

Written Representation 160

Name: Kweh Soon Han
Lawyer/Lecturer

Received: 7 Mar 2018

DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS (FROM THE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE IN SINGAPORE)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 On 2nd February 2018, the Singapore Buddhist Federation was invited to make written representation to share the Buddhist community's views with the Select Committee on our understanding of the impact of falsehoods relating to Buddhism both to Singapore and on the Buddhist community in particular. The mode of communicating these falsehoods is only through the internet or online. The "Green Paper" by the Ministry of Communications and Information ("MCI") and the Ministry of Law ("ML") (collectively called "the Green Paper") has succinctly explained the use of digital technologies to spread falsehoods in various countries from State and no-State actors (from both local and international/foreign origins) to influence and interfere with political processes, exacerbate and ferment racial and religious misunderstanding and discord.

1.2 Religions and religious beliefs are highly emotive matters¹. This is because faith plays a dominant role in the minds and practices of the members and worshippers of these religions. Despite differences amongst religions, there are some common factors which all religions generally share². These include a religious doctrine or scripture, a code of conduct and worship, a founder and a community consisting of both a hierarchical class of experts in the forms of a spiritual leader/s, a priestly or ordained class or a group of leaders vested with the role as custodians of their religion's ultimate knowledge and skills and its members. Often it is not the use of logic or scientific analysis that the spiritual leaders invoke or rely to justify the veracity of their teachings. Rather, through a unique personal relationship or experience these leaders have towards the ultimate personality or goal of their teachings empower them to assert a sense of authority or control over their flock, e.g. a concept of God to the Judaic-Abrahamic traditions or an attainment of Freedom from endless rebirths or

¹ Chris Baynes, "Why religious people 'cling' to beliefs even when contradicted by evidence", Independent, Thursday, 27th July 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/religious-people-beliefs-cling-contradict-evidence-facts-moral-compass-research-athiests-analytical-a7863446.html>

² Dalai Lama. (2011). Towards a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World Religions Can Come Together. Three Rivers Press. C.f. Prothero, S. (2010). God is Not One. The Eight Rival Religions That Run the world. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers.

1.3 Buddhism consists of 3 traditions, i.e. Theravada (the oldest), Mahayana (the second oldest, also called Chinese Buddhism) and Vajrayana (the youngest, also called Tibetan Buddhism) and within each of these traditions, many sects and sub-sects and lineages have been established. Generally they share common doctrines and teachings but differ in the application and emphasis of each tradition as Buddhism adapted to the different cultural landscape and environment within which it settled in. These common doctrines and teachings (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005) run like a thread which tie all 3 traditions together are:

- a. The “4-Noble Truths” of suffering, its cause, its cessation and the prescription for its cessation;
- b. The “Noble 8-Fold Path” which consists of the 8 noble qualities which must be developed for the attainment of Enlightenment (“Nirvana” or “Nibbana”) which leads to an escape from the endless cycle of births and deaths, called “Samsara”;
- c. The “12 links of Dependent Origination” which explains how and why beings are bound to Samsara;
- d. The concepts of “Karma” or “Kamma” and “Rebirths” which are universal ethical laws and process (without the intervention of any divine agency) which postulate that good begets good and vice versa both in this life and hereafter ad infinitum until the attainment of Nirvana or Nibbana;
- e. A prescribed of moral and ethical code of conduct called “Precepts” where both lay disciples have 5 Precepts whilst the monastic disciples a minimum of 227 Precepts to observe and practise; &
- f. The practice of celibacy amongst the ordained monks and nuns. This is to be differentiated from the some Buddhist groups where “priests” are married because of historical and cultural reasons, for example in Japan.

Practically, these translate into the practices of generosity, morality, compassion, kindness and indispensable cultivation of mindfulness and wisdom/insight through a unique regime of meditation. These common doctrines and characteristics are important for later discussion on the yardstick or standard of what constitute general Buddhist doctrines and practices.

1.4 Buddhism is perhaps unique from the other religions in that there is also a need to investigate and question the sources of their doctrines and leaders. Although the scriptures (called “Suttas” or “Sutras”) may be treated by Buddhists as the definitive words of the Buddha, Buddhists are encouraged in their practice to investigate and

³ Charles Joseph Adams, Classifications of religions, Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/classification-of-religions>

experience for themselves the attainments as taught by the Buddha in the Suttas or Sutras. In a sense, faith plays 'second fiddle' to a Buddhist practitioner. The role that faith plays in Buddhism is that it motivates and sustains the disciple in his or her practice and gives a sense of direction, confidence and peace until Enlightenment is attained. Enlightenment cannot be achieved by faith but by understanding, introspection and direct experience⁴. He or she is taught that the way to achieve the prescribed states of mental concentration and clarity in which the mind becomes intensely concentrated, blissful and peaceful or penetrating clear and sharp, is a regime of initial faith balanced by a robust attitude of mental investigation, reflection and mindfulness. This aspect can be utilised in the proposed countermeasures to be discussed in this paper.

1.5 This representations shall be presented from the Buddhist community's perspective in the Singapore context in the following order:

- a. Causes;
- b. Impact and consequences;
- c. Countermeasures.

2. CAUSES

2.1 The cause for spreading falsehoods relating to the Buddhist doctrine could be an acute sense of intolerance by a quasi-Buddhist, another religious and non-religious organisations and persons (both in or outside Singapore). Their objectives are to discredit and damage the doctrine, sanctity, respect, goodwill, sacred personalities and institutions associated with Buddhism. Often this is carried out with a sense of religious zeal, bigotry and irreverence. The motives could be to two-fold:

- a. To confuse, ridicule and create misunderstanding amongst Buddhists and Buddhist organisations inter se; &
- b. To create inter-religious or racial misunderstanding and friction between Buddhist and other religious, non-religious and legitimate political organizations and institutions in Singapore.

3. IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

3.1 The general impact and consequences are as follows:

- a. General confusion and disharmony within the Buddhist community

⁴ Nyanaponika. (1975). Devotion in Buddhism. Kandy: Buddhist Publications Society.

3.1.1 Unlike other religious practices, Buddhists in Singapore are not required to and generally do not undergo any prescribed or mandatory courses or regularly religious events or services on a congregational basis (daily or weekly). Most Buddhists rely on their individual family's Buddhist devotional practices (consisting of a mixture of Buddhist doctrines, Ancestral worship or even Taoist beliefs), self effort to read up on the doctrine and attending occasional talks on Buddhism by local or visiting foreign teachers to supplement their diet of the understanding and interpretation of the Buddhism. An exception is a generation of citizens who were permitted to opt for Buddhism as one of their "O" level examinations subjects for a short period (1984 – 1989) and a group of dedicated practitioners who take up formal study on a private individual basis and/or participate in more regular ritualistic programmes like regular chanting and meditation sessions at their temples and centres. For this minority group of citizens, their understanding of Buddhism is more structured, comprehensive and balanced. Hence, the majority are not familiar with the Buddhist scriptures and doctrine but possesses a devotional approach with an implicit understanding of the tenets of Buddhism which focuses on non-violence, tolerance, generosity, compassion and even the practice of vegetarianism on new or full lunar month days.

3.1.2 There may be some new Buddhist groups who are over-zealous in their interpretation and understanding of the Buddhist doctrine and may want to spread their brand of teachings and influence other main stream Buddhist groups. Some of these are new Buddhist organisations who adopt a more evangelistic and aggressive approach in their propagation of their brand of Buddhism. Their modus operandi is to circulate and popularise their teachings, doctrines and their self-proclaimed enlightened teachers through the social media. An example is the monk from Myanmar, Ashin Warathu and his national organisation called the Ma Ba Tha who advocates and justifies violence and aggression (with the consequential effects of killings and harming innocent lives) against Muslims which may encourage Buddhists who are not familiar with the general Buddhist doctrines and practices to misunderstand and misconstrue Buddhist teachings to approve the infliction of physical or mental violence, harm, torture and death on another human being⁵. This is against the basic teaching and "First Precept" of Buddhism that all living lives are precious and that not a single drop of blood can ever justify the spread of the Buddha's teachings (Narada, 2010). Lastly there are quasi-Buddhist groups who advocate sexual intercourse and relationships between teacher and disciples and also amongst members. These and many other examples of new quasi-Buddhist cults which misinterpret the teachings of the Buddha can be found at <https://buddhism-controversy-blog.com/2017/10/10/the-dalai-lama-on-abuse-by-buddhist-teachers-or-gurus/> and <http://viewonbuddhism.org/controversy-controversial-teacher-group-center-questionable.html>. These new interpretations become a threat to Singapore's present multi-religious harmony and peace when some of these teachers corrupt and substitute such deviant ideas and interpretations in the minds of Buddhists in Singapore and which will result in disharmony and confusion amongst Buddhist community.

⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30930997>.

b. General confusion and disharmony in inter-religious communities

3.1.3 Buddhist values upheld and practised by the majority have a beneficial and positive effect in a multi-racial and religious society like Singapore where Singapore Buddhists are tolerant and respectful of other religions and are willing to contribute to or be involved in any joint or individual religious activities and events

3.1.4 Given these circumstances, any fake news issued relating to any scriptural aspect of Buddhism can confuse the majority as they have no means of clarifying them readily either from any Buddhist centres or any national level platform. The effect of the fake information could incite hostility against other religious groups as Buddhists may misunderstand these fake news as representative of a particular religion's outlook or approach. This may weaken and damage Buddhist values of tolerance and respect and encourage hostility of other religions. A local example is self-proclaimed miracle worker Pastor Rony Tan of Lighthouse Evangelism Church who in 2010 through his church's Youtube video first showed an ex-Buddhist monk and nun's testimonies of why they left Buddhism and later Pastor Rony Tan continued by stating that rebirths, Nirvana and chanting are "rubbish", "nonsensical" and demonic. His intention was obviously to degrade, insult and poke fun at Buddhism in his church at the expense of Buddhist sensitivity and tolerance⁶. Another example from overseas are Youtube videos from the U.S.A of evangelistic pastors condemning and poking fun at Buddhism along the same line as Pastor Rony Tan. Another example is the purported discovery of an ancient Buddhist text in Chiangmai (Thailand) which convincingly claim that the Buddha prophesied that another person greater than Him will come to save the world and this person suits the description of Jesus Christ. Please refer to <http://bibleprobe.com/buddhatoldofjesus.htm>. Also the present availability of hate messages and condemnations directed at Buddhism by Christian evangelists in the Youtube, e.g. in the U.S. Lastly, the Rohingya crisis could be exploited by other groups to encourage Buddhists in Singapore to be violent, aggressive to and disrespect of Islam as a show of vicarious support for their Myanmar Buddhists on the basis that Ashin Warathu, a senior Buddhist monk (and his Buddhist national group, Ma Ba Tha) had endorsed and 'permitted' such deviant acts to be done.

4. COUNTERMEASURES

The government has discussed passing legislation to provide punishments for those responsible for the spread of fake news. In order for countermeasures to be effective, there must be a multi-faceted approach. In this paper, we would like to look at non-legal approaches and the following measures are proposed:

a. **A national-level religious platform/centre**: This is where all citizens, Buddhists and non-Buddhists can report, feedback and also seek clarifications and updates on Buddhism. This can either be established as a centralised Buddhist office managed by the Singapore Buddhist Federation ("SBF") or alternatively by a national-

⁶ <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2010/02/10/singapore-raps-evangelical-pastor-for-ridiculing-buddhists-taoists/>

level multi-religious centre. There are advantages under either anyone of these 2 choices. If it were to be established by the SBF, the main advantage is that it would have the venue, expertise and resources to carry out its functions effectively and expeditiously. The main disadvantage would be there may be duplication of tasks by both the Buddhist and other religious organizations if each establishes a similar outfit. Alternatively, if this were a multi-religious centre, the main advantage is there is a maximization of the pooling of expertise and resources and creates a healthy environment for multi religious co-ordination but the main disadvantages are that it might be time consuming to set up such a centre and a need to prioritise actions and resources in the event of multiple responses. The merits of which mode can be discussed in detail at another stage. But whichever mode is chosen, the need for Buddhist and non-Buddhist Singaporeans to be able to approach a central agency tasked with these functions can help to identify and isolate any fake news when it sprouts its ugly head and then to nip it at its bud.

b. **Public education:** A proactive role taken by Buddhist temples and organisations in Singapore to educate, inform, clarify, disseminate, update and publicise news relating and circulating in the internet and online social media relating to these fake news and to advise what can be done by Buddhists to tackle these fake news. This can be done through exhibitions and visits to schools, workplaces and to temples to explain and allow people from both the Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities to come together and learn more about Buddhism.

c. **Engagement of the mass media and technology companies:** The mass media in Singapore (especially those which are government owned) can be engaged to assist SBF and the Buddhist community to educate, inform, clarify, disseminate, update and publicise materials on Buddhism. Even the assistance of technology giants like Goggle, Yahoo, Facebook and Instagram operating in Singapore can be approached to assist in the early detection, location of their source and neutralisation of such publications of fake news through their technologies. Incentives, awards and recognition can be given to them for coming forward to offer to tackle and contain fake news circulation.

d. **Regular public discussion/forum:** There should be regular public discussion on Buddhism and also on other religions. This is a time for anyone, both Buddhists and non-Buddhists to raise any issues for clarifications, suggestions and discussions. In this forum, sensitive topics on Buddhism can be discussed openly and respectfully from learned teachers and leaders from the Buddhist Community.

5. **IN THE TRUE SPIRIT OF DISCUSSION**

5.1 It should be emphasized that the countermeasures especially the new laws are not to prevent, discourage or punish anyone who is genuinely interested to learn, clarify and contribute to a robust and healthy dialogue and discussion leading to a better understanding of Buddhism and a mutual respect and tolerance of religions in Singapore. Clearly it would be the motive and of intention of the originator of the fake news. If the originator of these fake news wishes to highlight something about Buddhism which may appear ex facie to be deviant, contrary to or offensive to the

common Buddhist doctrines or practices but his or her intention is to make it a relevant and beneficial practice, then this is to be encouraged and welcome by the Buddhist community in Singapore. This will be in line with the Buddha's teachings that regular reviews and discussions of any matters should be done in the spirit of harmony, truth and concord before, during and at the end of any discussion amongst its leaders even in a country. By doing this, the community and country shall only prosper and not be defeated by any foreign or unfriendly party or power. This is called the "7 Principles of Social and Communal Harmony" (Anguttara Nikaya 7:21 and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2016). Such genuine persons or organisations can go through the above avenues proposed at paragraph 4(a) to (d). However, if the intention or motive is to disparage, confuse and harm the target audience, i.e. Buddhists then the laws and countermeasures must be effective to detect, isolate and contain the fake news and their source and originators and prevent such incidents from occurring again.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 A harmonious, peaceful and tolerant society in which citizens and residents of different religions and beliefs can live, work and interact together is extremely crucial in Singapore and something which we cannot take for granted. It is something many countries want to achieve but very few achieve. We must always cherish and treasure this healthy state of affairs and be vigilant never to allow it to be hijacked by some who are either envious or unhappy and wish to destabilise the present peace and harmony we have managed to achieve and continue to nurture.

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