

On the Faith of Secular Buddhists

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*Secular Buddhism, “like all ‘isms’...is at best a parody, at worst a constriction.” —Nick Land**

Bloomsbury will publish my new book, *A Critique of Western Buddhism: Ruins of the Buddhist Real*, in September 2018. It is a detailed analysis of the *identity* of Buddhism using ideas from François Laruelle’s non-philosophy. What it shows is that forms of thought and practice like current “Secular Buddhism” are beholden to the identical transcendental norm as the most flagrantly religious and conservatively orthodox forms of Buddhism. In itself, this feature is not disqualifying. But when a system, such as Secular Buddhism, grounds itself in a rhetoric of immanence, or of “scientific” empiricism and philosophical phenomenology, this feature is extremely problematic.

The following text originated in my encounter with I Stephen Batchelor's "A Secular Buddhist." This short piece was distributed in advance of a public discussion between Batchelor and Don Cupitt, a self-described "secular Christian," on May 20, 2012 at London Insight Meditation.

Here, I would like to offer a raw reader-response account of my reading of Batchelor's statement. I know that his piece itself is too brief to base a broad criticism on. But there are two good reasons to attend closely to it. The first is that, according to the website, it represents Batchelor's "outlining" of his vision "for a contemporary spirituality." The second, and more important reason, is that it contains axiomatic features that are endemic to *all* writing on Secular Buddhism—whether in Batchelor's numerous books or on the newly sprouting Secular Buddhist websites, blogs, forums, and Facebook pages. These features form the very foundation on which Secular Buddhism is currently building its house. I say that they are axiomatic because these features go unchallenged, indeed unquestioned, by Secular Buddhists of all stripes, including the secular-scientific community around Jon Kabat-Zinn. These features, in short, constitute the faith at the heart of Secular Buddhism. It is a faith, moreover, that renders Secular Buddhism indistinguishable from every other system of religious

belief. The grounding of an “ism” in faith is neither new nor interesting. It is, however, a serious—perhaps debilitating—weakness in one that claims to reach for the values encapsulated in the term “secular.”

Radical?

James Blake’s comments introducing Batchelor’s and Cupitt’s statements alerted me to the first of several constrictions that render both arguments anemic. Blake announces that:

Both visions are radical...Radical is a paradoxical word, associated with the new and sometimes shocking, but literally meaning ‘of roots’. Stephen and Don are in this sense true radicals.

Blake says that Batchelor’s and Cupitt’s arguments are “rooted in deep study of the evidence for the lives and philosophies of the Buddha and Jesus respectively.”

Batchelor confirms this claim of radicality when he writes that his vision is “not just another modernist reconfiguration of a traditional form of Asian

Buddhism...It is more radical than that: it seeks to return to the roots of the Buddhist tradition and rethink Buddhism from the ground up” (pp. 3-4).

That sense of “radical” is, in Batchelor’s case, fraught with more pitfalls than the ostensible badge of honor is worth. First, as Batchelor himself notes, the Pali canon—Secular Buddhism’s go-to scripture—is a “complex tapestry” of data “shot through with conflicting ideas” (pp. 4-5). It is thus not the case that there is *no* ground to be staked out for a contemporary Buddhism on the basis of the Pali canon; rather, it is the case that there are numerous overlapping and intersecting grounds. Do you want your Buddhism to promise (actually, in the original context, *threaten*) rebirth? fiery hell? blissful heaven? It’s all in the canon. Would you like your Buddha to converse with horny spirits and cutesy gods til the wee hours of the morning? Grounds for that, too. How about a supernaturally powerful, miracle-performing Buddha? Yep. Oh, you prefer a Buddha who *despises* all of that mumbo-jumbo? Sure, no problem. How about banishing a member from your sangha for holding hands with a woman? You may do so! It’s canonical!

Batchelor is, of course, aware of the schizophrenic nature of the canon. So, he devises a methodology to get at the goods he wants. His method is to “bracket off

anything attributed to the Buddha in the canon that could just as well have been said by a brahmin priest or Jain monk” (p. 5). Why this? Because if a Brahmin or Jain could have said it, that is evidence *prima facie* that it was “determined by the common metaphysical outlook of that time” and “derived from the worldview of 5th century India” (p. 5). And if *only* the Buddha said it? Well, then it is “an intrinsic component of the dharma.” And here we have Secular Buddhism’s first article of faith.

First Article of Faith: Transcendental Dharma

The dharma is unconditioned. It is not the product of any century, particularly not of that century in which its creator (discoverer?) lived. It is timeless. Being so, it somehow nonetheless clarifies for us here and now, “in this world, in this century (our *saeculum*)” (p. 1), the “great matter of birth and death” (p. 5). The dharma—that unity of unique and timeless truths uttered by the enlightened Buddha—addresses and resolves our “ultimate concern” as human beings. Interestingly, Batchelor, unlike the communities that his work has spawned, comes clean here: “my secular Buddhism still has a *religious* quality to it” (p. 5;

emphasis in original). He reminds us, too, that “ultimate concern” is Paul Tillich’s gloss on “faith.” What did Tillich mean?

Paul Tillich believed that the essence of religious attitudes is “ultimate concern.” Ultimate concern is “total.” Its object is experienced as numinous or holy, distinct from all profane and ordinary realities. It is also experienced as overwhelmingly real and valuable—indeed, so real and so valuable that, in comparison, all other things appear empty and worthless. As such, it demands total surrender and promises total fulfillment (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; s.v. “Concepts of God”).

Why does Batchelor use for support, of all people, a Christian theologian? He gives a hint in his opening remarks:

I am a secular Buddhist. It has taken me years to fully “come out,” and I still feel a nagging tug of insecurity, a faint aura of betrayal in declaring myself in these terms (p. 1).

Stephen Batchelor needn't be concerned; for he now holds the beacon that illuminates the *ultimate* concern. That light is "the dharma." The first article of faith of all Secular Buddhists is that "the dharma" contains teachings that are (i) crucial to human flourishing, and (ii) otherwise unavailable or available only in inferior form from elsewhere. (Batchelor names four specific teachings. I will come back to these in a moment.) In my extended critique, I show that "the Dharma" is the transcendental norm that functions in all varieties of Buddhism, whether secularist-scientistic or flamboyantly devotional, in ways that are indistinguishable from other universal absolutes, such as God, Logos, Dao, or intelligent design. Here, I will only mention the logical impossibility of a timeless *saeculum*, and the irony of a Secular Buddhism grounded in deep religious sentiment. The first is absurd. The latter borders on bathos.

Why does Batchelor even bother to attach "secular" to his "Buddhism"? Here we have another constriction. The history of secularism is rich and complex. Contemporary secularism draws its inspiration from thinkers of the ancient Greek and Latin worlds through the Arab middle ages; it continues into the European Enlightenment with figures such as Voltaire, Spinoza, Locke, and James Madison, and comes down to modern times through Max Weber and Bertrand Russell. As

this diverse gallery of thinkers suggests, there is not one secularism, but many. The term cries out for nuance. So, what hints does Batchelor's outline "for a contemporary spirituality" offer about his usage of the term? All we get is the prosaic and literal "in this world, in this century (our *saeculum*)" (p. 1). That's it? What about—just for starters—secularism as a robust rejection of religious faith and, indeed, of anodyne "spirituality" itself?

Second Article of Faith: The Buddha

Secular Buddhism's second article of faith concerns *the human source* of this timeless dharmic clarification of the great matter of life and death: the Buddha. To arrive at just the right Buddha—the one who shares Batchelor's unspecified secular values—Batchelor must perform yet another act of constriction. He writes:

And when you bracket off the quasi-divine attributes that the figure of the Buddha is believed to possess...and focus on the episodes in the canon that recount his often fraught dealings with his contemporaries, then the humanity of Siddhattha Gotama begins to

emerge with more clarity too. All this supports what the British scholar Trevor Ling surmised nearly fifty years ago: that what we now know as “Buddhism” started life as an embryonic civilisation or culture that then mutated into another organized Indian religion. Secular Buddhism, which seeks to articulate a way of practicing the dharma in this world and time, thus finds vindication through its critical return to canonical sources, and its attempts to recover a vision of Gotamas’s own *saeculum* (pp. 6-7).

Batchelor already admitted to the cacophony of the Pali canon. So, to what canonical sources is he returning to extricate this humane master for our *saeculum*? I’ve said this before, but it bears repeating here.

Why do x-buddhists continue to embrace their Sunday-school fable of the Buddha? It is particularly curious that the scientifically-allied, ostensibly de-mythologized modern variety of Secular Buddhists do, isn’t it? Why this recurring, and seemingly unacknowledged argument from (mythological) authority? And why this dishonesty about the lack of reliable data for the so-desired authority? Or is it ignorance rather than dishonesty? And if ignorance,

is it the dark unknowing kind or the willful variety? I admit that, in past writings, I myself have done some damage in arguing for the reconstruction of a recoverable historical figure named “Gotama.”

Let me repent. My several years’ effort of searching for a reliable historical basis for a biography of Siddhattha Gotama can be summed up as this: Gotama is a ghost. He is a non-entity. Or, he is an entity like Ahab—a literary fiction. So, I now refer to him as “the Protagonist:”

Protagonist, The. The progenitor of the Buddhist dispensation. He is referred to by various names, such as “The Buddha,” “Gotama,” “The Blessed One,” etc. Speculative non-buddhism’s designation “The Protagonist” is intended to indicate the irrefutable fact that “the Buddha” is a historical figure entirely overwritten by a literary one. Not the slightest wisp of evidence has survived that sheds light on the historical progenitor. Any reliable historical evidence that once existed has been reduced to caricature by the machinations of internecine Buddhist institutional shenanigans and the stratagems of ideological dupery. The figure of the Buddha in the classical Pali texts

is a concoction of the collective imaginations of the numerous communities that, over several centuries, had a hand in the formation of the canon. Add to this imaginative mélange the imaginings—cultural, political, fantastic, ignorant—of all the iterations of all forms of x-buddhism, and the result is Buddha as Cosmic Magic Mirror, reflecting all things to all people. A viable composite human figure “The Buddha” can be salvaged from this protean symbol of buddhistic vanity only with force of the darkest, most atavistic yearning of puerile nostalgia for The Great Father.

May Secular Buddhists, *in our time*, put away their childish obsession with the ghost of Gotama.

Third Article of Faith: Special Teachings

Now, what about those presumably unique teachings that Gotama bestowed on humanity? That they are both *exigent and unique* constitutes the Secular Buddhists’ third article of faith. Batchelor writes:

Tentatively, I would suggest that this “bracketing” of metaphysical views, leaves us with four distinctive key ideas that do not appear to have direct precedents in Indian tradition. I call them the four “P”s:

1. The principle of conditionality
2. The process of four noble tasks (truths)
3. The practice of mindful awareness
4. The power of self-reliance

Some time ago I realized that what I found most difficult to accept in Buddhism were those beliefs that it shared with its sister Indian religions Hinduism and Jainism. Yet when you bracket off those beliefs, you are left not with a fragmentary and emasculated teaching, but with an entirely adequate ethical, philosophical and practical framework for living your life in *this* world. Thus what is truly original in the Buddha’s teaching, I discovered, was his *secular* outlook (p.6).

This statement echoes the apparently universal acceptance among Secular Buddhists of the sufficiency of the four noble truths/eightfold path framework for our *saeculum*. Now, with loud thumping of the canon, traditionalists will, of course, argue that such a constricted version of the teachings *does* precisely leave us with “a fragmentary and emasculated teaching.” (Why *emasculated*, anyway? Does Buddhism have a penis?) But that point does not interest me in the least. Neither does it interest me that a careful reading of Buddhism’s “sister Indian religions” reveals precisely the opposite of what Batchelor claims: there is much shared ground, much borrowing and reworking of each others’ ideas and practices. I am assuming that Batchelor knows that to speak of “Hinduism” at the time of the Buddha is wildly anachronistic—by well over a millennium; and that by “Indian religions,” he means the teachings that would eventually be recorded in the Upanishads, the Jaina canon, and the ancient yogic material. If that’s the case, he needs to return to those sources and read with heightened care. He will discover, if not outright incestuousness, at least a very close kinship between Buddhism and its “sister religions.” (Why *sister*, anyway? Buddhism is male and all the others are female?) But none of that interests me in the least. Finally, I will mention, though with disinterest, that Batchelor further constricts his Buddhism by reducing our expectations suddenly to a merely “adequate ethical,

philosophical and practical framework for living your life in *this* world” (p. 6; first emphasis added).

What does interest me is the fact that “the four Ps” render Buddhism *wholly expendable*. If the four Ps encapsulate crucial knowledge about how we should live as human beings at this time (*saeculum*), we can do drastically better than to look to Buddhism for that knowledge. For, all four have been articulated throughout history, and continue to be formulated and developed, in ways far more sophisticated, hence appropriate to a modern audience, than Buddhism’s ancient, ascetically-driven versions. Secular Buddhism’s fourth article of faith is thus the inviolability of *the principle of sufficient Buddhism*.

Fourth Article of Faith: The Principle of Sufficient Buddhism

It does not matter that Aristotle, Hume, and Parfit, for instance, provide us with vastly more nuanced and astute thinking on “the principle of conditionality.” No need for comparison to or dialogue with these thinkers: Secular Buddhism’s version is sufficient.

It does not matter that fields such as philosophy, psychology, biology, literature, neuroscience, medicine, and the arts have developed effective and often profound models and applications for fulfilling “the process of four noble tasks” (namely: fully knowing suffering; letting go of craving; experiencing cessation of craving; and cultivating the eightfold path). No need for comparison to or dialogue with these fields: Secular Buddhism’s version is sufficient.

It does not matter that the world’s treasure house of culture is teeming with suggestions for how to realize the “practice of mindful awareness.” Virtually every religious tradition includes a contemplative practice that has been lovingly transmitted through the centuries. Psychoanalysis, from Freud to Gendlin, has given careful thought to the nature of attention and the movements of the mind. So has philosophy, from the Stoics and Epicureans to Aristotle, and from Descartes and Kierkegaard to Wittgenstein-inspired thinkers such as Peter Winch, Norman Malcolm, and D.Z. Phillips. I could go on. Think of the creative practices of our poets and painters. But it wouldn’t matter. There is no need for comparison to or dialogue with these traditions: Secular Buddhism’s practice of mindful awareness is sufficient.

Finally, it does not matter that Emerson's thinking on "the power of self-reliance" makes the Buddha's look like a novice's. Let's bring others into this conversation about self-reliance. How about Thoreau? Montaigne? Pascal? Nietzsche? Hell, while we're writing invitations, why not invite the great American self-helpers like Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill? None of these thinkers will never get his invitation to the dialogue on self-reliance because Secular Buddhism's version is wholly sufficient for our *saeculum*.

Fifth Article of Faith: Ideological Rectitude

Why do Batchelor and the Secular Buddhists believe that they possess an "entirely adequate ethical, philosophical and practical framework for living your life in this world" and thus have no need of consulting the wider world of knowledge? The answer lies in their fifth article of faith. Batchelor is apparently convinced that what he is proposing as a Buddhism for our *saeculum* is—and these are universal Secular Buddhist buzzwords— *natural, empirical, pragmatic,* and *in accord with science*. The teachings, as the ancient trope has it, are simply

how things are. They are *phenomenologically* obvious. Thus, they posit not matters to be *believed* but tasks to be *done*. Batchelor writes:

Above all, secular Buddhism is something to do, not something to believe in...Instead of trying to justify the belief that “life is suffering” (the first noble truth), one seeks to embrace and deal wisely with suffering when it occurs. Instead of trying to convince oneself that “craving is the origin of suffering” (the second noble truth), one seeks to let go of and not get tangled up in craving whenever it rises up in one’s body or mind. From this perspective it is irrelevant whether the statements “life is suffering” or “craving is the origin of suffering” are either true or false. Why? Because these four so-called “truths” are not propositions that one accepts as a believer or rejects as a non-believer. They are suggestions to do something that might make a difference in the world in which you coexist with others now (p. 7).

Students of ritual have a saying: power is not manipulative; disguising power is. The Secular Buddhist propositions are *precisely* there to be accepted as a believer or rejected as a non-believer. Whether you accept or reject the postulates makes

a world of difference. Acceptance of those postulates conditions you for a *particular* way of seeing things, of interpreting experience, and so on. So, of course, you *see* things in those terms. You thereby share with others quite specific representations, language, and ideas about the world. Congratulations! You have an ideology (like the rest of us). The crucial question is whether the ideological nature of your worldview is overt or covert. Given its rhetoric of naturalness, pragmatism, and so on; given its fervent insistence on the *obviousness* of The Dharma; given its refusal to subject its beliefs to the rigors of humanistic discourse, Secular Buddhism cannot avoid the label of covert ideology.

I am not saying that Secular Buddhists intentionally disguise their ideological machinations, and thereby gain influence over their adherents. I am suggesting something deeper and darker than that. I am suggesting that Secular Buddhists themselves mistake the (ideological) lens for the data. They are blind to the fact that they even have an ideology.

Conclusion

Secular Buddhism and Stephen Batchelor are not, I suppose, necessarily synonymous. But you couldn't blame someone for thinking that they are. Just read first some Batchelor and then visit the ever-proliferating array of Secular Buddhist sites. The two are intimately entwined. The pervasiveness of Batchelor's influence throughout the Secular Buddhist universe is unmistakable. It often manifests in the form of his exact words. So, I think that it is legitimate to argue—at this juncture anyway—that Batchelor's faith is Secular Buddhism's faith as well.

A couple of final responses from my reading.

Contrary to James Blake's enthusiastic proclamation, secular Buddhism, as it is manifesting in the works of Stephen Batchelor and on the budding Secular Buddhist community websites, blogs, forums, and Facebook pages is *not* radical in any but the most trivial sense. It does *not* constitute a "reimagining [of] the dharma from the ground up." It is the same old exercise that Buddhists have been engaged in since their revered teacher made—what *my* Buddha would

consider—the colossal mistake of opening his big mouth: endlessly tinkering with the dharmic details. Batchelor is doing exactly what he asks us to believe he is not doing; namely, creating “just another modernist reconfiguration of a traditional form of Asian Buddhism” (pp. 3-4). I have seen nothing in the Secular Buddhist corpus that suggests otherwise.

I share the conviction that we need a radically new form of thought and practice for our time. So, I think it is unfortunate that Secular Buddhists have faith that they are salvaging eminently usable planks from the ancient, teetering, and dilapidated vehicle called Buddhism with which to build that new form. Slapping “secular” on a tradition born and nurtured in a world-renouncing asceticism inconceivable in today’s world, makes Secular Buddhism terribly close to a form of parody. Uttering “secular” before “Buddhism” certainly changes very, very little—and when Buddhism’s countless revisions throughout the centuries are taken into considerations, it changes nothing substantial whatsoever.

I have to wonder if Batchelor and the Secular Buddhists truly want such a radical reimagining of traditional Buddhism. In the end, they seem to swap radicality and innovation for the timeless certainties promised by traditional Dharma. The

Secular Buddhist quest, then, becomes identical to that of the mythical Buddha: *recovery* of a lost truth. As Batchelor expresses it in his somewhat millenarian final words:

Perhaps we have reached a time when we need to recover and practice again a solar dharma, one concerned with shedding its light (wisdom) and heat (compassion) onto and into this world (p. 8).

Does Secular Buddhism represent a first attempt, however frail, at a genuinely radical re-imagining of Buddhist postulates for the twenty-first century? Or is it a phantasmagoric mythos sprinkled with pseudo-philosophical platitudes, bad science, and facile recommendations for living? Something else?

Until Secular Buddhists ask long, hard, and, of course, potentially destructive, questions about their need to bolster up and preserve Buddhism or “Gotama’s teachings” or “the Dharma,” they risk being agents peddling the very goods they claim to be disposing us of: subscriptions to an ancient religion. Disguising that religion as “secular”—is that really what we need in our *saeculum*?

*Original: Like all 'isms', libidinal materialism is at best a parody, at worst a constriction. Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. xxi.

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