

Buddhism, Pacifism and Conscientious Objection: Focusing on the American Buddhist Experience*

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Abstract

Buddhist karma theory, which understands violence as a major factor in creating negative karmic consequences for individuals and collectives, is an important reason why, under certain circumstances, devout Buddhists may be inclined to practice pacifism, and especially oppose the aggressive, imperialist warfare. Buddhism as such, however, is not a “pacifist religion.” While the monastic practitioners were in most cases shielded from the militarist violence by their sacred status, warfare and punitive justice by the lay authorities were

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seen as either inevitable or even positive already by early Buddhists. Given its long tradition of close collaboration with war-making authorities in Asia, the reluctance of major Buddhist groups in the Vietnam War-time USA to openly advocate draft refusal and active anti-war resistance is understandable. Many lay Buddhists, however, were driven to anti-war resistance by the prevailing intellectual and political atmosphere in the USA after the worldwide outbursts of the anti-capitalist protests in 1968. It is not impossible thus to assume that a general radicalization in the wake of the current worldwide depression may bring a new activation of the pacifist, anti-imperialist streams in the Western –and, more generally, world –Buddhism.

Key words: Draft Refusal, Conscription, Modern Nation State,
Pacifism, Dalai Lama, Army Chaplaincy, Imperialism.

The people, through some spiritual alchemy, become convinced that they have willed and executed the deed themselves. They then, with the exception of a few malcontents, proceed to allow themselves to be regimented, coerced, deranged in all the environments of their lives, and turned into a solid manufactory of destruction toward whatever other people may have, in the appointed scheme of things, come within the range of the Government's disapprobation.

Randolph Bourne, "War is the Health of the State" (1918)

I. Introduction: "War is the Health of the State"

If we are to name just one main distinctive feature which separates the modern nation states from their pre-modern predecessors, the ability to mobilize their populations will most possibly be the answer. Modern nation state is mobilizational one—"mobilization" here to be understood in a variety of aspects. For one thing, it usually aims at what one can define as cultural mobilization of sorts, remaking its population into a cohesive, unitary nation by schooling it in standard national language and heavily standardized national version of high culture. Another important feature is political mobilization.

While pre-modern states were mostly content with their populations being passively submissive (that is, not too much restive) the modern nation states are based on the active political participation by all or most of their nationals—or at least on its fiction. Elections, even if purely decorative, are in most cases needed to legitimize the huge power that modern state tends to wield over its citizens. And, last but not least, an important feature of the original European nation-state project—which gradually developed throughout the nineteenth century, then saw its heydays in the first half of the twentieth century and expanded worldwide after the beginning of the decolonization in Asia and Africa in the late 1940s, to encounter a crisis and undergo important changes in the times of post-1970s neoliberal globalization—is the military mobilization of all the able-bodied male citizenry. In fact, participation in such a permanent mobilization, in the form of universal male conscription, was even often seen as a necessary prerequisite for a political participation. In some of nineteenth-century European states, the denial of suffrage to women was conveniently explained by their “natural” inability to serve in the military. Military service, in this way, was seen as a precondition for being a first-class, real citizen—women, handicapped or foreigners being either assigned second-rate citizenship (at best) or excluded at all from nation’s body politic (Gellner 1983, 34-85; Van Grevelde 1999, 263-336).

Far from being simply a way to recruit soldiers to a large-sized standing army, universal male conscription was a central part of modern nationalism’s hegemonic project. Insofar as nationalism is often characterized as a secular religion of modern societies, the same may be said about the institute of conscription, at least during its heydays before the 1970s. Just as religions, being the institutions of “social solidarity” (Durkheim [1915] 1982, 415-24), are mostly not supposed to be opposed on the personal grounds in these societies which they dominate, conscription was not a system one could contest simply on the ground of one’s personal preferences. We hardly can find a society where conscription could be rejected merely because of one’s reluctance to risk life in the battlefield. While perfectly understandable on the personal level, such reluctance would be represented as punishable sin of

“cowardice” on the societal level. Not unlike the participation in collective religious rituals in pre-modern societies, participation in national wars was (and, to a degree, still is) seen as a condition for being a normal member of the nation in question (Challenger 1955, 46–91).

If the conscription was to be opposed, this opposition was to be grounded in a project with a hegemonic potential comparable to that of nationalism. It could be an accepted religion—in the countries with solid traditions of religious tolerance, like the USA, the membership in a religious denomination with known pacifist credo (“peace churches”: Quakers, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mennonites, Plymouth Brethren, etc.) used to exempt one from a militia or draft duty in most wars during the last three centuries. As the dominant secular religion of the modern world, nationalism sometimes was able to make concessions of this sort to other, in most cases older, religions. Another project with world-historical ambitions which could provide some grounds for mounting a morally acceptable (distinctive from “personal cowardice”) challenge to conscription’s hegemony was (and is) socialism—here to be defined broadly, to include also its more libertarian outgrowths, such as anarchism. Not fully devoid of quasi-religious features itself, socialism could claim that adherence to its doctrine allowed an individual to participate to a much nobler fight than the trivial inter-state wars, namely the battle for liberating the whole humanity from the yoke of an inhuman and unjust socio-political system—which could be also plausibly named as the root cause of the modern inter-state warfare. Since the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist socialism was until the Soviet and Eastern European collapse of the 1989–91 often seen as the most dangerous challenger for the whole modern (capitalist) nation-state order, the claims of socialist pacifists were in many cases more likely to be rejected if the legitimacy of a personal challenge to the system of conscription (in the form of application for conscientious objector, or CO status) was to be proven in a juridical way. Still, such claims could possess certain moral authority, and allow an individual to remain a member of a national—or, in some cases, also international—“moral community” even after the refusal to be conscripted (Mayer 1966).

However, given the centrality of the military mobilization of the male, able-bodied nationals for the whole nationalist project, it comes as little surprise that rejecting such a mobilization was an extremely difficult, often bordering on impossible, task, for socialists and religious pacifists alike. The story of the collaboration between almost all moderate socialist parties of Europe and their national military authorities during the First World War is well-known (Fainsod 1973); it is not, however, that the mainstream churches and the majority of their members showed any more vigour at the service of peace. “Peace” was in many cases on their agenda, to be sure, but “peace” did not necessary meant pacifism—that is, personal struggle against militarism and conscription. Unlike the Quaker-dominated London Peace Society (the oldest in the Western world, established in 1815), the American Peace Society (originally Massachusetts Peace Society, established in 1816) was from the beginning led by the Congregationalists, Baptists and the members of other, no less mainstream Protestant denominations. While they sometimes allowed themselves to oppose certain specific wars (opposition to the Spanish-American War was the case in the point), their loyalty to the nation was unswerving in that the conscriptions during the “national emergencies”—be it Civil War, or both world wars—were never opposed. “Peace” meant the enlightened preference for international arbitration in the cases of conflict, but certainly not putting the loyalty to the peace cause above the “patriotic duties” (Davis 1978).

Indeed, all the “peace” rhetoric of the peacetime notwithstanding, most major modern wars until Vietnam War were either enthusiastically endorsed or at least grudgingly acknowledged as a fact of life—and in any case not seriously opposed—by most mainstream Christian denominations of the Western states, excluding only the historical “peace churches.” In the case of the attitude of America’s main Christian denominations on the war, it gradually changed from initial pacifist isolationism of 1914–15 to ardent support of the “battle against the Huns” by the point USA were to join the fray in April 1917. Most peace societies duly succumbed to the war frenzy, a small number of the members of the Church Peace Union remaining a rare exception. Many

churches went to the extreme of becoming recruitment offices for the US military (Abrams 1933, 55-69). In both USA and UK, most of the First World War objectors rejected the draft on the ground of Christian peace beliefs, but the absolute majority of them came from the historical “peace churches” rather than from the mainstream confessions completely engulfed by the militaristic hysteria. In case of the USA, the First World War conscientious objectors (ca. 4,000 persons) came from primarily the smaller denominational peace churches: Mennonites were about 50% of the COs. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Dunkards (Brethren) and Quakers (Friends) made up an additional 25% of the count, while the rest were Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentecostals, Russian Molokans, Christadelphians, Church of Christ, a handful of Catholic, a Jew and socialists (Abrams 1933, 127-29).

While it was typical for many high-level clergymen or popular preachers from the mainstream churches to identify COs as dangerous “anarchists”—as a popular conservative preacher, Billy Sunday (1862-1935) famously put it, the Christian pacifists were to be treated as Montana-based anti-war workers organizer Frank Little (lynched by possibly FBI-instigated mob; on Little’s anti-war stand, see Dubofsky 2000, 185-228)—the main organizational supports to the COs came from the traditional “peace churches,” especially Quakers. It were the Quakers who—in case of UK—organized Friends Relief Service, Friends Ambulance Unit and other non-combatant place of service for “alternativist” COs, prepared to collaborate with the authorities as long as the latter would not force them to the battlefield against their will. But even for the (often hereditary) pacifist members of the “peace churches,” opting out of the “national mobilization” was not easy even for them. For one example, over one-third of the draft-age British Quakers enlisted by the end of the First World War (Bourke 1999, 277). In the inter-war years, some of the mainstream Christian denominations followed the pacifist fashion of the time, but again showed little resistance to militarism with the coming of the Second World War. During the Second World War, only around 15% of ca. 12,000 COs accepted for CPS (civilian public service) programs were from the mainstream denominations. The bulk—ca. 60%—were still the historical “peace

churches” members (Keim 1969, 80). By the time of Vietnam War, the situation partially changed. At the face of the unprecedented mass anti-war resistance—in 1970, 25% of all those who received draft notices applied for CO status, and in 1971, the proportion increased to 42%—most mainstream confessions recognized the right of their members to reject the conscription on the basis of their religious conscience. A good number of mainstream denominations’ clergymen started to voice their protest at least against the most repugnant actions of US military in Vietnam (mass bombings of civilian targets in North Vietnam, etc.). By 1970, the proportion of mainstream denomination COs to “peace church” COs was 30% to 40% (Nelson 1998). Still, an outright condemnation of the US imperialism and militarism as such was out of question for most major denominations, accustomed as they were to close collaboration with the state—for example, inside the framework of the military chaplaincy.

II. Buddhism, War and Conscription: in Traditional and Modern Times

The position of Buddhism in relation to the issue of activist anti-militarism—that is, conscientious objection—seems to be determined by two mutually balancing factors. On the one hand, contrary to the accepted opinion, historical Buddhism never was a pacifist religion. The mainstream attitude of the institutional Buddhism towards the issues of war and peace was (and is) closer to what is known as “just war” thinking in the Christian tradition. Just as states and statehood as such, warfare was (and is) understood as unpleasant, but karmically conditioned and thus inescapable reality of life, which institutional Buddhism has to accept as it is (Bartholomeusz 2006). However, on the other hand, pacifism was what many of the Western converts often ardently expected of Buddhism, especially when this religion acquired growing popularity among Euro-American middle-class intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s.

Late 1960s and early 1970s were simultaneously the time of “Buddhist

boom” among West’s educated middle classes and the period when the “golden age” of the post-1945 capitalism had been increasingly displaying the full scale of its inherent contradictions, frustrating the rebellious middle-class youth by its intrinsic militarist tendencies or its persistent repression of human sexuality and disciplinary authoritarianism. The anti-capitalist, anti-war rebels and the Western adepts of a variety of Buddhist traditions were often the same people, whose turn towards Buddhism was frequently conditioned by their frustration with the mainstream Christian churches, with their high degree of bureaucratic institutionalization and trademark compromise with the nation state and its militaristic propensities (Prothero 1995). Buddhist missionaries from Asia and their local followers thus operated under the weight of certain expectations on the part of their lay adherents. Buddhism was sought as a “religion of peace” and thus had to emphasize its peace-loving side, even if in reality, its traditional attitude towards violence and interstate warfare was much more ambiguous.

In this way, pacifist trends in Euro-American Buddhism not infrequently looked more like a way of acculturating an Asian religion—which has been condoning and often encouraging militaristic violence in its homelands for centuries, in a manner more than comparable with the Christian attitudes towards “legitimate” warfare in mediaeval and modern Europe—to the fashions of the age of anti-war protests, rather than a demonstration of any essential “peacefulness” of Buddhism as a religion. This does not mean, of course, that some Asian Buddhist missionaries did not have an explicitly pacifist agenda of their own. The cases in point are such important original contributors to the “engaged Buddhism” in the contemporary West as the Vietnamese activist monks Thich Nhat Hahn and Chan Khong who moved to the West in the 1960s as a part of their struggle against the war and the US-imposed Southern Vietnamese dictatorship. It has to be pointed out, however, that their celebrated activism rather “invented”—in a positive sense of the word—the tradition of Buddhist socio-political engagement than inherited it. Thich Nhat Hahn, who had to leave a Buddhist school in Hue because he longed for much more “modern” liberal art curriculum than the one which was on offer,

himself testified about the influence Gandhi's anti-colonial campaign and American civil right protests had on his modes of thinking and action (Whipps 2010). Based on a core Buddhism value of compassion, "engaged Buddhism" is, of course, just as authentic interpretation of Buddhism's basic teachings as any older tradition of Buddhism. It is, however, pioneering in its emphasis on changing the material circumstances and combating the socio-political forces which are inherently inimical to any such changes. In most traditional interpretations of Buddhism, mental detachment from one's uncomfortable circumstances, rather than any efforts to improve them, was understood to be the starting point on the Way towards Enlightenment (Queen 1996).

While the iconic images of the Western Buddhism of the 1950s and 1960s—Alan Watts, Alan Ginsberg or Gary Snyder—were, with their skeptical attitudes towards socio-political and cultural establishment and unconventional lifestyles, close to the archetypical image of the "free-wheeling intellectuals," historical Buddhism functioned rather as one of the acknowledged hegemonic religious discourses, always in close and cohesive relationship with states and their elites. As long as the textual sources of the Buddhist tradition are to be believed, already in the time of Gautama Buddha, his community of full-time practitioners (*sangha*) led an existence which combined certain distance from the states and "normal" settled life they were ruling over, with a web of cohesive interrelations with the rulers of a variety of states on the territories of which Buddha and his disciples were active. As forest-dwelling monastics, Buddha and his ordained disciples were outside of the jurisdiction by any of the state rulers. The guaranteed autonomy of such type was, however, based on the understanding that Buddhists were not about to disturb the existing order of socio-political domination. To build up such a mutual understanding with the powers that be, Buddha prohibited, for example, accepting military deserters or fled slaves into his community. *Sangha* was no refuge for the outlaws or protesters; instead, Buddha acted as a trusted advisor to the kings of the expanding kingdoms Magadha and Kosala, sometimes being asked, for example, about the feasibility of monarchs' concrete military plans (Tambiah 1978, 3-54).

While Buddha's disciples were not supposed to visit monarchical residences or preach to armed soldiers, Buddha's general compromise with the state power was built upon principal, doctrinal grounds. Early Buddhism's foundational texts—for example, *Dīgha Nikāya*—envision state as based on a “social contract” of sorts: the ruler is to enforce law and order and keep the rules of justice which the ruled, burdened as they are by their karma, their egoistical desires and their shortsightedness, are unable to maintain and practice on their own. “Justice” may imply a centralized redistribution of sorts: widespread poverty is a signal that the rulers are either unable or unwilling to play their prescribed roles. But realizing social justice also implies resort to legitimate violence: as *Vinaya*, the disciplinary rules, put it, “these who administrate torture and maiming are called kings.” As to the “external” violence by the kings (military campaigns), it was logically understood as continuation of monarchs' domestic responsibilities related to criminal justice (Jerryson 2010; Horner 1982, 47). In a word, Buddha accepted state, with its apparatus of domestic repression and militaristic violence, on the ground of an intrinsically pessimistic outlook of the world, dominated by unwholesome desires and always ready to descend into chaos. State was a necessary evil—but it also could be functionally good, as long as it followed Buddha's teachings, which, in principle, aimed at humanizing it and making it a mechanism of limited wealth redistribution. The redistributive activities of the state—helping poor and destitute—were, in turn, to reinforce the legitimacy of its punitive apparatus (Omvend 2001). With the passage of time, and especially after the famous conversion of Emperor Aśoka made Buddhism into the official creed of his empire, any doubts about the legitimacy of violence perpetrated in the name of defending and upholding the Buddhist faith seems to have vanished. Monks rarely had to fight themselves on the battlefield in the traditional Asian states (mediaeval Japan and, to some degree, Korea and China in some moments of their history are among salient exceptions); however, we hardly know a single instance of Buddhist monks in traditional homelands of Buddhism attempting to dissuade the draft-age laymen to resist being drafted, or to decline fighting. While some instances of Christian

conscientious objection are registered already in second–fourth centuries CE— with much more examples coming after the Reformation, with the founding of the “peace churches”—the Buddhist tradition of conscientious objection is as good as non-existent. In fact, it had to be built anew from the scratch, primarily in the 1960s’ USA.

The relationship between Buddhism and peace were quite ambiguous from the very beginning of Buddhism’s introduction to the USA. On the one hand, the new religion targeted open-minded intellectuals who naturally tended to be skeptical about the militaristic trends of the “high imperialism” epoch. Some—although very few—early American Buddhists were indeed not only anti-militarist but also radical dissidents in more general meaning of the word. Good example is Dyer Daniel Lum (1839-93), a radical anarchist labour organizer who was fascinated by Buddhism’s supposed “rationalism.” Bona fide radicals were a tiny minority among early Buddhists, but rationalist and peace-loving liberals were relatively many (Tweed 1992, 78-111). Thus, Buddhism had to be presented as inherently peaceful. Paul Carus’ (1852-1919) influential 1894 *Gospel of Buddha* emphasizes Buddha’s role as a peace-maker—presenting him as doing what the members of mainstream peace societies considered the solution to the problem of war, namely resolution of the international disputes by arbitration:

It is reported that two kingdoms were on the verge of war for the possession of a certain embankment which was disputed by them. And the Buddha seeing the kings and their armies ready to fight, requested them to tell him the cause of their quarrels. Having heard the complaints on both sides, he said:

“I understand that the embankment has value for some of your people; has it any intrinsic value aside from its service to your men?”

“It has no intrinsic value whatever” was the reply.

The Tathagata continued: “Now when you go to battle is it not sure that many of your men will be slain and that you yourselves, O kings, are liable to lose your lives?” And they said: “It is sure that many will be slain and our own lives be jeopardized.”

“The blood of men, however,” said Buddha, “has it less intrinsic value than a mound of earth?” “No,” the kings said, “The lives of

men and above all the lives of kings, are priceless.” Then the Tathagata concluded: care you going to stake that which is priceless against that which has no intrinsic value whatever?—The wrath of the two monarchs abated, and they came to a peaceable agreement. (Chapter 77)

At the same time, the early propagandists of Buddhism in America were far from being unconditional pacifists, not to talk about fighting against war by more radical means. Shaku Sōen (1860–1919)—whose meeting with Carus at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions was one of the key starting points in the development of Western Zen Buddhism—(un)famously came to defend Japan’s 1904 war against Russia in terms bearing striking similarity to a very conventional “just war” doctrine as known in the Christian tradition:

War is not necessarily horrible, provided that it is fought for a just and honorable cause, that it is fought for the maintenance and realization of noble ideals, that it is fought for the upholding of humanity and civilization. Many material human bodies may be destroyed, many human hearts be broken, but from a broader point of view these sacrifices are so many phoenixes consumed in the sacred fire of spirituality, which will arise from the smoldering ashes reanimated, ennobled, and glorified. (Shaku Soyen 1971, 211–12; cited in Sharf 1993)

The same topic was developed into a “theory” of sorts in Nukariya Kaiten’s (1867–1934) 1913 *Religion of the Samurai: A Study of Zen Philosophy and Discipline in China and Japan*—a sort of introduction into Japanese Zen specifically targeting Western audience. By equating Zen with the newly invented “tradition” of *bushido* (“Way of the Warrior”) actively promoted by late Meiji Japanese establishment, Nukariya “elevated” the war from a sort of necessary evil caused by imperfect nature of humans and their societies (on the Buddhist interpretations of war as a “necessary evil,” see: Jayasuriya 2009) into a beneficial opportunity for Buddhist spiritual training. While the vision of Zen as “samurai religion” was not necessarily shared by all the early Japanese Buddhist missionaries to the USA, the belief into the virtue of obedience to the government seem to have been widely held.

Nyogen Senzaki, the famed Buddhist pioneer, did not oppose, for example, the forcible removal of the Japanese Americans into the concentration camps—government, as he put it in a poem, was to be supported, even at such a cost (cited in Fields 1981, 193). It was not the kind of soil on which the idea of conscientious objection to the conscription could easily grow. In fact, according to anecdotic evidence, at least in one case a Japanese American who wanted to reject draft on the ground of his (Zen) Buddhist beliefs, was simply imprisoned by the authorities, presumably without any help being received from the Japanese Buddhist groups. He was offered assistance by an anti-war Catholic priest instead, but refused to declare himself a Catholic pacifist in order to acquire the coveted CO status (Whelchel 1999, 115).

Indeed, the first initiatives to oppose militarism by personal deed—that is, by rejecting to participate in a war—were taken with deep skepticism by the US Buddhist establishment. The initiatives mostly came from the lay, American students of Buddhism, who already were anti-war before joining Buddhist groups, and many of whom continued to participate in radical politics after their conversions to Buddhism. According to one study, around three-fifths of the students in San Francisco Zen Center were participating in radical politics by 1970, either actively or passively (Kent 2001, 199). They were not necessarily supported by their teachers, however. It is well-known that Yasutani Hakuun (1885-1973), a Japanese master instrumental in popularizing koan training in the USA and also somewhat notorious for his zealous support for the Japanese militarism during the Second World War (Victoria 2003, 67-68), advised his American disciples who pondered draft rejection, to go and “answer the call of the country” (Aitken 1977). It did not seem to matter that already in early 1966, much of anti-war and anti-US protest in South Vietnam was led by the radicalized Buddhists (Wells 1994, 71) and that the self-immolations by the South Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963, widely televised all over the world, had already shown USA military’s support for a regime which could be well described as prejudiced against Vietnam’s Buddhist majority (Jacobs 2006, 151-81). Deeply ingrained belief in the primacy of the obligations towards the state over the individual religious

consciousness weighted heavier.

The American disciples of the first-generation Asian Buddhist teachers in the USA, often the people with pre-existing pacifist convictions, behaved significantly differently in many cases. Yasutani's disciple, Robert Baker Aitken (1917-2010), was famed for his long-term peace activism, which included also his role as a counselor to Vietnam War draft resisters. These activities, however, remained by and large Aitken's private pursuit, unsupported by any of the mainstream Buddhist organizations. There were a number of draft resisters among Aitken's students, but it is important to note that in a number of cases—for example, that of Prof. David Loy (Loy 1997)—these students had already developed firm anti-war views prior to their first contact with any Buddhist institutions. Since the numbers of the draftees objecting to the conscription on Buddhist grounds was relatively small, they often were not included into the CO statistics as a separate category, but rather lumped together with a number of smaller Christian denominations, Black Muslims and non-religious COs as “other denominations / no affiliation.” During November 1968–September 1969, for example, Mennonites comprised 36.8% of the objectors, Catholics–7.3%, Methodists–4.9%, and “other denominations/no affiliation”–10% (Anonymous 1970). Given lack of support from the mainstream Buddhist establishment, “no affiliation” might be in fact the right label, since young Buddhists were to reject draft as religiously-minded individuals rather than members of a specific religious group. Some of them were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of their anti-war beliefs. Indeed, two out of eight America-based protesters who committed self-immolations protesting the USA atrocities in Vietnam, were engaged, devout Buddhists (Hiroko Hayashi and Erik Thoen) (Zaroulis and Sullivan 1985, 4-5). These acts of desperate self-sacrifice were not supported by any Buddhist bodies, however.

Ultimately, it looks as if the supposed “pacifism” of Buddhism is largely a matter of modern interpretation—which may take both pro-war and anti-war turn, depending on the interpreters' socio-political and cultural background and affiliations. Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF; founded in

1978), established by a dedicated group of Buddhists-cum-social activists who, following the title and content of Gary Snyder's seminal essay, *Buddhism and the Coming Revolution* (1969), saw Buddhism and modern (Western) ideologies of socio-political change as both mutually compatible and complimentary, demonstrates both potential and certain inherent limitations of the pacifist trends in American Buddhism. The organization, approximately 4,000-strong (15 chapters nationwide) is known for its early collaboration with famous Protestant pacifist group, the Fellowship for Reconciliation, as well as for its commitment to aiding various victims of conflicts and dictatorships in the Third World, including the traditional homelands of Asian Buddhism—Burmese refugees in Thailand, Tibetan refugees in Nepal and India, etc. During the time of the US aggression against Iraq and Afghanistan in the first decade of the twenty-first century, BPF was also involved in consulting the few US Army members interested in personally objecting to the participation in an unjust war, and certifying their Buddhist beliefs (Buddhist Peace Fellowship 2006). Some of its programs—such as Buddhist Alliance of Social Engagement (BASE)—seem to have been also influenced by the radical tendencies in Latin American Catholicism, namely the Liberation Theology. However, BPF does not seem to offer any program of radical change alternative to the nation state-based capitalist socio-political order, with its inherent militaristic tendencies—nor does this predominantly middle-class organization enjoys any popular support needed for promoting such a program (Seager 1999, 206-8).

On the other end of the spectrum we find such American Buddhists as Captain Lawrence Rockwood, a Tibetan Buddhism practitioner and US Army counterintelligence officer, whose *Apology of a Buddhist Soldier* succinctly presents the case of Buddhist-style “just war” theory legitimizing the participation in warfare by “concerns over the wellbeing and rights of the fellow humans” (Rockwood 1996). The justification of military intervention based upon the “human rights problems” in the areas which interest Western powers for economical or geopolitical reasons being—as Noam Chomsky has already noted in the early 1990s—a recent fashion in mainstream Western ideology (Chomsky 1993-94), this sort of Buddhist pro-war apology is just as

modern as Buddhist pacifism which it refutes. It is also noteworthy that the Buddhist pro-war ideology was given an official status by the US Army, which appointed its first Buddhist chaplain, certain Thomas Dyer, in 2005—and sent him to Iraq in 2009 (Green 2009). The experiment with using the supposedly “peaceful” Buddhist religion for encouraging the participants in (aggressive) wars seems to be fully endorsed by one of the highest Buddhist authorities in the Western world, Tibet’s Fourteenth Dalai Lama. He was reportedly “pleased” to give an audience to the first-ever Buddhist chaplain to the British Army, Dr. Sunil Kariyakarawana (Anonymous 2008), and send in 2010 the following congratulatory message on the occasion of the UK Armed Force Day:

I have always admired those who are prepared to act in the defence of others for their courage and determination. In fact, it may surprise you to know that I think that monks and soldiers, sailors and airmen have more in common than at first meets the eye. Strict discipline is important to us all, we all wear a uniform and we rely on the companionship and support of our comrades.

Although the public may think that physical strength is what is most important, I believe that what makes a good soldier, sailor or airman, just as what makes a good monk, is inner strength. And inner strength depends on having a firm positive motivation. The difference lies in whether ultimately you want to ensure others’ well being or whether you want only wish to do them harm.

Naturally, there are some times when we need to take what on the surface appears to be harsh or tough action, but if our motivation is good our action is actually non-violent in nature...(Anonymous 2010)

The message of this kind seems to actually continue the age-old tradition of Buddhist support for state violence mentioned above; but it also deploys the strikingly modern rhetoric of “god/firm positive motivations” and “ensuring the wellbeing of others”—indispensable, as Chomsky noted in his essay cited above, for any contemporary imperialist ideology. It does not seem, however, that “imperialism” is a favoured term in Dalai Lama’s vocabulary, unless that is the Chinese imperialism that is being denounced. He acknowledged, for example, in one of his interviews that CIA’s well-known

support for 1950s' and 1960s' Tibetan guerillas was "entirely politically motivated," but hastened to add that "today, the help and support we receive from the United States is truly out of sympathy and human compassion. In spite of their desire for good relations with China, the Congress of the United States at least supports Tibetan human rights. So this is something really precious, genuine" (Dreifus 1993). The naively idealistic (to put it mildly) view of the US foreign policy the Dalai Lama so openly espouses, is certain to please the Tibetan Buddhism practitioners among the conservative segments of the US middle class. It is highly unlikely, however, that this particular group of the Western Buddhists would ever provide support for the radical anti-war cause.

III. Pacifist Buddhism: A Future?

Buddhism did not exert any formative influence on the American tradition of anti-war struggle. On the contrary, this tradition, founded by the historical "peace churches" and further developed by the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialist radicals, penetrated the fabric of the American Buddhism in the late 1960s and was influential in giving birth to one of the possible modern interpretations of Buddhism—that is, Buddhism as peace-loving and socially engaged religion. This interpretation owes much more to the circumstances under which it was born in the late 1960s—that is, to the general crisis of the post-1945 model of capitalism underlined by its reliance on military-industrial complex, neocolonialist practices in the Third World and traditionally authoritarian societal relations—than to any specific "essence" of Buddhist teachings as such. In fact, the contradictory coexistence of the very basic skeptical view of "karmically unwholesome" violence with the apology of "just war" one finds in the historical traditional of Buddhism, is perfectly comparable with the self-contradictory attitudes towards violence developed by Christianity in the course of the last two millennia. Just as in case with militaristic interpretations of Christianity, more conservative modern readings of Buddhism, with much more permissive attitudes towards state violence, abound—Dalai Lama's version of Buddhism being one among them. Whether

Buddhism in the USA—and generally in the West—will be able to contribute to the anti-war struggle, will depend on the further development of the current crisis of world capitalism, and also on the degree of radical influence from outside the Buddhist community. Without such influence, without radicals from the outside world joining the Buddhist community and becoming activist practitioners, the institutional Buddhist community would most likely follow the conservative line in the issues of relations with state and state violence—the line which looks most natural in the view of Buddhism’s traditional cohesive ties with the ruling classes and pro-war position of the first Buddhist missionaries to the West.

It seems to be fully possible, however, that the newer generations of radicals will be just as fascinated by Buddhism as at least a part of the American radical milieu of the 1950s and 1960s. Buddhism places strong emphasis upon humanity and compassion, the sentiments which the current outbursts of the resurging US militarism blatantly tramp upon. The 2003–11 US aggression against Iraq saw, for example, several American soldiers applying for CO status because of their Buddhist beliefs. A typical example was specialist Aidan Delgado, who chose being stigmatized and punished as a CO by the military establishment since he could not reconcile his Buddhist convictions with the mindless racist brutality shown by his units towards the Iraqis, especially the prisoners in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison (Fleming 2005). The case shows that the core Buddhist beliefs, authentically understood, are likely to be judged as incompatible with aggressive imperialist warfare. Then, after all, one important aspect of the current crisis of capitalism is a full-blown impending ecological catastrophe, manifested, first and foremost, by the issue of climate change. And Buddhism, with its logic of interdependence and causality, seem to provide exactly the sort of framework one needs to analyze the contemporary ecological predicament in religious and philosophical terms (Macy 1991). The “ecological attractiveness” of Buddhism may be conducive to the development of radical streams inside the Buddhist communities. In this way, at least to a certain degree, Buddhism may be able to overcome its persistent tendency to compromise with the secular power

hierarchies in the name of providing the right conditions for “awakening” for a small group of professional or semi-professional truth-seekers.

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