

Editorial

BETWEEN THE IRON WALL AND THE VOID: NATIONAL CONSERVATISM, RADICAL GENDER IDEOLOGY AND THE WISDOM OF THE MIDDLE PATH

MATHEW ATTUMKAL

The contemporary world finds itself suspended between competing moral certainties, each claiming to safeguard human dignity while simultaneously deepening social fracture. National conservatism and radical gender ideology have emerged as two dominant and often antagonistic frameworks shaping political discourse, public policy, educational curricula and personal identities across the globe. Both present themselves as responses to perceived crises—one to cultural disintegration and moral relativism, the other to historical injustice and structural oppression. Yet, the intensity with which these positions are defended often produces more heat than light, transforming legitimate ethical concerns into polarising absolutes. This issue of the *Journal of Dharma* highlights a pointed question: Do these ideological trajectories signify social prosperity, or are they symptoms of a deeper moral and spiritual impoverishment?

To approach this question meaningfully, this editorial proposes a deliberate shift away from ideological extremities toward a wisdom tradition that has long warned against the dangers of absolutism—the Buddha’s Middle Path (*Majjhimā Paṭipadā*). Articulated in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Buddha rejects both self-indulgence and self-mortification as unworthy extremes, affirming instead a path of ethical discernment, relational balance and compassionate realism. “Avoiding both extremes,” the Buddha teaches, “the Tathāgata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, knowledge, peace, insight and liberation” (SN 56.11). Though

articulated in a radically different historical context, this insight offers a powerful guideline for examining the veracity of today's ideological polarization.

National conservatism, in its diverse global expressions, often emerges from genuine anxieties: economic precarity, cultural displacement, demographic change and the erosion of collective moral frameworks. It emphasizes sovereignty, tradition, religious heritage and social cohesion, drawing legitimacy from narratives of historical continuity and collective identity. Thinkers such as Roger Scruton have defended conservatism as a "love of home" (*oikophilia*), rooted in responsibility, continuity and moral restraint. In this sense, national conservatism can serve as a corrective to unbridled globalization and cultural homogenization, reminding societies of the importance of memory, belonging and ethical limits. Yet, when elevated to an absolute, national conservatism risks transforming tradition into dogma and identity into exclusion. History repeatedly demonstrates that when nation, religion or culture is sacralized beyond critique, the result is not moral strength but ethical contraction. As Hannah Arendt warned, ideologies that claim total explanatory power tend to erode plurality and silence dissent. In contemporary contexts, this often manifests in policies that marginalize migrants, suppress minority voices and rigidly police gender and family norms. The moral question, therefore, is not whether tradition matters – it undeniably does – but whether tradition remains a living, self-corrective inheritance or becomes an instrument of control that impoverishes the moral imagination.

At the opposite pole stands radical gender ideology, emerging from long and painful histories of patriarchy, gender-based violence and systemic exclusion. Feminist and queer movements have rightly exposed how binary gender norms and heteronormative assumptions have functioned as tools of domination. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, for instance, has been influential in unsettling the idea that gender is a fixed, natural given rather than a socially mediated reality. From this perspective, expanding the language of gender and rights appears as a moral necessity, aligned with broader struggles for

recognition and justice. However, here too the Middle Path cautions against excess. When gender discourse becomes entirely detached from embodiment, relationality and cultural embeddedness, it risks creating new forms of alienation. Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity” captures this dilemma: identities rendered infinitely flexible may promise freedom but often generate anxiety, instability and fragile belonging. Among younger generations, this can result in what psychologists increasingly describe as identity fatigue—an overwhelming pressure to constantly self-define without stable relational anchors. Liberation, when severed from responsibility and mutual recognition, can paradoxically slide into ethical disorientation.

The Buddha’s Middle Path neither denies suffering nor dissolves differences into artificial harmony. It begins with the clear recognition of *dukkha*—the pervasive unsatisfactoriness arising from craving, attachment, and aversion. Applied to contemporary ideological conflicts, this insight proves illuminating: national conservatism may cling to fixed identities out of fear of loss, while radical gender ideology can absolutize fluidity out of fear of constraint. Both respond to suffering yet risk reproducing the conditions they seek to overcome. This tension becomes especially significant within global development discourse. The shift from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects an expanded understanding that development exceeds mere economic growth. The UN 2030 Agenda promotes a holistic vision integrating social inclusion, gender equity, environmental sustainability and intergenerational justice, even as ideological polarization increasingly shapes policies on education, healthcare, family life and human rights.

From a *dharmic* perspective, prosperity (*śrī, maṅgala*) is inseparable from ethical balance and relational harmony. The *Dhammapada* reminds us: “Not by hatred is hatred appeased; hatred is appeased by non-hatred – this is an eternal law” (*Dham.* 5). Similarly, the biblical tradition echoes this wisdom when Jesus declares, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27), subordinating rigid norms to human

well-being. Across traditions, we recognize that laws, identities, and institutions exist to serve life, not to dominate it.

The articles in this edition of the *Journal of Dharma* examine how religion, culture, gender and nationalism are being reimagined in societies shaped by globalization, ideological tensions and shifting identities. Rather than viewing religion as declining, contributors highlight its integrative role through philosophy, theology, sociology and political theory, challenging simplistic binaries. Some trace historical roots of national conservatism and gender discourse, while others analyze policy implications in education and social welfare, showing their impact on marginalized communities, with particular attention to youth navigating complex questions of identity, freedom and belonging.

The opening article by Bhoomi J. N., *“Made for Man, Not for the Sabbath”: Queering the Boundaries of Heteronormativity and National Conservatism*, explores the relationship between national conservatism and heteronormative ideology, arguing that rigid gender binaries operate as mechanisms of exclusion sustained by political power. Through a theological reinterpretation of Jesus’ statement, “The Sabbath was made for man,” the author advances a biblically grounded ethic of love that challenges patriarchal populism and affirms the dignity of marginalized queer communities, presenting religion as a source of liberation rather than control. The second article, by Arnab Basu and Nadindla Srividya, *Tradition and Transition: Mapping Asia’s SBNR Identities amidst Radical Ideologies*, turns to emerging spiritual trends among Asian youth. Using a PRISMA-based systematic review, the study traces the rise of “spiritual but not religious” identities across South, East, and Gulf/West Asia. In *Global Pop, National Conservatism and Gender Ideology among Gen Z in China*, Mengtian Wu examines how digital youth culture localizes global pop aesthetics within nationalist narratives.

A historical and literary perspective emerges in Sourav Das and Jaipal’s *Sacred Subversions: Bhakti, Androgyny and Queer Affect in Bengali Vaishnav Literature*. Drawing on queer theory and affect studies, the authors examine premodern expressions of gender fluidity within *Bhakti* devotion, demonstrating that alternative

gender imaginaries have long existed within South Asian religious traditions. A philosophical reconfiguration of gender and power appears in Shanshan Gu’s *Strategic Soft Power and Radical Feminine Daoism*. Recasting the feminine principle as strategic soft power, the article argues that Daoist concepts such as *wu wei* present non-coercive governance as a transformative political ideal. Femininity becomes a source of relational authority rather than passivity, offering an alternative model of leadership grounded in balance and vitality.

Expanding the discussion to international relations, Sreshtha Chakraborty and Deeksha analyse *Cultural Nationalism and Universal Altruism in India’s Foreign Policy*. Rooted in civilizational humanism and pluralism, this approach seeks to harmonize national sovereignty with universal altruism, presenting a middle path between narrow nationalism and abstract cosmopolitanism. The final article by Siyoon Lee, *Between Internal Competition and Post-Secular Engagement*, brings the discussion into sociological theory through a Habermasian approach. Applying the concept of the post-secular society to South Korea, the article demonstrates how a highly competitive multi-religious environment generates both conflict and dialogue between religious and secular institutions. Religious diversity has to become a catalyst for democratic participation rather than division.

What emerges across these analyses is a collective finding that moral prosperity cannot be measured by ideological victory. Economic growth, political dominance or cultural uniformity are poor substitutes for justice, compassion and care for the vulnerable. Moral poverty, by contrast, manifests not only in material deprivation but also in fear, exclusion and the erosion of trust. National conservatism and radical gender ideology, when insulated from dialogue and ethical self-critique, risk becoming symptoms of such impoverishment. Yet when critically engaged, purified of excess, and oriented toward the common good, they may also contain resources for social renewal.

The Middle Path does not offer easy answers, nor does it call for a bland centrism that avoids difficult questions. Rather, it demands sustained ethical discernment, humility and openness

to correction. As the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna famously argued through the doctrine of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), clinging to any fixed position as ultimately real leads to suffering. Wisdom lies not in abandoning convictions, but in holding them lightly, relationally, and compassionately. As we at times come across public discourses increasingly marked by outrage and absolutism, the task before scholars, policymakers and faith communities is not to choose between rigid conservatism and unbounded radicalism. It is, rather, to cultivate ethical frameworks capable of holding plurality without fragmentation, tradition without tyranny, and freedom without nihilism. Only such a Middle Path can transform the signs of our time from indicators of moral poverty into pathways toward shared and enduring prosperity.

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