

“THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC RELIGION AND EARLY BUDDHISM”: INSIGHT INTO BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TO DISENGAGEMENT OF RELIGION FROM WIDER SOCIETY

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The “disengagement” of religion from the wider society is an important theme. If a religion is disengaged from the common people, it marks the absence of “public religion” leading to a “private religion”. Public religion is a religion which has a direct impact on society. The present paper examines the early Buddhist standpoint regarding public religion with a reflection on some of the issues. As a teaching perceived to be focusing more on individual salvation, does Buddhism place private religion over public religion? Also, does Buddhism qualify as a public religion considering the attempts of the Buddha to ensure the betterment of some oppressed social groups? The research intends to address these issues. The research objectives entail an examination of the concept of “public religion”, early Buddhist position on public religion and private religion, and some issues in considering Buddhism as a private or a public religion. This is primarily a literature survey employing the early Buddhist discourses as the primary sources. Apart from them, the modern sociological works and other writings were used to clarify the sociological concepts related to the study. There are several instances in Buddhist discourses which admire individual religiosity over public religious behavior of the ordinary masses. However, religion appears to have played an important role in the public space in the 6th century B.C. India according to some Buddhist discourses. The entering of religion into the public ideology is not unusual even in Buddha’s time. More importantly, the commitment to social well-being is not a deviation from the Buddhist goal. The Buddha did not confine his *Dhamma* to a community living in monasteries. The Buddha’s advice given to his first missionary group reveals how far the doctrine was expected to be conducive to social benefit. However, if the “social liberation” in Buddhism can be explained in terms of individual salvation, it challenges the idea of public religion. Several issues were found when recognizing Buddhism as a public religion in the 6th century B.C. India, even though the impact of Buddhism on social betterment is of undeniable value. Considering all, it can be said that the commitment of Buddhism for a better society is secondary to its *summum bonum* and yet it has ingredients which can nourish the “public sphere” by improving justice, liberation and democracy, which all have an appeal to the common masses.

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