

Dalai Lama's visit to Buddhist centre met with 'sectarian' protests

Tibetan spiritual leader calls for religious tolerance as opponents accuse him of pursuing policy of apartheid within Buddhist community

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Monday 29 June 2015 23.15 AEST

Even as the Dalai Lama pleaded from inside a new Buddhist centre for religious tolerance and harmony, the constant drumming and chanting of protesters from a breakaway sect could be heard outside.

Fresh from an appearance at the Glastonbury music festival, where he spoke about the need for action on climate change, the Tibetan spiritual leader strongly condemned those who justified killing by using religion.

In front of a small audience, who had pressed forward eagerly with cameraphones as he arrived, the Dalai Lama said all religions were sources of forgiveness and tolerance.

“Now that it is a factor for division and killing, we have a responsibility to promote religious harmony ... killing in the name of religion is totally wrong,” he said, sitting cross legged in front of well-wishers.

He spoke following Friday’s deadly attacks in Kuwait, France and Tunisia, where as many as 30 British tourists were killed by an Islamist radical.

He suggested that praying for divine guidance to deal with practical political problems was not enough. “We pray to God as if it his problem but all these problems are our responsibilities, it is logical we take responsibility to solve these problems. God gave us free will,” he said.

The Dalai Lama, who turns 80 next month, also stressed the importance of modern sciences. Amid the constant chirruping of mobile phones, he described how he had valued his discussions with scientists and had particular praise for quantum physics.

“These discussions with scientists have been very useful and helpful,” he said, as he called for Buddhist centres to turn themselves into centres of learning. “Please study more. This temple should be used firstly for study.”

Throughout his remarks, the chants and drumming of hundreds of followers of the International Shugden Community, a breakaway sect, could be heard. “Stop lying,” chanted members of the ISC, some who had come from as far as Florida to protest against the Dalai Lama’s visit to Aldershot in Hampshire, which has a large Buddhist population.

Shugden members accuse the Dalai Lama of trying to ostracise those who follow the spirit known as Dolgyal or Shugden. ISC supporters have organised noisy demonstrations outside his speaking engagements across North America, Europe and Australia. Aldershot was no exception.

A leaflet distributed to people who arrived at the town's train station criticised the Tibetan spiritual leader. "There is a vast body of well-documented evidence proving that away from the glare of the international media the Dalai Lama is a ruthless and corrupt politician who uses intimidation, humiliation and banishment to suppress those who do not abide by his authoritarian edicts." said the ISC.

Nicholas Pitts, an ISC spokesman who lives in Hong Kong, explained a Tibetan government-in-exile decree in 1996 banning the practice of Shugden had laid sowed the seeds for the sectarian rift within the Buddhist community. "Until then he had advised against Shugden, but that was a bombshell," said Pitts, who accused the Dalai Lama of pursuing a policy of apartheid within the Buddhist community. "Stop the segregation and the protests would stop," he added.

The Dalai Lama turned to the Shugden controversy at the end of his talk in the ornate temple, with Buddha statues behind him. He said he worshipped the spirit Shugden until 1970 but stopped because he found it harmful. "I should complain because until I stopped worshipping Shugden, I did not have religious freedom," said the Dalai Lama, who described the ISC as "very sectarian".

Mainstream Buddhist groups dismiss Shugden claims of persecution as unfounded, accusing its followers of "aggressive, misleading and unethical behaviour". An alliance of 10 UK Buddhist organisations has issued a statement formally dissociating themselves from Monday's protests.

"The UK Buddhist organisations signed up to this statement express their respect and support for his holiness's stance on promoting wider religious harmony between the religious traditions and on promoting mutual respect and admiration between the Buddhist traditions," it said.

The International Campaign for Tibet believes that the Shugden group's tactics play into the hands of the Chinese government and a couple of counter-demonstrators referred to the ISC supporters as "Chinese dogs".

"The protesters are from an extremist religious group that is aligned with the political agenda of the Chinese government in Tibet to undermine the Dalai Lama and enforce allegiance to the Chinese Communist party," said Kate Saunders, the communications director of the International Campaign for Tibet.

"This systematic campaign against the Dalai Lama and deepening oppression threatens the very survival of Tibetan religion and cultural identity."

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