

Example of the matter of free choice term paper

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



Abstract

While, nowadays, spiritual leaders have less influence on Western society, the influence of religion on the East still remains profound. In this context, of particular interest is how tendencies of society's modern development, which are undeniably present in the eastern countries, are interacting with the ancient religions characteristic for this region. Thus, it would be interesting to track how specific religion treats certain important issue of human rights and their implications. One of examples of such analysis is the article “Abortion and Buddhism” by Robert Florida. The aims of the present paper is to analyze the article in the most keen and critical manner and to give appropriate opinions on the topic, supporting them by relevant academic sources. The main conclusions will be given in the end of the paper.

Key words: Buddhism, abortion, free choice, noninterference, contraception, karma.

The Matter of Free Choice

In the history of human development, there were numerous questions which humanity was addressing but still could not answer. Usually, in order to distinguish certain position on a specific issue, people from various spheres of human society were involved. Depending on the level of social development, those people could have been ordinary workers, intelligent youth, scientists and even political leaders. Irrespective of the level of societal development, one category of people was always involved – spiritual leaders or representatives of religious groups. While, nowadays, the situation had changed and spiritual leaders have less influence in the Western society, the influence of religion on the East still remains profound. In this context, of

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particular interest is how tendencies of society's modern development, which are undeniably present in the eastern countries, are interacting with the ancient religions characteristic for this region. Thus, it would be interesting to track how specific religion treats an important issue of human rights. One of examples of such analysis is the article " Abortion and Buddhism" by Robert Florida. The aims of the present paper is to analyze the article in the most keen and critical manner and to give appropriate opinions on the topic, supporting them by relevant academic sources. The main conclusions will be given in the end of the paper.

The main strength of the article is its structure. Florida starts from the mentioned above introduction which he follows with description of the main Buddhist ethical principles. This makes even general audience aware of the main pillars of Buddhism. Then he explained the essence of Buddhist perception of fetus development, which he described in the sub-chapter of " Buddhist embryology" (Florida 1999, p. 139). Only after these two summaries of Buddhist perceptions, he continued with the actual analysis of Buddhist position about abortion in the framework of universal historical perceptive, based on traditional texts and quotations of the monks who again relied on those texts. In the end, he quoted a couple of modern scientists and doctors. This gave a more modern look to the issue. Further, Florida proceeds with explanation of the difference in perception of the issue in different countries and the main reasons for such situation. He argues that Thailand lives by double standards of condemning the issue on legal and religious level and practicing it in everyday life. In Japan, he refers to the ritual of mizuko kuyo and its financial benefits for Buddhist temples. On the

other hand, in case of Korea, he outlines the absence of high interest to the issue and lack of extreme condemnation characteristic for cases of Thailand and Japan.

The mentioned above structure contributes to a better comprehension of the difference between Buddhist interpretation of the issue by monks and by Buddhist population of different countries. In this context, the difference between religion, political power and human freedom of choice is made. Another essential general strength of the article is resources used for its writing. Florida did not stop only on quotation of the Ancient texts and sacred books of Buddhism; he cited words of real, living monks and adepts. He used official, legislative documents and research studies relevant for the field. He also referred to articles of other scholars and argued or supported their positions. The most vivid example was his argument against view of Helen Hardacre, “ who wrote from a strong feminist position” (Florida 1999, p. 155). In this context, he opposed her findings and showed counterarguments of her statement that the ritual of mizuko kuyo was entirely “ greedily exploitative” (Florida 1999, p. 155). His main argument was that this ritual was dating back to traditional Buddhist perception of reincarnation and the idea that if something went wrong the soul or essence would not be able to go to another incarnation and would stuck somewhere, just as it was explained in the Japanese ritual (Florida 1999, p. 157).

Having explained the main general characteristics of the article, it is important to analyze its specific aspects. The corner stone of Buddhist attitude to abortion is the way Buddhists believe conception takes place. According to Buddhism, conception and subsequent phenomenon of

reincarnation take place when egg meets spermatozoid and “ the intermediate being or vijñana” is present (Florida 1999, p. 139). The main result of this idea is that fetus is considered to be a human being from the moment of its conception. One might say what is the difference? The main difference is that when the act of abortion is taking place, it is viewed by Buddhists as an act of a kill, which equals to the murder of entirely formed human individual (Sevilla 2010). Thus, the act of abortion interferes with the first and the main precept of Buddhist morality – “ to abstain from taking life” (Florida 1999, p. 141). Therefore, no monk of Buddhist follower can tolerate or encourage the act of abortion. It turns to be even prohibited in case of rape or danger for mother’s death.

Having given the explanation of Buddhist perception of abortion, Florida challenged two essential problems connected to the issue. First of all, he outlined the difference between Buddhist teaching and its practical implementation in lives of Buddhism followers, meaning the fact that although Buddhism prohibits abortion, the rate of legal and illegal abortion on the mainly Buddhist countries is extremely high. Thus, the phenomenon is widely spread. Another question Florida raised in his article was why Buddhist monks were reluctant to challenge the issue publicly and explain the rationale of condemnation in the framework of the modern reality. It is essential that Florida did not only raise these questions, he also gave his answers to them. In case of the first one, he argued that people manage to divide their modern social life with religious one. From one perspective, the main result of this is that women make abortion not because they do not know that it is prohibited and judged by monks and Buddha, but because

they separate their modern social life and spiritual one. The main connection between two realms is in Buddhist rituals used for atonement for sins and misconducts, which aim at partial purification of karma and redemption. In this context, the ritual of mizuko kuyo fits perfectly, because it helps women to get rid of their grief and feeling of guilt, which, in its turn, contributes to the development of Buddhist temples in Japan.

Concerning the second question, Florida argues that Buddhist ignorance of the issue on public level is conditioned by their general principles. Buddhist monks do not see the point of restating the main postulates according to the new tendencies of the surrounding social environment, mainly because these principles are universal and should be followed irrespective of the environment and new challenges (Florida 1999). On the other hand, monks would also argue that official position of Buddhism concerning the issue of abortion can be derived from five essential principles and perception of conception. This means that since fetus is viewed as a human being from the moment of its conception, than killing it would equal a murder of a grown-up individual. In this context, it would be strange for the monks to restate things which were proclaimed by Buddha centuries ago. In this context, Florida argues that Buddhists consider that the issue should be treated in its basic nature, meaning that it is not a condemnation of abortion that should bother people, but the preemptive measures which could be taken in order to prevent the act of fetus' kill (abortion). In this context, Buddhists would address the source rather than consequences and would publicly encourage contraception and rational reasoning based on rejection of greed, hatred and disillusion (Florida 1999).

Although Florida's article is an example of profound and logical reasoning on the target topic, there are still numerous aspects which were not included or rather indirectly emphasized in the article. Subsequently, the second part of this paper is devoted to those issues and certain criticism of the article and topic. My personal opinion will be also given in this part. In this context, the first issue which should be outlined is that some scholars would argue that the main reason why there was such a huge difference between modern tendencies of social life and Buddhist spiritual life was that Buddhism was not modern enough to take a crucial and motivating place in human life (Maguire 2003). In this context, people are likely to divide their life between regular rituals, tradition of following the same religious path as their parents rather than actual belief in those matters. In other words, Eastern society is going through the same stage as Western society did in the previous decades – “crack of faith” and moral code of behavior (Sevilla 2010).

Although, today, Eastern society still remains more spiritual and religious than Western one, the influence of religious moral on actual human behavior in every-day life had significantly decreased (Keown 1995).

The main examples to support the last statement are the following. First of all, the issue does not refer only to the problem of abortion. For instance, the rate of suicides in Japan once was one of the highest in the world and, at certain point, turned to be on the second place after Scandinavian countries (Sevilla 2010). Particular feature of this comparison is that Scandinavian countries belong to those which have the lowest level of any religious believers in the world (Sevilla 2010). Therefore, it becomes arguable how far Japanese society is indeed religious rather than being simply traditional in

following old ways in social pretending rather than actually following in decision-making (Keown 1995). This statement can be also proved by the example used in the article, where the rituals of mizuko kuyo were developed. It is unarguable that this ritual is a mixture of classical Buddhist tradition and modern Japanese society needs. While Buddhist tradition is mainly in taking care of the lost spirits and protecting them on their path of reincarnation or its failure; Japanese social reality is that people/women need some comfort for their consciousness and ability to decrease their feeling of guilt and grief. In this context, this function is entirely opposite to classical Buddhism and its idea that life is suffering and that the act of murder cannot be forgiven (Maguire 2003).

In the context of “ crack of faith”, there is another essential issue which Florida had described in his article, but did not single it out. Such thing is “ marketization of Buddhist religion” (Sevilla 2010). This process was described on the ritual of mizuko kuyo in context that it supported various temples and gave an opportunity for their further growth (Keown 1995). In this case, Florida was not referring to a long-termed perspective of this phenomenon and how it interacted with Buddhist reluctance to address abortion publicly. The main reality of the modern world is a lack of faith and deterioration of the position of all world religions (Sevilla 2010). While Western religions are in deeper decline, Eastern ones manage to withstand the waves of human skepticism and scientific explanation of the universe. Some scholars believe that the main secret of Buddhism is its ability not to interfere into human development and challenge new tendencies of human social life (Maguire 2003). In this case, noninterference into discussion of

abortion makes sense. Although abortion's abolishing is derived from the classical Buddhist texts and is seen as the same sin as murder, it does not force an individual to do something or create limitations for free will (Sevilla 2010). In such way, Buddhism manages to keep a large number of its followers and remain alive in the modern world.

The vivid example why Buddhism's desire not to go public is partly dictated by survival instinct is Roman Catholic Church. In the recent years, the wide public debate and official condemnation of abortion and contraception by Catholic Church had resulted in vast criticism and following decline of Christian followers (Sevilla 2010). This is conditioned by simple logical reasoning which states that it is immoral to have safe sex and it is immoral to do abortion, then Christians should either refuse from sex or make babies all the time (Sevilla 2010). It is just illogical and unbelievably selfish especially from the point of environment. Buddhism, on the other hand, supports contraception, not only because it helps to keep its followers, but because it corresponds to its essential ideas of preemptive actions and rational consideration of consequences (Keown 1995). On the other hand, if Buddhism went public about abortion the way Catholic Church did, it would have lost numerous followers especially in Korea where Buddhism was not as strong as it was in Thailand and Japan (Sevilla 2010).

Another substantial reason why Buddhism is not going publicly against abortion and does not prevent it by severe consequences is that it is just not a kind of religion to do that. In this context, Florida forgot to strictly distinguish the consequences of difference in spiritual obligations of monks and followers. Although Buddhist monks are to condemn the action of

abortion in case of an advice or consequences of the act, he has no actual legal or spiritual right to prevent it by direct actions (Maguire 2003). In this context is meant the idea of observation and non-interference in human free will and personal development on the chosen path of incarnation. Since life is suffering of one's inner self or vijnana; it is human inner self or soul which matters; and deeds are judged often by their motives and consequences for the spirit and karma (Sevilla 2010). So an individual is the only one to deal with himself and consequences of his choices. In this context, the aim of religion and Buddhist monks is to explain what is right and what is wrong for human karma and how person should deal with it. Therefore, there is no use of making rules mandatory, legal or illegal. It is not society that will suffer from the consequences of one's bad karma, but an individual himself and his further incarnations (Sevilla 2010).

Overall, from all mentioned above, it can be concluded that the article by Robert Florida gives a wide explanation of Buddhist attitude to abortion and differences of its implementation in three Buddhist countries. Although he managed to outline why abortion rate in Buddhist countries was high irrespective of Buddhist condemnation of abortion and outlined why it was not publicly condemned, Florida could not cover all aspects of these issues in details. His answers referred to the situational and functional aspects of the topic, while other critics applied a wider scope for analysis and compared Buddhism to Christianity in senses of survival and free will. Personally, I respect Buddhism for its principle of non-interference. It is up to a person to make mistakes or to live a noble life. The role of religion is to give guidance, but not to decide for a person what to do.

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