Research Article

The Coming of Secular Buddhism:

a Synoptic View

Winton Higgins

University of Technology, Sydney
Winton.Higgins@uts.edu.au

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Abstract

Secular Buddhism is coalescing today in response to two main factors. First, it rejects the incoherence of Buddhist modernism, a protean formation that accommodates elements as far afield as ancestral Buddhism and psychotherapies claiming the Buddhist brand. Second, it absorbs the cultural influence of modern secularity in the West. Historically understood, secularity has constituted a centuries-long religious development, not a victory of "science" over "religion." Today's secularity marks a further stage in the cultural decline of "enchanted" truth-claims and the intellectual eclipse of metaphysics, especially under the aegis of phenomenology. In Buddhism as in Christianity, secularity brings forth a new humanistic approach to ethical-spiritual life and creative this-worldly practices.

The coming of secular Buddhism: a synoptic view

> *Naïveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike.*
>
> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 21

Seventeen years ago I started teaching Buddhist meditation (mainly what was then called vipassana) in a large lay-based dharma centre cum monastic hermitage outside Sydney, one linked to the Theravadin monastic network.[1] What I taught applied hallowed formulas and techniques, and raised no Theravadin hackles. Everyone concerned belonged to the broad church of Buddhist modernism, even if tensions were already high around those aspects of the Theravada untouched by modernity—the

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[1] "Theravada" and "vipassana" are often mistakenly treated as synonymous. The first of these terms (which literally means "the teaching of the elders") refers to the dominant, monastic-centred school of Buddhism in south-east Asia, and is thus sometimes also referred to as "southern Buddhism." Along with the Mahayana and the Vajrayana, the Theravada constitutes one of the three great divisions of traditional Asian Buddhism. "Vipassana" (literally "seeing deeply") is a meditation practice that began inside the Theravada in modern times. In the West, however, this practice has been successfully promoted such that it has for some time flourished as a sui generis "movement," often at considerable remove from its Theravadin doctrinal and institutional origins: see Fronsdal 1998. In more secular circles, "insight" now tends to replace the term "vipassana" when referring to meditation practice. While these terms are often used interchangeably, vipassana usually connotes reliance on techniques or formulas (exemplified by the Mahāsi and Goenka approaches), and "insight meditation" often connotes free-form "non-formulaic" approaches to meditation. I adopt this contrast and these terms in what follows.

marginalisation of women, male monastic primacy, and the concentration of power at the top of a hierarchical organisation. We the non-hierarchs saw these failings as relics we could reform over time, so that the Buddhism we practiced would shine forth as what we naïvely assumed it to be—proto-modern, rational, democratic, and amenable to gender equality.

Seven years ago the dharma centre imploded in the hierarchs' attempt to simulate an orthodox Thai Theravadin monastery in the Australian wilderness. The institutional underpinnings of the Buddhist-modernist compromise collapsed in acrimony (Bubna-Litic and Higgins, 2007). Together with other teachers of similar background, I now teach insight meditation retreats in various venues typically rented from Catholic nuns, and weekly practice evenings in three suburban insight meditation groups called *sanghas.*

These sanghas are all self-generated and have no organisational links to each other, but they march to the same drum. They are self-evidently secular, free of ritual, inclusive, egalitarian and democratic—voluntary associations like any other, the stuff of civil society. Their members study the Pali Canon (the earliest teachings of the Buddha) in their historical context, in order to deepen into their dharma practice in their own intellectually free-ranging way. They trade tips on books, journals, blogs and websites, and Stephen Batchelor's work enjoys a certain prominence. Ethically speaking, their conception of dharma practice extends beyond the traditional five lay precepts to tackling the big issues of today's globalised world, and many are active in progressive social movements or community work. None of these sanghas identifies with the Theravada.

Two years ago I queried an overseas visitor's use of the expression "secular Buddhism"—what could *that* possibly refer to? But on reflection no alternative presents itself to capture the changes that have already occurred and are intensifying in the meditation practice, sangha life and modes of communication around me. Willy-nilly, secular Buddhism is upon us, ruffling fideist feathers, prompting panics and alarums, and drawing rancorous anathemas (for example Wallace, 2010). The changes in the Sydney "dharma scene" seem to merely exemplify shifts occurring elsewhere and around some other Buddhist schools, at least in the English-speaking world. Though globalisation tends to diffuse cultural trends in short order, I see little evidence so far of secular Buddhist practice or discourse outside Anglophone countries. In any event, I will not speculate here about secular Buddhism's potential for diffusion elsewhere.

In this article, then, I embrace the expression, together with the movement emerging in its name (Its spontaneous and multilayered manifestation so far precludes describing it as a "school."). I will seek to place it historically and conceptually, rather than try to pre-empt its doctrinal development: it is far too early to try to reduce it to a done-and-dusted characterisation. But Stephen Batchelor's (2012) essay in this volume well illustrates its doctrinal thrust, and my account of its provenance will offer some further specification. My opening *mise en scène* hopefully suffices as a preliminary marker of the secular-Buddhist condition, which answers to the need to resolve incoherences in Buddhist modernism (the "push" factor), while responding to

secularising impulses in contemporary Western society (the "pull" factor).

More generally, as my opening narrative indicates, secular Buddhism betokens a new stage in the acculturation of the dharma in the West. My account draws on Charles Taylor's oeuvre, though he exercises an option (Christian belief) different to the one I am presenting here. I draw on him indirectly through the influence of his *Sources of the Self* (1989) on insightful accounts of Buddhist modernism, and more directly on his historical analysis of the secular turn in the West, *A Secular Age* (2007). The latter establishes a model for tracing the sources of transformations in religious-spiritual-ethical life to manifold shifts in cultural, socio-economic, political, and institutional affairs. In the background, the classical sociologist Max Weber's analysis of modernity informs Taylor's work, as it does this essay.

My story thus starts with Buddhist modernism, out of which secular Buddhism is gradually crystallising. The former, an increasingly fraught mix of ancestral Buddhism and modern discursive practices, initially arose to deflect Western colonialism's Christianising mission in Asia, and provided a bridge for missionary Buddhism's entry into the West. But internally it has harboured incongruities at the levels of practice, doctrine and institutions, ones which have obstructed the dharma's deeper acculturation in the new host societies, not least as the latter have themselves been undergoing a marked cultural shift during the last half-century. Secular Buddhism constitutes one response to the impasse. In the second part of this article I will go into the modalities of contemporary secularity that mould this response.

Secular Buddhism leans towards what Taylor (2007: 18) calls an "exclusive humanism," that is, a discourse and set of practices in aid of full human flourishing, one that disavows superhuman agencies and supernatural processes, and thus soteriological exits from the human condition. It seeks a renewal of the Buddha's tradition, first by retrieving the Buddha's teachings free of later commentarial spin, and second by developing affinities between it and fertile social practices and intellectual developments in the host societies. I will focus mainly on the post-Theravadin experience, which provides something close to a paradigmatic case in the shifts involved in this story, and for the most part leave it to the reader to qualify my remarks for the legatees of other branches of ancestral Buddhism.

The Modernist Historic Compromise

Heinz Bechert (1966) appears to have coined the term "Buddhist modernism" (aka "modern Buddhism" in Lopez, 2002), but its origins go back to the latter half of the nineteenth century in Sri Lanka (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988). In brutal summary, its course has run like this. Under the umbrella of British colonial rule, Christian (mainly Protestant) missionaries sought conversions among Sinhalese Buddhists, some of whose leaders resisted by devising modern Buddhist practices along "Protestant" lines without disturbing existing institutions or folk observance. They thus gave more weight to lay practice and study, including laicising meditation practice and making canonical texts available to a much wider readership, not least in the rising (and

increasingly educated) middle class. Soon this form of resistance to Christianised Western cultural hegemony spread to Japan, Burma and Thailand, and then further afield in Buddhist Asia. As it did so, it challenged Christianity on a point on which the latter was taking a hit in its homelands: the perceived clash between Christian doctrine and ascendant scientific rationalism. Buddhism, by contrast, gained a reputation for meshing with the scientific worldview, and indeed, for being a "scientific religion" (see Lopez, 2008). The "New Buddhism," as it was sometimes called, proved amenable not only to rationalism, but also to the Romantic reaction against rationalism in the West. Thus equipped, Buddhist modernism established its own bridgeheads on Western soil from the 1960s, and today it is practiced on every continent.

Premodern Buddhism was ever and remains a mosaic of disparate canons, doctrines, local social practices, institutions, beliefs and folkways. In fact, the totalising concept "Buddhism" was a European "discovery" of the 1820s, one first proclaimed in print two decades later by the French Sanskrit scholar, Eugène Burnouf ([1844] 2010). Now Buddhist modernism melded this ancestral mosaic with core but discordant themes of Western modernity, and it was this modernist hybrid that came to stand for Buddhism *tout court* from its arrival in the West.

It follows from the above synopsis that Buddhist modernism was never designed to sweep through the Buddhist world as an all-reforming, homogenising force. Nor has it. For most Asian Buddhists, both those who have stayed at home and those who have migrated to the West and joined ethnic diasporas, ancestral Buddhist life and observance persevere largely untouched by modern innovations. So at the heart of Buddhist modernism is an historic compromise—a *compromesso storico* in the Italian sense, to be compared with the coalition between Christian Democrats and Communists in postwar Italy, whereby diametrically opposed formations cooperated to achieve certain temporarily converging objectives.

David McMahan (2008) offers an insightful study of today's Buddhist modernism, and I want to briefly follow his analysis to make my point. In his second chapter, he dramatises the "spectrum" of current "tradition and modernism" by building up five representative profiles of present-day Buddhist practitioners, from a lowly Thai villager at one extreme, to a highly educated female Jewish-American dharma teacher at the other. Far from presenting as co-religionists sharing a faith-based identity, these individuals inhabit parallel universes, with radically diverging assumptions, values, beliefs, practices and ways of life.

The main "discourses of modernity" and their effects together comprise one party to the compromise in question, and as we will see, secular Buddhism has inherited its DNA. Both Woodhead and Heelas (2000) and McMahan (2008) follow Taylor (1989) in developing an account of them. Like Taylor, they present these modern discourses not as mere ideas, but as the foundations of "the modern identity," constituent elements of the Western form of life. As we have seen, Protestantism is the first of these, to the extent that the earliest version of Buddhist modernism attracted the sobriquet "Protestant Buddhism" (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988). In its homelands Protestantism subverted clerical intercession between God and his creatures; it

stripped religious powerholders of their charismatic authority; it insisted on the primacy of an interiorised piety in the individual's direct relationship with God over communal practices and rituals; it thereby replaced external, institutionalised religious authority with the "internal" one of the individual's own realisation; and it frowned on "superstitious" folk beliefs and practices, such as festivals and image- and relic-worship. Protestantism thus engendered individualism, interiority, and what came to be known—after Friedrich Schiller and Max Weber—as "rationalisation" and "the disenchantment of the world."

In this way Protestantism prepared the ground for the second of the three fundamental modern discourses—scientific rationalism, part of the heritage from the European Enlightenment. In this outlook, the world (including humanity) is entirely bound by immanent natural laws which are discoverable and constitute complete explanations of what exists and how it develops. To anticipate Taylor's (2007) later work, this means that human lives and contexts belong to an order driven by an exclusive immanent logic: extraneous agents such as God, angels and sprites no longer count in "the immanent frame."

The rationalist outlook in turn provoked the third of the discourses in question—the Romantic reaction, which John Keats, in his 1819 poem *Lamia*, pithily announced with the complaint:

> Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air.

In the upshot, Romanticism did not so much succeed in "re-enchanting" the world as in reasserting the value of emotion, passion, and creativity in human affairs, which makes it a progenitor of later expressive individualism and "the psychological turn."

As Taylor (1989) points out, together these modern discourses established two thematic emphases: a world-affirming stance that valorised the good life cultivated in this earthly existence instead of pining for otherworldly planes of blissful abiding, and a shift towards interiority and individual introspection.

The other party to the historical compromise is ancestral Buddhism in all its canonical, commentarial, institutional and folkloric diversity. The canons of all its schools are markedly "enchanted"—the Mahayanic ones exorbitantly so; even the far more down-to-earth Pali Canon, however, contains not only the Buddha's own teachings but also its fair share of miracles, devas, and other sprites. Various takes on rebirth make for a shared enchantment across the ancestral board. In the Theravada, the Buddha's teachings as they appear in the Pali Canon suffer severe commentarial displacement, as the bulk of this school's doctrine and practices comes from the later *Abhidhamma*, and Buddhaghosa's fifth-century CE *Path of Purification*, the idiom and substance of both of which vary markedly from the canon.

Monasticism casts a longer shadow over Buddhism than any other religious tradition, and that shadow stretches farthest over the Theravada. Monasticism as such enjoys a metahistorical sanctity, one at odds with the impermanent, historically contingent institutions encountered throughout recorded human history. Monks constitute both a priestly class and a spiritual elite such that the laity suffers a Feuerbachian alienation: the monks ply the full gamut of spiritual practice, only they enjoy the boon of *sangha,* and all religious authority resides in their hierarchs, while the laity's practice consists largely in supporting the monks and their practice. Two articles of faith ensue: only monks can achieve enlightenment, and only teachings and practices sanctioned by them enjoy validity.

Here we have come a very long way from the animating discourses of modernity, even before we arrive at the single most destabilising factor in the modernity-exposed Theravada today—the exclusion of women from full ordination. In the postwar world, where the ethical commitment to our common humanity is globally enshrined in such UN compacts as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the exclusion of women fundamentally transgresses what Taylor (2007: 159-171) calls "the Modern Moral Order."

The Travails of the Modernist Compromise

As Buddhism was making landfall in the West from the 1960s, neophyte Buddhists lacked the familiarity to discern and challenge the incongruities and regressions that lurked beneath the seamless, modernity-friendly façade of Buddhism as the historic compromise rendered it. In time, though, the naïveté lifted and the now visible incongruities unleashed a number of destabilising processes that McMahan (2008), following Woodhead and Heelas (2000), identifies as *demythologisation*, *detraditionalisation*, and the reaction against the latter—*retraditionalisation* (the process that overtook the dharma centre referred to in my first paragraph).

To these processes we must add the controversial and complex process of *psychologisation.* For nigh on a century commentators have acknowledged common ground between some of the myriad forms of both Buddhist and western psychological practice (McMahan, 2008, 52–53). That they can creatively cross-fertilise, as Jeremy Safran (2003) and his collaborators exemplify, is hardly controversial. Controversy does arise, however, when Buddhism is reduced to a psychology or psychotherapy like any other, and when particular Buddhist practices are isolated, decontextualised, commodified, and then marketed as stand-alone therapies trading on the Buddhism brand (Carrette and King, 2005; Dawson and Turnbull, 2006). The psychotherapeutic model also infects Buddhist meditators in the West, leading many of them to foster "curative fantasies" about their practice (Magid, 2008).

Everyone can rejoice when psychotherapists deploy certain Buddhist practices to good therapeutic effect, but the deployment itself normally occurs on an individualistic,

fee-for-service basis at a considerable remove from Buddhism's dharmic, communal and ethical framework, including the principle of making the dharma freely available. The Buddhist branding is thus deceptive. The problem deepens in the face of such contemporary phenomena as "the happiness industry" and "the modern mindfulness movement" with their apotheoses in expensive corporate events bearing such names as "Happiness and its Causes" and "Mind and its Potential," and panels combining berobed Buddhist dignitaries (such as the Dalai Lama) with celebrity neuroscientists. The Buddhism brand then becomes a fashion label.

Two related areas of naïveté within Buddhist modernism remain, however, even in the works of our principal guides above, and they vitally concern secular Buddhism. The first attaches to the promiscuous use of the word "tradition" to denote the imagined unity and sacred authority of whatever has been inherited, that which (in the narratives of its defenders like Wallace, 2010) now supposedly finds itself desecrated by secular Buddhist writers such as Stephen Batchelor in his *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2010). This usage equates tradition with some ill-defined *ancien régime*, the significance of which term I will return to below.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) provides us with a more serviceable notion of tradition as an intergenerational conversation that informs and holds any practice worthy of the name—a conversation whose participants know what the founder's generative questions were. "A tradition may cease to progress or may degenerate," he writes (146). "When a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which give to that tradition its particular point or purpose... Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict" (222). In this way MacIntyre characterises a *living* tradition, which reveals "those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present" (223). A *dead* (or "sedimented") tradition, by contrast, is one in which the generative questions have been lost, along with knowledge of how the conversation has developed—a tradition whose practitioners are thereby condemned to merely defend, preserve and re-enact the certitudes and rituals into which they have been inducted.

Seen through this prism, secular Buddhists—with their penchant for examining afresh the canonical sources, asking probing questions and adapting the teachings to the time and culture in which they live—stand out as upholders of the Buddha's living tradition rather than apostates. In which case, what is to be made of the claims of their "traditionalist" critics? This question requires us to tackle the second surviving naïveté inherent in Buddhist modernism, one concerning the status of monastic doctrine and practice, which seem to go to the core of the traditionalists' sense of what constitutes "the tradition." Monastic life is "traditionally" not seen as a mere personal choice, comparable to alternative choices, but rather as an incomparably superior one commanding deference—one beside which lay life and practice can only ever amount to a pale imitation. Only monks attract the title "venerable;" their way of life and practice constitutes the template against which all others are evaluated.

In particular, the naïveté here consists in assuming that the monastic institutions in question have functioned as merely neutral, high-minded incubators of doctrine and

practices whose genetic makeup was already established at the dawn of the tradition, such that the nature of the incubators themselves has exercised no formative influence on their products. This implicit assumption of institutional neutrality is not unique to Buddhism—it underpins most narratives of religious doctrinal development in which references to institutional power, interests and dynamics are radically occluded. Yet—to return to the Buddhist case—power attends monasticism at every turn. All substantial organisations, not least hierarchical ones such as monasteries, generate power relations and internal power struggles. The external power relations that monastic orders participate in include alliances with temporal authorities, bolstering monastic authority over lay people, and men's authority over women. In many Buddhist countries, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, monasticism plays important roles, typical of religious institutions in general, of social integration around established mores, and legitimation of established temporal elites, who in turn patronise the monastic hierarchs. (See for example Tambiah, 1992).

Monasteries are thus power-full institutions on multiple dimensions, and they require a disciplined cadre to retain their cohesion and to reproduce patterns of domination and subordination. What appears on the surface as a rigorous training for spiritual seekers also exemplifies the sort of discursive disciplinary power that Michel Foucault (1977 and 1980) theorised—the drilling of minds and bodies in the service of a regimented personal development focused on "purity." As noted earlier, the operative discourse arises from the Abhidhamma (nowadays appearing as "a comprehensive manual"—Nārada, 1979) and Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification.* They are both monastic commentaries, in spite of the official retrofitting of the Abhidhamma into the Pali Canon as the "third basket" after the Buddha's own teachings—the suttas and the monastic rule (*vinaya*). Buddhist modernism's laicised vipassana meditation practices and retreats have their roots in this discursive practice, and impose the template of renunciant monastic life even on those practitioners leading markedly divergent lay lives (Siff, 2010: 146-7).

In the mid-twentieth century an ancestor of secular Buddhism, Ñanavīra Thera ([1965] 2001) pointed out how the Pali commentaries in question diverged from the Buddha's dharma as found in the suttas and vinaya. Having identified those texts that do contain the Buddha's teachings, he comments: "no other Pali books whatsoever should be taken as authoritative; and ignorance of them (and particularly of the traditional Commentaries) may be counted a positive advantage, as leaving less to be unlearned" (Ñanavīra, 2001: 5). He would not have been surprised to observe how the monastic template of spiritual practice on and off the cushion has proved inappropriate to many Westerners, an experience that has renewed the call to "unlearn" it, not least in its technical and formulaic approaches to insight meditation (Siff, 2010). Though "Buddhist meditation" as a job lot is sold as a royal road to modernist interiority and introspection, in formulaic guise it actually deflects and short-circuits the inward probe, as so much of actual meditative experience (including the arising of thought) falls outside the template, to be rejected as "not meditation."

That "Buddhist meditation" of the formulaic kind has found a home in some western psychotherapies, not least cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), may then seem ironic.

But as Darian Leader (2009: 2, 18) points out, CBT too leaves the intricacies of the patients' lives and experience—their subjectivity—unexamined, and "is a form of conditioning that aims at mental hygiene." There is a striking affinity between normalising Abhidhamma-based meditative techniques and a notion of mental hygiene that merely suppresses symptoms. Both fail as vehicles of modern interiority.

The Secular Trajectory

Secular Buddhism constitutes one attempt to overcome the incongruities of the Buddhist modernist compromise, one that seeks to renew the Buddha's tradition by abandoning the anomalous vestiges of ancestral (monastic) Buddhism—including monastic organisational and meditative culture redacted in laicised form—as a prelude to bringing the dharma into a deeper connection with today's Western sensibilities and way of life. (Its coming, however, hardly heralds the end of Buddhist modernism, on whose protean nature so many vested interests and careers continue to depend.) Why, and in what sense, this response is "secular" is by no means obvious, and I will now attempt to sketch some of its sources and possible lines of development.

As a preliminary observation we should note the poignant etymology of "secular" in the Latin *saeculum*—originally a human life span, later specified as a century, as in the French *siècle*. As already hinted, secular Buddhism makes a priority of returning to the Buddha's own teachings while cultivating a sense of their historical context (unfurled in Mishra, 2004 and Batchelor, 2010, building on earlier accounts, such as Ling, 1973: 43-129) as a hermeneutic strategy. This practice aligns with today's contextualist (aka "Cambridge") school of historical interpretation that reads significant discursive interventions as initiatives taken in (and witnessing to) concrete historical predicaments in which the authors were embedded, rather than as contextless iterations of timeless truths (Pocock, 2006). In this approach, the Buddha appears not as a religious messiah but more like a contemporary Greek philosopher addressing human predicaments in turbulent times, and attracting a following which forms communities committed to living by his teaching (C.f. Kuzminski, 2008).

The attention to *saecula* applies equally to how we in our own time and context receive and deploy these messages from the past. Instead of lapsing into a fundamentalism around what the Buddha arguably "really" meant, we take advantage of what the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (2002: 62-63) calls "the productiveness of interpretation" (or "ontological hermeneutics") which can add something essential to texts so that they can better address our own contexts and predicaments.

That said, in today's common parlance (helped along by best-selling militant atheists) "secularity" connotes a challenge to religion, and implies religion's retreat from social and individual life, supposedly as science propagates an alternative and more authoritative worldview. According to mainstream secularisation theory, the European Enlightenment and scientific rationalism trumped the enchanted religious imaginary with its attendant pieties and sensibilities. One of Taylor's (2007) many achievements consists in overthrowing this naïve thesis, in the first instance in "the North Atlantic

world" on which he focuses. He dubs the variations on the thesis "subtraction theories" which imply that, as science debunks religious myths and subtracts them from current reality constructs, secular truth simply shines forth. Helpfully, he disaggregates secularity into three related aspects: the falling away of the religious under- and overlays of public institutions; the decline in popular religious belief and observance; and the changed "*conditions of belief*"—or "contexts of understanding"—whereby Westerners have moved, over several centuries, from a condition of virtually unchallengeable belief in God, to one wherein belief "is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (Taylor, 2007: 1–3).

In setting up his inquiry in this way, Taylor makes a vital philosophical move out of the barren, view-from-nowhere epistemological stance that asks questions such as "Does God exist?" or "Do we really get reborn?" This is the stance from which most polemics against secular Buddhism (and Christian belief, for that matter) are conducted (for instance Wallace 2010), in the form of endless clashes without victors between proponents of ancient and modern truth-claims respectively. Instead, he follows Heidegger in particular in framing questions of belief in terms of the engaged agent's "pre-ontological" cultural background and situated experience (Taylor, 2006). One's embeddedness in a particular culture and its stage of development (one's "conditions of belief") informs one's receptivity or resistance to various values and beliefs.

The first two aspects of secularity listed above are essentially matters of record; it is by inquiring into the dynamic driving the third aspect—the main focus of Taylor's monumental work—that one can also come to grips with the way in which Anglophone societies have received and adapted Buddhism since the latter twentieth century. In his own historical analysis of the Christian experience, Taylor introduces a number of ideal types based on periodisations that apply pari passu to Buddhist-modernist development, even if the historical breaks in the Buddhist world slightly lag those of the Christian one.

Especially before the Reform period (roughly 1450–1650), Western Christendom clove to the *ancien régime* (AR) ideal type: the individual was baptised into and learned to participate in "the Church" as a matter of course; it and its truth-claims had no rivals—in this sense belief was "naïve"; its structures based on the sacred/profane binary, its enchanted stories, doctrines, rituals and festivals had been there since "time out of mind" and constituted the very fabric of one's reality and way of life. Religion was something enacted, communally acted out, to win favour with benevolent supernatural forces and ward off the malevolent.

But the Reform period gradually destabilised the AR-type church. Reformers frowned on "superstition," and the "carnality" of festivals; they encouraged the laity to pursue a more disciplined, "pious" way of life, and to practice self-examination as a form of piety, a first move towards later interiority and individuation. And they rebelled against the elevation of a renunciatory priesthood over the laity (Taylor, 2007: 61). Rival versions of religious reform clashed in often large-scale, bloody conflicts, with half-reformed Catholicism pitted against various versions of Protestantism. Some states (revolutionary America and France in particular) distanced themselves from these

conflicts and from any institution claiming to represent an established national church.

In time, disestablishmentarianism would overtake virtually all Western state religions. Thus the conditions of belief were already changing drastically away from birth into a self-evident "one true faith." Much of what appears today to be hallmarks of secularity in fact emerged from endogenous religious developments, which in turn impacted on Western culture, including the European Enlightenment, and had little to do with the putative victory march of "science" as such. Today more sophisticated versions of Christianity can give an enhanced account of the faith without the ballast of the Genesis creation myth, the virgin birth, the physical resurrection, and even God as an external entity (for instance Geering, 2007). Weber's ([1905] 1948) classic study of Protestantism and the rise of capitalism also points to the religious sources of secularity. Following Nietzsche and Heidegger, Vattimo (2002: 26), comes to the same conclusion: "The death of God, of the moral-metaphysical God, is an effect of religiosity." He, too, mounts a powerful case for Christianity's role as "source and condition for the possibility of secularity" (p. 98). We may note a similar pattern in the Buddhist case: the authors of the earliest secular Buddhist texts (Ñanavīra Thera, [1965] 2001 and Batchelor, 1983) were both monks at the time.

Thus Taylor arrives at what he calls "the age of mobilisation," roughly 1800–1960, which fostered the M (for "mobilisation") type of religious institution, typically represented by an ever growing number of "denominations." The latter had clearly not existed since time immemorial: one had to commit to one of them as a matter of individual choice and conscience; they and their assets had to be built up, often from humble beginnings. The faithful lived largely in a modern, disciplined, disenchanted, soul-searching world. Their piety expressed itself in their orderly work, family and church lives, and their attention to civic duty: being a Christian meant being a robust citizen of one's community and nation. Here we find the origins of America's "civil religion" (Bellah, 1970: ch. 9). Religious choice and piety were individual responsibilities, further aspects of individuation, but they fostered a communitarian ethic.

In Taylor's (2007: 492) analysis, the drastic cultural turn of the 1960s broke the nexus between individualism and communitarian mobilisation. The turn took individuation even further and sacralised individual authenticity—hence Taylor's (2007: 473–504) dubbing the current stage "the age of authenticity"—at the expense of communal integration. Authenticity emerged as a significant theme in early and mid-twentieth century philosophy (Heidegger, Sartre, Camus), and became a central trope in a new twist on Western culture driven by expressive individualism. The demands for solidarity and conformity of the M-type denominations fell foul of spiritual seekers insisting on forms and practices that could unreservedly contain their own personalised inward quests, which themselves had good Christian antecedents going back through Protestantism to medieval German mystics such as Meister Eckhart.

The pluralistic pattern of religious life in the age of mobilisation now exploded (in Taylor's metaphor) in a "nova effect." The spiritual seeker faces unlimited options, and under these drastically changed conditions of belief, no particular option could credibly

hold itself out as the one true faith or way, or the "true" reading of the sacred texts. Nor could the non-delusive chooser imagine that s/he had encountered and espoused the one true faith rather than simply exercised a personal option. This logic applies with equal force to Buddhism which, as Bernard Faure (2009) argues, never has presented one true form or essential doctrine in any event. Those who inveigh against secular Buddhism in the name of "traditional" or "true" Buddhism, or "what the Buddha really meant," rehearse the very naïveté that Taylor declares no longer available.

From the Western perspective, the coming of Buddhism in its manifold and proliferating forms in the latter twentieth century simply contributed to the nova effect; to shift metaphors, the spiritual *smörgåsbord* just expanded a little further. But Taylor's ideal types help clarify the dynamic within Buddhist circles in the West. Here Buddhist modernism has manifested both in monastic forms that align with Taylor's AR type (maintained by diasporic communities and Western retraditionalisers in the main), and other, modernising laicised forms reminiscent of the denominations of his M type. Some of the latter, such as Gaia House in England, and Spirit Rock and the Insight Meditation Society in the USA, have mobilised robustly around reformed teaching and practices, and thus gained prominence.

But Buddhists lack the Christian taste for spirited contention, and baulk at "embodying continuities of conflict" as MacIntyre would have a vital tradition do. The Buddhist ARs and Ms have co-mingled uneasily in the West in their *front populaire*, carefully avoiding two intertwined issues that a Buddhist movement born to the age of authenticity (secular Buddhism, for instance) has no choice but to confront: the status of the monastic norm in Buddhist practice; and the incompatibility of the renunciatory conception of the good life on the one hand, and the native Western eudaimonic one of developing our manifold human capacities ("full human flourishing" in Taylor's phrase) on the other.

Behind these two issues lurks a third, one that preoccupies Taylor, as it goes to the nub of what a "secular age" actually is: "one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people" (Taylor, 2007: 19–20). Or, to pose a less theistic question: can full human flourishing be pursued within the human condition—entirely within "the immanent frame"—or must it ultimately seek to transcend it? Crudely put, does the Buddha's teaching point to a (steep) stairway to heaven, or to full human flourishing here on terra firma? Both construals are canonically available in manifold variations, such are our conditions of belief today.

These issues thus arrange themselves in increasing order of difficulty.

Exercising Secular Options

Monastic ordination in the Theravada remains a legitimate option for a male Buddhist to choose. In the Anglophone West, though, only a tiny minority do so. The remaining dharma practitioners must take responsibility for their stance toward the male

monastic norm that infuses our received conceptions of practice. Should they honour, as best they can, its renunciatory values and its standardising conceptions of spiritual practice, process and attainment? Or should they fashion a dharma practice that excises the monastic norm—a practice informed by their own cultural heritage from Greek eudaimonic thought, modern humanism, and the contemporary valourisation of authenticity and individuation? The latter combination would seem to be the only one that integrates their spiritual aspirations with their embeddedness in contemporary Western culture and the modern moral order, and for most of them their actual commitment to such elements of full human flourishing as free-ranging interiority, sexual love, family life, occupational fulfillment, aesthetic appreciation and self-expression, and civic and social engagement.

These two renderings of a dharmic commitment—the renunciatory and the eudaimonic—may share common elements, but as options to live by, they diverge markedly and call on today's Western dharma practitioners to choose between them if their spiritual lives are not to fall into incoherence. Moreover, as embedded agents in the Anglophone countries in particular, they inherit a culture in which religious Reform has long since marginalised the practice and values of monasticism, not least its trope of "purity." They are perhaps more likely to accept Mary Douglas's (1976: 161) anthropological assessment: the lived pursuit of purity works by rejection, and must end up in something "poor and barren."

All options run moral risks, however, and one needs to remain alert to those stalking the secular one. The age of authenticity has a narcissistic shadow side, as Christopher Lasch (1979) pointed out; some commentators now see culturally induced narcissism reaching "epidemic" proportions (Twenge and Campbell, 2009). New Age spiritualities and shallower psychotherapeutic currents draw on vulgarised Buddhism; they can in turn deflect the pursuit of authenticity in its name into a self-preening solipsism, and a moral and civic indifference, and therewith into a narcissistic corruption. Secular Buddhism thus has added cause to uphold its dharmic bearings and ethical commitments, as well as its membership of the modern moral order.

The third issue mentioned above that needs to be tackled invokes the old transcendence-versus-immanence conundrum. For the Theravada (as opposed to Zen, for example), the goal is to transcend (leave behind) the human condition—encapsulated in the specific aspects of *dukkha*: birth, sickness, old age, death and so on—by attaining an irreversible awakened *status*, angel-like arahantship, a project normally taking several lifetimes and thus predicated on rebirth. Once again, one faces a stark choice between this scenario on the one hand, and a notion of spiritual fulfillment (including awakening understood as *process*) within the human condition on the other.

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." We find this negation forcefully played out, she writes, as early as Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus rejects the goddess Calypso's offer of eternal youth, beauty, life and love on her peaceful island, in order to return across the

perilous "wine-dark ocean" to his aging-prone and mortal Penelope. If he stayed with Calypso, he would betray what he essentially is—a needy, mortal but resourceful being. The recall of this moral tale ushers in her defense of what she calls "internal" transcendence, one internal to the human condition. It is an example of the "exclusive humanism" that Taylor (2007) names, only to ultimately reject as incompatible with his own Catholic commitments.

In Homer's spirit, Nussbaum (1990: 379) rejects "as incoherent...the aspiration to leave behind altogether the constitutive conditions of our humanity"—the aspiration we also find in those Buddhist accounts of "enlightenment" that posit permanent removal to a super-human status "beyond suffering." In contrast, internal transcendence rules out a soteriological terminus of that kind, and consists rather in "a bewildered human grace" that comes from cultivating "fine-tuned attention and responsiveness to human life...a kind of precision of feeling and thought that a human being can cultivate...above the dullness and obtuseness of the everyday" (Nussbaum, 1990: 379). So far, secular Buddhist discourse has maintained a symptomatic silence around the question of the ultimate purpose of dharma practice, but when pressed, it may well deliver an answer in similar terms. Such an answer would cohere, at any rate, with the sense of dharma practice one finds in Batchelor's (2012) account of it.

The Greek thinkers' warning against *hubris* reinforces the critique of external transcendence, Nussbaum adds. Hubris comes down to *"*the failure to comprehend what sort of life one has actually got, the failure to live within its limits (which are also possibilities), the failure, being mortal, to think mortal thoughts. Correctly understood, the injunction to avoid *hubris* is...an instruction as to where the valuable things *for us* are to be found" (Nussbaum, 1990: 381; her emphasis).

To fully accept the human condition is to confront our *finitude*, which potentially constitutes the central strength of secular Buddhism, and its bulwark against narcissistic grandiosity. Greek thought, myth and tragic vision locate the dignity of the mature human spirit in confronting finitude, in exercising agency in the face of all its aspects as they unpredictably and implacably impact upon a human life. To live otherwise is to inhabit the world of the child, the narcissist, the capricious immortal gods of Greek legend. Instead of fleeing finitude, dharma practitioners can deploy it to season and lend urgency to their human subjectivity. Needless to say, this view of the human condition resonates with the Buddha's concept of impermanence and change (*anicca*).

Secular Buddhism can enrich this theme by referencing modern Western sources. Martin Heidegger ([1927] 2008: 279–311) strongly reclaims the theme in his concept of "being-toward-death," as part of his larger theory of embodied and embedded human agency under the rubric *Dasein* (being-there). Gianni Vattimo (2002: 134) extols this being-toward-death as "a key to authentic existence." Pascal Mercier dramatises finitude in the same vein it in his novel, *Night Train to Lisbon* (2008). A secular Buddhism that embraces finitude (Nussbaum's "constitutive conditions of our humanity") still aspires to radical human transformation, as well as awakening and other epiphanies on the way, but it would tend to eschew a terminus in a timeless super-human stasis as so

much hubris.

Conclusion

I have tried to account for the coming of secular Buddhism—why it is emerging now, and what general perspectives it offers Western dharma practitioners (in the first instance) in the current "age of authenticity." It has a longer history in the form of piecemeal, unlabelled innovations in spiritual practice, engagement with the wider culture and its associational forms, and is only now coming to profile itself in labelled doctrinal terms. On the one hand, it seeks to resolve incongruities in the wider Buddhist modernism, ones that now engender growing spiritual incoherence. On the other hand, it answers to the call of today's secularity—a complex and frequently misunderstood *religio-cultural development* in the West.

Secular Buddhism's specific reason for being is to participate in that cultural development in aid of the dharma practice of those embedded in it, while situating itself in the Buddha's living (as opposed to sedimented) tradition of practice and thought. It attracts controversy for departing from two aspects of ancestral Buddhism which often pose as Buddhism-as-such: "enchanted" truth claims, including a conception of super-human transcendence; and monasticism—particularly putative monastic metahistorical authority, and the renunciatory monastic norm for practice inscribed even in the laicised forms of Buddhist modernism.

Secular Buddhism can only fulfil its remit by remaining highly receptive to ancient and modern intellectual and artistic developments in the West. I have touched on a number of these, including ancient Greek thought and modern psychoanalytic theory. But the association that arises with greatest persistence is with phenomenology, and its key figure, Martin Heidegger, in particular. This association goes back a long way. In the early 1960s Ñanavīra (2001) was already citing chapter and verse from Heidegger's locus classicus, *Being and Time*, in his own writings. Heidegger's opus also provides the conceptual backbone of Stephen Batchelor's earliest book, *Alone with Others* (1983), which exemplifies how phenomenology provides a conceptually rich post-metaphysical meeting point for ancient and modern thought and practice, far from the noisy arenas wherein gladiatorial truth-claims do endless battle.

While secular Buddhism's relationship with phenomenology is far from exclusive, it continues to be a peculiarly fertile one. *Being* (including becoming, engaged agency and subjectivity informed by finitude) and *time* (the temporality of human life, time as the measure of change) constitute the axes around which dharma practitioners' lives and spiritual practice unfold. Above all, phenomenology returns us to a strong sense of our embodiment previously lost to religious systems (Christian and Buddhist) that have "excarnated" us, in Taylor's felicitous term. Heidegger's work, and that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 and 1968) complement the Buddha's own teachings on meditation practice, ones like the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* which emphasise the immediacy of embodied conscious experience in the awakening process.

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