BUDDHISM'S RELIGIOUS RESISTANCE TO SECULARISM

Some observers might maintain that it is the 'religious' quality of Buddhism that is most likely to prove a weakness in the modern situation, and to affect adversely its ability to maintain its influence in the contemporary world. But to see the religious element in Buddhist culture as its area of weakness is, in the view of the present writer, a mistaken and superficial view of the matter. In fact, the recent history of the predominantly Buddhist countries of South-East Asia suggests that it is precisely their religious culture which offers the strongest resistance to Western secular materialism. It is therefore important that we should include here a brief review of that history.

BUDDHIST VALUES IN POST-WAR BURMA

On 2 March 1962 the Burmese government, headed by the devoutly Buddhist Prime Minister, U Nu, was swiftly and silently removed from office by a military coup. It happened in the small hours of the morning, and the whole operation was
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complete by the time most of the inhabitants of Rangoon began their day's work; it was done with the efficiency one had come to associate with the Army under General Ne Win. The event came as a surprise when it did, although it was not totally unexpected. Under U Nu's premiership Burma's political and economic difficulties had grown more and more acute until the point had been reached where in order to function at all as a modern state sterner measures seemed to be needed than those which had characterized the benevolent and pious rule of this self-declared champion of Buddhism.

It would be naïve to suggest that the issue was simply between a greater or lesser degree of Buddhist principle and practice in government policy. Obviously many other factors were involved in the army's taking over control of the country. Any Burmese national leader is likely to have experienced the same kind of difficulties that U Nu encountered, whether he was as pious a Buddhist or not. The new political élite lacked the skills necessary to adapt Western forms to the Burmese situation, they had to contend with complicated internal struggles and with the opposition of strong traditional elements in Burmese society. U Nu has been seen by some observers as a type of leader not without parallel in other newly emerging nations, especially in Africa, the leader who is charismatic but inexperienced. It is because he was so avowedly Buddhist an administrator that the difficulties into which his government ran might be taken to indicate some conflict between Buddhist principles and the political and economic factors at work in the twentieth-century world. It is therefore worth noting that successive governments of independent post-war Burma have gone to the trouble of denying that there is any incompatibility between the philosophy of Buddhism, and the aims of a