conversion of Hindu untouchables in 1956 (Omvedt 2005).

Of the three Schools or Traditions of Buddhism, *Theravada*, the oldest of these is associated with Early Buddhism (Southern Buddhism), and is found mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia and Thailand. The modes of practice of this tradition give primacy to self-transformation and emphasise the practice

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1 Early Buddhism, or Canonical Buddhism, refers to the compendium of the Buddhist Teaching in the Pali Canon (see Rhys Davids 1977 and Ling 1981a). For Mahayana scriptures which were mainly in Sanskrit (see Suzuki 1963; Williams 1989). The Vajriyana or Tibetan Buddhism is a later School with an emphasis on ceremonial practices and ritual (see Powers 1995 and Tucci 1980).

of meditation, in attaining liberation or salvation through one's own effort. The *Mahayana* tradition (Eastern Buddhism), though originating in India, exists mainly in countries extending from China, Vietnam and Korea to Japan and documented in texts such as the *Lotus Sutta*. The Mahayana, unlike the Theravada tradition is more communal by virtue of its emphasis on social transformation and social activism. The third dominant School or Tradition of *Vajrayana* (Northern or Tibetan Buddhism) shares much in common with the other two Traditions, and is associated mainly with Tibet, Nepal, Butan, Mongolia, and parts of China.

Whilst there are marked variations, of theory and practice, between and within different forms of Buddhism, in their understanding of Buddhism as a religious system, there remains a solid core common to all the doctrinal renderings of Buddhism (Gethin 1998). Conceptually this common core is enshrined in the three signata or fundamental axiomatic principles of the phenomenal world—*anicca*, *anatta*, *dukkha* (impermanence, no self, and suffering) and the Four Noble Truths: the existential fact of suffering its cause, its cessation; and the path leading to its cessation. In short, Buddhism is a religion with a broad church based on an underlying commonality of practice around the shared foundations of the Buddhist ethic, prescriptive of moral virtues governing wholesome actions.

Focussing specifically on the analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and Politics (or the State) one can consider this from either one of two perspectives: doctrinal or in terms of popular Buddhism.[2] The doctrinal or textual approach first looks at Buddhism in terms of how it is portrayed in the classical teachings, and refers primarily to the expositions contained in such historical texts as the compendium of Early Buddhism. Popular Buddhism, or 'cultural Buddhism' (King 1996) highlights the practice of Buddhism in the daily life of its adherents, and manifest in local expression of religious customs and practices (Gombrich and Obeysekera 1988; Ling

2 This differentiation is similar to that proposed by Redfield (1956) between the 'Great' and the 'Little' traditions, which is applicable to all the living religions. Others such as Evers (1965) and Ames (1964) reject this distinction. See Ling (1973) for an appraisal of these points of view in relation to Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

1981). Here, one takes a distinctly sociological perspective locating Buddhism more as a social and cultural phenomenon in countries where the majority of the populace are adherents of the Buddhist faith (e.g., Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and Laos).

In adopting a 'popular Buddhism' point of view, one is confined to country case studies with a view to locating the practice of Buddhism within a given socio-historical context (Harper 1964; Harris 1989a). Taking this approach, Sri Lanka, for instance, stands out as a Buddhist country with a long history of maintaining a close interactive relationship between the monastic order, the state, and wider community, which has continued from the colonial times to the present day (Phadnis 1976; Seneviratne 1999; Bartholomeuz 1989). Likewise, a distinct feature of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand is the link between state and religion, which is legitimated by the constitution and the people (Sukumaran 1977; Swearer 1970).

More generally, however, there are marked differences with respect to statecraft, political institutions and practices in contemporary Buddhist countries, i.e., where the majority are followers of Buddhism. These variations clearly reflect the different socio-historical circumstances of each country such as the extent to which external influences arising from colonialism, globalisation, or modernisation have shaped the historical character of religious institutions and religious practices (Scheter 1967). Clearly a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism and politics requires an exhaustive comparative study which is a task beyond the limited confines of this essay. Instead, the focus here will be primarily on an exposition and analysis of the political dimension of Buddhism with reference to the historical texts, the standard doctrinal Buddhist literature. In adopting this perspective we avoid conflating 'disparate and historically distinct cultures and political systems of Asia' (Harris 1989b: 1).

This more textual and historical account of Buddhism and politics will show above all, that Buddhism was equally concerned with the mundane and transcendental worlds. More specifically, it will endeavour to demonstrate how key features of the lay approaches to governance were a derivative from the

logic and rationale of monastic governance. The principles of lay governance were most clearly evident in the theory and practice of statecraft of Emperor Asoka—described in some quarters as the 'greatest king' (Wells 1946)—who pioneered the classic model of a 'Buddhist kingdom.' No doubt the Asokan model of governance was to become an 'ideal type' adopted in different ways by other Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia and to a lesser extent China, Mongolia, Japan, and Korea.

II. Buddhism－A Socio-Political Perspective

1. Early Indian Experience

Looked at historically, Buddhism outlined 'a far reaching and original' compendium of ideas, a religio-philosphic system, which was 'subversive of the religion of the day' (Rhys Davids 1896). For this reason some maintain that Buddhism was essentially an Indian system 'which grew out of the intellectual work of [the Buddha's] predecessors' (Rhys Davids 1896: 76). Buddhist teachings were formulated at a time of profound social and economic change and turmoil in Indian society. This era of early Indian history was marked by new forms of social and economic relations built around trade and agriculture, and was closely associated with the rise of urbanism and a new mercantile community.[3]

The new social order now included an increasingly dominant group, the new rich 'middle class' of landowning farmers and merchants, many of whom were the chief patrons of Buddhism. These patrons of the Buddha were imbued with a spirit of individualism bordering on selfishness, which not only challenged the orthodoxy of the Brahmin social order but also presented an intellectual and philosophical challenge to the Buddha.

However, this Buddhist thinking sat uneasily in the context of the social and political institutions of traditional society, grounded in an institutional

3 Chakravarthy (1996), Wagel (1966), and Uppreti (1997) document the social and political context in which Buddhism flourished in India. See also Thapar (2002).

fabric based on a caste-based society (*varna-jati*) linked to the Vedas. The emergent social order reacted strongly against the rigidity and the dominance of a culture which denied individual autonomy, human freedoms and legitimated inequalities. In particular, the new urban mercantilism rejected this hierarchical ordering of society in terms of a divinely ordained sacrosanct social structure made up of four social classes—*kshatriya*, *brahmins*, *vaishya* and *sudras* (nobles, brahmins, traders and work people, and the outcasts).

What we see here is the extent to which Buddhist ideas and its philosophical rationale endeavoured to cater to the needs and interests of an agrarian/trade oriented society in a new more urban/secular social environment. The Buddha virtually became the spokesperson of the new urban based merchant class in rejecting Brahmin orthodox, particularly the religious justification of social inequalities arising from the status ordering of human relations. Interestingly, the Buddha's preference for a more open society was characteristic of what prevailed in the smaller tribal oligarchies (*gana sangha* or clan republics) than the larger monarchical kingdoms (Kosala and Magadha).

The smaller tribal oligarchies or confederacies, particularly the *Vajjian* confederacy, proved to be a fertile catchment for the Buddha. According to Ghosal (1959), the functional and utilitarian social practices of the *Vajjian* clan republics in promoting happiness and prosperity were imbued with a sense of public spirit, pragmatic forms of governance and moral rectitude. This more open liberal political culture which also included respect for elders, women, and holy persons, was more congenial and receptive to the teachings of the Buddha.

But as it turned out, the Buddha, by acting in close accord with groups such as the *Vajjians*, was cast not just as a religious teacher with a new philosophy, but a social critic, a revolutionary social theorist. The Buddha was, indeed, a social reformer, reminiscent of a Martin Luther in Christendom, who dared to challenge the Brahmin orthodoxy on such issues as an omnipotent creator or a divinely revealed social and political order. Assuming that both the Roman Catholic Church and Brahmanism are 'sacrificial systems' [which]

'places the essence of religion in sacrifices' (Clarke 1869: 715), Buddhism, by stimulating 'a process of self-cleansing' (Chaitanya 1975: 89) bears comparison with Protestantism arising out of Catholicism. This led many early students of Buddhism in the late 19th century to characterise Buddhism as the 'Protestantism of the East' (Clarke 1869) in that Buddhism was seen as a 'critic and complement to the reigning orthodox of Brahminism' (Deakin 1893).

This led some scholars to regard Buddhism simply as a variant of the classical Hindu Vedantic tradition on the grounds that 'in all essentials Buddhism and Brahmanism form a single system' (Coomaraswamy 1964: 221). Accordingly, Hindu scholars often cast the Buddha as an *Avatar*—an incarnate of the God Vishnu—who only sought to bring about a reformation of Brahmin religious practices such as those pertaining to sacrificial rites. In rejecting this interpretation others such as the Dalit theorists regard Buddhism as an independent moral and social philosophy. These theorists see Buddhism as offering a more liberal and humanistic alternative to the classical Vedantic tradition associated with Brahmanism, one which offered a far more radical and revolutionary creed of social conduct (Omvedt 2005).

The philosophy and political ideas which evolved during the reign of Emperor Asoka (208 BCE - 239 BCE), heavily influenced by Buddhist ideas, sought to challenge the orthodoxy of Indian social and political theorizing (Ling 1973; Thapar 2002). The classical theory of statecraft in early India was based on the Vedas, and included such notions as the divine origin of rulers, the absolute power of the monarch, and the superiority of the upper caste—the Brahmins. These ideas, characteristic of Hindu philosophy, were well documented in Hindu mythology in such works as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* (Jayasuriya 1997). Later, during the reign of Chandragupta (Asoka's grandfather) these Brahminic ideas of politics and statecraft were given formal expression in the writings of the influential political theorist, Kautilya around the 3rd century (see his magnum opus, the *Arhtasastra*). A central feature of Kautilya's political philosophy was the justification offered for a monarch's absolute power and authority including the use of coercion

and violence in matters of governance.

The art of government for Kautilya rested primarily, but not exclusively on the exercise of force for the pursuit of material interests and also the maintenance of order (Armojanad 1993). As a political theorist Kautilya was very much in the mould of a Machiavelli for whom 'might or what was expedient was right' (Jayatilleke 1967). This political credo stood in sharp contrast to the implicit theory and practice of the Buddhist approach to statecraft which was based on the wheel of moral righteousness and singularly based on non violence. This was what subsequently influenced Asoka in his approach to governance which was clearly inspired by Buddhist notions of social and political theory (Ling 1973). A later Mahayana text (*Ariyasatya Parivarta Sutta*) not only commends the avoidance of war and violence, but also encourages the resort to negotiations and strong alliances in matters of conflict resolution (Harvey 2000).

But, barring a few notable exceptions (e.g., the work of Jayatilleke 196 7), the Buddhist attitude to politics received scant mention in the Buddhist literature, as well as the scholarly work of political theorists. This lacunae of Buddhist scholarship has, however, been rectified by the recent work of a new breed of scholars associated with the Dalits in India (Omvedt 2005). Foremost among these is the political scientist, Kancha Ilaiah (2002) who has carved out a new territory of Buddhist scholarship by emphasising the 'this-worldly' rationalistic nature of Buddhist philosophy.[4] This new Buddhist scholarship documents lucidly the extent to which the Buddha has strong claims to be regarded a 'political philosopher' in addition to being an original religious thinker (Omvedt 2001). This mode of theorising, contrary to scholars such as Max Weber (1966), stands in sharp contrast to the widely held view that Buddhism is primarily as an 'other worldly' religion concerned with personal salvation (Gombrich and Obeysekera 1988; Queen and King 1996).

By contrast, the Buddha, as portrayed by Ilaiah (2002) and others, stands out not only as a great social reformer but also as a political thinker

4 The defining work of the Sri Lankan Buddhist philosopher (Jayatilleke 1967) has been further developed by the Dalit scholars (followers of Ambedkar's Buddhism in India). Sangharakshita (1986) documents this recent work on Buddhist political philosophy. Also Ilaiah (2002) and Omvedt (2001, 2005).

(if not a 'political philosopher') who sought to 'reform and humanize the mercantile economy, the patriarchal family and the monarchical state [by challenging] Brahminical political theorists' (Omvedt 2001). Admittedly, the claim that the Buddha was a 'political philosopher' remains a contested issue mainly because there is no clear evidence that the Buddha attempted to develop an explicit political philosophy or to formulate a distinct form of political practice. The general consensus is that the Buddha's teachings (the dhamma), without necessarily formerly outlining a political philosophy in abstract terms, nevertheless contained profound insights of a social and political nature (Ling 1981a, 1985).

The political dimension of Buddhist teachings though not systematically formulated as in the exposition of Buddhist philosophy and psychology—the *Abhidhamma*[5] is best understood as an offshoot of the more clearly well formulated expositions of Buddhist social and moral philosophy set out to accompany what was essentially an ethic of 'human liberation' (Swaris 1999). The exposition relating to a Buddhist social philosophy may be readily discerned primarily from four Discourses[6] portraying the kind of society which is morally acceptable and logically defensible in terms of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism. All these normative prescriptions are framed within a spirit of scientific humanism and commended to those who wish to govern in accord with the Buddhist teachings and abiding by the 'Middle Way.'

Buddhist social philosophy, in brief, presented a systematic and functional framework for fashioning a pattern of social relations that was clearly attuned to the needs and demands of the new social milieu, especially the political culture of the rising 'new middle class' at the time of the Buddha (Thapar 2002; Swaris 1999). In these circumstances, the Buddha sought to restrain the growing spirit of individualism characteristic of this social climate by proposing a more ethical and humane way of characterising

5 Jayasuriya (1963) and Gethin (1998) provide a good introduction to the Abhidhamma which constitutes a later addition as the Third Basket of the Buddhist Canon.

6 For an exposition of the Discourses in the Buddhist texts on the social dimensions of Buddhism—the *Kutadanta*, *Agganna*, *Cakkavatti*, and *Sigalovada Suttas*—see Ling (1981a). These were later expanded by Mahayana theorists such as Nargarjuna. Emperor Asoka warrants comparison with Emperor Constantine who used the Christian religion as the official creed of the Roman Empire.

the place of the individual in society. This, among other considerations, included a concern for others and acceptance of difference, as for instance, in the positive attitudes to social differentiation of 'race' or caste (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke 1958). This way of thinking was also reflected in the Buddhist attitudes towards other religions which showed a greater willingness to accept other faiths (Jayatilleke 1975). Confronted with the religious pluralism[7] of the times, the Buddha readily acknowledged 'every form of [rival religious beliefs] as a possessor of some degree of Truth' (Pratt 1928, quoted in Jayatilleke 1975).

2. Monastic Governance－A Form of 'Deliberative Democracy'

Many of the crucial features of the Buddhist approach to social philosophy and political governance derive from the principles and practices governing the organisation of the monastic community (the *sangha*). A distinctive feature of the monastic community, over and above the social and moral dimension of Buddhist practice, was its rules and procedures for the management of the monastic community. The monastic community was governed and regulated by a well formulated code of conduct—the *Vinaya*—which formed an integral part of the Buddhist Compendium, enumerating the rules and procedures governing the structure and functioning of the monastic community.

According to this mode of governance, the brotherhood of monks (*sangha* and later nuns) was established on 'democratic foundations with a constitution and code of law governing their conduct' (Jayatilleke 1967). The day to day affairs of the *sangha* were governed by a liberal culture of equalitarian inter personal relations. There was no formal hierarchy or dynastic favouritism in the monastic order. It was not social status but other characteristics such as the seniority of a monk, determined by the date of ordination, that guided inter personal relations within the community. In fact, the Buddha's own son when ordained as a monk took his place in the

7 The *Brahmajala* Discourse No 3 which enumerates some 62 types of 'religions and philosophies' (Walshe 1987).

monastic community according to seniority.

The monastic code of conduct stipulates that the individual life of a monk is immersed in a Brotherhood—a community of persons ideally seeking liberation from greed, hatred, delusion, folly, conceit, and ignorance—and living in communal harmony, with communal property and a bare minimum of one's private material possessions. In addition to pursuing spiritual needs of the monastic order, the monastic code specifically indicates that the *sangha* has a responsibility towards the wider society of lay persons who cater or assist the community in meeting their daily needs. In short, there was a deep sense of social responsibility, of caring and compassion underlying the mutually constituted relationship between the monks and lay followers.

This form of monastic governance contained many features of statecraft present in the self governing confederacies and republic rather than the large monarchical kingdoms of he North, such as Kosala and Magadha. Whereas the monarchical kingdoms were guided by Brahmanic notions of a divinely sanctioned superior class of rulers, the self governing confederacies had much in common with the logic of the humanistic Buddhist ethic. For instance, it is reported that on one occasion the Buddha exhorted the citizens of the republic of *Licchavis* or *Vajjis* of Vasili who were threatened by a rampaging aggressive monarch (*Ajatasatru*) from one of the large kingdoms to act prudently and skilfully using more democratic forms of conflict resolution. The Buddha suggested to the republics that if they wished to maintain their independence they should strengthen their more democratic forms of governance. These include holding regular and frequent assemblies to discuss affairs of state collectively with each other, endeavouring to carry out the day to day tasks of governance in harmony, and paying due heed to established practices and customs (Mishra 2004).[8] This normative code of conduct included the primacy attached to human freedoms and the equality of all human beings was more characteristic of governance in the self governing

8 Mishra (2004), in his succinct and readable account of this episode, draws pointed attention to an inherent conservatism in governance (e.g., paying heed to custom0 alongside other more liberal features such as participatory decision making. This indicates the functional and pragmatic nature of governance.

confederacies. The principle of equality in Buddhism, applied equally to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and was a governing principle in matters of statecraft.

However, this 'radical egalitarianism' (Swaris 1995) and the idea of equality in a universal community became somewhat problematic in relation to the issue of gender equity that arose on the question of the ordination of women as nuns. This was most apparent when the Buddha took some time in agreeing to admit women into the monastic order, and, in fact, had to be persuaded by Ananda, one of his trusted disciples. He agreed to their reasoned arguments but with some conditions attached, namely, that nuns will agree to abide by additional rules which did not apply to the order of monks. In accepting 'women as spiritual equals,' the Buddha, while not discounting the fact that their social role was culturally prescribed, still provided women with avenues of self expression.

The fact that 'the Buddha is often seen as the most enlightened classical philosopher on the role of women' (Coomaraswamy 1984: 80), testifies to the Buddha's pragmatism in his willingness to entertain and consider rationally dissenting points of view more generally on such questions as the role of women in the monastic order. This flows from the Buddhist philosophical stance that 'the ought is not an absolute command or necessity but a pragmatic call to recognise the empirical existence and adopt solutions to whatever problems associated with it' (Kalupahana 1995a: 45) in accord with the moral code. Here again, we note the remarkable commonality between the modes of governance of the monastic community and the self-governing republics.

Furthermore, the liberal and humane culture of the clan republics was mutually supportive of the monastic community as they were more inclined to a 'democratic' non authoritarian[9] style of governance, characterised by such features as a regard for majority opinions in decision making, regular meetings to conduct affairs of state, etc. There is no doubt that the more liberal political culture of the *gana sanghas* or tribal republics was central in

9 Fromm (1955), among others, identifies Buddhism as a non authoritarian religion.

formulating the nature and character of the monastic community as a social organization. Overall there is no doubt that this model of governance was clearly attuned to the needs of peace and harmony in a small community with a view to maintaining long term stability and continuity as a well knit social organization.

To this end, the Buddha gave pride of place to communal deliberation, face to face negotiation, regular meetings of the community, and encouragement to engage in free and frank discussion. Given the value placed on reason and rational thought, consensus was to be achieved by a process of reasoned choice rather than a blind belief in a prescriptive code. There was clearly a consensus in collective decision making arrived at in accord with 'Constitution' of the Community, its code of conduct rules, conventions and form of practice. At least within the monastic community a strong ethos of debate and discussion amongst equals was recognised.

In an oft-quoted text (the *Kalama Sutta*), the Buddha advises those with doubts about the truth to discover the truth themselves by a process of rational inquiry untrammelled by faith or tradition.[10] By encouraging disputants to adopt a dispassionate and critical attitude, employing logic and reason in resolving religious and philosophical disputes, this went sharply against convention. The *Kalama Sutta* or the *Charter of Free Inquiry* (Bhikku Soma 1963) drew pointed attention to the importance of rational thought, which preceded the European Enlightenment by many centuries. This also led to the Buddha being labelled in some quarters as a 'sceptic' for adopting a non dogmatic cautious attitude governed by reason.[11] Some like Batchelor (1997), characterise Buddhism as an agnostic faith, and Sen (2005) even regards agnosticism as a 'foundational characteristic of Buddhism.'

This form of governance was conducive to maintaining a plurality of discourse, more akin to the Socratic method of dialogue than the prevalent

10 Evans (2007) has offered an interesting argument suggesting that this treatise extolling the merits of rational inquiry can be subject to one of two interpretations—epistemological or ethical.

11 Gallop (2007) alludes to the agnosticism of Buddhism as particularly appealing to Western intellectuals, He points out that Batchelor (1997) aligns Buddhism with Thomas Huxley's definition of agnosticism as a method of resolving differences on the grounds of demonstrable reason.

prescriptive doctrinaire approach of the Brahminical code. The underlying logic and rationale of governance was that it was a form of 'deliberative democracy' which was participatory and permitted accommodating differences of opinion and even dissent without imposing majoritarian decision making principles. Irreconcilable dissent as that which occurred at meetings of the several Councils of the monastic fraternity (e.g., at the Third Council during the reign of Asoka) led to an amicable agreement to differ and the formation of different sects.

III. Governance and the State: A Buddhist Perspective

1. The Asokan Model of Statecraft

The Buddhist model of monastic governance was destined to have a profound impact on social and political thought in Asia, especially in Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. This legacy was transmitted through Emperor Asoka with his core Buddhist ideas, principles, and practices being the template for formulating his unique form of political governance embodying a code of secular law.[12] The rationale for Emperor Asoka's model of governance, though primarily inspired by Buddhist practices, also bore the impact of the historical legacy of modes of governance inherited mainly from the self governing confederacies or tribal republics. These democratic principles of governance, for instance, were enunciated in the Vajjian constitution and included a detailed exposition of the structure, and mode of operation of the Vajjian judicial system.

At the time of the Asokan Empire Buddhism was not just a religious belief system but also 'a social and intellectual movement influencing many aspects of social life' (Thapar 2002: 200). Asoka's concept of the *Dhamma* often used as

12 These Buddhist legal principles (e.g., four avenues of injustice) were also apparent much later in the Sinhalese legal treatise—the *Niti-Niganduwa*—which contains a summary of civil law in the Kandyan period (Jayatilleke 1976: 13).

> a synonym for Buddhism ... was aimed at creating an attitude of mind in which the ethical behaviour of one person towards another was primary and was based on a recognition of the dimity of human beings (Thapar 2002: 201).

These influences were also evident much later in the social and political climate of India particularly during the Mauryan era (321-185 BCE). As a consequence, the ideals of democracy manifest in Buddhist social and political philosophy were seen as the best form of governance to the extent that it generated 'principles of statecraft [denoting] a democratic welfare state' (Jayatilleke 1967: 81), mainly embodied in terms of a specific understanding of kingship. Contrary to the prevailing idea of a divinely ordained monarch, the idea of a king as a chosen leader, it was argued, has arisen historically as a social contract. Accordingly the people by mutual agreement selected one person as the 'the king' in the hope that he could be relied on to maintain law and order, and social harmony.

The Buddhist view of kingship, particularly the duties and responsibilities of a chosen ruler was governed by the notion of the *social contract*, one that was—propounded long before Hobbes and other western expositions. The Buddhist idea of 'social contract' proposed an evolutionary view of society opposed to the Brahminical view of a divinely ordained monarch and also society.

These views were spelt out in the *Discourse on Genesis* (*Agganna Sutta*),[13] and were described in the following terms:

> When the earth had been formed and vegetation of low, then higher grade, had evolved, till at length the earth brought forth an abundance of cereals, there developed agricultural life, and human families and households came into existence. As households came into existence, food began to be stored, land came to be divided among individual owners and boundaries had to be set up, thus giving rise to rights of property. Now someone of greedy disposition

13 See Ling (1981a) for details of the *Aganna* Discourse; also Gnanarama (1996). Harris (1989b) provides a useful critique of the idea of a social contract.

> would encroach upon another's property. The rest would take him to task and charge him with trespass. Thus strife and injustice entered into the life of humans, necessitating the institution of protective and punitive measures till at length a ruler was chosen by the people's consent (sammata) to maintain justice, the rest giving their support to him, that is to say, like law abiding citizens (Wijesekera 1962: 6).

What is emphasized in this concept of kingship was 'a democratic conception of state and law' (Jayatilleke 1967) based on the principle of equality. Thus, the king is a 'Great Elect,' (*Maha Sammata*) i.e., chosen by the people as a whole and authorised to rule. This is also based on the assumption of the equality of man and that the king is only *primus inter pares*, and exercises authority only by virtue of the social contract. The duties of a compassionate ruler, set out in the Discourse entitled *Cakkavati Sihananda* or the Universal Monarch, specify ten virtues[14] that constitute the essential elements of the Buddhist ethic and social philosophy. Accordingly,

> a king is generous, has his senses under control, ready to make sacrifices, straightforward in dealings, gentle and kind, able to suffer for the people's sake, free from anger and resentment, he is compassionate to all, tolerant and very approachable.

This Discourse recommends that a ruler fashions his conduct as an 'enlightened altruist (Jayatilleke 1967: 59) on the grounds of self interest and expediency.' These ten virtues which formed the basics of legislation depicts an 'ideal type' characterization of the 'monarch' or 'ruler' who was expected to act with a sense of moral righteousness, and for which in return the people agreed to give the king 'a portion of rice' for fulfilling his duties and obligations.

In the absence of constitutional checks and safeguards against the arbitrary exercise of power, public opinion alone was the only safeguard against a wicked ruler or tyrant who acts unrighteously. One example cited in

14 In Pali these ten Royal virtues are *dana*, *sila*, *pariccāga*, *ājjave*, *maddava*, *tapa*, *akkodha*, *ahimsa*, *khanti*, and *avirodha* (Gnanarama 1996). See Ling (1981) for this Discourse (*Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta*) on the Universal Monarch.

texts of how public opinion operates was that of a king who proposes to sacrifice his throne rather than allow his son to atone for his transgressions. However, the people rejected this and demanded that the son be banished from the kingdom. And the king's response was to act in accord with 'the people's will.' In another instance, a Queen who demanded that she be given absolute authority by her husband, the king, was denied this request on the grounds that the King was not 'an absolute Lord.' This again serves to underline the fact that the exercise of the power and authority associated with kingship is constrained by public opinion, the voice of the people.

The duties associated with a monarch denote a highly principled and at the same time eminently reasonable and sensible way of resolving complex problems which included guidelines for fashioning acceptable social relations (Kalupahana1995a; Guruge 2007). Kingship, no doubt, was limited by one's capacity to act within the guidelines of the teaching, the *dhamma*, i.e., the principles of moral righteousness. Accordingly, the maintenance of the normative order—the code of righteousness, was seen as a prime requirement of a good ruler. What made the exercise of power—political power and authority—legitimate lay in the ability of the person exercising this authority to act skilfully in striving to uphold the principles of *compassion*, *equity* and *justice*. These principles were enshrined in the moral code of righteousness, and were equally applicable to a lay person as well as an administrator—be he a monarch or lesser official. In this regard, there are many examples in later Buddhist Mahayana texts such as the *Mahavastu*, of the specific advice given to rulers. For instance, the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna[15] (circa 150 - 250 CE) in his advice to the *Satavahana* dynasty enjoins the monarch to actively support the work of doctors, set up hostels and rest houses, eliminate high taxes, care for victims of natural disasters and keep profits low (Mishra 2005).

This clearly affirms that the norms of compassionate justice enshrined in the Buddhist ethic and moral order provides no rational basis for a ruthless

15 Nagarjuna, the philosopher/monk who probably lived in the 2nd century CE, generally identified as founder of the 'Middle' School of Buddhism (*Madhyamaka*) belonging to the Mahayana tradition (Gethin 1998). See Kalupahana (1995b) for an exposition of Nagarjuna's moral philosophy.

culture of greed and selfishness characteristic of some perverse forms of individualism or unadulterated forms of ‘laissez faire’ thinking. Considering that the welfare of the community of monks was heavily reliant on the goodwill and patronage of the kings or the governing authorities of the self-governing republics, there emerged a skilfully engineered reciprocity in the relationship between Buddhism and the State. This was well reflected in the patronage and support the Buddha received from key personalities of the self governing republics and also from some of the kingdoms such as the rich influential merchant Anathapindaka. Here again this serves to draw pointed attention to the inherent pragmatic and utilitarian attitudes of the Buddha in dealing with mundane matters subject to the proviso that these did not infringe the broad parameters of the ethical code.

2. Buddhist Social Philosophy in Practice－the Asokan Model

The meaning and significance of Buddhist social and political philosophy is best revealed in the Asokan practice of statecraft which incorporated Buddhist ideals of governance in the pursuit of social justice and peace. The normative code of the Asokan ‘welfare state’ spelt out clearly the Buddhist ideals of a ‘just society’ as one in which there was equality, economic prosperity and the practice of the good life. These moral and social values were exemplified in the Buddhist notion of welfare built around the seven virtues or skilful actions of ordinary lay persons. These virtues refer to refraining from: taking life, stealing, confusing speech, and uttering falsehoods, malicious speech, frivolous talk, harsh speech and being attached to vulgar sensibility, not only as abstentious but positively.[16] The practice of these virtues which formed the basis of legislation that ensured peace and stability underlines the raison d’etre of the Buddhist social ethic, namely, that the concern for the welfare of others, was considered integral to the personal morality of salvation.

16 Kalupahana (1995a) provides a useful summary of these virtues taken from the *Brahmajala Sutta*— Discourse 1 on the Brahmas Net (Walshe 1987). He notes that these are not merely abstentions but also the more positive aspects of a virtuous being. It includes welfare of oneself and others.

The social ethic of Buddhism, revealed in the Asokan welfare state, stands in sharp contradiction to critics of Early Buddhism such as Max Weber (1966) as well as the more recent proponents of 'Protestant Buddhism' (Gombrich and Obeysekera 1998). These theorists mistakenly argue that Buddhism became 'this worldly' only in response to modernization or westernization by emulating Christian/Protestant ideas of service. However, the critical stance adopted by students of Early Buddhism such as Max Weber (1966) was made more on doctrinal grounds, namely, that the subjectivism of the Buddhist individualist ethic amounts to a selfishness.[17] This, it was suggested was a preoccupation with the transcendental, and an indifference to human welfare and the improvability of society.

The either/or fallacy inherent in this juxtaposition of egoism and altruism has been exposed by scholars such as Jayatilleke (1967) who have shown that the life of a lay Buddhist unlike those in the monastic order, has to be lived within a distinctly social context. For this reason, unless one conflates the lay and ascetic moral code of conduct, Buddhism was never limited to a 'private form of salvation concerned with the illusory *self-contained individual*' (Ling 1985: 117). Philosophically, the 'methodological individualism' of Buddhism, understandably asserts the centrality of the individual and one's personal freedom and autonomy. But, at the same time, the Buddhist ethic places limits on an unbridled individualism by acknowledging the interdependent relationship between the individual and society. Consequently,

> this inevitability entailed a concern with social ad political matters [which] receive a large share of attention in the teaching of the Buddha. ... To attempt to understand Buddhism apart form the social dimension is futile (Ling 1973: 140).

The exposition of the basic tenets of Buddhist social philosophy makes

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17 Tambiah (1976) makes the valid point that Max Weber may have overstated his view that Buddhism as a religion was confined to ascetics and individual salvation. The Weberian analysis of Buddhism was also evident in those (e.g., Gombrich and Obeysekera-1988) who sought to characterize Sinhalese Buddhism in the 20th century as 'Protestant Buddhism.' Holt (1900) provides a useful overview and critique of this highly problematic descriptive epithet.

it abundantly clear that the individual's conduct borne out of a sense of moral righteousness is attuned to confront and respond to the realities of the mundane world. Importantly, the practice of the Buddhist social ethic was eminently pragmatic and utilitarian in the form of an 'enlightened realism' (Wijesekera 1952; Jayatilleke 1969: Gnanarama 1996). Indeed, this is what has enabled Buddhism to deal more effectively with the impact of the forces of modernization in a socially acceptable and morally responsible manner (Jayasuriya 1997; Guruge 2005; Harvey 2000). Put simply, the Buddhist social ethic, out of which arose much of the theory and practice of Buddhist politics, was very much concerned with 'the public world and its structures,' which included, among other things, economic and political institutions. This social ethic, according to Schumacher (1973) and others, was also applicable to the economic life of human beings. For example, from a Buddhist perspective poverty is frequently associated with adverse economic conditions, and can be alleviated by providing for a more equitable distribution of wealth. The latter as a policy strategy of poverty alleviation affords some measures of social security which is likely to ensure the welfare of society as a whole.

The Discourses relevant to social and political philosophy (see Note 6) highlight the importance of frugality, resourcefulness and control over excessive craving and conspicuous consumption. In one Discourse (the *Kutadanta Sutta*) the Buddha has acknowledged that having a gainful employment is more important than the possession of, or access to, goods and services routinely produced. The emphasis placed here on work, among other reasons, is also because the ethic of diligent work was conducive to moral progress, and even seen 'as a boon to be enjoyed' (Ling 1979: 113).

But importantly, these prescriptions testify to the 'middle way' as an approach to social well being and spiritual progress. They constitute the normative guidelines for public policy in terms of the ideals of the Universal Benevolent Monarch who 'is concerned not only with the material welfare of his subjects but also their moral well-being' (Kalupahana 1995a: 123). As the Buddha states in the *Vinaya*, 'he who serves the sick serves me.' The King of righteousness (called the *Cakkavartiraja*) exemplified in the Emperor Asoka

was one who not only provided welfare for the destitute, but also established a welfare state. The 'welfare state' of Emperor Asoka, sought to emulate the model of the benevolent Universal Monarch whose philosophy of compassionate love portrayed in the Buddhist texts is neatly expressed in one of Emperor Asoka's Edicts as follows:

> All men are my children and as I desire for my children that they obtain every kind of welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, so I do desire for all men' (quoted in Jayatilleke 1962).

Asoka's welfare state policies and his statecraft in general were by no means utopian or idealistic in that 'entrepreneurship and money making were positively endorsed as long as these were done by righteous means' (Omvedt 2001). In so arguing, the Buddha showed how 'the moral life and the acquisition of wealth can go together' (Kalupahana 1995a: 122). No doubt this in part again reflects the sense of realism and pragmatism, characteristic of Buddhism, in the day to day Buddhist politics in dealing with the mundane world. Historically this way of thinking, is best illustrated by the fact that as previously noted many of the Buddha's main patrons and lay supporters of the monastic community were drawn from the urban centred rising new middle class.

What was distinctive of the Asokan welfare state was that, contrary to Brahminical code of social conduct, it was built essentially on a 'Buddhist Humanism' wherein human relationships are tempered by compassion, love, sympathy and care for one another's feelings. Thus 'the worker-master [was] not abolished but it [was] humanized ... [and] far from a relationship of slavery' (Omvedt 2002). Indeed, even Max Weber, despite his dismissive comment on the Asokan welfare state as 'a historical accident' (Harvey 2000), was constrained to admit that this was the:

> first time in the Hindu culture ... there appeared the idea of the 'welfare state' of the 'general good' (the promotion of which Asoka regarded as the duty of the king). 'Welfare' ... was understood to mean spiritual welfare ... but also rational and economic action'

(quoted in Jayatilleke 1962: 88).

The Asokan principles of statecraft that evolved in the 3rd century BCE may well have influenced the thinking of the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna in outlining a 'compassionate socialism' of welfare policies. In the classic treatise, *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsel*, Nagarjuna enumerates Guidelines for Social Action given to his friend and disciple, the king of Satavahana in central India (Thurman 1985a). These guidelines specify principles of *tolerance*, *justice*, and *generosity* as the essential elements of a Buddhist social order, inspired by the moral injunction that the king must put the collective interests or the 'common weal' ahead of himself, that is the 'people first' (Thurman 1985a).

The key features of state policy developed and practiced in Asokan times comprised 'a system of public morality and social welfare [based on] a sophisticated radical analysis of the human situation' (Ling 1973: 166) which filtered across over time to many Buddhist countries notably to Burma and Sri Lanka. In Burma the first Prime Minister of an Independent Burma, the late U Nu (1948-1962), is remembered as a devout Buddhist who was committed to the 'restoration of Buddhism and the *sangha* [and] a socialist welfare state programme remarkably similar to English Fabianism' (Matthews 1999). Likewise it may be well be argued that the Sri Lankan welfare state which evolved in the late colonial state (Jayasuriya 2004) and grounded on a notion of the 'equality of minimum need' ... [may have been] sanctioned through ... Buddhist thought and practices' (Coomaraswamy 1984: 82). Tambiah goes further and suggests that in several countries of southeast Asia 'Buddhist ideas ... legitimate a kind of socialist welfare policies' (Tambiah 1973: 18) which may in part derive from the act that the king or ruler was in the ideal form cast as a 'Buddha like' figure (a bodhisattva) who came to be seen as the defender of the 'bowl and robe' (Tambiah 1976: 226).

Importantly, this draws pointed attention to the historical continuity from the time of the Buddha to Emperor Asoka, of the triangular inter relationship that prevailed between the king or ruler, the monastic order or the *sangha*, and the people. The relationship between the monastic community (the *sangha*)

was not just with the society which sustained it, but more importantly, with the ruler or the State. Despite the fact that in principle the *sangha* does not recognize or formally relate to the State (understood as a monarch or ruler) in reality this formal distancing was severely constrained. The compelling fact was that the monastic order could not survive without a minimum of political support—whether it was from a monarchy or a republic. Indeed, early Buddhist practice shows 'a kind of ambiguity towards political power' (Ling 1981b: 32), be it of the monarchical or republican variety.

This casts a new light on the notion of the secularisation of religion, i.e., the 'separation' between church and state, which according to conventional political theorising, was seen as a post Enlightenment phenomenon in western society. This devaluing of religion in matters of state was a notable feature of European secularism in the post-Enlightenment period of anti clericalism which echoed the spirit of Volatire's critique of the *ancient regime* with his famous cry 'destroy the infamy' (Berger 2005). This form of European secularism, especially in France, differs from that prevailing in America where secularism provided no constitutional legitimacy except for a guarantee of religious freedom by the state. In general the idea of secularism which still remains a distinctive feature of the liberal secular state in western societies (Bader 1999), has been associated with the loss of the importance of religious values and beliefs in guiding affairs of state.

But, as we have shown, the rationale of secularism was implicit, if not explicit, in the Buddhist ideals of governance as revealed in the Asokan polity. The principles and values of the European Enlightenment, such as *equality*, *tolerance of dissent*, *freedom*, and *justice*, were remarkably congruent with the political philosophy of Emperor Asoka. This certainly contradicts the views of those who argue that the 'ideas of "justice," "right," "reason" and "love of humanity" [are] predominantly, perhaps even uniquely Western values' (Himmelfarb quoted in Sen 2000). As Sen (2005) persuasively argues, there are substantive grounds for locating democratic ideas of political principles and practices as pre-dating Athenian democracy.

Adopting Buchannans's definition of democracy as 'government by

discussions' (quoted in Sen 2005), Sen goes on cite Emperor Asoka as one who championed public discussion in matters of governance, resorting to a kind of ancient Indian version of 'Robert's Rules of Order.' This commitment of Asokan political philosophy to a deliberative democracy, one of broad discussion of public issues, also entailed a proviso, namely, that in advocating 'restraint in regard to speech there should be no extolment of one's own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions; and [also] that it should be moderate even on appropriate occasions' (Sen 2005: 16).

IV. Conclusion

The foregoing account of the relationship between Buddhism and politics, particularly as it relates to statecraft, highlights, among other considerations, the need to reclaim a much neglected facet of Buddhist thought, namely, the 'this worldly and rationalistic nature of Buddhist thought' (Omvedt 2001). The Buddha was, indeed, a profound social thinker—though not necessarily an abstract theorist in the western philosophical tradition—who chartered new ways of thinking not just about the human condition, but also about the place of the individual in society. This understanding of Buddhism decries the oft made misunderstanding or misinterpretation in some quarters (e.g., notably Weber 1996) that Buddhism, particularly Early Buddhism was confined to personal salvation and indifferent to the concerns of the mundane world such as 'the reconstruction of the political centres' (Eisenstadt 1993: 19) of society.

On the contrary, as we have shown, Early Buddhism had a 'well developed view of social and political matters' (Tambiah 1976: 25) which has remained a powerful template, providing normative guidelines for the theory and practice of all aspects of statecraft—be they in the domains of economic and social welfare, or in matters of governance of the polity. This value system was not to be applied rigidly or arbitrarily, but skilfully bearing in mind the moral considerations governing an act such as in the application of

the principle of non killing (Omvedt 2001).

These normative ideals were framed alongside one of the earliest statements of a 'deliberative democracy' which gave Emperor Asoka a unique place in the history of ideas and political thought. Asokan style 'Royal' Buddhism provided a ritual legitimation of kingly rule and perhaps, the 'most visible link between church (the *sangha*) and the state' (Matthews 1999). Unlike, Emperor Constantine who made Christianity the official creed of the Roman Empire, Asoka never made Buddhism a state religion. Furthermore, by his willingness to accept dissent and commitment to tolerance of other faiths, Asoka looked upon sectarianism with strong disfavour (Ling 1973). Following the precedents set by the Buddha, Asoka strove to ensure 'religious freedom by supporting not just the Buddhist monks but ascetics of other religious sects' (Harvey 2000:116); and also by striving to negotiate differences through participation and consensus building. The Asokan model of governance was informed by what Sen (2005) terms a 'foundational agnosticism and commitment to public communication and discussion' (Sen 2005: 182).

Democracy understood as a way of thinking and acting implies a rational commitment to *freedom*, *equality* and *tolerance* in a pluralistic society, profoundly open minded, if not agnostic. This form of democracy and social theorizing is fundamentally a secular ideal which served as an 'ideal type' model for many Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. It has also sometimes been described as generating a kind of pragmatic 'accommodative secularism' (Bartholomeuz 1989) in determining state compliance with some forms of religious practice. At the same time the *Sangha* (i.e., the Church) was readily available to act as the moral conscience of the community, and thereby ensuring the accountability of the rulers. This was clearly evident in the recent action of the Burmese Buddhist monks against the authoritarian Generals at the helm of the state.

When looked at from the point of religion and politics, Buddhism as a religious system remains profound and relevant in contemporary society because of its 'deeper ontological roots.' Just as therapy from a Buddhist perspective did not stop with the 'removal of the malaise but proceeded to

[work on] the quality of Being, advocacy of democracy and integrative social and international relations had deeper relevance to the spirit' (Chaitanya 1975: 85). The Buddha favoured democracy not just as a question of the constitutional or legal right of equality and 'the absolute worth of the individual' but more as an affirmation of the moral obligation cast on the individual to act within a code of conduct based on such values was the ideal of human dignity, equality of respect and worth of the individual. These are congruent with social ideals and values which are identified as the most important and distinctive characteristics not just of liberal thought but of the western intellectual tradition (Gardner 1966).

The distinctly rational and deliberative nature of this mode of thinking bears a remarkable affinity to a key tenet of the European Enlightenment, namely, the power of reason or the primacy given to rational thought. The Buddhist mode of governance based on deliberation and participation, highlighted a predisposition to logical reasoning within a quieting spirit directed towards skilfully determining the best and morally defensible outcome. Admittedly this becomes more problematic when considered in relation to another key feature of the European Enlightenment, namely, the perfectibility of human nature, insofar as perfectibility is not entirely dependent on reasoning. However, as Sen persuasively argues, while these two 'pillars' of the European Enlightenment make 'quite distinct claims ... the undermining of one does not disestablish the other' (Sen 2000: 34).

The remarkable convergence of those two intellectual traditions—the western and the Buddhist or 'Asian'—has been acknowledged by several western scholars (e.g., Fromm 1955, Thouless 1962, and Cousins 1984), as well as to use Bhabha's pithy phrase, 'vernacular cosmopolitans' like Ambedkar. These scholars also attest to the great humanizing effect Buddhism has had throughout Asia and also more widely. However, importantly, the 'vernacular cosmopolitans' were committed to a crossing of cultural domains and boundaries by reconnecting Buddhist thinking with the rest of the world. They did this without being indigenist or asserting the sovereignty of a particular intellectual tradition (Ganguly 2007). This 'translation of cultures'

warrants greater scrutiny for it may well provide the moral and intellectual foundations for, among other considerations, a 'new politics' spanning the East-West dichotomies and creating the space for a civilizational dialogue rather than a 'clash of civilizations' as forecast by Huntington (1996).

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