




The Dalai Lama's Reinvention of Buddhism Supporting Religious Pluralism: The Middle Way between Traditionalism and Secularism

Dedy Irawan^{[a]*}



^[a]Department STIAB Jinarakkhita Jl. Raya Suban No. 80, Kel.
Pidada, Kec. Panjang, Bandar Lampung 35241, Indonesia
* Author for correspondence; email: dedy713@gmail.com

[Abstract]

The HH 14th Dalai Lama (HH) is one of the most influential Buddhist figures nowadays. My research will focus on the HH's role in promoting religious pluralism in the contemporary period. Particularly, I will discuss how HH skillfully highlights some Buddhist doctrines to adapt contemporary audiences from different religious backgrounds. He strongly advocates that Buddhism is a pluralistic religion *par excellence* that is suited to the modern pluralistic society. I am aware that some authors have the same idea of mine that HH is promoting religious pluralism in modern society. Further elaborating on the authors's idea that HH actively reimagines and portrays Buddhism as modern, I will argue that his presentation of Buddhism as a pluralistic religion can be analyzed as his attempt or "skillful means" to bridge and find the "middle way" between traditionalism and secularism for his contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Dalai Lama, Buddhist Modernism, Religious Pluralism, Middle Way

Introduction

Modernism contains various aspects, of which pluralism¹ is one of the important. Some authors have argued that HH actively reimagines and portrays Buddhism as a tolerant religion supporting pluralistic ideas.² Although HH is a Tibetan Buddhist monk and upholder of Prasangika Madhyamaka philosophy (Dalai Lama, 1999:18), he strongly advocates pluralism in the modern world.³ Further supporting these authors' ideas, I argue that his reinvention of Buddhism containing pluralistic ideas is an example of skillful means and an attempt to find a middle way, one between traditionalism and secularism, for the benefit of modern audiences. In this paper, I will discuss 1) pluralism, 2) HH's reinvention of Buddhist ethics, doctrine, practice, and soteriology, 3) HH's middle way between the extremes of traditionalism and secularism, and 4) the objections of conflicting roles and the authenticity of HH's reinvention.

Methodology

In this research, I approach religion from a sociological perspective. HH and his audiences are part of the religious society. Rather than arguing from a doctrinal perspective, I intend to analyze HH's reinvention of Buddhism and the modern audiences' reception of Buddhism by understanding their behaviours in a social context. Here, I will focus on secondary literature, without concerning primary literature on Buddhist doctrines of middle way, skillful means, and so forth. Particularly, I will look at the theory of Buddhist Modernism from David L. McMahan, Jay L Garfield, and Roger R. Jackson. Also, I will connect these theoretical backgrounds to examine the Dalai Lama's presentation on religious pluralism. In discussing the Dalai Lama's model of religious pluralism,

¹ Kim follows Berger's definition of pluralism, "co-existence with a measure of civic peace of different groups in one society." (Kim, 2003:5)

² For example, Netland says that HH is the Eastern representative for religious tolerance and diversity and the symbol of religious harmony. (Netland, 2001: 216)

³ For example, HH says "Harmony among the major faiths has become an essential ingredient of peaceful coexistence in our world." Gyatso, Tenzin. (2010, May 4). Many Faiths, One Truth. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25gyatso.html>.

I will read some of the Dalai Lama's works – *Ethics for the New Millenium*, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*, and *Spiritual Advice for Buddhists and Christians*. Moreover, some scholarly works on the Dalai Lama's reinvention of religious pluralism by Donald S. Lopez, Leo D. Lefebure, and Jane Compson are my additional sources.

Pluralism

In the context of religion, I define pluralism as the co-existence among different religious group in a society. Pluralism occurs because modern society values diversity of thought and practices. We can see nowadays, modern people expect coexistence, peace, and harmony among members of society regardless of their different religious backgrounds. Pluralistic religious groups will consider adjusting and modifying its doctrines and practices with all sorts of religious system, such as monotheism, atheism, polytheism, and so forth in order to coexist harmoniously. For example, we might see a pluralist, such as HH, will attempt to harmonize and adapt his thought with these diverse religious systems. In fact, HH aligns with his modern audiences from monotheistic backgrounds by dialogue, exchange, compatibility, and coexistence.

Harmonizing Buddhism and Pluralism in the Modern World: HH's Reinvention of Buddhist Ethic, Doctrine, Practice, and Soteriology

Here, I present one of the HH's attempts to support pluralism harmonizing Buddhism and Christianity. HH harmonizes Buddhism with Christianity by remaking Buddhist ethics, doctrines, practices, and soteriology. From the reinvention of this "new" Buddhism, HH shows that Buddhists and Christians can learn and practice together, although they have different sets of belief, practice, and tradition. We might see that HH supports religious pluralism by mutual exchange, dialogue, compatibility, and coexistence between Buddhism and Christianity.

From an ethical perspective, HH suggests an exchange of practice between Buddhists and Christians. For example, HH suggests that Christians can borrow Buddhist meditation to enhance the practice of love

and compassion (Dalai Lama, 1998:46). HH also explains that Christians can do analytical meditation on love and compassion by contemplating Jesus' activities. Having familiarized themselves, and become convinced, and transformed by this meditation, Christians can pursue one-pointed meditation (Ibid., 47). Thus, HH wants to show that there is no much constraint for Christians to practice Buddhist meditation, and both traditions can live and practice together. Also, it is implied by HH that Buddhists can also emulate Christians' engaged activities toward society (Dalai Lama, 1999a:24). For example, HH highlights the bodhisattva attitudes, deeds, and activities to exemplify Christians' service to the world (Ibid., 59). In addition, HH admits that the bodhisattva ideal might also present in Jesus Christ. HH says "my attitude toward Jesus Christ is that he was either a fully enlightened being or a bodhisattva of a very high spiritual realization" (Dalai Lama, 1998: 83). Here, HH demonstrates that Buddhism and Christianity contain similar doctrines of engagement in social works and of the bodhisattva ideal. In this way, HH attempts to raise the possibility of exchange and dialogue between two different religious traditions in terms of ethical behaviors. He intends to promote pluralistic ideas – Buddhism and Christianity have similar ethical practices and they can coexist together in modern world.

Furthermore, HH also shows that Buddhist and Christian doctrines are mutually applicable in his reinvention of Buddhism. For instance, HH says that the concept of three kinds of faith in Buddhism is also applicable to Christianity. The faith of "admiration," is by contemplating the biography of Jesus; the faith of "aspiration" is by aspiring for "union with God;" and the faith of "conviction" is by strong determination for that attainment (Ibid., 112-113). Hence, the applicability of Buddhist doctrines to Christianity is one support that both traditions can coexist in the society. Buddhists and Christians can study and practice together, although they have different beliefs. While admitting similarity and compatibility, HH recognizes some doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Christians, such as the attainment of Buddhist nirvana and the Christian ideal of union with God (Dalai Lama, 1999a: 12). Still, HH can reconcile this soteriological difference by his ecumenical soteriology described below.

HH's efforts to present doctrinal compatibility and reconciliation show his concern for religious pluralism. His reinvention of Buddhism based on pluralism reflects his supremely tolerant view of other religions. Indeed, HH skillfully seeks for doctrinal applicability and reconciliation between two religious traditions in order to promote religious pluralism.

In addition to ethical and doctrinal exchanges, HH also encourages practices of coexistence for both Christianity and Buddhism. HH suggest religious pilgrimages to the various holy places by different religious followers. Both Christians and Buddhists can pray and meditate together in such places. For example, HH himself visited Lourdes and Jerusalem, although he does not have personal connection with those holy places. HH prayed and meditated silently with different religious groups there, and he testified a spiritual experience (Dalai Lama, 1998:40). In this way, HH supports religious pluralism by religious practice of coexistence. These show that both Buddhists and Christians have potential to practice together in different holy places.

Finally, HH advocates an ecumenical spiritual goal for society “to cultivate the positive human qualities of tolerance, generosity, and love” (Dalai Lama, 1999a:12). This kind of goal is necessary to unify the different goals of Buddhist nirvana and Christian heaven. By this ecumenical goal, HH does not show Buddhist triumphalism, fanaticism, or dogmatism. Thus, modern people, who values pluralism, will not reluctant to accept the development of Buddhist positive qualities because this spiritual goal are acceptable for all religious traditions. Indeed, HH wholly adopts and transforms traditional Buddhist ethics, doctrines, practices, and soteriology in order to suit his audiences from pluralistic cultures. HH intends to promote religious pluralism by this remaking of “new” Buddhism in response to modern demands. Accordingly, HH's reinvention of Buddhism is the middle way to bridge traditional Buddhism with modern pluralistic audiences.

HH's Middle Way – Middle between Traditionalism and Secularism

In addition to bridge traditional Buddhism with pluralistic

backgrounds, HH's creation of Buddhism is also the middle way between traditionalism⁴ and secularism.⁵ Theoretically, HH's effort to invent the middle way is not peculiar in Buddhist history and texts. Roger R. Jackson has shown how the Buddhist conception of "middle" is flexible. Historically and textually, the metaphor of middle has undergone various changes, expansions, and interpretations. For example, in early Buddhism, the middle describes right practices beyond the extremes of "hedonism" or "asceticism" in *Dharmacakrapravartana Sūtra* and the extremes of "nihilism" or "eternalism" in *Mahākatyāyana Sutra* (Jackson, 2000:228-230). However, the early Buddhist middle undergoes changes in Mādhyamaka, Yogācāra, and Tantric Buddhism (Ibid., 230-235). Because the middle always shifts and is not fixed, Jackson argues that the middle is flexible. Based on these Jackson's arguments, I suggest that HH's reimagination of Buddhism containing pluralistic ideas resembles the middle way, which is beyond the extreme of traditionalism and secularism.

HH's reinvention of Buddhism in accordance to the contemporary ideal of pluralism shows his avoidance of traditionalism. Traditionalism can lead to dogmatism and fanaticism, which are opposed to pluralism. On the other hand, HH has never taught and promoted traditional Buddhist doctrines to his modern audiences, which show his pluralist attitudes. In the case of his portraying Buddhism containing pluralistic ideas, HH avoids traditionalism from soteriological, ethical and doctrinal perspectives.

⁴ I define traditionalism as the strong tendency to preserve Buddhist doctrines, lineages, and practices, which might lead to Buddhist dogmatism. For example, Buddhist traditions bind to some doctrinal standards to be a Buddhist, such as refuge to the Three Jewels, belief in karma and rebirth, the view of four seals, the goal of nirvana, and et cetera. Another example is in Tibetan Buddhism, there are certain steps of procedural rituals such as preliminary practices, generation stage, completion stage, and so forth.

⁵ I define secularism as a secular approach to Buddhism in particular. A secular Buddhist attempts to redefine Buddhism by abandoning metaphysical beliefs and classical Indian soteriological backgrounds. A secular Buddhist might practice Buddhism without believing rebirth, karma, etc. and aims to attain happiness in this life. Instead of practicing Buddhism with metaphysical beliefs, secular Buddhists focus on pragmatic practices, such as meditation, mindfulness, compassion, and so forth. For the example of secularism, see Batchelor, 2012: 87-107.

HH does not fall into traditionalism because he emphasizes universal soteriology and practical ethics in this life, rather than speaking in terms of philosophical differences.⁶ The universal soteriology and practical ethics demonstrate HH's pluralistic attitude a willingness to relinquish his dogma regarding Buddhist soteriology and ethics. HH asserts that we should pay attention more on the universal soteriology of religion – the cultivation of positive qualities, such as love, tolerance, generosity, and so forth (Dalai Lama, 1999a:12). For HH, the ethics of love and compassion can be practiced in daily life towards ourselves and others (Dalai Lama, 1999b: 124). These practical ethics result in wholesome karmic results and a happy life (Ibid., 131). From the perspective of religious goal and conduct, HH advocates a universal soteriology and practical ethics. More specifically, instead of proposing the Buddhist ideal of nirvana and the spiritual goal in the afterlife, he stresses the universal goal of all religions in this life calm, restrained, and moral mind. Furthermore, instead of promoting Buddhist karma and five precepts, HH chooses to teach love and compassion as practical ethics to his audiences. HH's presentation of universal soteriology and practical ethics represents his pluralistic view and keeps him far from the extreme of traditionalism.

In fact, HH does not neglect that there is a doctrinal conflict between religions even in a pluralistic society, but he uses the Buddhist doctrine of skillful means for supporting pluralism. Rather than asserting Buddhism as true, HH explains the different religious doctrines by the analogy of medicine. Using the analogy of diseases for people and medicine for religion, HH describes that not all people might find Buddhism helpful. He says, “Different medicines are prescribed for different diseases, and a medicine which is appropriate in one situation may be inappropriate in another” (Tenzin Gyatso:2006:39). Thus, HH appreciates all doctrinal differences and sees great value in religious diversity for different people. Certainly, HH's attitudes to other religions are different from traditionalism. Traditionalist Buddhists tend to be dogmatic, and will assert their religions or sects as true and necessary for attaining uli-

⁶ HH reconciles the philosophical differences by the analogy of medicine discussed below.

mate happiness. Traditionalists will also criticize and argue against other doctrines and they believe their own doctrines to be superior. HH's analogy of medicine and his flexibility shows his skillful means and non-dogmatic attitudes, and prevents him from falling into the extreme of traditionalism. From soteriological, ethical and doctrinal perspectives, HH supports pluralism by his middle way which is beyond traditionalism.

Also, from HH's identity as a pluralist, HH still can teach traditional Buddhist doctrines, which in turn prevent him from falling into extreme secularism. Although he promotes religious pluralism, HH does not need to abandon his identity as a Tibetan Mādhyamaka monk. HH still establishes his "Mādhyamika triumphalism" in Lopez's terms according to HH, it is impossible to attain liberation without the realization of Mādhyamaka emptiness (Lopez, 1998:187). In addition, for his traditional Buddhist students, HH gives traditional, textual, and doctrinal Buddhist teachings, such as *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, *The Four Noble Truth*, and so forth. Here, from the contents of his teachings, HH still retains some traditional Buddhist teachings, such as the conception of rebirth, Buddhist cosmology, the notion of human life as dissatisfaction, the final Buddhist goal of nirvana, and so forth. In spite of supporting pluralism,⁷ HH still holds his traditional Buddhist identity and doctrines, which simultaneously prevents him from falling into secularism. In fact, HH's traditional approach is different from secular Buddhism, which denies some Indian doctrinal worldviews. In this way, HH's pluralist identity demonstrates his middle way.

Moreover, being a religious pluralist also allows HH to maintain his traditional Buddhist activities and practices. By conducting the traditional Buddhist activities and practices, HH still can both promote religious pluralism while avoiding secularism. HH's avoidance on secularism is

⁷ In religious pluralism, we see all different religious figures gather and coexist with their various religious identities and traditions. Rather than unifying their identities, pluralists are tolerant to diversity of religious identities, beliefs, activities, practices, and traditions.

supported by his religious pluralism, which enables him to engage in traditional Buddhist activities and practices. HH gives some empowerments, such as Rigzin Dungdrup, Avalokiteśvara initiation, long life empowerment, and so forth. HH also shares his personal Buddhist practices of analytical meditation on dependent arising, deity yoga, prayer, and et cetera (Dalai Lama, 1999a:42-44). In contrast to a secular Buddhist who will not perform such rituals HH does not fall into secularism because he still can hold traditional Buddhist rituals and practices, while being a pluralist. HH skillfully transforms his roles and Buddhism in order to suit different audiences. Indeed, HH's reimagination of religious pluralism establishes the middle way from his pluralistic teachings on soteriology, ethics, and doctrine which is beyond traditionalism; and allows him to retain his traditional Buddhist identity, activity, and practice which simultaneously prevent him from secularism.

Justifying the Middle Way and Pluralism within Buddhism: Answering the Objections of Conflicting Roles and the Authenticity of HH's Reinvention of Buddhism Containing Pluralistic Ideas

Superficially, we might see that HH's roles between traditional Buddhist monk and religious pluralist are seemingly conflicting.⁸ However, I affirm that his shifting roles are, indeed, the application of skillful means; and HH's upholding of tradition and less dogmatic attitudes are also his skillful means. Moreover, the idea of transformation of identities is not peculiar to Buddhism. We might find some justifications of HH's actions in Buddhist world views. For instance, in the *Lotus Sutra*, we find that Avalokiteśvara has 33 emanations as skillful means to benefit all sentient beings (Kubo and Yuyama, 2007:297-298). HH might exemplify Avalokiteśvara in changing his identities to perform various acts for different audiences. When he needs to be a Buddhist spiritual figure for his traditional Buddhist audiences, he will perform his roles, such as teaching dharma, giving empowerments, and so forth. When he

⁸ Lopez affirms the seemingly conflicting roles of HH as Buddhist modernist, Buddhist pluralist representative, the political leader of Tibetan independence, and the Tibetan Buddhist leader. (Lopez, 1998:185-188)

needs to be a religious pluralist for his modern audiences, he will give talks from a universal point of view. Thus, HH's shifting roles are, in fact, his skillful means for benefitting many beings.

One might further object that his transformation of traditional Buddhism and his diverse roles might sacrifice the authenticity of Buddhism. For example, Garfield states, "When we see transformation or change in a tradition, insiders instinctively think of degeneration, and the cant of the degeneration of the Dharma has always been part of Buddhist rhetoric." It may be true that change might lead to inauthenticity and disappearance. However, in the case of HH's reinvention of Buddhism to contain pluralistic ideas, HH is balancing it in a middle way. HH does not abandon his traditional Buddhism, and he still preserves his Buddhist traditions and lineages by teaching dharma and giving empowerments, despite promoting religious pluralism. Moreover, he merely modifies some Buddhist ideas, such as skillful means, love and compassion, meditation, and so forth in his transformation of Buddhism. Hence, HH not only maintains his traditional Buddhism, but also markets Buddhism in different packages to his modern audiences.

In fact, Buddhism allows for the transformation of Buddhism itself. HH's transformation of Buddhism can be approved based on Buddhist textual, historical, and doctrinal perspectives. Concerning the use of language, in the *Araṇavibhanga Sutta*, the Buddha says that monks should not insist in using their local language (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2001:1084). And in the *Cūlavaggapāḷi*, the Buddha bans monks from preaching the Dharma in metrical form and there is an offence of wrongdoing (*dukkata*) for doing so; and he allows monks to learn the dharma according to their own dialect (Horner, 1963:194). The Buddha's permission to use vernacular language for various audiences in different places shows that Buddhism can create a new image of itself in various devices in order to propagate itself. Thus, the early Buddhist texts justify HH in transforming traditional Buddhism into his Buddhism which contains pluralistic ideas for propagation to various places.

From the historical facts, Garfield and McMahan's theories of

transformations are compelling. Garfield says, "Buddhism is a missionary religion and in every one of these transmissions Buddhism itself has been transformed by the cultures that have adopted it." Garfield provides historical case studies of how Buddhism has transformed itself in China and Tibet. Also, McMahan states, "In order for the rescue to succeed, however, Buddhism itself had to be transformed, reformed, and modernized purged of mythological elements and 'superstitious' cultural accretions" (McMahan, 2008:5). Hence, both Garfield and McMahan basically agree that Buddhism has to adapt and transform itself to survive in a new environment. Again, the historical facts reveal that HH's transformation of Buddhism containing pluralistic ideas is not so new in the development of Buddhism.

From the doctrinal perspective, particularly, the skillful means is HH's device to justify the transformation from traditional Buddhism into Buddhism incorporating pluralistic thoughts. John J. Makransky informs us of the significance of skillful means for transformations in Buddhism, such as the new appearance of sutras and the authority of Mahayana (Makransky, 2000:118). The transformative power of skillful means is also employed by HH in his reinvention of Buddhism. Moreover, Jane Compson supports skillful means inconsistency of Buddhist teachings for adapting different level of audiences as the key to understand HH's presentation of religious pluralism (Compson, 1996:276-277). Accordingly, the doctrine of skillful means is HH's support to remake Buddhism comprising pluralistic values in order to bridge traditional Buddhism and modern audiences. Indeed, the textual, historical, and doctrinal evidences justify HH to flexibly adapt and transform his traditional Buddhism into pluralistic ideas according to different audiences. Hence, the objections to the seemingly conflicting roles of HH and the authenticity of his reinvention can be reconciled based on Buddhist texts, histories, and doctrines.

Conclusion

Although Buddhism does not contain the idea of pluralism explicitly, we have to give credits to HH, who invent Buddhist pluralism in order to accommodate a changing world. HH's reinvention of Buddhism

supporting pluralism is the middle way between 1) traditionalism, which he avoids by remaking Buddhist ethics, doctrine, and soteriology; and 2) secularism, given that he retains his traditional Buddhist identity, activity, and practice. We can notice that HH skillfully maintains his traditional Buddhism and at the same time also compromises with his pluralistic modern audiences. HH's reinvention of Buddhism incorporating pluralistic thoughts also provides a case study of Buddhist modernism. Likewise, the remaking of Buddhism presents the modern application of Buddhist doctrines of skillful means and middle way. The idea of transformation is in accordance with the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. Not only we are subject to decay and old age, but Buddhism is also subject to reinvention and development in different times and places.

References

- Batchelor, Stephen. (2012). A Secular Buddhism. *Journal of Global Buddhism*, Vol. 13, 87-107.
- Compson, Jane. (Jun., 1996). The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend? *Religious Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 271-279.
- Garfield, Jay L. Buddhism and Modernity. *PhilPapers*. Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/rec/GARBAM-3>.
- Gyatso, Tenzin. (2010, May 4). *Many Faiths, One Truth*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25gyatso.html>.
- _____, The Fourteenth Dalai Lama His Holiness Tenzin. (2006). *Kindness, Clarity and Insight*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications.
- Holiness The Dalai Lama, His. (1998). *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- _____. (1999). *Spiritual Advice for Buddhists and Christians*. New Delhi: New Edition Publishing House.
- _____. (1999). *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Riverhead Books.

- Horner, I.B. (1963). *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya Piṭaka) Volume V (Cullavagga)*. London: Luzac and Company Ltd.
- Jackson, Roger R. (2000). *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*. Great Britain: Curzon Press.
- Kim, Kwang-Ki. (2003). *Order and Agency in Modernity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kubo, Tsunugari and Akira Yuyama. (2007). *The Lotus Sutra*. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Lopez, Donald S. (1998). *The Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Makransky, John J. (2000). *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*. Great Britain: Curzon Press.
- McMahan, David L. (2008). *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Netland, Harold. (2001). *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*. USA: InterVarsity Press.
- Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi. (2001). *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Anon, (2018). Retrieved January 8, 2018 from <https://www.dalailama.com/videos/categories/teaching>
- _____ (2018). Retrieved January 8, 2018 from <https://www.dalailama.com/schedule/2016-archive>