Basic Buddhism

a philosophy,

not a religion

*The Dalai Lama, who is in Washington, DC for a ten day event, has written: “I have come to the conclusion that whether or not a person is a religious believer does not matter much. Far more important is that they be a good human being.”. . . “That is why I sometimes say that religion is* something we can perhaps do without.”

*It seems many in the West agree with the spiritual leader, as millions report that they incorporate Buddhist practices such as meditation or mindfulness into their own spiritual activities without necessarily adopting Buddhism as their religion.*

*Does religion aid or hinder the spiritual journey? Can you practice Buddhism without becoming Buddhist?*

1. While teaching religion in the University of Hawaii, on a Honolulu walk one day I wandered into a Buddhist temple, opened a hymnal at random, and read these words: “Buddha loves me. This I know, for the sutras tell me so.” That is religious. The deity (Buddha) loves the devotees, & they reciprocate his love by gratefully singing his praise. In the original, which was the hymn’s model, the deity is Jesus Christ as incarnate second Person of the Holy Trinity, and the worshipers are Christians: “Jesus love me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so.” (Albert Schweitzer, world-eminent both in musicology and in Bible, as a Christian medical missionary used these words to explain to his black-African patients why he cared about them.)

2. But Gautama (later called “the Enlightened” [i.e., “Buddha”]) was a philosopher who walked away from Hinduism’s 30,000 deities (as well as from his family) and whose original followers did not consider him a deity. Originally, Buddhism was not a religion; and the Dalai Lama, in saying “religion is something we can perhaps do without,” is returning to square one. He’s right in step with millions in the West who are saying “I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” And, like them, he says morality (being “a good human being”) is “far more important” than religion.

3. As the West’s Enlightenment was one kind of Christian protestantism, Buddhism was one kind of protestant Hinduism. Early in the 19th century, Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard remarked that “enlightened” movements degenerate into moralism (the good trumping the holy), which then degenerates into narcissistic aestheticism (the individual’s notion of the beautiful, trumping the good). Said he, while human beings have a God-given moral sense of right/wrong, good/evil, it is fragile. For health and strength, it needs the support of our God-given religious sense. Meditation and “mindfulness” are self-conscious manipulations of attention: they are not religious.

4. “The urge to worship sparked civilization” said the lead article in last month’s [National Geographic. The Gobekh Tepe Temple (in southern Turkey)](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/06/gobekli-tepe/mann-text), built by hunter-gatherers 11,600 years ago (7,000 years before Stonehenge), proves that “The Birth of Religion” (the article’s title) preceded the birth of cities, which were preceded by the birth of agriculture. Contrary to the Dalai Lama’s “conclusion,” religion as worship is not “perhaps something we can do without.” Efforts to eliminate religion have a sorry history, a sophomoric present, and a foreboding future.

5. America’s political founders spoke and wrote of “the Creator,” “Providence,” and “nature’s God.” They could have said (as some today are beginning to say) “We’re not spiritual, but we are religious.” And they spoke of our religious, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and rational powers and our rights as “God-given.” I doubt that the American civilization can survive the death of this language in our public schools.

6. Finally, On Faith’s two questions:

(1) “Does religion aid or hinder the spiritual journey?” Good religion aids, bad religion hinders. Our present-day culture of multiculturalism forbids our judging among the religions with, ironically, the exception of Christianity: we are free to criticize it. But the question is prejudiced against “religion” (which is viewed as an optional means) and for “spirituality” (viewed as the individual’s goal).

(2) “Can you practice Buddhism without becoming Buddhist?” Yes, if Buddhism is defined as meditation, mindfulness, and (as, now, the Dalai Lama) being good. But no, if Buddhism is defined not as a philosophy (as Gautama, the founder) or as attentional exercises or as morality but as a religion with Buddha as its deity (”Buddha loves me....”).

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