

Buddha and the New Atheists: On the Art of Teaching the Dhamma in the Bible Belt

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Introduction:

This paper examines recent attempts to associate the Buddha and Buddhism with the movement called New Atheism. The underlying thesis of the paper is that the atheist interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism is misleading and counterproductive for teaching the Dhamma, at least in predominantly Christian countries; more specifically, in the Bible belt, a large area in the south and southeast of the United States in which an evangelical and socially conservative form of Christianity prevails.

The first part of the paper introduces the New Atheists and examines Stephen Batchelor's atheist interpretation of the Buddha of the Pāli Nikāyas. Special emphasis is given to the reading of Buddhism found in Sam Harris's best-seller *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004), and Stephen Batchelor's latest book *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2010).

Stephen Batchelor describes the Buddha of the Pāli Nikāyas as an "ironic atheist." Although Batchelor does not relate his reading of the Buddha and Buddhism to the work of the New Atheists, the back cover of his book is endorsed by Christopher Hitchens, who together with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennet, is one of the "four horsemen" of the New Atheist movement. According to Hitchens, "*Stephen Batchelor adds the universe of Buddhism to the many fields in which received truth and blind faith are now giving way to ethical and scientific humanism, in which lies our only real future.*" The back cover also describes Batchelor's book as a "*stunning and groundbreaking recovery of the historical Buddha and his message.*" Thus, the connection between Batchelor's interpretation of the Buddha and the New Atheism seems unavoidable.

The second part explains some of the reactions I have encountered while discussing different interpretations of the Buddha at Eastern Kentucky University, a public institution in the heart of the Bible belt in which most students are Christians, many of them with a strong evangelical background. I draw on my own experience as a scholar-practitioner of Buddhism who teaches various courses related to World Religions including *Buddhism* and *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*.

Although Batchelor's overall understanding of the Buddha is psychologically sophisticated and probably appealing to secular humanists suspicious of "religion" and convinced that science provides the only valid means of knowledge, the atheist interpretation of Buddha is misleading and counterproductive to teach the Dhamma in Christian countries.

The atheist interpretation of the Buddha is misleading because it gives the impression that for Buddhists the question of God is primary, when in fact such question is, at least in the Pāli Nikāyas, open to several interpretations and only remotely related to the central question of suffering and its cessation. The atheist interpretation is counterproductive to teach the Dhamma in Christian countries because for many Christians atheism is synonymous with immorality and confrontational attitudes that have little, if anything, to do with Buddhism. Instead of contributing to understanding

Buddhism in its own terms, the atheist interpretation of the Buddha discourages Christians from studying the Dhamma seriously and with an open mind.

1. The New Atheist Interpretation of the Buddha

1.1. Sam Harris's Interpretation of the Buddhism

The “New Atheism” movement started with the publication of five books between 2004 and 2007. In 2004 Sam Harris published *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. In 2006 Harris published *Letter to a Christian Nation*, in which he responded to his Christian critics. Also in 2006, the philosopher Daniel Dennett published *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and the biologist Richard Dawkins published *The God Delusion*. In 2007, physicist Victor J Stenger published *God: the Failed Hypothesis*. And in 2007, the journalist Christopher Hitchens published *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.¹ All these books became best-sellers in the United States, and their authors, especially Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens can be considered intellectual celebrities who appear on a variety of TV shows, deliver lectures in many American universities, and participate in debates about religion and the existence of God across the USA.

The “New Atheism” movement refers to the aforementioned books and those who sympathize with the authors’ negative view of religion and faith. What distinguishes the new atheists from other atheists, agnostics, humanists, and followers of non-theistic traditions, is that the new atheists are more outspoken and confrontational in their attitude towards religion. Unlike moderate atheists, for whom atheism is primarily a philosophical standpoint, the new atheists are also social activists who encourage other atheists to be more proactive in order to counteract the negative effects of religion in societies around the world.

The new atheists can be understood as the secular counterpart of religious fundamentalists. Whereas religious extremists perceive the traditional values of their religions and cultures under attack by secular forces, the new atheists perceive science and world peace as threaten by religious violence and irrationality. As Armin W. Geertz states, “The growth of New Atheism in the United States during the last 20 years has closely paralleled the increase of religious extremism in the world.”²

According to the journalist Simon Hooper, what the new atheists share is “a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.”³ In fact, Sam Harris challenges religious moderates for believing that the path to peace “will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others.”⁴ For Harris, this ideal of tolerance has gone too far, and it is “one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.”⁵

Thus, new atheists like Harris not only criticize religious extremists but also religious moderates who do nothing to oppose the growing influence of religious fundamentalism in public life. Religious extremists are to be challenged because their

¹ Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2009) 13.

² Armin W. Geertz, “New Atheistic Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion,” in *Contemporary Theories of Religion: a Critical Companion*, edited by Michael Stausberg, (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 242-263.

³ Accessed September 19, 2011. http://articles.cnn.com/2006-11-08/world/atheism.feature_1_new-atheists-new-atheism-religion?_s=PM:WORLD

⁴ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York & London: W.W.Norton & Company), 14-15

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

faith leads to harmful social consequences; moderates also need to be blamed for allowing fundamentalists to flourish in the name of freedom, tolerance and respect.

The new atheists tend to contrast science and reason with religion and faith. This negative view of religion and faith, however, at least in the case of Sam Harris, does not entail the rejection of spirituality and mysticism. Quite the contrary, Harris encourages people to adopt “a truly empirical approach to spiritual experience.” Harris also recommends the study of what he calls “the Wisdom of the East,” especially Buddhism.

How does Harris reconcile his atheism with his positive view of Buddhism and Eastern spirituality? Is Harris a Buddhist? What interpretation of Buddhism underlies Harris critique of religion and faith? In order to answer these questions we need to examine in more detail what Harris says.

In the last chapter of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Harris states that religions make a claim about the human condition, namely, that “it is possible to have one’s experience of the world radically transformed.”⁶ The problem, Harris explains, is that religions mix such claim with “the venom of unreason,” that is, beliefs based on insufficient evidence. As an example of this combination of spirituality and incredible dogmas, Harris mentions the case of Jesus. The ethical teachings and the spiritual transformation experienced by Jesus was not enough for Christians, “He also had to be the Son of God, born of a virgin, and destined to return to earth trailing clouds of glory.”⁷ For Harris such beliefs place the example of Jesus out of reach and transform his empirical claims about the connection between ethics and spirituality into a “gratuitous, and rather gruesome, fairy tale.”⁸

For Harris, the example of Jesus and many others sages demonstrates that it is possible to give a more profound response to our existence. That response is more than seeking health, wealth and good company. Genuine happiness requires spirituality and mysticism terms that Harris uses interchangeably.⁹ Spirituality and mysticism are the means to attain “a form of well-being that is intrinsic to consciousness in every present moment.”¹⁰ For Harris, the possible transformation of our experience of the world through spirituality and mysticism need not be irrational. We need a rational approach to spirituality and mysticism. As Harris says “nothing need be believed on insufficient evidence for us to look into this possibility with an open mind.”¹¹ However, our beliefs about God are an obstacle to a truly empirical approach to spiritual experience.¹²

Harris acknowledges that we do not know what happens after death and that the idea that the brain produces consciousness “is little more than an article of faith among scientist at present.”¹³ Likewise, we do not know exactly what the mental self actually is, although we do know that what we call the “I” cannot be found, “it actually disappears when looked for in a rigorous way.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is a fact that we all experience the feeling of what we call “I” as well as the duality of subject and object. For Harris, every problem we have ultimately derives from this experience of separateness, this experience of dualism. Therefore, Harris concludes: “It would seem that a spirituality that undermined such dualism, through the mere contemplation of consciousness, could not help but improve our situation.”¹⁵

⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁷ Ibid., 204.

⁸ Ibid., 204.

⁹ Ibid., 205.

¹⁰ Ibid., 206.

¹¹ Ibid., 207.

¹² Ibid., 214.

¹³ Ibid., 209.

¹⁴ Ibid., 214.

¹⁵ Ibid., 214.

According to Harris, the non-dualistic spirituality we need to improve our situation can be found in what he calls “The Wisdom of the East.” For Harris, Western traditions have not thought enough about personal transformation and liberation from the illusory nature of the self. That is why Harris suggests that many people in the West are conceptually unequipped to understand empirical claims about spirituality.¹⁶

Harris does not deny that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam contain spiritual teachings that demonstrate profound knowledge of consciousness and the stages of personal transformation. Similarly, Harris does not claim that Asian religions are perfect or free from dogmas, false prophets, and charlatan saints. Rather, the point seems to be that Asian religions overall have paid more attention to the nature of consciousness and meditation than monotheistic religions. In their empirical approach to spirituality, the great Asian sages have no equivalents in the west. In Harris’ own words:

“when the great philosopher mystics of the East are weighed against the patriarchs of Western philosophical and theological traditions, the difference is unmistakable: Buddha, Shankara, Padmasambhava, Nagarjuna, Longchenpa, and countless others down to the present have no equivalents in the west. In spiritual terms, we appear to have been standing on the shoulders of dwarfs. It is little wonder, therefore, that many Western scholars have found the view within rather unremarkable.”¹⁷

In a long note to the above quote, Harris elaborates on his view of monotheistic religions. The mystical insights of Meister Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Theresa of Avila, and many others “for the most part, remained shackled to the dualism of church doctrine, and accordingly, failed to fly.” The mystical impulses of Jewish contemplatives were similarly constrained, and Islamic mysticism, i.e., Sufism, has been generally considered a form of heresy.¹⁸ While Harris acknowledges that there are many contemplatives and mystics in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, he contends that this says nothing about the adequacy of the Bible and the Koran as contemplative manuals. For Harris, “the failures of faith-based religion are so conspicuous, its historical degradation so great, its intolerance so of this world, that I think it is time we stopped making excuses for it.”¹⁹

In order to illustrate his claim about the spiritual superiority of Asian religions, Harris quotes a single passage by the Indian Buddhist Padmasambhava. Harris claims that he has selected the passage at random from a shelf of Buddhist literature. The passage describes the nature of self-awareness as a lucid clarity that is empty and pure, without any duality of clarity and emptiness. Then Harris concludes that “One could live an eon as a Christian, a Muslim, or a Jew and never encounter any teachings like this about the nature of consciousness.”²⁰

What distinguishes the aforementioned Buddhist passage from the teachings of monotheistic religions is that it limits itself to describe the nature of consciousness. This description is merely phenomenological, that is, it is not metaphysical in nature, it only explains what someone experiences as the content of her or his awareness. Harris goes as

¹⁶ “Personal transformation, or indeed liberation from the illusion of the self, seems to have been thought too much to ask: or rather, not thought at all. Consequently, many of us in the West we are conceptually unequipped to understand empirical claims of the sort adduced above,” *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

far as to states that contemporary literature on consciousness “cannot match the kind of precise, phenomenological studies that can be found throughout the Buddhist canon.”²¹

Harris does not claim to be a Buddhist, only that he has a “debt to a variety of contemplative traditions that have their origin in India.”²² However, for Harris Buddhism excels other traditions in spiritual sophistication and in number of methods to transform the human mind.²³ More specifically, according to Harris, “it remains true that the esoteric teachings of Buddhism offer the most complete methodology we have for discovering the intrinsic freedom of consciousness, unencumbered by any dogma.”²⁴

In order to illustrate the spiritual superiority of Tibetan Buddhism, Harris compares the meetings of the Dalai Lama with Christian representatives to the hypothetical meetings of Cambridge physicists with the Bushmen of the Kalahari to discuss their respective understandings of the physical universe.²⁵ The Christian view of spiritual matters, like the worldview of the Bushmen is based on irrational beliefs; on the contrary, the spiritual teachings of Buddhists are similar to the way Cambridge physicists conceive the universe, i.e., rational and based on empirical observation. For Harris, the spiritual instructions found in the Bible are less precise and far less numerous than the spiritual instructions found in Buddhist texts.²⁶

The aforementioned contrast between Buddhist and Christian approaches to spirituality does not mean that everything within Christianity is primitive and intellectually unsophisticated, or that all aspects of Buddhism are rational and scientific. For Harris, Buddhism is not free from dogmas and religious elements. In fact, Harris suggests that Tibetan Buddhists are saddled with certain dogmas, but qualifies that physicists are not different in this regard.²⁷ Likewise, Harris says that Buddhism has also been a source of ignorance and occasional violence, but clarifies that Buddhism “is not a religion of faith, or a religion at all, in the western sense.”²⁸

Harris accuses millions of Buddhists of ignoring that Buddhism is not a religion of faith or not a religion at all in the Western sense. These Buddhists who ignore that Buddhism is an empirical and scientific approach to spirituality “can be found in temples throughout Southeast Asia, and even in the West, praying to Buddha as though he were a numinous incarnation of Santa Claus.”²⁹ Such expressions of devotion to the Buddha are for Harris a “distortion of the tradition.”³⁰

The aforementioned dogmas and religious elements found in Buddhist traditions do not put Buddhism on par with other religions. Although Harris does not see any reason to be dogmatically attached to a particular spiritual tradition, it would be intellectually dishonest not to acknowledge the preeminence of Buddhism as a system of spiritual instruction.³¹

²¹ Ibid., 217.

²² Ibid., 217.

²³ “Buddhism, in particular, has grown remarkably sophisticated. No other tradition has developed so many methods by which the human mind can be fashioned into a tool capable of transforming itself” Ibid., 293.

²⁴ Ibid., 293-4.

²⁵ “It is no exaggeration to say that meetings between the Dalai Lama and Christian ecclesiastics to mutually honor their religious traditions are like meeting physicists from Cambridge and the Bushmen of the Kalahari to mutually honor their respective understanding of the physical universe.” Ibid., 294.

²⁶ “Any person familiar with both literatures will know that the Bible does not contain a discernible fraction of the precise spiritual instructions that can be found in the Buddhist canon.” Ibid., 294.

²⁷ This is not to say that Tibetan Buddhists are not saddled with certain dogmas (so are physicists) or that the Bushmen could not have formed some conception of the atom. Ibid., 294.

²⁸ Ibid., 294.

²⁹ Ibid., 293.

³⁰ Ibid., 293.

³¹ “Though there is much in Buddhism that I do not pretend to understand—as well as much that seems deeply implausible—it would be intellectually dishonest not to acknowledge its preeminence as a system of spiritual instruction.” Ibid., 294.

Despite of the fact that for Harris Buddhist spiritual teachings are superior to the teachings of other spiritual traditions, this does not mean that Harris endorses Buddhism. In a short article entitled “Killing the Buddha” published in the Buddhist magazine *Shambhala Sun* (March 2006: 73-75), Harris who goes as far as to suggest that we should follow the ninth-century Rinzai Zen master Lin-Chi and “kill the Buddha,” which for Harris refers to the killing Buddhism.

According to Harris, it would be nice if Buddhism spreads in the world, but this is not likely to happen any time soon. For Harris, Buddhism cannot successfully compete with the relentless evangelizing of Christianity and Islam. Instead of adopting aggressive proselytizing methods, Harris encourages Buddhists to abandon Buddhism as the best way to maximize the impact of the Buddha’s wisdom in the world today. In Harris’ words:

“to turn the Buddha into a religious fetish is to miss the essence of what he taught. In considering what Buddhism can offer the world in the twenty-first century, I propose that we take Lin Chi’s admonishment rather seriously. As students of the Buddha, we should dispense with Buddhism...The wisdom of the Buddha is currently being trapped within the religion of Buddhism... So insofar as we maintain a discourse as “Buddhists,” we ensure that the wisdom of the Buddha will do little to inform the development of civilization in the twenty-first century.”³²

For Harris, it is better not to describe oneself as a “Buddhist” in order to avoid being complicit in the word’s violence and ignorance.³³ Similarly, it is counterproductive to present as “Buddhist” whatever truths may be found in Buddhist literature, e.g., emptiness, selflessness, and impermanence. Describing as “Buddhist” truths about the mind and the world because they were discovered by Buddhists is like talking about Christian physics and Muslim algebra because they were discovered by Christians and Muslims. Identifying any truth as “Buddhist” will confuse the matter for others. What we need, according to Harris, is a contemplative science, that is, a scientific approach to spirituality and mysticism. For Harris, such scientific approach will not develop by attempting to spread any particular kind of Buddhism, be it “American Buddhism” “Western Buddhism” or “Engaged Buddhism.” Students of the Buddha are in a unique position to further our understanding of the mind, “but the religion of Buddhism currently stands in our way.”³⁴

In conclusion, Harris proposes a rational and empirical approach to spirituality and mysticism. This approach requires that we study scientifically methods to explore and modify consciousness throughout the history of spirituality; such methods include fasting, chanting, sensory deprivation, prayer, meditation, and the use of psychotropic plants. Special attention should be given to the study of meditation³⁵ and “the Wisdom of the East,” especially Buddhist traditions.

Mysticism and spirituality are rational enterprises, whereas religion is not. Mystics have empirical reasons for what they believe, religious people may have reasons too, but they are not empirical. We need not believe anything on insufficient evidence and that is precisely what religion wants us to do. We need to bring reason, spirituality and ethics

³² Sam Harris, “Killing the Buddha” *Shambhala Sun*, March 2006, pp.73-74.

³³ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁵ Harris defines meditation as “any means whereby our sense of “self”—of subject/object dualism in perception and cognition—can be made vanish, while consciousness remains vividly aware of the continuum of experience.” *Ibid.*, 217.

together; this marks the beginning of a rational approach to spirituality and this bringing together of ethics, spirituality and reason will be *the end of faith*.³⁶

1.2. Stephen Batchelor's Interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism

Stephen Batchelor is a contemporary Buddhist teacher born in Scotland in 1953. He studied Tibetan Buddhism in India (1972-75), Switzerland (1975-79), and Germany (1979-81). Batchelor was ordained as a monk in the Tibetan tradition in 1976, but in 1981 he travelled to South Korea to become a monk in the Zen tradition. He left South Korea in 1984 and disrobed in 1985 to marry Martine Fages, a former nun he met in South Korea. They live in France since 2000.

Batchelor has translated and written several books about Buddhism including *The Awakening of the West* (1994), the best-seller *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (1997), *Living with the Devil: A Meditation on Good and Evil* (1997), and *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2010).

In *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Batchelor advocates an agnostic approach to Buddhism. According to Batchelor, "An agnostic Buddhist eschews atheism as much as theism."³⁷ However, in 2010, in *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, Stephen Batchelor describes himself as a "Buddhist atheist" and characterizes the Buddha as an "ironic atheist."

Although Batchelor does not relate his atheism and his atheist reading of the Buddha to the New Atheism movement, the back cover of his book is endorsed by Christopher Hitchens, who together with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennet, is one of the "four horsemen" of New Atheism. According to Hitchens, "*Stephen Batchelor adds the universe of Buddhism to the many fields in which received truth and blind faith are now giving way to ethical and scientific humanism, in which lies our only real future.*" Thus, since Batchelor's book is endorsed by the new atheist Hitchens, and since Batchelor describes himself and the Buddha as atheists, the connection between Batchelor, the Buddha, and New Atheism seems unavoidable.

Has Batchelor shifted from Buddhist agnosticism to Buddhist atheism? How does Batchelor justify his atheist interpretation of the Buddha? What interpretation of Buddhism does Batchelor advocate? In order to answer these questions we need to examine in more detail Batchelor's ideas about the Buddha and Buddhism.

In *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, Batchelor narrates his personal journey as a Buddhist and develops an atheist interpretation of the Buddha. The back cover describes Batchelor's book as a "*stunning and groundbreaking recovery of the historical Buddha and his message.*" In order to reconstruct the historical Buddha, Batchelor focuses on the Pāli Canon. Batchelor contends the Pāli Canon provide an inconsistent image of the Buddha: a solitary figure, a heroic public figure, an accomplished meditator, a miracle worker with supernatural powers, a messianic "Great Man" with superhuman physical marks, and an ordinary monk.³⁸ Batchelor discards idealized images of the Buddha as a serene and perfect teacher who cannot do anything wrong. For Batchelor, the Buddha was a human being like the rest of us, and like us, he was not morally perfect and he had to live in an unpredictable world. The Buddha was not omniscient; he did not know what might happen in the future.³⁹

Following Trevor Ling, Batchelor interprets the Buddha as someone who did not intend to found a new religion but rather a new civilization.⁴⁰ That is, the Buddha was not

³⁶ Ibid., 221.

³⁷ Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 19.

³⁸ Stephen Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 213.

³⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 102.

a world-renouncing monk whose main interest was liberation from the cycle of saṃsāra through some sort of mystical contemplation. Rather, the Buddha was a social critic and reformer who advocated a new way of life not only for individuals but also for communities.⁴¹

For Batchelor, the traditional story of the Buddha's life is one of the greatest obstacles to understand his social engagement and his vision for humankind. The image of the Buddha as a world-renouncing monk is problematic.⁴² The traditional story according which the Buddha was the son of a king is also inaccurate. The truth is that his father was just a leading nobleman of the Gotama clan, a regional governor at most subject to king Pasenadi of Kosala. Likewise, the traditional story of the Buddha going outside his palace and seeing for the first time a sick person, an old person, a dead person, and a holy person, is part of a mythical story about a former Buddha. For Batchelor, the story of the four sights "has nothing to do with Gotama himself." Even the Buddha's first name "Siddhattha" does not even appear in the Pāli Canon.⁴³

For Batchelor, the key to understand the Buddha's character and vision for humankind is his relationship with King Pasenadi. The Buddha compares his enlightenment to the discovery of an ancient path leading to an ancient city. For Batchelor, this simile indicates that the Buddha saw his teaching, not as an other-worldly religion to free oneself from karma and rebirth, but rather "as the template for a civilization." This socially engaged goal required more than the support of monks and nuns, it needed the cooperation of King Pasenadi of Kosala.⁴⁴

Batchelor explains how his understanding of the Buddha changed as he became more familiar with the Pāli canon. He began to suspect that the Mahāyāna traditions he studied as a Tibetan and Zen monk had lost sight of what the Buddha originally taught. However, Batchelor does not go as far as to equate the Pāli canon with the original teachings of the Buddha.

Batchelor distinguishes between what is and is not an intrinsic part of the Buddha's teachings. According to Batchelor, the original approach of the Buddha was therapeutic and pragmatic, not speculative and metaphysical.⁴⁵ However, the Buddha's words were transformed into the religion we call Buddhism.

The criterion to differentiate Buddhism from what is intrinsic to the Buddha's teachings is simple: if a teaching cannot be derived from the matrix of classical Indian thought, then it does not correspond to the Buddha's distinctive voice. In Batchelor's words: "Anything attributed to him [Buddha] that could just as well have been said in the classical Indian texts of the Upanishads or Vedas, I would bracket off and put to one side."⁴⁶

For Batchelor, the doctrines of karma and rebirth, the belief in gods and other realms of existence, the idea of freedom from the cycle of life and death, and the concept of a consciousness that is unconditioned, they all predate the Buddha. Therefore, Batchelor concludes, they were not "intrinsic to what the Buddha taught, but simply a reflection of ancient Indian cosmology and soteriology."⁴⁷

In order to justify that the Buddha's original approach does not include the doctrines of karma and rebirth, Batchelor reinterprets the undetermined questions. For Batchelor, the Buddha's refusal to address the undetermined questions "undermines the

⁴¹ Ibid., 109.

⁴² Ibid., 124.

⁴³ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁵ Stephen Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 100.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 100.

possibility of constructing a theory of reincarnation.”⁴⁸ More specifically, the Buddha’s refusal to address the questions about whether mind and body are identical or different, and the questions about the Tathāgata or liberated being after death, indicates that the Buddha was reluctant to affirm an immaterial mind and a postmortem existence. And, Batchelor concludes, without such beliefs in the immateriality of mind and the existence of an after life, “it is difficult—if not impossible—to speak coherently about rebirth and karma.”⁴⁹

For Batchelor, the teachings intrinsic to the Buddha’s original approach are four: the principle of specific conditionality or dependent origination, the process of the four noble truths, the practice of mindfulness, and the power of self-reliance.⁵⁰ These four teachings cannot be derived from ancient Indian thought. For Batchelor, these teachings are “the four core elements of the Dhamma,” and “the four axioms.” These four elements of the Dhamma frame the way of life anticipated by the Buddha and his vision for a new civilization.

For Batchelor, the Dhamma should not be confused with the religion we call Buddhism. Unlike Buddhism, the Dhamma is to be lived, not just believed in. Living according to the Dhamma involves more than just practicing the aforementioned four teachings, it also requires that “one embraces this world in all its contingency and specificity, with all its ambiguity and flaws.”⁵¹ This embrace of the world and its contingency presupposes a new interpretation of the Buddha’s awakening.

According to Batchelor, awakening is not a new insight into some higher truth, i.e., the four noble truths, but rather a new perspective in which we wake up to the groundless ground of this world. In fact, for Batchelor, the four noble truths are not true because they correspond to the way things are but rather because they are useful, that is, when put into practice, they can enhance the quality of our life.⁵²

Life in this world is groundless. Batchelor describes the groundless ground of life as follows: “no sooner does it appear, than it disappears, only to renew itself, then immediately break up and vanish again.”⁵³ This awakening to the groundless ground is not so much a cognitive act as it is an existential readjustment that allows us to establish a new relationship with the impermanence of life. In this new relationship with the impermanence of life, we stop obsessing with the past and the future, and we remain conscious of what happens in the present, that is, we focus on the “contingent world as it unravels moment to moment.”⁵⁴

Focusing on this groundless world and the contingent present requires training in mindfulness. For Batchelor, mindfulness has nothing to do with anything transcendent or divine. Quite the contrary, mindfulness “serves as an antidote to theism, a cure for sentimental piety, a scalpel for excising the tumor of metaphysical belief.”⁵⁵

Not even nirvana is transcendent. The Buddha, according to Batchelor, “rejected the idea that freedom or salvation lay in gaining privileged access to an eternal, non-contingent source or ground, whether it be called Atman or God, Pure Consciousness or the Absolute.”⁵⁶ Nirvana is simply a way of being in this world that is not conditioned by greed, hatred, and confusion; a way of being that penetrates deep into the contingent heart

⁴⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁵¹ Ibid., 237.

⁵² Ibid., 199.

⁵³ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 131.

of the world.⁵⁷ The Buddha woke up to the “this vast open field of contingently arising events.”⁵⁸

Batchelor contends in several places that the Buddha rejected the existence of any transcendent reality, whether it is called nirvana, God, Self, Brahman, Consciousness. For Batchelor, the Buddha’s awakening to the contingent ground of life “contradicted the belief in an eternal soul and, by implication, in the transcendent reality of God.”⁵⁹ Rather than teaching the need to liberate the soul from the body and the physical universe in order to achieve mystical union with God, the Buddha encouraged his disciples to pay attention to the rise and fall of the world, “noticing its emergence and disappearance, its ephemerality, its impersonality, its joy and its tragedy, its allure, its terror.”⁶⁰

Unlike many brahmins and ascetics of his day, the Buddha did not believe in an eternal soul or self that is identical to the transcendent reality of Brahman (God).⁶¹ Similarly, the Buddha did not believe that the goal of the spiritual path was to achieve mystical union of the individual soul with the transcendent reality of God.⁶² Batchelor compares what the Buddha did for the self to what Copernicus did for the earth. Instead of regarding the self as the center of the spiritual universe, the Buddha contended that the self, like everything in the universe, is a fluid and contingent process.

For Batchelor, the Buddha’s attitude toward the religions of his day was revolutionary, he was “a dissenter, a radical, an iconoclast. He wanted nothing to do with the priestly religion of the brahmins. He dismissed its theology as unintelligible, its ritual as pointless, and the social structure it legitimated as unjust.”⁶³ Similarly, Batchelor contends that the Buddha “rejected all notions of a transcendent God or Self, openly criticized the system of caste, mocked the beliefs of the Brahmins and other religious teachers of his day, and accepted nuns into his community as equals with the monks”⁶⁴

In sum, for Batchelor the Buddha denies the existence of God because he denied the existence of a transcendent reality. The Buddha awoke to the impermanent, impersonal, contingent, and dependently originated nature of the world, and nirvana is simply a mental state free from greed, hate, and confusion. However, in Batchelor’s reading, the Buddha denied not only an impersonal concept of God, i.e., a transcendent reality, but also the theistic concept of God.

Batchelor admits he does not understand when someone asks him whether he believes in God; he is also puzzled by those who claim not to believe in God. For Batchelor the traditional meaning of God is problematic because it combines personal and impersonal characteristics.

In the West, God is presented as the source and ground of everything; for Thomas Aquinas God is Being itself, and the New Testament tell us God is love and He sent his only begotten Son into the world. Batchelor asks “how can the ultimate source and ground of everything have an emotion like “love” or an intention to “incarnate”? In what possible sense can Being itself be thought as a Person?”⁶⁵ The problem is not solved, Batchelor suggests, by saying that God is unknowable and ineffable. Similarly, in Indian thought it is difficult to reconcile the concept of an unknowable, transcendent, and impersonal Brahman with an anthropomorphic concept of Consciousness. For Batchelor,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁶¹ Ibid., 131.

⁶² Ibid., 133.

⁶³ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 167.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 177.

both images of God, the Indian and the Judeo-Christian are human constructions, they “bear the indelible imprint of their creator: the conscious human person.”⁶⁶

In order to demonstrate that the Buddha rejected the theistic God, Batchelor quotes three texts from the Pāli Nikāyas. He does not provide the reference and does not discuss the context of these texts.

The first text Batchelor quotes appears in the *Tevijja Sutta* (D.I.235-240). There, the Buddha compares a file of blind men to the brahmanical tradition. In the same way that each blind man follows the other blind men before him, brahmins repeat what other brahmins of the past claim about the path to attain union with the personal god Brahmā without actually having experienced such union; none of the brahmins have seen Brahmā face to face, they just follow tradition blindly.

The second text appears in the *Cūḷasakuludāyī Sutta* or Short discourse to Sakuludāyīn (M.I.32-35). In a conversation with the ascetic Udāyīn, the Buddha compares those who teach out of faith “this is the perfect and highest splendor” with those who claim to be in love with the most beautiful woman without actually knowing how or who she is.

The third text appears in the *Kevaddha Sutta* (D.I.215-223). There, a monk asks a variety of gods “where the four great elements cease without remainder.” Not even the highest personal god Brahmā is able to answer this question. Only the Buddha knows the answer, the implication being that the knowledge of Buddhas is superior to that of gods, even superior to the knowledge of the supreme god Brahmā, who claims to be omniscient, the lord, creator and father of all beings.

Although none of the aforementioned three texts question the existence of gods, Batchelor describes the Buddha as an “ironic atheist.”⁶⁷ Batchelor clarifies that the Buddha’s rejection of God was not the main concern of his teaching, and that his atheism should not be mistaken with the aggressive atheism of western modernity.⁶⁸

In order to differentiate the atheism of the Buddha from Western atheism, Batchelor suggests that it would be more accurate to call the later “anti-theism.” Thus, the Buddha was an atheist in the literal sense of the word, not an “anti-theist.” The word “God” was not part of the Buddha’s vocabulary. The Buddha’s concern was the practice of mindfulness and the suffering of this conditionally arisen world.

According to Batchelor, for the Buddha there is not a higher reality beyond or underlying this world. The world is an open field of contingent events, and “all events are ontologically equivalent: mind is not more “real” than matter, nor matter more “real” than mind.”⁶⁹ Consciousness is also contingent and impermanent. There is nothing else but this world, not even another existence after death. As Batchelor puts it, “There are no wormholes in this intricate and fluid field through which one can wriggle out, either to reach union with God or move on to another existence after death.”⁷⁰

For Batchelor, we are alone in this universe and we alone have to define what we are with our actions. Nobody can help us, and “there is no point in praying for divine guidance or assistance.”⁷¹ In order to illustrate this point, Batchelor quotes again the *Tevijja Sutta*. This time the section in which the Buddha tells the brahmin Vasetṭha that

⁶⁶ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁷ Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, 179.

⁶⁸ “The rejection of God is not a mainstay of his teaching and he did not get worked up about it. Such passages have the flavor of a diversion, a light entertainment, in which another of humanity’s irrational opinions is gently ridiculed and then put aside. This approach is in contrast to the aggressive atheism that periodically erupts in the modern West.” Ibid., 179.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 181.

⁷¹ Ibid., 181.

those who invoke Hindu gods to attain union with the God Brahmā are like those who would like to cross a river by asking the other shore to come here.⁷²

Batchelor acknowledges that his goal is not to provide an objective interpretation of the Buddha, but rather to do “what I can only call *theology*—albeit theology without *theos*.”⁷³ He admits that his reading of the Buddha is selective and based on the passages that best fit his own views and biases as a secular Westerner. For Batchelor, there is nothing intellectually dishonest with his selective interpretation of Buddhist texts because all Buddhist schools have done exactly the same.⁷⁴

Thus, although the texts Batchelor quotes do not necessarily suggest that the Buddha rejected the existence of God and gods, he nevertheless uses them to argue that the Buddha was an ironic atheist who rejected the theistic beliefs of his contemporaries and “enjoyed poking fun at the absurdity of their claims.”⁷⁵

Interestingly, Batchelor claims that most Buddhists throughout Asia are and always have been polytheists because they believe in spirits and gods. Batchelor acknowledges that for Buddhists gods are downgraded and less important as the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.⁷⁶ Similarly, Batchelor states that the Buddha “did not reject the existence of the gods, he marginalize them.”⁷⁷ Yet, Batchelor does not describe the Buddha as a polytheist but rather as an ironic atheist.

The Buddha, like most Buddhists, accepts the existence of gods. For both the Buddha and most Buddhists, the cosmological and soteriological role of gods is irrelevant. They do not create the universe or sustain the cosmic order, and they cannot liberate beings from suffering. Yet, gods play an important role in the life of both the Buddha and Buddhists. However, Batchelor uses the label atheism in the case of the Buddha and polytheism in the case of most Buddhists. It is unclear why Batchelor consider Buddhists polytheists and the Buddha an ironic atheist despite of the fact that both share a common view of gods.

Although Batchelor criticizes Buddhism, he does not reject all religious aspects of Buddhism in order to spread the practice of the Buddha’s teachings. Batchelor acknowledges that we need Buddhist orthodoxies and institutions to preserve the teachings of different Buddhist traditions. The point, for Batchelor, is not to abandon all Buddhist institutions and dogmas, but rather to realize they are not timeless entities that have to be ruthlessly defended or forcibly imposed upon others.

Batchelor does not think that a nebulous and eclectic “spirituality” is a satisfactory solution for the twenty-first century. The solution that Batchelor proposes is what can be called “collage Buddhism.” That is, Batchelor compares his Buddhist practice to a collage that draws on the teachings and practices that best work for him as a layman in today’s world. In his words:

⁷² (D.I.244-5).

⁷³ Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, 181.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁷⁶ “Most Buddhists throughout Asia are and always have been polytheists. They believe in the existence of a range of spirits and gods whose worlds intersect with our own. These entities do not have a merely symbolic existence; they are real beings with consciousness, autonomy, and agency, who can grant favors if pleased and wreak havoc if offended...On formally becoming a Buddhist, one “take refuge” in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, thereby renouncing reliance on these beings. But spirits and gods are only downgraded, not abolished. They continue to play a role in one’s personal and social life” *Ibid.*, 197.

⁷⁷ “Siddhattha Gotama did not reject the existence of the gods, he marginalize them. He may have mocked their conceits but he acknowledged their presence. At times they even functioned as inspirational voices that prompted him to act.” *Ibid.* 198.

“To practice the Dhamma is like making a collage. You collect ideas, images, insights, philosophical styles, meditation methods, and ethical values that you find here and there in Buddhism, bind them securely together, then launch your raft into the river of your life. As long as it does not sink or disintegrate and can get you to the other shore, then it works. That is all that matters. It need not correspond to anyone else’s idea of what “Buddhism” is or should be.”⁷⁸

For Batchelor, the institutions and dogmas of Buddhism are necessary to preserve the Buddha’s teachings, but we should be dogmatic about what Buddhism is or should be. Buddhism can be many things and we can all create our own Buddhist collage as long as it works for us. The assumption underlying Batchelor’s concept of collage Buddhism is that a Buddhist teaching is true not because it corresponds to something that exists “out there,” but simply because it is useful.⁷⁹

Batchelor advocates a collage approach to Buddhism and distinguishes between what is intrinsic to the Buddha’s teachings and what is part of the religion called Buddhism. The Buddha’s teachings tend to be equated with Dhamma practice, whereas Buddhism has to do with the beliefs in karma, rebirth, gods, and liberation from *samsāra*. Batchelor also distinguishes between the ironic atheism of the Buddha and the polytheism of most Buddhists. Nirvana is not a transcendent, deathless, and unconditioned reality, but a mere psychological state that is not conditioned by greed, hatred and delusion. The Buddha’s awakening does not involve insight into higher truths or liberation from the cycle of life and death, it is just a new perspective in which this world is mindfully embraced in all its contingency, with all its joys and sufferings. There is nothing but this life and this world, and awakening is a simple existential adjustment to cope with the uncertainty and ambivalence of life.

Batchelor’s presentation of the Buddha and Buddhism is problematic. Here I limit myself to point out an inconsistency between his concept of truth and his ideas about the Buddha and Buddhism. Batchelor’s concept of truth seems to entail that “anything goes as long as it works.” This pragmatic concept of truth is at odds with the Buddha’s concept of truth as well as with Batchelor’s own critique of Buddhism. If traditional Buddhism “works” for many people, and if it helps to preserve the Buddha’s teachings, why then is it necessary Batchelor’s existentialist, secular, and atheist rendition of the Buddha? What are the normative grounds that justify Batchelor’s reconstruction of the Buddha if all Buddhist collages are fine insofar as they are useful? Is not it internally incoherent to propose a normative understanding of the Buddha and the Dharma, while at the same time claiming that every Buddhist raft that “works” is pragmatically true?

2. The Art of Teaching the Dhamma in the Bible Belt

In what follows I discuss the problems I have encountered while teaching atheist interpretations of the Buddha and Buddhism at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), a public institution in the heart of the Bible belt in which most students are Christians, many of them with a strong evangelical background. I draw on my own experience as a scholar-practitioner of Buddhism who teaches various courses related to World Religions including *Buddhism* and *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*.

The first problem I have encountered while teaching the ideas of new atheists at EKU is that their negative view of religions does not encourage students to learn about other religions. Instead of helping students to see for themselves whether all, none, most, or some aspects of religions are a source of ignorance and eventually violence, the

⁷⁸ Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, 229.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

negative view of religions presents all religious traditions and all aspects of religions as intellectually naïve and the main root of evil in the world.

Both Harris and Batchelor interpret the Buddha and Buddhism while presupposing a negative view of religions. All religions including Buddhism share a primitive and superstitious worldview that includes beliefs in supernatural powers and metaphysical realities. Similarly, for Harris and Batchelor religious fundamentalists are not that different from moderate and progressive religious people because they all accept irrational beliefs on insufficient evidence.

One of the goals of my courses about Buddhism and World Religions is to show that religions are intrinsically diverse. That is, I would like students to understand religions in non-essentialist terms as dynamic and historically conditioned realities that cannot be defined once and for all. Religions are fluid processes with multiple historical layers as well as many traditions and sub-traditions. Likewise, religious people are not monolithic. There are conservative, ultra-conservative, moderate, progressive, and ultra-progressive factions in all religions. I also challenge sectarian concepts of religions that use a particular historical period or just one tradition to define the nature of a religion.

Another goal of my courses is to help students to appreciate, and if possible respect, the elements of truth and goodness that may be found in other religions. I would like students to understand other religions in their own terms as much as possible, and to keep an open mind while listening to what people from other religions have to say about themselves.

By presenting religion and faith in general as sources of ignorance and violence, the new atheists discourage students from even paying attention to what people from other religions actually think and do. Instead of fostering appreciation and respect for the elements of truth and goodness that may be found across religions, the negative view of religion characteristic of atheists misleads students to believe that all religions and all religious people are alike. While this negative view of religions need not be conducive to violence, it does not help to facilitate mutual understanding and peace among religions either. Rather than dispelling misconceptions and clarifying misunderstandings, as good interreligious education is supposed to do, the negative view of religions reinforces secular stereotypes about the lack of intellectual sophistication among religious people. The religious other is reduced to a source of ignorance and violence, and the possibility of seeing religions as a source of wisdom and inspiration is rule out.

Many of my students have been taught that Christianity is superior to other religions, and that Jesus Christ is the only way to attain salvation. While my goal is not to challenge the claims of any religion, I do want students to think more critically about their beliefs and realize that most religions, not just Christians, make similar claims about the absolute truth and the unique superiority of their traditions. I also point out that the universal claims of superiority and absolute truth made by most religions tend to be a priori, that is, before experience or without having studied other religions.

Not all students are open to reconsider their beliefs about the inferiority of the religious other, but at least they understand that their claims are questionable insofar as they are not based on careful study of the data available. In this regard, I explain to my students, claiming that religions in general are a source of violence and ignorance is not that different from claiming that all non-Christian religions are inferior and soteriologically useless. Both the fundamentalist view of other religions and the new atheist view of religions presuppose a faith-based claim, not a comprehensive study of religions. Negative claims about religion are not based on an objective study of all aspects of religions, e.g., the positive role of religions as sources of wisdom and peace. Similarly,

supremacist and absolutist claims about Christianity are not based on an objective study of religions.

I encourage students to see for themselves and think whatever they want about other religions, but only after they have listened and studied their basic teachings and practices. At the end of all my courses, students realize how simplistic is to generalize about religions and view them as either good or evil, as sources of ignorance or wisdom. Students have learned that such generalizations about religions are a sign of ignorance. Students have studied the history of religions and realized that there are dark chapters in most religions and various kinds of religious followers. Not everything among the religions is good and a source of wisdom, but not everything is evil and a sign of ignorance.

The response of my students to the atheist view of religions is for the most part negative. Only a small group of students (10%) tend to agree with Harris and Batchelor in understanding religion and faith as intellectually naïve and as a source of intolerance. For the overwhelming majority of my students, religion and faith are a source of meaning, emotional comfort, and ethical conduct. That is, for the majority of my students (70-80%), being religious is not synonymous with being irrational and narrow-minded. Harris and Batchelor assume that science and reason are incompatible with religion and faith. However, for most of my students religion and faith need not be in contradiction with the findings of science.

It is true that for a minority of students (20-30%), the Bible is literally true and without errors of any kind. For this minority of students, creation took place as the book of genesis claims, and, therefore, evolution must be false. But even these students will not say that religion and faith in general are a source of violence and ignorance. For instance, students who interpret the creation stories and the Bible literally, accept religious diversity and freedom of religion as an inalienable right, and differentiate themselves from what they perceive as irrationality of suicide bombers who expect to be greeted in paradise by seventy-two virgins.

Although most of my students disagree with both the fundamentalist and the atheist view of religions, most of them share a common theistic concept of religion. That is, they all tend to define religion as a set of beliefs that requires faith in and worship of a supernatural power or powers that create and govern the universe. As the Oxford University Press online dictionary puts it, religion is “*the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.*”⁸⁰

During the first week of class, I explain that the theistic concept of religion is outdated and biased. Definitions of religion as involving creeds and reverence for God/s were prevalent in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. The definition applies mainly to Christianity and, to a lesser extent, to other monotheistic religions. The problem, however, is that not all religions are theistic, and not all monotheistic religions emphasize creeds as Christianity does. For instance, Buddhism and Taoism are not theistic religions, and neither Judaism nor Islam define their identity mainly in terms of beliefs in certain doctrines. Thus, I tell my students, in order to avoid taking sides in favor of Christianity and monotheistic religions, we need a broader concept of religion that can encompass Buddhism and Taoism.

Another point I make during the first week of class is that even a non-theistic concept of religion remain problematic because the term “religion” carries with it Christian and Western assumptions. For many scholars, the concept of religion is not culturally neutral. I mention recent debates about the concept of religion, and how some

⁸⁰ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/religion>. Accessed on October 11th, 2011.

contemporary scholars of religion goes as far as to claim that the term “religion” should not be imposed onto other cultures.

While I agree with much of the recent critiques of the concept of religion, I believe that the concept of religion can be refined and critically appropriated. If the term “religion” is not used to discriminate or to privilege any tradition, then it can be useful, at least to facilitate cross-cultural comparison and understanding. It is obvious to claim that Buddhism is not a religion in the theistic sense of the word, but it is also true that there are other concepts of religion that can be applied to Buddhism.

Although I prefer not to give students a definition of religion, I teach that religions usually contain theoretical and practical dimensions mediated by social institutions and “texts,” be they oral traditions or scriptures. Such beliefs and practices mediated by “texts” and social institutions help people to relate to, achieve or realize whatever they deem “most important.” I emphasize that religions have to do with the most important, and that whatever becomes the most important in your life, that has become your religion, be it wealth, work, God/s, the Dharma, salvation, liberation, happiness, holiness, the spiritual path, and so on.

The aforementioned concept of religion as that which relates to the most important does not favor any particular tradition, and it does not assume anything about the nature of the most important. This concept of religion only presupposes that something functions as the most important in people’s lives, and that people do and believe various things that function as means to better relate to, achieve, or realize that which they perceive as the most important.

Unlike the theistic definition of religion, the “most important” concept of religion can be applied to Buddhism. That is, unlike the theistic definition of religion, the concept of religion as that which relates to the most important does not exclude Buddhism from the field of World Religions, and it does not privilege Christianity as the only religion that fits nicely into the concept of religion.

Some students, very few, do not have a problem with the theistic definition of religion. For them, like for Harris and Batchelor, the solution is simple: Buddhism is not a religion. Rather, Buddhism, they claim, is a psychological philosophy or a way of life. In response, I explain that the non-religious interpretation of Buddhism originated in Europe during the nineteenth century, when our knowledge of living Buddhism was very limited and based primarily on textual sources in Sanskrit and Pāli. However, I say to them, today we know much more about the social role Buddhism perform in many countries. Even if Buddhism is different from other religions in its rational outlook and critical attitude towards God/s and the soul, it remains the case that, at least sociologically, Buddhism functions as any other religion. There are Buddhist rituals, monks, nuns, canonical texts, pilgrimages, temples, monasteries, and devotional attitudes towards the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha.

Harris and Batchelor are not the first ones to contend that Buddhism is not a religion. In fact, such view of Buddhism was used in the nineteenth century by both Christian missionaries and Buddhist apologists, albeit with two distinct agendas. Buddhist apologists were interested in contrasting the scientific nature of Buddhism with the superstitious and irrational nature of all the other religions, especially, Christianity. Christian missionaries, on the other hand, wanted to show that Buddhism was not worthy of the term religion, and therefore, that it should not be studied by the then emerging History of Religions.

It should be noticed that Harris and Batchelor have a different agenda. By claiming that Buddhism is not a religion, Harris and Batchelor do not seem to be interested in undermining Christianity and idealizing Buddhism. Rather, they seem to be

interested in secularizing Buddhism and depriving it of its rituals, monastic institutions, and devotional attitudes. In other words, both Harris and Batchelor share a rationalistic, philosophical understanding of Buddhism.

The interpretations developed by Sam Harris and Martin Batchelor are similar in that both present the Buddha as a philosopher whose main teachings have been neglected and transformed into the religion we called Buddhism. While the Buddha was a secular atheist primarily concerned with eradicating suffering in this world, most Buddhists are polytheists in practice, and mainly concerned with securing a happy existence after death.

Both Harris and Batchelor distinguish between the Buddha's teachings and Buddhism. Buddhism is presented as a religion that involves superstitious and ritualistic petitions to supernatural beings e.g., gods and spirits, as well as beliefs in metaphysical concepts such as karma, rebirth, and *samsāra*. In contrast, the Buddha's teachings are a rational system of ethics and meditation that does not require believing anything on insufficient evidence (Harris); the Buddha's teachings are not intended to establish a religion among others but rather a pragmatic and therapeutic way of life conducive to a new civilization or culture of awakening (Batchelor).

Yet another similarity is that Harris and Batchelor consider current Buddhism an obstacle. In the case of Harris, Buddhism hinders the development of a contemplative science, and for Batchelor a civilization of awakening. Batchelor's position is more moderate than Harris's, who goes as far as to suggest that students of the Buddha should "kill" Buddhism. Batchelor only advocates a secular and individualized form of Buddhism, i.e., collage Buddhism, which is in principle compatible with the existence of traditional Buddhist orthodoxies and institutions.

After clarifying that the agenda behind Harris and Batchelor is substantially different from the agenda of nineteenth century Buddhist apologists and Christian missionaries, I ask students to think about who benefits from saying that Buddhism is not a religion. What is gained by presenting Buddhism as a secular philosophy or way of life? What does such interpretation do to living Buddhist traditions?

I get a variety of answers. Some students reply that Buddhism needs to adapt to present needs, and that losing its religious baggage is the price to pay in order to make Buddhism more palatable to Westerners. Other students are afraid that such presentations will transform Buddhism into a commodity, another object of consumption for spiritual seekers unsatisfied with organized religions. Yet other students agree with Harris in believing that Buddhism need to disappear so that the true practice of the Dharma can flourish in Western countries.

Most students, however, agree in that presenting Buddhism as a mere secular and psychological philosophy or way of life does not do justice to the social reality of Buddhism. Affirming that Buddhism is just a philosophy or a way of life is quite simplistic. All religions presuppose philosophical claims, and most religions contain several schools of thought. Even if Buddhism were reducible to just a philosophy, it would be necessary to clarify what kind of philosophy it is. Is such a philosophy the same thing as the Abhidharma of the Theravāda or the Sarvāstivāda schools? Or is it what Nāgārjuna and other Buddhist thinkers taught? Similarly, all religions can accommodate various ways of life. Saying that Buddhism is a way of life does not specify which one among the many possible ways of life compatible with Buddhism is the one that all Buddhists must observe. Is it the monastic way of life the ideal or rather the lay person way of life? Is the Buddhist way of life compatible with living within globalized pluralistic societies or is the Buddhist way of life only possible by residing in remote monasteries in the jungle and mountains?

Besides being simplistic and doing injustice to the complex reality of living Buddhist traditions, defining Buddhism as a psychological philosophy or way of life endangers Buddhist identity. Most of my students understand that Buddhism emphasizes meditation and psychological ethics. However, they do not think that beliefs in gods, spirits, and the supernatural acts of bodhisattvas can be extricated from Buddhism without affecting its traditional identity. Similarly, my students find hard to envision a form of Buddhism that does not believe in karma, rebirth, and saṃsāra.

Yet Harris and Batchelor would like to purge the Buddha's teachings from the aforementioned beliefs, which for them are irrational in the sense of being based on insufficient evidence. For them, accepting the existence of superhuman agents such as gods and spirits, and believing in metaphysical concepts such karma, rebirth, and saṃsāra is characteristic of religions. Similarly, for Harris and Batchelor, performing rituals that express devotion to Buddhas and his disciples, i.e., monks, as well as requesting favors from the Buddha and celestial bodhisattvas is part of Buddhism, not an intrinsic part of the Buddha's teachings.

While I do not deny that the Buddha's core teachings can be practiced without having to believe anything on insufficient evidence, I fail to see how someone can practice the Buddhist path without believing in karma and rebirth. Yet, I teach my students, karma and rebirth need not be understood as metaphysical concepts. Everybody can experience that evil actions tend to lead to evil consequences, and that good actions usually lead to positive results. The concept of karma, I teach, does not presuppose a mysterious metaphysical quality of actions, it only describes what most people experience when performing certain actions. Similarly, the concept of rebirth need not be understood as a metaphysical belief that can never be proved or disproved. In fact, I tell my students, there is substantial empirical evidence that seems to support the belief in rebirth. Such evidence has been scientifically investigated by the late professor Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia.

Thus, I find academically questionable to claim as Batchelor does that the beliefs in karma and rebirth are not an intrinsic part of the Buddha's teaching. I also find academically questionable to suggest, as both Harris and Batchelor do, that all religious beliefs including karma and rebirth are irrational. While it may be true that many religious beliefs are irrational and based on faith, this is not necessarily so, especially in the case of the Buddha and Buddhism. Needless to say, my point is not that all Buddhist teachings are rational and scientific while the teachings of other religions are not. Rather, my point is that we cannot generalize and contend that any religious belief whatsoever must be metaphysical, irrational and based on faith as Harris and Batchelor seem to assume. There are many religions and many types of religious beliefs. Likewise, there are other kinds of faith besides irrational faith, and not all expressions of religious faith are irrational and incompatible with science.

Regarding the atheist interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism, after living in the Bible belt for five years, I have realized there is an urgent need to clarify what the Buddha of the *Pāli Nikāyas* says about the question of God. Can we apply the concept of God to Buddhism? Did the Buddha believe in God? What concepts of God were rejected by the Buddha? Can we consider the concepts of Dhamma and Nibbāna as analogues to the concept of God, as functionally equivalent, or as having nothing to do with such concept even with non-theistic understandings of God?

My experience teaching Buddhism in the Bible belt is that using the terms "atheism" and "non-theism" is misleading and counterproductive for a variety of reasons. The categories "non-theism" and "atheism" are unhelpful to understand Buddhism in his own terms. In order to illustrate this point, I ask students to tell me what their favorite

sport is. Some say basketball, others football, others baseball. Then I explain that I am originally from Spain and that I love soccer, which for me, I exaggerate a little bit here, is the greatest and most powerful sport on earth. In my worldview, I continue exaggerating, people can be divided into two categories: those who love soccer and those who do not. Therefore, I label “non-soccer fans” all those who do not consider soccer the greatest and most powerful sport on earth.

I ask students whether they are comfortable being labeled “non-soccer” fans despite of the fact that for them soccer is not the greatest and most powerful sport on earth. They agree that such characterization is problematic because it defines them, not in their own terms but rather in terms of soccer. Well, I say, that is precisely what happens when we define Buddhism as a non-theistic religion. Instead of understanding Buddhism in its own terms, we understand it in terms of theism.

What is wrong with defining Buddhism in terms of theism as “a non-theistic religion”? Exactly the same thing as describing basketball, football, baseball fans in terms of soccer as “non-soccer fans.” We fail to understand Buddhism and other sports in their own terms. We understand Buddhism from the perspective of theistic religions, and fans of other sports from the perspective of “soccer fans.”

Besides failing to understanding Buddhism in its own terms, using the terms “non-theism” or “atheism” gives the false impression that for Buddhists the question of God is a primary concern. In fact, the question of God, at least in the Pāli Nikāyas, is open to several interpretations, and only remotely related to the central question of suffering and its cessation. It is true that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. However, it is not true that what defines Buddhism is its lack of interest in the theistic concept of God. Buddhism is not about affirming or denying the existence of God in the theistic sense. Rather as the *Dhammapada* states, the teachings of Buddhas is about avoiding what is evil, doing what is good and cultivating the mind (Dhp, 183).

The primary concern of the Buddha is not the problem of God but rather the problem of suffering. Describing the Buddha’s teachings as “non-theistic” misses the point of the Dhamma, which, as the simile of the rafts indicates, is to cross over from the shore of suffering to the other shore of ultimate happiness (MN.I.134-5). That is, the truth of the Dhamma has to do with the specific conditionality and the dependent origination of suffering (MN.I.167). The Buddha himself claims in (MN.I.140) that “Bhikkhus, both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering” (*Pubbe cāhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañceva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*).

Thus, describing Buddhism and the Buddha’s teachings as “non-theistic” loses the pragmatic and therapeutic focus of the Dhamma. The non-theistic interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism unavoidably shift the emphasis from the urgent and immediate question of suffering to the speculative and metaphysical question of God.

The problem worsens with the atheist interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism. In order to illustrate this point, I continue with the comparison of Buddhism and soccer. Once my students realize that the labels we use to describe religions matter, and once they see why the concept of “non-theism” should not be applied to Buddhism, I ask them to think about the term “atheism.”

Well, I say, you refuse to be described as “non-soccer fans” because soccer is not that important to you, and you believe that you deserve to be defined, not in terms of soccer but rather in terms of what really matters to you, whether basketball, football, or baseball. Now, let us pretend that my way of thinking about sports is binary: people are either in favor or against soccer, either they love it or hate it. It does not matter that you do not care much about soccer, and that your position is neither against nor in favor of soccer. For me, hypothetically speaking, if you do not love soccer, and if you refuse to be

labeled “non-soccer fans,” I cannot but conclude that you dislike soccer. Since you do not care about soccer, and since you do not want to be considered “non-soccer fans,” you must hate soccer because for me there are no other options between loving and hating soccer, between being in favor or against soccer. Therefore, for me, you may be “non-soccer fans” in theory but in actual practice you are “anti-soccer” because you do not support soccer.

Students acknowledge right away that there is something wrong with my binary way of thinking and the mutually exclusive categories it presupposes. It is just bad thinking, it is not accurate to describe them as “anti-soccer” simply because they object to being called “non-soccer fans.” All of my students agree that it does not make sense to argue in that way. From not caring much about soccer, and from refusing to be labeled “non-soccer fans,” it does not follow that they are against soccer.

I extrapolate the aforementioned way of thinking about soccer to the question of God and Buddhism. Similarly, if Buddhists do not like to be defined as non-theistic, and if they do not care much about the theistic concept of God, then they must be atheists. Again I explain, this hypothetical way of thinking is defective because from not considering the theistic concept of God the most important, it does not follow that Buddhists are atheists.

Then, I clarify that such binary way of thinking is not uncommon among fundamentalists. For instance, for many Christians in the Bible belt there are only two options: theism and non-theism, believers and unbelievers, black or white, yes or no. Either people believe in God or they do not, either they believe in Jesus as the only begotten son of God or they do not. Many of them even quote the Bible to support their binary way of thinking: “He who is not with me is against me” (Mathew 12:30). Therefore, for Christians with a binary way of thinking, if Buddhism does not consider the theistic concept of God the greatest and most powerful reality in the universe, then, they conclude, Buddhism must be against God, and it is nothing but a more subtle form of atheism.

The atheist interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism contributes to this misrepresentation of the Buddhist position. It is true that Harris and Batchelor distinguish between Western atheism, which is more militant, and Buddhist atheism. This distinction, however, is not likely to be understood by those who apply a binary way of thinking to religions and the question of God. Since there are many people in the Bible belt who think in binary terms about religions and God, speaking about the Buddha and Buddhism in terms of atheism is not only misleading but also counterproductive.

In the United States, especially in the Bible belt, the concept of atheism is loaded with negative connotations. For many of my students, being an atheist amounts to being immoral and without a purpose in life. The assumption is that only God can provide a solid foundation for ethical conduct. Therefore, if Buddhism is portrayed a religion without God or as atheist in some way, many students automatically lose interest in studying whatever the Buddha or Buddhists have to say. These students, a minority to be fair, conclude beforehand that Buddhism and the Buddha are not worthy it of study because for them nothing good can come out of atheism or any atheist tradition. That is, the atheist interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism discourages many Christians from studying the Dhamma seriously and with an open mind.

Yet another negative consequence of defining the Buddha and Buddhism in terms of “non-theism” or “atheism” is that it drags Buddhists into the cultural wars currently being fought across the USA between fundamentalist Christians and atheists. Fundamentalists Christians interpret the Bible literally, and see themselves as being under attack by what they perceive as the prevalent secular and liberal culture. On the opposite

camp, there are those who perceive science and reason under attack. Those who oppose Christian attempts to teach intelligent design alongside the theory of evolution are not necessarily atheists. However, fundamentalists do not distinguish between atheists who interpret religion as irrational and dangerous, and other more moderate positions that just would like the separation between church and state or between science and religion to be respected. Presenting the Buddha and Buddhism in atheist terms antagonizes Christian fundamentalists and leads many people to believe that Buddhists, like atheists, are against God, religion, and faith, which is not necessarily the case.

The confrontational attitudes behind religious fundamentalists and new atheists have little, if anything to do with the Buddha's teachings. Science and religion need not be enemies. Religious people need not be ignorant and violent. Likewise, scientists and rational people need not be atheists and against religion. Yet, if someone listens to the new atheists, one cannot help but to think that religion is irrational, and that science demonstrates the truth of atheism.

Would the Buddha take part in the cultural wars between theism and atheism, science and religion, reason and faith? Would the Buddha try to clarify the meaning of each term, and show that there is a middle way between binary ways of thinking? Would the Buddha avoid the two extremes of the debate and focus on the problem of suffering? While we cannot say for sure what the Buddha would do if he had to teach the Dhamma in the Bible belt, I think it is safe to guess that he would not like to be involved in heated and endless disputes conducive to anger, frustration, and other negative mental states.

In order to avoid all the negative consequences of presenting the Buddha and Buddhism as "non-theistic" and "atheistic," I encourage students to realize that current debates between theists and atheists are foreign to most Buddhist texts. I also invite students to overcome binary ways of thinking about God and religion. The dilemma either theism or atheism is a false dilemma because it does not exhaust all possible ways of thinking about God. In other words, I teach students that the concept of God is broader than the theistic understanding of God.

Another important point I try to underscore while teaching the Dhamma in the Bible belt is that the core teachings of the Buddha and Buddhism need not be in contradiction with either theism or atheism. That is, Buddhism does not fit neatly into either side of the debate between fundamentalist Christians and atheists. I do not go as far as to teach that Buddhists believe in a non-theistic concept of God, but I do point out that the concepts of Dhamma and Nibbāna may contribute to a better and deeper understanding of what the concept of God may signify.

Unlike the atheist interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism, I try to teach the Dhamma in the Bible belt without taking sides either in favor or against theism. This "middle way" approach has the advantage of not antagonizing anybody, be they Christians, secular atheists or agnostics. This "middle way" approach facilitates the study of the Dhamma from different ideological standpoints.

Another advantage of this "middle way" approach to teaching the Dhamma is that the Buddha and Buddhists are not unnecessarily dragged into cultural wars foreign to them. By avoiding the dilemma either theism or non-theism/atheism, students are able to understand better the pragmatic and non-confrontational attitude of the Buddha and most Buddhist. That is, setting aside the debate theism versus atheism helps students to understand the main concern of Buddha and Buddhism, which is not the affirmation or denial of God/s, but rather the mind and the suffering generated by unwholesome mental states.

In conclusion, although the atheist understanding of the Buddha and Buddhism is psychologically sophisticated and probably appealing to secular humanists suspicious of

“religion” and convinced that science provides the only valid means of knowledge, it is highly misleading and counterproductive to teach the Dhamma in predominantly Christian lands.