

Dalai Lama's spokesman dismisses Australian tour protesters as a 'cult'

Shugden community accuses the leader of creating 'sectarianism and religious intolerance' in a row that has dogged Tibetan Buddhism since the 1970s

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A spokesman for the Dalai Lama has described the Shugden Buddhist community who have staged protests against the religious leader during his tour of Australia as a “cult” and said their protests were intended to “create friction among Tibetan Buddhists”.

Protests against the rejection of the Shugden community, which has been described by the demonstrators as “religious apartheid”, have marked every point of the Dalai Lama’s 12-day tour. The mixed reception to his appearance in at a business lunch in Perth on Monday, his last formal engagement before the tour ended on Tuesday, was typical.

A group of about 50 protesters carrying placards and chanting “false Dalai Lama, stop lying” lined the road opposite the Hyatt Regency, where the Dalai Lama addressed an event hosted by the Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce. On the other side of the road, a smaller group stood in welcome, playing Tibetan instruments.

The protesters are complaining about the Dalai Lama’s stance on the worship of Shugden, or Dolgyal, a spirit alternatively seen as enlightened or malevolent. The Dalai Lama, on his own website, cites the danger of Tibetan Buddhism “degenerating into a form of spirit worship”. Since 1975 he has recommended against the practice.

The specific complaint of the Shugden protesters is that he also asks that those who do follow it to stay away from his teachings and formal events.

In a statement released on Monday, Rob Keldoulis, a spokesman for the Dalai Lama, reaffirmed the religious leader’s disapproval of the practice while also saying he believed everyone should be free to practice religion as they wished.

“Because of its fiercely fundamentalist and sectarian associations, the Dalai Lama concluded that worshipping the Shugden spirit was divisive, inhibiting philosophical inquiry and critical analysis,” Keldoulis said.

“Whatever one believes about the reality of fierce spirits it is clear that the leaders of the Dolgyal/Shugden cult had intended to cause trouble among their own followers and sought to create friction among Tibetan Buddhists.”

The Shugdengs, for their part, say any sectarianism in the Tibetan community is caused by

the Dalai Lama's refusal to accept Shugden worshippers, saying he started and maintained a practice of discrimination and exclusion.

Nicholas Pitts, spokesman for the Shugden community, said the Dalai Lama needed to "end to the suffering caused by his sectarianism and religious intolerance".

"Religious freedom should apply to all traditions whether he likes them or not," Pitt said. "As a powerful political leader he must implement a policy of religious freedom and non-discrimination for all."

Religious harmony was one of the topics the Dalai Lama addressed in Monday's talk in Perth, which happened to fall on his 80th birthday.

"All religious institutions have same practice, the practice of love," he said, adding that there needed to be, "constant effort to promote religious harmony on the basis of mutual respect, mutual harmony".

He also addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, telling the audience: "I really admire the Jewish community. Hard-working, very practical," before adding, "The political side, some complications there."

The Dalai Lama arrived in Australia on 4 June for his 10th tour of the country, touching down in Sydney with the actor Richard Gere as his travelling companion.

Gere, a Buddhist, told the waiting press that the Dalai Lama gave, "very high teaching, experiential, something extraordinary - so it's worth coming this far".

The Dalai Lama and his entourage then went to a spiritual resort in the Blue Mountains, where he remained for five days, before giving lectures in Sydney, Brisbane, and Perth.

He also visited Uluru in the Northern Territory, meeting Mutitjulu elders on Saturday. He told the gathering in Perth that after seeing the living conditions in central Australia he had donated \$100,000 to local Aboriginal communities. A spokeswoman told Guardian Australia the money had been set aside and would be donated when an appropriate organisation was identified.

The Dalai Lama said Indigenous people in Australia had been "isolated" through lack of education, but said "they are the same human beings, they have the same rights" as anyone else in Australia.

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