The Flexible Appropriation of Tradition: Stephen Batchelor's Secular Buddhism

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Stephen Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010, 320 pp., $17.00, ISBN 978-0-385-52706-4, paperback);

Stephen Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015, ISBN 978-0300-20518-3, 381 pp., $18.00, ISBN, paperback);

Stephen Batchelor, *Secular Buddhism: Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain World* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017, ISBN 978-0-300-22323-1, 285 pp., $27.50, hardback).

In 1972, Stephen Batchelor, aged eighteen, left his native Britain and made his way to Dharamsala, center of Tibetan Buddhism in exile. There he studied in the Gelugpa tradition, ordained at age twenty-one, and underwent a rigorous monastic training for the next ten years. The latter part of his period in Tibetan robes found him working in Switzerland, then Germany. He first came to international attention as a Tibetan-English translator, starting with the 1979 publication of his rendering of Śāntideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.* Translations of Nāgārjuna and contemporary Tibetan teachings followed.

Dissatisfied with what he saw as the scholasticism and doctrinal certitudes of Tibetan Buddhism, Batchelor moved in 1981 to Ssonggwangsa, a Korean Sŏn monastery, under the tutelage of Kusan Sunim. In 1985 he disrobed, married Martine Fages (now Martine Batchelor, a dharma teacher and author in her own right, as well as his collaborator), and entered on his present career as an independent, international dharma teacher, scholar, and writer. A long list of publications, plus co-founding the Sharpham College for Buddhist Studies and Contemporary Enquiry and the more recent Bodhi College, and substantial input in the development of Buddhist institutions in the West (not least the insight meditation retreat center Gaia House), lend distinction to this career .

As Batchelor has worked mainly in the West, the overarching theme of adapting the dharma to Western culture has steadily grown in intensity in his work through the decades. Over its two and a half millennia, the Buddhadharma has crossed many cultural boundaries, so historical precedents abound. The Chinese one,

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starting around two millennia ago, stands out. In China, the dharma encountered an advanced civilization whose language and culture expressed emphases, folkways, and reality constructs quite different to those of its birthplace, fifth-century BCE India. After generations of acculturation, a particularly Chinese iteration of dharma and its practice, Chan, emerged in the seventh century CE. It was unmistakably dharma, but at the same time unmistakably different from the original model. Would the Western experience eventually turn out to be similar, only more so? Batchelor's answer to this question was a tentative yes that has become less and less tentative over the last three decades. In the three more recent books under review, that yes has become emphatic.

Just as the Chinese acculturation of the dharma produced Chan (which in turn spawned Sŏn in Korea and Zen in Japan), so secular Buddhism is one thinkable contender for the dharma's Western acculturation, and the one with which Batchelor is now publicly associated. Secular Buddhism as it exists today is a developmental tendency only; it makes no claim to being an institutionalized and fully articulated "school" of Buddhism, nor does Batchelor claim to speak authoritatively on its behalf. But we may have to wait some time for a plausibly competing account to emerge and challenge the one presented in the three books reviewed here.

Another enduring theme in Batchelor's recent work is narrativity. We tend to make sense of things by telling stories about them, thus grasping their origins in a temporal dimension—whether through more or less mythologized histories, or through pure myths of origins. Epics such as the *Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, the Hebrew Bible, and the *Mahābhārata* have laid foundations for civilizations and religious traditions. Yet—apart from a mythical rendering of the Buddha's life, starting with the crown prince in the palace—the dharma has singularly eschewed the narrative of its own origins. The early texts contain no sense of historical time. The Buddha's life story and its context are fragmented and chronologically scrambled throughout the five collections (*Nikāyas*) of the discourses and the monastic rule (*Vinaya*), attributed to him in the Pali Canon.

An earlier British-born convert, Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu (1905–1960), made the first attempt to unscramble the elements of the Buddha's life story and the development of his teaching (Ñāṇamoli, [1972] 2001). Batchelor ambitiously follows suit. His recent books contain layers of narrative: of the Buddha's life, of those of some of his associates, and of the turbulent political and socio-economic context in which these lives unfolded. He acknowledges the contributions made by G. P. Malalasekera ([1938] 1997) and Trevor Ling (1973) to his own retrieval. In this way Batchelor gleans many interpretive insights that I will return to below. For good measure, he throws in the narrative of his own spiritual trajectory, a story which accounts for the elements of Asian and Western thought that have contributed to his iteration of the dharma.

Confession

This personal narrative in fact generates the structure of *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist,* published in 2010. The book is formally divided into two parts, dealing with the author's monastic and lay periods, respectively. But the chronological

arrangement of the book's eighteen chapters tracks a smooth narrative arc and cumulative development that belies this two-part division. Batchelor takes us through his many sequential sources of inspiration, uncomfortable changes in perspective, and consequent agonized leave-takings from his traditional teachers and institutions.

Batchelor honors the enduring inputs that his Tibetan and Korean teachers have made to his dharmic formation. Alongside these, he introduces readers to the currents of Western thought that have influenced him to the present day, ones that he sees as resonating with the dharma. These currents start in ancient Greece with the skeptics, stoics, and epicureans, and then mainly fast-forwards to post-Nietzschean, post-metaphysical thought: phenomenology (notably Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time*), existentialism, and American philosophical pragmatism as expressed primarily by John Dewey, William James, and Richard Rorty. The modern current also includes post-metaphysical Christian theologians, from Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Batchelor's friend Don Cupitt. Another formative influence (and yet another earlier British convert), Ñāṇavīra Thera (1920–1965), himself straddles the Pali Canon and modern post-metaphysical thought. He also provides an alluring role model for a European outrider in Asia, one who digs deeply into the early dharma to radically challenge its orthodox interpretation.[1]

Enfolded in Batchelor's autobiographical narrative in *Confession* is the second draft (after Ñāṇamoli's, but in a starkly contrasting idiom) of Gotama the Buddha's life story. Batchelor's draft draws on the Pali Canon; his own thought-provoking 2003 tour of prominent sites where Gotama grew up, awakened, lived, taught, and died; and plausible inferences about the Buddha's life where the canon remains sketchy, contradictory, or altogether silent. The silence is especially loud around Gotama's formative years up to his "going forth" into wandering mendicancy at the age of twenty-nine. Given his aristocratic status, lifelong associates, and erudition, for instance, might he not—like his cohort—have received an advanced education in Takkasila (Taxila), intellectual center and capital of Gandhara to the west of his native Sakiya?

In any event, the Gotama we meet here, embedded as he is in a fraught time and place, bears little resemblance to the timeless and decontextualized Buddha of conventional Buddhism. The former had to maneuver around and compromise with powerful but capricious rulers to survive and protect his following. This situated Gotama spoke from and to real-world experience, and (Batchelor argues) ought now to be heard and interpreted as having done so: "Gotama's voice is confident, ironic, at times playful, anti-metaphysical, and pragmatic" (124). Both the individual and his message thus become more intelligible and compelling for modern Westerners.

In the book's narrative of his own life, Batchelor introduces virtually all the concepts and arguments that will, in the two later books, provide him with the building blocks

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1   Ñāṇavīra's writings were first published in 1987 in *Clearing the Path* (Ñāṇavīra, [1987] 2001), twenty-two years after his death, and came to Batchelor's attention in 1989.

for his edifice, secular Buddhism. Since I will consider that edifice as a whole later in this essay, at this stage I will only briefly introduce them as they appear in *Confession.*

In his earlier *Buddhism without Beliefs* (Batchelor, 1997), Batchelor had already taken a skeptical stance toward the doctrine of rebirth, one that becomes outright rejection in *Confession.* In the Buddha's time and place, the rebirth premise underpinned the ambient religious culture, and the early Buddhadharma preserved it—de rigueur if it was to have any currency in its birthplace—while forcefully suggesting that the present life (and dharma practice in it) could never be reduced to mere preparation for the next. But in the West, Batchelor argues, rebirth doctrine actually depreciates the dharma's currency: it sits ill with Western religious culture, and even worse with the secular-scientific culture of late modernity. Moreover, an unwavering consciousness of human finitude and the finality of death constitutes a precondition to living authentically for phenomenology and existentialism, which otherwise exhibit a strong elective affinity with the dharma (53, 156).

In most societies in which Buddhism has manifested as a mass religion, belief in rebirth has played an essential role. All mass religions have served vital socio-political purposes: upholding communal cohesion and norms and legitimating existing temporal power structures. For this reason, in virtually all religions, visions of contrasting post-mortem destinies promise redemption through transcendence to a higher plane of existence for the compliant, and threaten the transgressive with damnation. "Soteriology" is the technical term for the salvation or redemption that religions offer in this way. Institutionalization of a mass religion calls for revealed truths that support these soteriological visions, as well as institution-sustaining forms of mass observance driven by the relevant carrots and sticks of future redemption/transcendence on the one hand, and damnation on the other.

For Batchelor (as for Ñāṇavīra before him), the underlying problem lies in the Buddhadharma's reissue as a religion, which in Batchelor's account (229–235) began when Kassapa seized control of the dharmic community at the First Council shortly after Gotama's death around 400 BCE. After that, tamperings with the canon and the emergence of the whole Pali commentarial tradition served the purpose of adapting the dharma to the soteriological religious template, complete with revealed truths and their custodians—a professional priestly class materially supported by a religiously dependent laity.

Ñāṇavīra drew out the implications of this view in drastic terms. The Pali commentaries constituted mere "dead matter," ignorance of which was to be commended in one's deeper study of the canon. In particular, he restored the emphasis, in the putative first discourse of the Buddha, on the four *tasks* of the practitioner rather than the revelatory "noble truths": "they are imperatives, they call for action (like the bottle in *Alice in Wonderland* labelled 'Drink Me!)."[2] While Batchelor shows more (selective) respect for later contributors to the tradition such as Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, and some Zen sages, his own approach owes something to his predecessor's: he bypasses the religious development since the Buddha's death

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2 Ñāṇavira, [1987] 2001: 106–107. The discourse in question is the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta: *Samyutta Nikāya* 56:11.

in order to open up a direct channel back to the world of the Pali Canon and of its protagonist, Gotama. In particular (as we will see below), he builds on Ñāṇavīra's reworking of the four noble truths.

Having done so, Batchelor—like any other serious reader—must pick out a coherent discursive thread from the canon's cacophony of contrasting voices, assertions, and obiter dicta. Crucially, he foregrounds what Gotama has to say that distinguishes his teaching from positions that a Brahman or a Jain of his time might just as well have announced—positions that merely restate ambient beliefs rather than strike out in a new direction. Having thus isolated what is unique to the Buddha's teaching with this hermeneutic move, Batchelor proceeds to bolster that teaching by picking up resonances with it in Western thought. He evokes sympathetic currents in the latter to present the Buddha's awakening as "an existential readjustment" (129) that is more recognizable and less exotic for his readership, and often to crystallize dharmic conceptions of the human condition. For example, Heidegger's presentation of human life in terms of *process* (as being-there, being-in-the-world, being-toward-death and so on) rather than an ontological *status*, can help many to come to grips with key dharmic experiences and concepts such as not-self (*anattā*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

The process that matters above all others in Batchelor's reinterpretation of the Buddha's teaching is *living this very life*. For him the Buddha adumbrated a practical philosophy comparable to the foremost ancient Greek thinkers, rather than set himself up as the prophet of a new religion. The dharma addresses the generic questions of all humanist modes of thought: How should I live? What sort of person should I become? Such ethical questions demand answers in a specific historical context. This primary ethical aspect touches on the meaning Batchelor ascribes to secularity, deriving as it does from the Latin *saeculum* (a particular age or century). "I think of myself as a secular Buddhist who is concerned entirely with the demands of this age," he declares in the final paragraph of *Confession* (240). This meaning does not impel him on an anti-religious crusade. Some versions of religion share this emphasis; indeed, Charles Taylor (2007) has argued that secularity is an *achievement* of seven centuries of Western religious evolution, one that promises a more meaningful religious life. Secularity only takes issue with a religiosity that highlights post-mortem existences, beyond-human transcendence, and timeless truth-claims.

But that issue is a hefty one for conventional Buddhism, focused as it is on the twin goals of favorable rebirth and ultimate transcendence of *dukkha*, which—as the Buddha specifies in the first discourse—encompass the inevitable difficulties that inhere in human life as such. This emphasis renders dharma practice as a movement toward a destination rather than a present way of life, and an individual solution even when being practiced communally. In contrast, Batchelor's rendition points dharma practice toward human flourishing in this life and the nurturing of a "culture of awakening"—the seeds of a new civilization, as Trevor Ling (1973) suggested decades earlier (190–191).

Thus Batchelor draws fire from defenders of the old-style religion by quoting the Buddha in ways that demystify and bring within immediate reach its most exalted

"attainments." Stream entry stands for sincere conversion to the dharma. Nirvana is an accessible, lucid state of mind in which greed, hatred, and ignorance have ceased (however momentarily) and is thereby the precondition to serious cultivation of the eightfold path. Awakening comes down to "a radical shift of perspective" whereby one abandons old habits of mind to root oneself in "the contingent, transient, ambiguous, unpredictable, fascinating, and terrifying ground called 'life'" (128–129). All this—in the Buddha's words—is "clearly visible, immediate, inviting, uplifting, to be personally sensed by the wise."[3] Gone, then, are the privileged access to esoteric knowledge and revelatory omniscience of the irreversibly Awakened Ones, and the after-death happy landings in dukkha-free realms.

Batchelor draws out the implications of his interpretation for meditation practice. As a Tibetan monk he balked at ritualistic evocations and visualizations of archetypal bodhisattvas, and as a counterweight even went on a Goenka-style *vipassanā* retreat. The latter left an enduring impression of the value of intensified awareness of psycho-physical experience in real time—a foretaste of the contingent, transient ground of awakening mentioned above. "Mindfulness focuses entirely on the specific conditions of one's day-to-day experience. It is not concerned with anything transcendent or divine. It serves as an antidote to theism, a cure for sentimental piety, a scalpel for excising the tumor of metaphysical belief" (130).

A later and more powerful influence in the same direction was the central meditation practice into which the Korean Sŏn master Kusan Sunim initiated Batchelor: constantly asking oneself, "What is this?" Thus "meditation was no longer a matter of becoming proficient in a technique. It was about sustaining a sensibility that encompassed everything I did" (64–65). Rather than reaching for esoteric certitudes, this practice served an ethos of skeptical not-knowing. As Kusan kept saying: "When there is great doubt, then there is great awakening" (65).

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Confession of a Buddhist Atheist breaks a great deal of new ground in making the dharma intelligible and practicable in the West. It rests on firm foundations in Batchelor's depth of scholarship in the Pali Canon, certain developments in the dharmic tradition since the Buddha's death, and cognate currents of ancient and modern Western thought, as well as his own decades of experience as a monastic and then a lay dharma teacher. He writes elegantly, lucidly, and persuasively. For the most part he maintains a cool, non-polemical tone.

The book is best not judged by its cover (especially its dust jacket), where tonal lapses occur. Why "a Buddhist *Atheist*" when most informed readers would assume that Buddhism has never had a dog in the impermanence-defying fight between theists and atheists in the first place? The dust cover awakens further bewilderment with an endorsement from doyen of the New Atheists, the late Christopher Hitchens, who lays claim to the book as a contribution to "ethical and scientific humanism, in which lies our only real hope." This endorsement might stimulate sales, but it diminishes and misplaces the book. In chapter fourteen, Batchelor reassures us that

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3   *Anguttara Nikāya* VI: 47, quoted in *After Buddhism,* 340.

he is an "ironic" atheist only, and by the end (as we have seen) he has come out as a secular Buddhist, which is something else entirely.

After Buddhism

After Buddhism, the main title of the second book I am reviewing here, is more defensible if also perhaps confusing for some. "Buddhism" as word and concept is an early nineteenth-century European coinage which lumped together a variety of institutionalized and ritualized religious observances that, contents unseen, its authors "discovered" on their wanderings through Asia. The coinage has acquired a new utility in the current age of solemnized social diversity when Buddhism can appear as a religion like (and beside) any other—with revealed truths, supernatural beliefs, and rituals like any other—and its randomly-selected robed representatives can take their place at official celebrations of multiculturalism. Batchelor is seeking to retrieve the dharma from *that* conventional Buddhism, certainly not to leave the dharma behind, as the subtitle, *Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, makes clear.

The main title also implicitly acknowledges a debt to recent Christian thinkers who have sought to distil a navigable ethical path for the present secular age, one couched in a post-metaphysical sensibility, from their own tradition—a process that has involved peeling away its supernatural and metaphysical elements. For our purposes, the most prominent of these thinkers is Batchelor's friend Don Cupitt, the academic and former Anglican priest who wrote (beside much else) *After God* (Cupitt, 1997). Another who has influenced Batchelor is the Italian still-Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo, author of *After Christianity* (Vattimo, 2002). In this context, it is worth recalling that secular Christianity first announced itself in a book title over half a century ago (Smith, 1966). So book titles beginning with "After" go with the territory.

In this dharmic retrieval, Batchelor seeks to integrate themes in his writings since *Alone with Others* (1983), including those in *Confession*. He restates his starting point, not in disinterested academic scholarship, but in the urgent questions that dharma practice itself poses, starting with "What does it mean to practice the dharma in the context of modernity?" (ix). "As a practicing Buddhist, I look to the discourses not just to mine them for scholarly knowledge but to come to terms with my own birth and death," he declares in the first synthesizing chapter (21).

Unlike *Confession*, this book does not rely on an overarching narrative structure, although it contains poignant narrative content—including reminders of the stages in the author's own development. The structure alternates chapters developing conceptual perspectives with ones that recover the stories of five significant figures in the Buddha's life, three of whom were laymen practicing under the Buddha's personal tutelage while dealing with the pressing demands of their vocations in a dangerous world. They are Gotama's cousin Mahānāma, who chairs the Sakiyan council; Gotama's powerful but capricious patron Pasenadi, king of Kosala; and Jīvaka, physician at the Magadhan court.

These individuals, whom the monastic commentators have neglected, have greater relevance to lay Western practitioners today than the conventional pantheon

of monastic achievers who have, as the canon asserts, "realized the Goal." The individual stories also evoke significant issues for dharma practice around what the Mahāyāna tradition calls "this great matter of birth and death," such as the formative experience of conversion, and the significance of care (*appamāda*) as the dharma's master virtue. In this way they are singularly moving, while pinpointing spiritual conundrums that still manifest today in several major religious traditions, not to mention our own life processes.

Thus Batchelor returns us to the heat and dust of Gotama's world, the Ganges basin of the fifth century BCE. But interestingly, he changes canonical horses, no longer relying on the Pali Canon, but on the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstavāda school, preserved in Tibetan and translated into English by the American diplomat and polymath Woodville Rockhill (1884). With little variation, it tells the same story as the Pali Canon. These two accounts, Batchelor surmises, drew on the same original version that probably existed between the Buddha's death and the reign of Ashoka in the third century BCE.

He returns to these roots precisely as a *traditionalist* in the sense elaborated by Alasdair MacIntyre, whom he quotes (20): "A living tradition is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument… about the goods which constitute that tradition" (MacIntyre, 1981: 222). Such a tradition of practice is thus an intergenerational conversation, which can be sustained only so long as its current practitioners and contributors remain conscious of its origins and generative questions and the course of the conversation to the present time. MacIntyre goes on to contrast such a tradition with a "dead" one in which the current practitioners have no access to its evolutionary trajectory, thus cannot contribute to it, and merely inherit and reproduce the usages of the preceding generation as they stand. Tactfully, Batchelor refrains from explicitly applying this characterization to conventional Buddhism, but in *Secular Buddhism* he will come close:

> I have long been puzzled why Buddhists of all traditions unhesitatingly describe themselves as followers of the Buddha yet ignore or disparage the discourses that are most likely to go back to him, put into his mouth sayings and views that emerged centuries after his death, regard the mythic account of his life as biography, and accept a comically idealized picture of what he looked like (14).

Batchelor characterizes the living dharmic tradition as a life-affirming *task-based ethical path*, a phrase I will expand on below. Early in *After Buddhism* he excludes from it two present-day tendencies: "a Buddhism that seeks to discard all trace of religiosity, that seeks to arrive at a dharma that is little more than a set of self-help techniques that enable us to operate more calmly and effectively as agents or clients, or both, of capitalist consumerism"; and "the *secularization* of Buddhism, which renders Buddhist ideas and practices palatable and useful for those who have no interest in committing themselves to the core values of the dharma" (17).

True to his synthesizing purpose, Batchelor works into this book a number of themes already canvassed in *Confession* and other writings. To keep this essay within

reasonable limits, I will touch on some salient ideas that appear here for the first time or in enhanced form—ones which stand out in his original contribution to the dharma today.

To begin with, he completes the transition from the conventional four noble truths—the central beliefs of conventional Buddhism—to the "fourfold task." As noted above, on Ñāṇavīra's reading of the first discourse in Pali, the supposed "noble truths" were actually "imperatives" to be carried out rather than revelations and articles of faith.[4] Later, the leading scholar of Prakrit dialects (especially Pali) K. R. Norman ([1982] 2003: 223) concluded on syntactical grounds that the term "noble truth" (*ariya-saccam*) must have been added to the discourse sometime after its original formulation. If we now excise the apparently apocryphal term and fine-tune our translation of the Pali text, Batchelor argues, the first discourse becomes a limpid and coherent recipe for action—an ethical path on which one flourishes and fully realizes one's human potential as an ethical agent.

Interpreted in this way, the first discourse announces a middle way that steers clear of the two dead ends of infatuation and mortification. It defines this path in terms of four tasks that so tightly follow each other in a sequence that we can usefully roll them into just one task with four aspects. First, fully embrace the difficult aspects to which human flesh is heir (*dukkha*), which the Buddha specifies as birth, aging, sickness, death, encountering what is not dear, separation from what is dear, not getting what one wants, and the five bundles of clinging (*khandhas*—aspects of human experience). Second, let go of the reactivity (greed, hatred, and delusion) with which we habitually meet these difficulties and thus actually compound them. Third, behold (register, indeed relish) the experience of a mind entirely free from reactivity (nirvana). Fourth, so inspired, dedicate oneself to cultivating the eightfold path consisting of appropriate view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and mental integration. While the four tasks are sequential, in practice they are conterminous; they enhance each other, so constituting a lifelong feedback loop.

A second salient theme in *After Buddhism* is the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth that underpins dogma, metaphysical truth-claims in general, and conventional Buddhist beliefs in particular (117–120). According to this theory—equally at home in popular culture as in learned discourse—truth-claims can be tested against some sort of ultimate reality or metaphysics. Batchelor can quote many instances of the Buddha refusing to answer metaphysical questions, criticizing the way metaphysical arguments distract from practice focused on one's immediate predicament, and counselling against attachment to views. "[T]he word 'truth' (*sacca*) in the Pali discourses predominantly refers to the virtue of being truthful, honest, loyal, and sincere," Batchelor comments (117–118). In modern English we retain this ethical usage in expressions like "a true friend." Ethical truth appears to be the only truth that the Buddha dealt in.

On this point Batchelor makes common cause with modern post-metaphysical thinkers. For the pragmatists, as for the Buddha, a truth-claim should be judged

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4   The first commentator to notice the incongruity was apparently F. L. Woodward ([1930] 1993: 358n.

by its usefulness to human well-being, not its supposed correspondence with some ultimate reality. It will, in any event, only ever amount to an interpretation that depends on our agreement to make it appear to be "true" in some ultimate sense (119). When people believe themselves to be in (exclusive) possession of the Truth, especially religious truth, they have proven capable of waging war and committing genocide to assert it. In this context, Batchelor quotes Vattimo (2011: 77) in *A Farewell to Truth*: "[W]hen the word 'truth' is uttered, a shadow of violence is cast as well." This critique of metaphysical truth subverts the central truth-claims of conventional Buddhism—rebirth and the four noble truths—while reinforcing Batchelor's characterization of the dharma as a task-based ethical path which requires no support in metaphysical constructs.

A third major theme developed in *After Buddhism* touches on "the everyday sublime" as a meditative experience and a key facet of the sensibility that the dharma fosters. In a muscular passage, Batchelor declares:

> Meditation originates and culminates in the everyday sublime. I have little interest in achieving states of sustained concentration in which the sensory richness of experience is replaced by pure introspective rapture. I have no interest in reciting mantras, visualizing Buddhas or mandalas, gaining out-of-body experiences, reading other people's thoughts, practicing lucid dreaming, or channelling psychic energies through chakras, let alone letting my consciousness be absorbed in the transcendent perfection of the Unconditioned. Meditation is about embracing what is happening to this organism as it touches its environment in this moment. I do not reject the experience of the mystical. I reject only the view that the mystical is concealed behind what is merely apparent, that it is anything other than what is occurring in time and space right now. The mystical does not transcend the world but saturates it. "The mystical is not how the world is," noted Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1921, "but that it is" (231).

Implicitly Batchelor is foregrounding Zen and insight meditation practice—the two Buddhist traditions that have gone furthest in penetrating today's Western culture. They also accommodate the kind of non-technical approaches to meditation that would align with his perspective (for instance Magid, 2008 and Siff, 2010).

He is also embracing numinous experience and the radical shifts in consciousness that can arise in intense practice of these disciplines and at other moments in our lives when we fully focus on the flow of our immediate being-there. Without being grounded in the everyday sublime, these experiences otherwise default into culturally established transcendental beliefs that sever them from their origins in the actual texture of our lives. The reference to the "everyday" implicitly evokes the "average everydayness" that reverberates throughout Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The "sublime" explicitly references Edmund Burke's youthful 1757 work *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, and the Romantic poets. Heidegger, Burke, and Batchelor are all evoking experiences that are so mysterious, bafflingly beautiful, or terrifying, that they beggar our capacity to represent them in words or images. If we plunge deeply enough into any moment of our experience—this "groundless ground" in

Zen terms—it will reveal itself as sublime in this sense. In Batchelor's presentation, awakening to the everyday sublime constitutes a vital facet of the awakening process itself.

Batchelor renders a key canonical formulation of the Buddha's awakening as follows:

> This dharma I have reached is deep, hard to see, difficult to awaken to, quiet and excellent, not confined to thought, subtle, sensed by the wise. But people love their place...: they delight and revel in their place. It is hard for people who love, delight, and revel in their place to see this ground..., "because-of-this" conditionality.... And also hard to see this ground: the stilling of inclinations, the relinquishing of bases, the fading away of reactivity, desirelessness, ceasing, nirvana (333–334).[5]

Here awakening appears as a drastic change of existential perspective from habitual attachments and ways of life (*habitus*, Pierre Bourdieu might say) to an intense experience of our conditions of existence: the groundless ground of contingency in total flux, but one in which the boon of nirvana—an inner life beyond habitual reactivity—is always accessible. Hence the vital experiences of conditionality and nirvana constitute awakening, not esoteric knowledge, let alone omniscience.

In Peter Watkins's (2014) survey of post-metaphysical Western thinkers and creative writers (from Heidegger to Proust, and many in between) the common thread that brings them together is the ideal of living *intensely*. In plain terms: this life is no mere rehearsal for the next—it is the main event, the only life we will ever have. So we need to live it to the full, with urgency, intensity, and authenticity. With his concept of the everyday sublime, Batchelor brings dharma practice further into alignment with this late-modern ethos.

Secular Buddhism

Whereas *After Buddhism* develops around a carefully constructed argument, my first impression of *Secular Buddhism* was that it constitutes a companion volume (in smaller format) to both the former and *Confession*. Among other things, it reproduces in their original form some of Batchelor's essays going back to the mid-1990s, ones which enlarge upon the turning points he describes in *Confession*. But as usual, first impressions deceive. Apart from being a self-described "scholar-practitioner" (4), he is a practicing artist in two disciplines: photography and collage, the aesthetics and dharmic relevance of which he discusses in the final section of the book. The intricate, five-part structure of *Secular Buddhism* in fact draws on collage principles.

The constituent parts in turn unfurl Ñāṇavīra's contribution, and his life sympathetically recalled in the round; a summation of how secular Buddhism diverges from the conventional version; a miscellany of controversial topics (starting with rebirth); recorded key conversations with others; and desiderata for a Buddhist aesthetics. (To follow him into this latter territory would require a separate essay. Suffice it to say that he is here initiating a project to make good the underdevelopment of the

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5   Ariyapariyesanā Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya* 26. For a more literal translation see Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 2001: 260.

aesthetic dimension in historical Buddhism and its culture.) The contents of each part follow a chronological order and thereby support the narrative of the author's own evolution.

There is an overarching third artistic project at work here: the author's search for a "voice" in the literary sense—an idiom in which to convey not only his own spiritual ideals, doubts, and inquiries, but also to express canonical insights in ways that give them wings in a modern sensibility. Overall, this book takes us backstage, to show how the more public Stephen Batchelor has come to present his major performances on stage, and what we might expect from him in the future.

The book contains surprises, too. Perhaps the biggest of them consists in his spirited defence of the spread of therapeutic mindfulness (166–169), coming as it does after his dismissal of secularizing, stand-alone self-help techniques based on extrapolations from Buddhism (quoted above under "After Buddhism"). Batchelor in fact contributed to the British all-party parliamentary inquiry into the subject (as acknowledged at MAPPG, 2015: 82). The resulting report, *Mindful Nation UK*, recommended the deployment of mindfulness training in major areas of social practice: health, workplaces, criminal justice, and education. The National Health Service now funds mindfulness training for people suffering from mental health issues that it has been shown to alleviate. Mindfulness practice goes to the heart of the dharma, he argues; it is the seventh path factor. Buddhists should not gainsay this major inroad of the culture of awakening into the functioning of a core Western society. Among the many thousands that mindfulness now touches will be some who will feel the urge to trace it back to the dharma itself.

"A Secular Buddhism," an essay Batchelor first published in this journal in 2012, constitutes the second section of the book, as well as its crux. It sets out to delineate his version of secular Buddhism in contrast to conventional Buddhism in all its apparently divergent forms. He does so by building on an analogy with operating systems in the world of computers. Conventional Buddhism becomes Buddhism 1.0, an operating system that supports the many different "programs" of which institutionalized Buddhism consists, from the Theravāda through the Mahāyāna to the various strains of Tibetan Buddhism. But the requirements of secular Buddhist insights call for a new operating system, Buddhism 2.0 (79–81). Before computers invaded our lives, we used to call conceptual leaps of this magnitude *paradigm shifts* in honor of Thomas Kuhn, or even *epistemological breaks* à la Louis Althusser.

Buddhism 1.0 supports a soteriological religion that requires adherence to a belief system. It promises individual redemption and transcendence based on fidelity to a multi-life perspective (rebirth) and the four noble truths understood as revealed truths. The form of transcendence it offers is full awakening, which permanently removes the practitioner from the suffering endemic to the human condition and reveals ultimate truths inaccessible to the unawakened. Maintenance of Buddhism 1.0's subsidiary programs calls for a professional priestly class and their hierarchical monastic institutions as repositories of doctrine, spiritual authority, and ritual. The Buddha himself manifests as an historically decontextualized, beyond-human,

protean figure to whom can be ascribed whatever doctrines (including post-Gotama canonical texts) emerge from monastic institutions and their luminaries.

In contrast, Buddhism 2.0 supports a task-based ethical path that does not rest on any belief system or promise of redemption or transcendence and is compatible with a single-life perspective. That path starts with the fourfold task (or the four great tasks) specified in the first discourse, including the eightfold path itself. It points the way to human flourishing and moral agency, in the first instance at the individual level, but also as the basis of an emerging culture of awakening. At both levels awakening is a process rather than a change of status; it involves neither access to special knowledge nor a terminus in some post-human existence. The criterion of truth is an ethical one premised on human well-being; Buddhism 2.0 does not entertain metaphysical truth-claims. Communal practice and realization are vital, and must proceed from inclusive and egalitarian forms of association rather than exclusive and hierarchical ones. The Buddha was a human being; like anyone else he was a child of his time and place: his teachings need to be historically contextualized to be understood and they need to be adapted to each new age and cultural milieu that receives them.

The contrast here is striking, especially given that both paradigms proceed from the same teaching—the first discourse. Many other teachings spawn divergent interpretations in Batchelor's work as well. Perhaps he could have reduced the friction between them by more firmly nailing down his hermeneutic approach. He does aver that "each generation has the right and duty to reinterpret the teachings that it has inherited. In doing so we may discover meanings in these texts that speak lucidly to our own *saeculum* but of which the original authors and their successors may have been unaware" (81). This statement, and Batchelor's general approach to interpreting the canon, lead me to suspect that Hans-Georg Gadamer in particular has influenced his work more than somewhat. If explicitly introduced, the latter's hermeneutics might have contributed to the authority of Batchelor's interpretations and undercut his quest for the timelessly "correct" way to read the canon.

Batchelor could have gone further in his comparison of operating systems by contrasting their end users. Buddhism 1.0 underpins a mass institutionalized religion that infuses folkways and whole societies in many parts of Asia and their diasporic offshoots in the West, whereas Buddhism 2.0 in the first instance supports small-scale urban practice communities and their websites in the West. Nonetheless, he does acknowledge the gulf between these two sets of end users by acknowledging that, from the late 1960s, "Buddhism was catapulted into modernity from deeply conservative, agrarian societies in Asia" (159).

One of Batchelor's favorite pragmatist philosophers, Richard Rorty, might have helped him to sharpen the contrast between his operating systems still further by reference to his own two opposing models of ethical aspiration: self-purification as against self-enlargement. Ascetic monastic training under the auspices of Buddhism 1.0 gravitates toward the former: the desire "to slim down, to peel away everything that is accidental, ...to become a simpler and more transparent being" (Rorty, 1991: 154). For instance, the fifth-century CE Pali commentary that underpins the orthodox

Theravāda is appropriately entitled *The Path of Purification* (Buddhaghosa, 1956). This ideal evokes the angels of the Christian imaginary and the fully awakened beings of the Buddhist one. In contrast, Buddhism 2.0 inclines toward self-enlargement: "the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself entirely over to curiosity, to end by having embraced all the possibilities of the past and the future" (Rorty, 1991: 154).

Do we have to take a definitive position for or against transcendence, as the choice between operating systems suggests? Martha Nussbaum (1990: 365–391) mounts a powerful argument against the aspiration to transcend the human condition in a perfection and immortality alien to us—what she calls "external transcendence." Instead she holds out the prospect of an "internal" transcendence "to a kind of precision of feeling and thought that a human being can cultivate…, [to a sensibility that can] soar above the dullness and obtuseness of the everyday, offering… a glimpse of a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world." She prefers the "fine-tuned perception and bewildered human grace" of this world to that of "the angels of the religious tradition—who, as Aquinas most perceptively saw, would not be able to get around in our world at all, since they lack imagination and the ability to perceive particulars" (379). With these words she seems to clinch the vision that Batchelor offers us, and does so in a way that allows us to retain our being-toward-death decency while indulging in the prospect of becoming so much more than we already are before we throw ourselves into dharma practice.

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For the benefit of the time-poor reader, I had hoped to end this essay by ranking the three books under review according to their importance. I now find this hope to be out of the question. They share the virtue of elegant, clear, and coherent writing, but they come into their shared subject matter from different angles, to end up together presenting a cubist whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The intractably time-poor reader will thus have to choose which part she or he wants most—the narrative of Batchelor's formation in *Confession*; the more formal argumentation of *After Buddhism*, or the collage-like *Secular Buddhism*. After reading any one of these books, she or he might find their time-poverty less constraining than first thought and come back for more.

Mainstream Buddhists, and non-Buddhists who cleave to mainstream assumptions about what Buddhism is, will find at least some of the contents of these books unfamiliar, even jarring. In which case it is well to remember John Maynard Keynes's insight in the last sentence of the preface to his ground-breaking work, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*: "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds" (Keynes, 1936: 5)

Do we really need to escape from the old ideas? The main manifestations of Buddhism in the West today are simply Asian transplants, with or without the adoption of local languages and other ready-to-hand surface modifications. The deeper acculturation of the dharma to the modern West has barely begun and it will require all those

involved to face the issues that Stephen Batchelor raises in the three books under review.

One issue he does not raise touches on the viability of his conception of secular Buddhism as the basis of resilient sangha- and movement-building—the precondition to his "culture of awakening." He presents Gotama's dharma as a *practical philosophy* (a philosophy that supports a practice and way of life), a familiar category in classical Greek and Roman civilization. And he strongly suggests that it should now be reissued in the West as a practical philosophy rather than a religion. But why did the dharma morph into a religion so quickly after Gotama's death, and how compelling is even the most persuasive practical philosophy under late-modern conditions?

In his classic work *The Varieties of Human Experience*, the pragmatist philosopher William James evaluates religions precisely on the use-value (in terms of human welfare) of various kinds of personal religious *experience* (James [1902] 1994). With their offers of solace, certitudes, ecstatic moments, life-after-death, and transcendence, religions tend to out-compete practical philosophies on the market in experiences to assuage the discomforts and insecurity of the human condition. In this way, James argues, religions as social phenomena can outlive any amount of skepticism toward their doctrinal premises, even among their active adherents. Perhaps this circumstance helps explain the dharma's rapid morphing into a religion after the putative founder's death. Perhaps it also sounds a warning about secular Buddhism's prospects for attracting a committed following now. After all, this doctrine encourages clear-eyed embrace of human anguish, insecurity, and finitude, not their blurring or deflection.

Buddhism in all its manifestations shows no sign of becoming a mass movement among Westerners. For the reasons James adduces, many of those who are nevertheless drawn to it seem to prefer the religious experiences that Buddhism 1.0 offers, embellished by the orientalist frisson of the Asian transplants. But in this secular age, a more formidable competitor looms over both religion and practical philosophy on the market in palliative experiences: the psych disciplines, now including those that purvey therapeutic mindfulness.

Our individualistic "age of authenticity" since the 1960s, Taylor suggests (Taylor 2007: 473–504), comes with an anti-communitarian ethos that discourages mobilization in practice communities, whether religious or philosophical. An important attraction of the psych disciplines, including the mindfulness-based ones, is their adaptation to this ethos. Their services come packaged and commodified as one-on-one consultations or courses of fixed duration; their purveyors are accredited professional individuals who take a fee for service; their products promise achievement of explicit personal goals and boast evidence-based outcomes. No sociability, volunteering, civic virtue, or open-ended commitment to evening meetings is called for, nor any ethical undertakings. To access the boons in question, the individual has only to pay the entry fee.

The dharma points to a human potential that goes far beyond enabling us "to operate more calmly and effectively as agents or clients, or both, of capitalist consumerism,"

as Batchelor puts it in an earlier quote. Though his work reframes this potential in a way that draws on leading thinkers of our own time and culture, he is still swimming against the individualistic adaptive stream that the psych disciplines exemplify.

But then again, Gotama applied that same metaphor to his own awakening process.

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