

**Batchelor, Stephen. *Secular Buddhism: Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.**

*Reviewed by Katie Javanaud*

The credibility of this book hangs on a single question: stripped of three of its core concepts, *nirvāṇa*, karma and rebirth, can Buddhism survive?

For those disillusioned with institutionalised religion, Batchelor's call to reconfigure the dharma for a secular age may inspire hope for a morally enlightened future that is freed from dogma. Others will see his proposed reconfiguration as too radical. Even if they share his commitment to promoting human flourishing, many will feel uncomfortable with describing the resultant reconfiguration as a form of Buddhism. As a former Buddhist monk, the reticence Batchelor shows towards breaking with the tradition is understandable. However, he fails to explain why other Westerners (who meditate but who are unconvinced by the theories of karma and rebirth) might self-identify as Buddhist. He anticipates the most serious objection to his thesis: to deny the validity of Buddhism's soteriological goal is to risk undermining the "entire edifice of Buddhism itself" (p.79). In response he argues that it is crucial to disentangle those aspects of the dharma which speak to universal human concerns from those which address problems particular to fifth century BCE India. If the contemporary Western outlook cannot accommodate the theories of karma and rebirth, could the secularization of Buddhism ensure the value of traditional meditative *practices* in our world today? For the past forty years, Batchelor has grappled with the task of applying ancient Buddhist insights to the problems of the present. This preoccupation has led to his advocacy of what he now describes as a "fully-fledged" form of secular Buddhism (p.ix).

Batchelor's objectives, methodology and conclusions have often sparked controversy and at times he has experienced the "backlash" of his provocative assertions (p.154). Nevertheless, while those who agree with his unorthodox

position may be in the minority, his ideas are worth taking seriously. There seems to be a growing interest in the possibility of non-religious spirituality – as the popularity of such books as *Religion for Atheists* (by Alain de Botton), *Taking Leave of God* (by Don Cupitt) and, now, *Secular Buddhism* attests. Batchelor is one of the few contemporary writers addressing the uneasy relationship between Buddhist and Western thought head on. Even those who fundamentally disagree with him cannot but appreciate the fearlessness with which he advances his radical arguments. In short, he succeeds in eliciting a response even from those whom he fails to convince. At the very least, his argument suggests that the role Buddhism can play in an increasingly secular world needs to be re-examined.

Structurally, the book feels a little disjointed. There is some repetition, with ideas overlapping across chapters, and some loose ends; but, whatever the weaknesses of such a structure, one senses that this is deliberate. In the final part of the book Batchelor explores the symbiotic relationship between his written work and his artistic output. Since the mid-90's he has been creating collages from discarded objects and, gradually, these have come to represent for him a “silent counterpoint” to his written work (p.252). For him, meditation and artistic creativity are mutually supportive practices. In a concluding remark, he toys with the idea of integrating the two dimensions of his work but concludes that that task is for another day. However, there is a sense in which *Secular Buddhism* is itself a collage. Only the introductory and concluding essays, as well as his interview with Peter Maddock, are published here for the first time. In organizing pre-existing materials in the way he does, Batchelor deploys the structure of his book to convey an important point: whatever we make of *Secular Buddhism*, it is but a “work-in-progress” (p.4). The task of articulating secular Buddhism remains incomplete and so the reader is invited to participate in the on-going discussion.

“Conversation” is a central theme throughout the book. Batchelor sees his expression of secular Buddhism as the product of “conversations” he has had with thinkers within and beyond the Buddhist tradition. He attributes the successful spread of Buddhism over the last 2,500 years to the fact that Buddhists have been remarkably willing to engage with, rather than dismiss out of hand or dogmatically suppress, alternative worldviews. From this perspective, he argues, secularization is the natural next step for Buddhism as it encounters the scientifically attuned modern West. If Buddhism is to avoid becoming “ghettoized” (p.192) or “remaining a marginal interest” (p.143), then, he argues, conversations on the dharma can no longer be confined to universities and

monasteries. Not only must practitioners of Buddhism be invited to explore how they understand the relevance of Buddhism today, but the idea of the saṅgha as essentially monastic needs to be rethought altogether. The reader is encouraged to abandon the “dinosaur mentality” of the religiously conservative and to embrace and celebrate the adaptability of Buddhism (p.130). For Batchelor, the West’s inability to accept the classical Buddhist worldview as literally true does not mean that nothing of value can be salvaged for our times. He implores us to focus more on the practical insights and less on the abstruse metaphysics and cosmology of classical Buddhism.

In the introduction, “In Search of a Voice”, Batchelor identifies four figures who have profoundly influenced the development of his ideas: Śāntideva, Augustine, Gotama and Feuerbach. The cultural/ historical situation and the spiritual/ political objectives of these four figures could hardly be more different, yet each has been an invaluable interlocutor. His assessment of the relationship between the mythic and historical dimensions of the Buddhist narrative has been shaped by the respective attitudes of these four figures towards matters of historicity. When properly appreciated, both myth and history can conduce to human fulfilment. However, given the West’s “heightened sense of historical consciousness”, the time has come to return to the message of the historical Buddha (p.16). Essentially, this is a message of hope in the face of the psychologically afflictive states – greed, hatred and delusion – by which sentient beings are bound. This message Batchelor considers “truly original” in so far as it delivers a secular outlook (p.162).

In describing the Buddha’s teachings as secular, Batchelor exposes himself to accusations of anachronism and cherry picking. His insistence that we disentangle the culturally specific from the universally applicable parts of the Buddha’s teaching will not resolve matters here: the Buddha’s belief in supernatural beings and his commitment to the operation of the karmic law according to which beings are reborn in accordance with their actions are not on a par. While it might be possible to strip Buddhism of the supernatural, to strip it of karma is to leave a gaping hole in the principle of conditionality and to risk undermining the very foundation of Buddhist ethics. Batchelor’s willingness to “bracket off” (p.161) anything attributed to the Buddha which could just as easily have been said by a Brahmin priest or Jain monk will not work in the case of karma: for while belief in karma is almost a pan-Indian phenomenon, each tradition nuances its account of karmic operations in accordance with other factors of its worldview – not least its position on the reality or otherwise of an

inherently existent substantial self. There is already a large body of literature dedicated precisely to establishing that, far from being merely inherited from Brahmanism, the Buddha's karmic theory was original.

The main thesis of the book is that Buddhist thought and practice remain coherent and purposeful even when divested of nirvāṇa, karma and rebirth. In part two, entitled "Buddhism 2.0", he presents his case for radically reconfiguring Buddhism so as to achieve a "gestalt switch" in the prioritization of metaphysical and practical concerns (p.96). For Batchelor, this amounts to reconceiving the *four noble truths* in terms of the *four tasks*. Batchelor recommends, then, that secular Buddhists should cease thinking of the first noble truth, "existence is suffering", and instead should take up the task of "embracing" their suffering. He summarizes the *four tasks* as follows: Embrace, Let go, Stop, Act. He sees the shift of emphasis from *truth* to *task* as so momentous that it heralds the collapse of traditional Buddhism ("Buddhism 1.0") and the birth of secular Buddhism ("Buddhism 2.0"). However, the idea that the four noble truths are to be acted upon has a long precedent in classical Buddhism so it is unclear why Batchelor sees his idea as something completely new. As the Buddha himself emphasizes in the First Sermon, *recognizing* the truth is not enough: it must also be *realized*. This means that mere cognitive assent is insufficient to bring about moral and spiritual transformation in a person: the truth must also be *internalized* so that one comes to live in accordance with it.

Moreover, contrary to Batchelor's claim, Buddhists have not traditionally drawn a dividing line between believers and non-believers on the basis of assent to or rejection of the four noble truths. Of the many differences between the monotheistic traditions of the West and Buddhism, perhaps the most noticeable is that whereas the former place great emphasis on confession of faith, the latter has always been more concerned with practice. In any case, unlike the so-called "revealed truths" of the Abrahamic faiths, the four noble truths are supposed to be empirically verifiable. It is therefore not so much a question of *assenting* to the truth claims as *testing out* the propositions.

In part three, "Thinking Out Loud", Batchelor develops his case for the secularization of Buddhism and, with appeals to the *Cūḷa Māluṅkya Sutta*, calls for the resurrection of Buddhist agnosticism. Meanwhile, he heavily criticizes those who have used their positions as spiritually revered masters as tools for oppression. In part four, "Conversations", he writes: "claiming to have insight into an ultimate metaphysical truth is how representatives of a given orthodoxy maintain their authority over the unenlightened... You can't separate metaphysics

from issues of control and power.” (p.202) Batchelor offers *Secular Buddhism*, in part, as a protest against hierarchical structures and institutionalised religion: it is clear that he regards the secularization of Buddhism as important to the progress of civil, as well as spiritual, liberty.

While the “dogmatic ossification” and abuses of power referred to may be deplorable, it is uncertain that a return to Buddhism’s agnostic roots will be sufficient to solve these problems, which, after all, are regrettably universal (p.225). Again, whilst a “democracy of the imagination” (according to which practitioners create, rather than merely passively receive, spiritual truths) might sound appealing, we have to ask ourselves whether our present theory of truth can accommodate such a transition and, if it cannot, whether we are willing to revise it (p.227). The philosophical implications of embracing secular Buddhism may, therefore, turn out to be too costly. Is ‘truth’ the correspondence between mind-independent reality and propositions or is it something merely invented? Finally, that Batchelor has drawn the right conclusion from the *Cūḷa Māluṅkya Sutta* is something only those persuaded of the legitimacy of secular Buddhism will concede. Insofar as he reads the text as subordinating metaphysical concerns to the task of eradicating suffering, there is nothing new or controversial in his analysis. However, the Buddha’s refusal to comment on such matters as the eternity or otherwise of the world is to be *contrasted* with his unambiguous affirmation that beings are reborn in accordance with their karma. Unlike those posed by Māluṅkyaputta, questions pertaining to nirvāṇa, karma and rebirth are soteriologically relevant: without the karmic mechanism moral and spiritual transformation is impossible, regardless of the eternity of the world.

The adoption of an agnostic stance towards karma and rebirth is reasonable given the absence of definitive evidence either way. Why exactly Batchelor regards his agnosticism as unusual is hard to say: as the *Tevijja Sutta* points out, only those who have attained enlightenment for themselves can be said to have *knowledge* of karmic operations. Hence, regarding karma, the main difference between conservative and secular Buddhists is that for the former the theories of karma and rebirth are morally motivational, whereas for the latter they are not. Batchelor offers a sound reply to those who worry that without karma Buddhists will become moral nihilists: “One of the most lasting and powerful realizations of the [European] Enlightenment was that an atheistic materialist could be just as moral a person as a believer, and maybe even more so.” (p.118)

While Batchelor may experience no loss of spiritual motivation by replacing the goal of nirvāṇa with the aim of achieving “moment-to-moment flourishing

of human life...here on earth,” it is reasonable to suspect that others might (p.150). In the face of the harsh reality of many people’s lives – poverty, disease, political oppression and personal abuses – Batchelor fails to explain why meditation should necessarily be a preferable option to suicide. To accept the first noble truth/ task but not to accept the possibility of final emancipation (nirvāṇa) seems overwhelmingly pessimistic. If suffering is pervasive, if the chances of alleviating one’s suffering are slim, and if there is no life after death in which one would reap the consequences of one’s actions, why not commit suicide? The main defect of this book, then, is Batchelor’s failure to address the question of how secular Buddhism makes sense of suicide and death. However, this question casts a shadow over much of the work and the theme of death recurs throughout. From part one onwards, in which the suicide of the renowned monk and Pāli scholar Ñāṇavīra is recounted, the reader is left wondering how to contextualize the human flourishing Batchelor mentions alongside such horror. Although he does not settle on any one interpretation of Ñāṇavīra’s suicide, at one point he speculates that it might be regarded as an act of “enlightened euthanasia” (p.59). Similarly, in part five Batchelor struggles to make sense of the mysterious deaths of his acquaintances Gert Bastian and Petra Kelly. For Batchelor to persuade his reader that the practice of secular Buddhism is both more *rational* and psychologically *preferable* to suicide, a more detailed and robust account of his conception of the goal of that practice is required. This is not to say that the dawn of secular Buddhism would see an increase in suicidal acts, only that there is no *reason* why it should not.

*Secular Buddhism* is a thought-provoking and interesting book. It makes an original contribution to the emerging literature on the intersection between traditional and secular values as articulated by new religious movements. Readers must decide for themselves whether they can accept the central argument; I, for my part, cannot. There are too many reasons for scepticism about the prospects of articulating a philosophically coherent as well as psychologically satisfying version of secular Buddhism. Despite this, Batchelor’s work is to be recommended in so far as it encourages reflection on problematic issues which are too often glossed over by the mainstream Buddhist academic community. To find his answers unsatisfactory is not at all the same thing as to find the questions illegitimate.