# In Defense of the Secular

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I have enormous respect for Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the truly great Buddhist teachers and meditation masters of our time. And it is his job as a religious leader to advocate for his religious tradition, a burden he undertakes with good cheer and with great skill. Nonetheless, I must disagree with some of what he says in his recent article in the Huffington Post. Of course I write not as a religious leader, but as a philosopher, and one who worries about the role of religion in public life and the dangers that religious advocacy can sometimes pose for public life if not handled with care. Our different perspectives may lead to different conclusions.

Khyentse Rinpoche worries that Buddhism does not get enough attention in India, despite India's role as the cradle of Buddhism. He worries both that ordinary Indians do not sufficiently value their Buddhist heritage and that the Indian government is insufficiently active in the promotion of Buddhism as an Indian religion. This is one strand of his argument with which I will take issue.

Khyentse Rinpoche also argues that the Indian neglect of Buddhism and the lack of what he would regard as sufficient government patronage of Buddhism is due to "Western secular political correctness," to which he also refers as "cowardly political correctness," values he argues are legacies of British colonial rule, and which he blames for a decline in Indian spirituality. I will take issue with this strand of his argument as well.

Let me first call attention to a fact that Rinpoche cites late in his article: He says that 1% of contemporary Indians are Buddhists. (Actually, the more accurate figure, according both to the Indian census and the Pew Trust is 0.8% Twice as many Indians profess Christianity, and three times as many are Sikh, by comparison.) A recent survey of the United States by the Pew Memorial trust reveals that 1% of Americans who are Buddhist; in Germany the figure is about 1/3 that. Now Khyentse Rinpoche sees that as a cause for concern (after all, 20% of Chinese identify as Buddhist, and nearly 100% of Bhutanese). I do not. It simply reflects the religious history of India. Religious affiliations change over time. On the other hand, this is an important statistic to bear in mind when we ask about public attention to Buddhism.

Let us consider the appropriate government attitude towards a religious tradition in the context of a pluralist, liberal democratic society. (I note that while Khyentse Rinpoche deplores the attitude of Indian government and society towards India's Buddhist heritage, he does not advocate a retreat from liberal democracy or the religious neutrality it involves, per se. And I trust that he would not advocate so reactionary a position.) Note that the United States government, which administers a nation even more Buddhist than India, does not propagate or encourage the study of Buddhism (although it protects the right to practice and study Buddhism, just as it does any religion—but so does India). The Indian government, by contrast, supports several universities with Buddhist

preservation in their mission statements, including the Central University of Tibetan Studies where I teach, Nāgārjuna University in Andhra Pradesh and the new Nālandā University underway in Bihar, to which we will return below. Why should the Indian government devote even more special attention to a religion to which fewer than 1% of its citizens adhere?

Khyentse Rinpoche's implicit answer to this is twofold: First, Buddhism is part of India's historical heritage. Second, Buddhism offers a special teaching of interdependence that is especially beneficial in the present age. Neither is convincing. Before addressing these arguments specifically, we should pause to note the burden of proof any such argument must bear. A liberal democratic state like India (or Germany, or the United States) is a *secular* state. Now Khyentse Rinpoche treats the word *secular* as a pejorative term, contrasting it with the valorized *spiritual* throughout his essay. That is a mistake, and is the central difficulty with his entire essay; it creates a pernicious duality between the secular and the spiritual that denigrates the civil society that is the best protection that a minority tradition like Buddhism could ever have.

Secular values are the values that citizens share regardless of their religious differences; secular policies are policies to which citizens can be expected to give rational consent regardless of their religious commitments. It is the ability to recognize such values and to adopt such policies that allows a society to host a plurality of diverse religious communities, each of which can flourish and contribute its insights to the larger society and for such a pluralistic society to attain a unity of purpose and to retain the allegiance of its citizens. It is secular values that both restrain the state from imposing a single religious viewpoint and protect citizens' free exercise of their religious beliefs.

These secular values that make modern democratic civilization possible are hence *spiritual* in a deep sense. They bind us to mutual respect, and they bind us to celebrate our differences. They reflect our moral commitments to one another and the moral obligations of the state to its citizens. To denigrate them as anathema to the spiritual is to fail to understand what democracy means at a moral level. Note, for instance, that the destruction of Nālandā that Khyentse Rinpoche laments was at the hands of a religious movement, in the service of what it regarded as *spiritual* values. The ruins of Nālandā today are curated and maintained by a *secular* state. No religious state in India would defend Buddhism—the spiritual Taliban government offered no protection to Buddhist monuments in that country; it is the secularity of India that allows the protection of all spiritual traditions.

Khyentse Rinpoche argues, however, that India should violate its commitment to religious neutrality on the grounds first, that Buddhism is part of India's heritage, and second that Buddhism offers a uniquely valuable teaching, that of interdependence. we can now see why neither of these arguments can succeed. First of all, too much is part of India's long heritage, including reprehensible as well as salutary practices and traditions. Heritage may make a case for curatorial responsibility, but not for advocacy; and India does a fine job of curating Buddhist sites. Second, the teaching of interdependence is indeed

valuable, but this does not, as religious leaders as eminent as HH the Dalai Lama have emphasized, rest on a religious doctrine or practice, but rather on sound philosophy, which has now been widely shared and can be even more widely disseminated despite the dearth of Buddhist practitioners.

But, Khyentse Rinpoche points out, both the Hindu and Muslim religions get attention from the Indian government and the general public. He points out that the government does pay attention to Hindu and Muslim sensibilities and holy places, and the general public in India is aware of Hindu and Muslim ideas and sensibilities. So, India, he argues, isn't really secular; instead, he says, "only two religions matter in India."

Is this a violation of the secular principles I defended above? I think not. Instead, it is recognition of the importance of the values of large population blocs. In many American and European countries, for instance, Christian holidays such as Christmas or Easter are public holidays. In those countries, where the vast majority of the population is Christian, this makes sense, as the vast majority of people would take these as holidays anyway. Jewish, Muslim and Hindu holidays do not get the same recognition in these countries; adherents of those religions are free to take those as religious holidays, but because so few people do, they are not state holidays.

Similarly, in India, where fewer than 1% of the people are Buddhist, but many more are Hindu and Muslim, we would expect to see state attention to the interests and sensitivities of these large groups. This just makes good policy sense. In particular, in India, the history of tension between Hindu and Muslim communities, and the often terrible consequences of those tensions are reason for special attention to potential sources of conflict there. So, while I agree with Khyentse Rinpoche that Buddhism receives far less public and official attention in India than do the Hindu and Muslim faiths, that seems to me to be perfectly appropriate.

Khyentse Rinpoche also argues that the decline in interest in Buddhism in India is a consequence of the import of Western modernity through colonialism. For one thing, this is historically inaccurate. Indeed, Buddhism was completely absent from all but Himalayan India by the time the European colonists first turned up in India. Moreover, Buddhism was reintroduced to India through European-inspired Buddhist theosophists, such as Anagarika Dharmapala, who was working closely with the American Colonel Alcott. The Mahabodhi Society, responsible for the restoration of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites Khyentse Rinpoche discusses, is a colonial construction. Finally, even secularism was present in India well before the colonial powers, as a principle of religious tolerance in the Mughal court of Emperor Jahangir.

On the other hand, liberal constitutional democracy and legal secularism, as well as secular education, did arrive with European colonialism. And I think these were important gifts to India, gifts that India eagerly accepted. Khyentse Rinpoche laments the decision by Prof Amartya Sen that the new Nālandā

university would be a secular university with strong Buddhist Studies, and not a "revival," as Khyentse Rinpoche puts it, of a medieval Indian Buddhist university.

I must say that when I heard this news, I was relieved. I feared that the traditionalists involved in the Navya Nālandā movement would have their way and create an anachronistic institution teaching a medieval curriculum worthless to modern students, as a kind of living diorama. Nothing could do a greater disservice to the memory of Nālandā, which taught what was the most respected knowledge of its time. A new university worthy of that name should do the same, and not enshrine a ninth century curriculum pretending that it is appropriate to the 21st century.

Khyentse Rinpoche calls this "political correctness," and claims that it represents a triumph of Western secularism over Indian spirituality. Nothing could be further from the truth. Politics has nothing to do with it; this is a decision about what curriculum is most useful to today's students; and that decision has nothing to do with a battle between the spiritual and the secular. As I argued above, it is the secular that preserves the spiritual. Only a secular society could create a university devoted to the study of a tradition followed by such a tiny minority. And a secular society legitimately demands that in a university that tradition be studied, not promulgated. Nothing like this happens in theocracies; they promulgate religion, but they do not even tolerate the religions of minorities.

Khyentse Rinpoche also accuses India of "political correctness" and cowardice for not posting a sign at the front of the ruins of Nālandā informing visitors that it was destroyed by Muslims. Actually, the signage at Nālandā is very good, attesting to the excellent curatorial work of the Archeological Survey of India. I might add that I have visited Nālandā with student groups over twenty times. Each time, an excellent guide explained the history of the place and the role of Muslim Afghan armies in its destruction. There was no shying away from that history. But why put this up on a sign at the entrance? The predictable effect would be inflammatory, as Khyentse Rinpoche acknowledges in his misplaced use of epithets such as "political correctness" and "cowardice." Generating conflict is not a good thing, even for the Buddhist monument. Instead, I would see this decision to convey this information inside through guides as an instance of *upāya,* of skill, so valorized in Buddhism. The information can be provided without the provocation to violence.

Khytentse Rinpoche also accuses the Indian government of failing now to protect Buddhists from violence. I have no idea to what episodes he refers and he does not say. He complains that Indian airports have Hajj terminals, but no special terminals for Buddhist pilgrims. Again, the comparative numbers explain this decision better than any cowardice or political decision. There is much more to say about Khyentse Rinpoche's article. He is certainly right that money could be made by more skillful exploitation of Buddhist pilgrimage, upgrading of facilities, etc… But that is relevant advice to a tourist bureau; it is not cultural or political critique. The broad indictment of India as hostile to Buddhism, and as a slave of a foreign anti-religious ideology is simply misguided.

At the outset, I noted that it is Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche's job to promote Buddhism. I applaud his doing so. But I hope that he comes to see that it is modern secular society that is Buddhism's greatest ally, not its enemy.