



Post-religional perspective and secular Buddhism: Stephen Batchelor and the post-metaphysical religion

Perspectiva pós-religional e Budismo secular:
Stephen Batchelor e a religião pós-metafísica

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Abstract

This paper aims to present one of the contemporary trends on Buddhism, specially from the last decades in West, for its encounter with the globalized and dynamic context of present societies. This Buddhist trend, the progressive secularization of its traditions and practices, not to mention its increasing acceptance of historical-textual refutation, finds in Stephen Batchelor - a former monk in two different Buddhist traditions, Tibetan and Korean Zen - a catalyzer and a well-known advocate of secular perspective to the contemporary Buddhism. Here we will present the potential dialogue between the Secular Buddhism - besides the secularizing perspectives over orthodox cultural traditions - and the post-religional subject, as proposed by Marià Corbí and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the modernizing and secular hermeneutics on Dharma practice, as defended by Stephen Batchelor and others.

Keywords: contemporary buddhism; secular buddhism; secularization; dharma; religious practice.

Resumo

Este texto pretende apresentar uma das tendências contemporâneas que o budismo vem assumindo ao longo das últimas décadas, sobretudo no Ocidente, em face às mudanças trazidas a cabo pelo contexto globalizado e dinâmico das sociedades atuais. Tal tendência, a progressiva secularização de suas tradições e práticas, bem como a abertura à crítica e à refutação histórico-bibliográfica, ganha aqui seu catalisador na pessoa de Stephen Batchelor, renomado estudioso budista, ex-monge em diferentes ordens tradicionais – nomeadamente a tibetana e o zen da Coreia - e um dos mais destacados defensores da perspectiva secular do budismo contemporâneo. Buscaremos, ao longo desta comunicação, indicar o diálogo potencial que o budismo secular - e as perspectivas secularizantes sobre as tradições culturais ortodoxas – apresenta com relação à temática pós-religional, como enunciada pela Associação Ecumênica de Teólogos do Terceiro Mundo e por Marià Corbí. Recorreremos, para tal, a referências hermenêuticas modernizadoras e seculares da prática do Dharma, como advogada por Batchelor, entre outros.

Palavras-chave: budismo contemporâneo; budismo secular; secularização; Dharma; prática religiosa;

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In regards to common sense about religions, we usually take faith and religious practices as their core definition. To this extent, one is religious—no matter his affiliation—when, once belonging to a collective and/or exposed to a series of cultural influences and structured traditions, professes the same beliefs as his peers.

However, as Marià Corbí claims when analyzing contemporary conditions of industrial societies,

The new [post-religional] paradigm cannot be dependent on any system of beliefs, neither religious, nor lay. We could say it is a non-believing paradigm. Societies that live by continually changing the interpretation of reality due to the transformation of our scientific knowledge, in all areas of human life, that live under a permanent technological creation that change continuously our way of living, of working, of organization and, therefore, our systems of cohesion and of objectives cannot be believers because beliefs are fixed, and new societies survive by changing all their patterns of life. (CORBÍ, 2012, p. 252).

Like many other authors linked to the discussion of theology in face of contemporary societies (cf. EATWOT, 2012), Marià Corbí means by *post-religional paradigm* a new axiological condition we currently face in our globalized world of fast communication, a world in which everyday life—both concrete and pragmatic—gets more related to a profound human quality “which is the cultivation of the absolute and free dimension of reality” (CORBÍ, 2012, p. 253).

What we consider post-religional is not different from a human understanding about ultimate human existence, that is to say, a symbolical and hermeneutical understanding that is embraced by all sociocultural realities of its time. Therefore, it refers to religions and religious thought. Yet, as ultimate, it embraces terms such as *faith* and *beliefs*, not to mention ideas related to transcendence.

Besides all religious historic of creed, the aforementioned quote emphasizes that contemporaneity—“that lives by continually changing the interpretation of reality due to the transformation of our scientific knowledge”—guides religious

experience based on profound human quality to a new sociocultural landscape. To be taken as religious, professing static shared faith and beliefs of a particular group is simply not enough, even considering that, according to pressures of social realities, no faith and belief are indeed static. In fact, for one to be taken as religious, it is necessary to boost the profound human quality when it is confronted with typical challenges and changes of our changeable time – even its core assumptions, as it works with scientific and technological procedures.

The tradition we refer to in this paper—and based on some considerations about Stephen Batchelor's thought—is the one in the West that has been named *Buddhism* for some centuries. One of its core characteristics, in almost all cultural traditions developed after Buddhadharma – different Buddhist schools, in other words –, is the recognition of *impermanence*. That is to say, the constant and total mutability of all conditions and phenomena. Taking that into account, we are also led to consider the impermanence—even the fragility—of beliefs and orthodox systems of thought. Batchelor, in accordance to the trend named *Secular Buddhism* especially in United States¹ presents some reflections that can, at first, elucidate points of convergence between Dharma traditions and contemporary societies and, secondly, offer possibilities to problematize those same traditions.

We shall keep using Corbí's terminology a little further since we have used his ideas on *post-religional paradigm*. Corbí claims “The new paradigm should allow us to inherit all the wisdom of religions and spiritual traditions of our ancestors in all humanity, without incurring in our becoming believers, religious and compliant” (2012, p. 254). In other words, the heritage of all wisdom and developments, inheriting all the wisdom and reflexive, philosophical, pragmatic and doctrinal developments from Buddhist traditions—especially from East Asia—without submitting oneself to cultural models and exotic ways of life, either for authoritarian or hierarchical reasons. To conform itself to contemporary world,

¹ In U.S. context, one could mention *Secular Buddhist Association*, a network with continuous debates on questions aligned to ours. Its interview project, shaped as a *podcast*, is one of the most consolidated in contemporary Buddhism scene. Batchelor himself did participated as a guest in its episodes. Association's motto states its intention: “A natural, pragmatic approach to early Buddhist teachings and practice”, cf. <http://secularbuddhism.org/>

Secular Buddhism, instead of seeking the *compliant* to any traditional teachings from Eastern Buddhism, it focus on its *practice* and *understanding* through lay approaches, Western and even agnostic understandings about beliefs on subjects like *karma*, rebirth, metaphysical realms of existence, etc. All of them unquestionably cultural.

We can now turn to some of Batchelor's considerations related to contemporary Western practices of Buddhist traditions presented in his autobiography *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (BATCHELOR, 2011). He depicts his trajectory as a former Tibetan monk up to his experience as a Korean Zen monk during the 1970s and 1980s. This monastic transcultural peregrination—anthropological in its broad sense—resulted in an openness to the conditions of Buddhism in the current world, especially in our industrial and technological societies usually guided by lay paradigms built upon public debate and confrontation of ideas.

Aiming at the same critical potential that exists both in Secular Buddhism and in the post-religious proposal made by EATWOT's (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), Batchelor highlights a fundamental feature placed at the core of Buddhist traditions. As the author states:

“Just as goldsmith assays gold, by rubbing, cutting, and burning,” says an oft-cited passage attributed to the Buddha, “so should you examine my words. Do not accept them just out of faith in me.” This openness to critical inquiry struck me then, as it does now, as central to the entire Buddhist endeavor. Moreover, since such inquiry was seen, together with meditation and ethics, as part of the path to awakening, it ceased to be an academic exercise in logic chopping. I found this approach highly appealing. Buddhism, it seemed, was a rational religion, whose truth-claims could withstand the test of reason. (BATCHELOR, 2011, p. 33)

This “openness to critical inquiry,” to questioning and to the proposition of doubt concerning previous statements, is what makes Buddhism finds fertile

ground amidst both the public and scientific debate. We could go along with Batchelor himself and restate that this criticality is not—and does not even intend to be—some “true Buddha's teaching” or his ultimate and undisputable doctrine. Knowing and recognizing the fact that each period and culture establishes its own relations with Buddhist doctrine and pragmatic means and religious practices, the author clarifies that such secular posture only responds to a localized sociocultural urgency. He does not propose a *Buddhist truth*, but a possibility to understand and practice the Dharma in accordance to contemporary mind, one defined as inquisitive and secular. In this sense, such “doctrinal intelligibility” could be compared to that which is, in Buddhism, broadly named as *upaya*.

This notion, “commonly rendered into English by translations such as 'expediency,' 'skillful means' and 'adapted teachings'” (MATSUNAGA, 1974, p. 51), refers precisely to this plasticity sought by Secular Buddhists in regards to Dharma lay and modern modulations. Therefore, it is possible to consider the adaptability of Buddhism to secular contemporary standards. The broad historic of *upayas*, i.e. skillful means, can demonstrate through Buddhist history its dialogue and integration with cultures and societies where it arrives. To conform itself to new contexts *upaya* makes use – through historical process always continuous and complex - of previous existent cultural substrates. As an example, we can think about Chinese Buddhism in dialogue with native Daoism and Confucianism in China, which is contrasting to the adaptations that take place in Tibet when Buddhism meets Bon tradition, an indigenous shamanistic system of beliefs and practices.

The simple use of *secular*, a term not emphasized within the theological post-religious propose, demonstrates the way of thought Batchelor articulates at the beginning of his paper *A Secular Buddhism* (2012). He starts with a triple consideration: 1) *secular* as opposed to *religious*, in the very sense given to it by common discourse. As Batchelor exemplifies, one could think about divergences of polemical subjects—existence of God, for instance—broadcasted by different types of media. During such debates, it is not rare to see some religious opinions, usually

ecclesiastical and/or confessional, confronted by another perspective, the secular one. In the former, says Batchelor, there is no precise definition of the words *secular* and *religious*, but we can understand them as the same; 2) *secular*, derived from its Latin radical, means the present temporality (*saeculum*, “this age”, “this siècle (century)”). Here, the notion of secularism leads us to considerate our material and temporal reality, embracing “those concerns we have about *this* world, that is everything that has to do with the quality of our personal, social, and environmental experience of living on this planet” (BATCHELOR, 2012, p. 87); 3) finally, *secular* is viewed through its historical and sociological sense, the one highlighted by Western distinctions between the State's and the Church's public power.

The second most important meaning that conceptualizes Century as present temporality shall be considered in this debate. Even though neither generic distinction between *secular* and *religious* nor historical process of changeable public power should be ignored, the understanding about a secularity engaged into present time is of central importance. As a technological and global society, we need actions and consideration oriented by socio-historic-environmental process as a response ultimately concerning our nowadays dilemmas.

In regards to this specific topic, Stephen Batchelor agrees with Buddhist criticism aimed at modern developmentalist models, the ones that often ignore environmental impacts and global socio-environmental inequalities. David R. Loy, another author and Buddhist teacher, calls attention to a delusional flaw in our planetary social reality. In his paper *Collective Bubbles of Delusion*, while attacking negationist discourses about current climate change, he argues:

What is perhaps most baffling about climate change denial, though, is that there is little if any real benefit in doing so for anyone except those who own and manage fossil fuel corporations. Denying global warming is not only an especially problematic collective fantasy; it is a false belief manipulated with expensive and

clever propaganda campaigns, by people who mostly know it is a dangerous fiction, but who are more interested in the short-term profits to be made by continuing to pump fossil carbon into the atmosphere. The result is not just a collective bubble of delusion: it is a bubble intentionally perpetuated by powerful corporations and billionaires – an example of institutionalized delusion. (LOY, s/d)

Our author, Stephen Batchelor, does not touch on such critical or socio-environmental questions. However, his second meaning to the word *secular*, as in being worldly-oriented, offers epistemological foundation for one to take Loy's criticism into account, for example.

If Batchelor does not engage himself to point out the limited and negative developments of an institutionalized delusion, like David Loy does, he indeed and sincerely suggests some potential negative developments that a Buddhist soteriological institution could lead to. Demonstrating the Buddhist dependence on soteriological, epistemological and cultural dimensions of ancient India—the place where it actually comes from—Batchelor broadens his hermeneutics to fields that have not exactly been explored by Buddhist traditions.

As an example, he asserts that the Indian framework that facilitated the appearance of earlier Buddhism doctrine, is cyclical concepts of creation time and rebirth, its different realms of existence and, especially, its notions such as *karma* and the liberation from births and deaths—known as *nirvana*, that is to say, the ultimate goal to this soteriological view of a cyclical world—has no cultural equivalence in modern Western thought.

Denying the importance of these fundamental notions of Buddhist traditions (*karma* and *nirvana*) is one of the most common critiques against Batchelor's ideas. However, Secular Western Buddhism, which has been growing up for the last decades, cannot get rid of this questioning. Since the West does not have a cyclical time tradition, in Indian terms, can we take its acceptance of Eastern notions a simple cultural conversion rather than a philosophical and pragmatic practice, as the secularist advocates.

The belief in the existence of supermaterial realities and many rebirths, and also the belief that enlightenment to which the Dharma leads is the overcoming of this metaphysical cycle, according to the secular perspective, is just a metaphysical consideration. Batchelor himself came to that conclusion and argued that it is impossible to prove or disprove, in modern rational manner to which we are culturally accustomed, a metaphysical assertion. Requiring the belief in a cycle of rebirth and the potential release of this cycle is, according to the author, analogous to requiring the unprovable belief - also irrefutable - in any metaphysical dimension.

The emphasis put on this distinction, that is to say, between *truths* to be accepted and *tasks* to be accomplished, was present even in Batchelor's *Buddhism without Beliefs*, a book dated to 1997. He attempts “to write a book on Buddhism in ordinary English that avoids the use of foreign words, technical terms, lists, and jargon” (1997, p. xi). With this intention in mind, he makes no reference neither to technical terminologies of meditative traditions nor to specialized bibliographies or quotes of terms in Pali or Sanskrit, two of the most ancient idioms responsible for firstly registering its doctrine.

Laying no stress on metaphysical beliefs—even soteriologically metashysical taken as liberation from *samsara* (death-and-rebirth cycle) through *nirvana*—his book presents guidance to meditation practice, as well as some foundation to understand Dharma. Considering that “historically, Buddhism has tended to lose its agnostic dimension through becoming institutionalized as a religion” (p. 16), Batchelor seeks to present it through a non-institutionalized form, even knowing by experience some institutional traditions that he attempts to overcome, not because such traditions are wrong, but because they are socioculturally incompatible, they do not correspond to the fluid and easily recognizable worldview accepted by our critical thought.

The distinction between *truths* to believe and *tasks* to perform, although first present in *Buddhist without Beliefs*, is further explained—and even reconsidered—in the above mentioned *A Secular Buddhism* (2012). Here, Batchelor revisits the question in an academic sense, quoting different texts and researches on Buddhist studies. When addressing the *four noble truths* (normally taken as Buddha's first sermon after his enlightenment), our author articulates a groundbreaking thesis when pointing to the possibility that there was no term for *truth* in the earliest versions of this sermon. The consequences of this textual change to Buddhist practice could be enormous. He says:

This tendency becomes even more pronounced when “truth” is further qualified as being either an “ultimate” (*paramattha*) or a merely “conventional” (*samutti*) truth. Although this two-truth doctrine is central to the thinking of all Buddhist orthodoxies, the terms “ultimate truth” and “conventional truth” do not occur a single time in the Sutta or Vinaya *Pitakas* (baskets) of the Pali canon. Yet for most Buddhist schools today—including the Theravada—enlightenment is understood as gaining direct insight into the nature of some ultimate truth. This privileging of “truth,” I would argue, is one of the key indicators of how the dharma was gradually transformed from a liberative praxis of awakening into the religious belief system called Buddhism. (BATCHELOR, 2012, p. 92-93).

It is possible to see a clear critique against a whole religious tradition which retraces its core back to centuries. As Batchelor argues, if there are no *four noble truths* in Buddha's teaching, but simply *four*, the doctrinal qualification of its words could be greatly modified.

Let's us stop for a moment and pay a little bit more attention to this issue. Traditionally, Buddhism depicts the four noble truths as follow: 1) identity between existence and suffering; 2) attachment as the reason to suffering; 3) the possibility to overcome suffering and 4) the way through which one could reach this liberation. Batchelor considers that this formulation, presented in this precisely way by almost all Buddhist traditions, gives wrong meanings to those terms. He goes on to demonstrate that these four noble truths indicate a belief system rather than an experienciable Buddhadharma.

The crucial point of this discussion seems to be the fact that traditional formulations (“existence is suffering” as the first noble truth, for instance) would not represent some nirvanic teaching from Buddha, but rather a rethorical argumentation built through centuries to justify the above mentioned Indian metaphysical soteriology. Alluding to philologist K. R. Norman's paper, Batchelor strengthens this understanding about a doctrinal-enunciative deviance. In this paper, published in 1992, Norman attests that “the earliest form of this *sutta* did not include the word *ariya-sacca* (noble truth)” (NORMAN *apud* BATCHELOR, 2012, p. 92), which appears only as a later inclusion.

For this conclusion, Batchelor suggests a change in the formulation of the four “things”—not to be taken as “noble truths” anymore— and even an inversion of their argumentative causal sequence. Rather than talking about truths to be accepted and believed, he points out the four terms as notions to be accomplished. Tasks, therefore. Through this secular and non-metaphysical way, the four terms from Buddha's first discourse could be then stated as following: 1) existence of suffering; 2) arising of attachment, not to be seen as cause for suffering, but as its consequence; 3) ceasing of attachment, considered as a break to suspend the feeling of being attached to suffering sensation/thought; 4) centered detached path, free from usual and instinctive responses.

We have touched on an important change in causal links. Batchelor deepens this change, alluding to textual and doctrinal references to which we shall not refer to here. Most importantly, for its fundamentals to secularity on such contemporary Buddhism, is the displacement from *accepted noble truths* to *practice of tasks*. Going further, there is also a central distinction between metaphysical beliefs (through acceptance of a pre-established truth (“life is suffering”)) and everyday practices which are pragmatic and verifiable.

Such verification could indicate what follows: there is suffering and we must acknowledge and understand it as a fact. Accepting it is, thus, the task to be accomplished. When there is no willingness to understand this fact deeply, one tends to attach oneself to usual responses sprung from suffering, that is to say, to seek for distance or denial from the causes of our suffering. From this point, one must realize the need for stopping such usual reactions, which leads, by extent, to stopping endless suffering. By understanding suffering and being able to stop it unconsciously, as well as usual responses to it, one reaches the point where ceasing suffering becomes possible. Therefore, the task would be exactly to cease suffering after one's accomplishment in understanding it in a previous stage. Ultimately, by understanding suffering, stopping usual reactions to it and ceasing it, one reaches the point where the so-called *noble eightfold path* begins.²

Stephen Batchelor creates an acronym—ELSA—to refer to this new argumentative formulation. Each letter is a guide to the most recommended approaches concerning this new worldview which is based on Dharma's four tasks of enlightened Buddha. They refer to: *Embrace, Let Go, Stop* and *Act*. The whole change, either in argumentation or causal links of terms, redefines Buddhist practice understanding, relocating it from a series of metaphysical statements—“existence is suffering”, to which cyclical Indian soteriology remains as the framework—to an ethical presentation of guides of conduct.

Secular Buddhism, no more metaphysical in its previous sense, seems to offer a worldview built according to a different foundation. Much the same way technological-industrial societies infer a mutation in theology itself (which starts to be acknowledged as post-religional), the Western contemporary secular Buddhism thought, intertwined with scientific and critical inquiring, potentially becomes the seed for a new conception to Dharma itself.

² Having in mind that we have pointed out to a doubt, yet to be further explored, in which this “noble” could be also a later inclusion. Eightfold path, then.

It could be the beginning of a new face of Dharma. There is no difficulty in understanding that all traditional forms of Buddhism, especially the Eastern one, were shaped not only by their Buddhist “truths,” but also—perhaps especially—for its social and cultural contingencies, different in space and time. Secular Buddhism could be an attempt to shape traditional practices once more, as well as an adaptation to new territories, new periods and new inquiries.

Stephen Batchelor suggests that secularization of Buddhism, of its practices and doctrinal assumptions, cannot lead to a degeneration of its vitality or its death as spiritual tradition. It is possible that this process, through endless critiques, restatements and profound studies of current debates, arises as a weakening factor in face of religious traditional orthodoxies. On the other hand, it could also be a naissance and strengthening of a new cultural way to practice Dharma, one more aligned to contemporary demands, mentalities and cultural backgrounds.

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