

Buddhism in the Global Eye

Beyond East and West

Edited by
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and Alexander Soucy

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2020

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3501-4063-9

ePDF: 978-1-3501-4064-6

eBook: 978-1-3501-4065-3

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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Buddhism and Global Secularisms¹

David L. McMahan

Buddhism in the modern world offers an example of (1) the porousness of the boundary between secular and religious; (2) the diversity, fluidity, and constructedness of the very categories of religious and secular, since they appear in different ways among different Buddhist cultures in divergent national contexts; and (3) the way these categories nevertheless have very real-world effects and become drivers of substantial change in belief and practice. Although the very concepts of “religious” and “secular” are of European vintage, they have been adapted in different ways in different Buddhist contexts. This adaptation has shaped Buddhism in different places (particularly under different systems of government) in distinctive ways, suggesting multiple secularisms, multiple modernities, and indeed, multiple Buddhisms. Drawing from a few examples of Buddhism in various geographical and political settings, I hope to take a few steps toward illuminating the broad contours of the interlacing of secularism and Buddhism. In doing so, I am synthesizing some of my own and others’ research on modern Buddhism, integrating it with some current research I am doing on meditation, and considering its implications for thinking about secularism.

The Religious-Secular Binary

The wave of scholarship on secularism that has arisen in recent decades paints a more nuanced picture than the previous reigning model. For most of the twentieth century, social theorists adhered to a linear narrative of secularism as a global process of religion waning and becoming less relevant to public life. The processes of disenchantment, social differentiation, displacement, and the growing dominance of instrumental reasoning and scientific thinking would gradually come to occupy the spaces once inhabited by religion, and religion would fade away or at least become increasingly a matter of private belief.

The classical secularization narrative parallels a prominent narrative of Buddhism in the modern world. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, authors from around the globe began to create a narrative of Buddhism, celebrating the rediscovery of “true” Buddhism, in part by Western scholars: a Buddhism of texts, philosophy, psychology, meditation, and ethics that contrasted starkly with the “degenerate” Buddhism that

colonists found on the ground in places they occupied. The latter Buddhism was a matter of “cultural baggage” that had accumulated around the core of the Dharma and was inessential—even corrupting—to its original liberative message (Almond 1988; Lopez 2002; McMahan 2008). Most scholars today are quite skeptical of this narrative and recognize the picture of a pure rational core of Buddhism enveloped by various cultural impurities to be inadequate to account for the complexities of Buddhism in all its varieties today and throughout history. Yet the picture persists in many different contexts of the rescue and renewal of Buddhism from moribund tradition and its (re) emergence into its true ancient form—which turns out to be the most compatible with the modern.

Both of these narratives—that of linear secularization of the world and of the linear modernization (and recovery) of Buddhism—are now, I believe, untenable. Yet there is still sense to be made of secularism, as well as Buddhist modernism, and their mutual intersections. After the Iranian revolution and the rise of resurgent Islam, the flourishing of evangelical Christianity and Pentecostalism in the global south, the “return” of religion in China and the former Soviet Union, we need not rehearse all of the reasons why most social thinkers today have become skeptical of the “classical” secularization thesis (Berger 1999). What has emerged is a more complex picture of the interlacing of secular forces with religious ones, along with the increased appreciation of the interdependence and co-constitution of these categories. Rather than seeing secularization as the inevitable and global fading and privatization of religion in the face of inexorable processes of modernization, we see heterogeneous, geographically differentiated processes in which different societies adopt certain themes that might fall into the category of “secular” and combine or juxtapose them in unique ways with particular understandings of the “religious.” Although perhaps governed by an underlying logic rooted in its origins in the European Enlightenment, secularization is not a uniform process of the withering of religion from public life, as many twentieth-century thinkers imagined. The fact that this had happened to a great extent in western Europe makes that area the exception rather than the rule. Nor is the division between secular and religious a stable, incontestable, and impermeable membrane but rather something constantly renegotiated in various national and legal contexts.

The contemporary compulsion to put “religion” and “secularism” in scare-quotes betrays a metareflective stance that has come to recognize the extent to which the very categories of religious and secular are modern, co-constitutive categories that cannot simply refer to natural, unambiguous species of phenomena. What some have begun to call the religious-secular binary is (or is part of) a *discourse*—a particular way of constituting knowledge, subjectivity, meaning, power, and practice that increasingly pervades modern societies. This discourse determines what counts as secular and what counts as religious and what is marginalized as superstition or cult, as well as what counts as a legitimate exercise of religion and what does not.² To point out the discursive or constructed character of these categories, however, does not imply that they are of merely academic or taxonomic concern or that they are categories without a referent. Indeed, how these categories are deployed can have profound real-world effects on nations, communities, and individuals, since they are matters not only of rhetoric but also of legitimacy, law, and practice. Whether a practice falls under the

category of religious, secular, or superstitious can have high stakes. In the face of such stakes, practices change to accommodate these categories: where “superstition” is discouraged or even outlawed, communities may modify rituals so that they take on a new life within what is considered legitimate religious expression. In other cases (meditation, for example, as we shall see in *The Secularization of Meditation*), adherents may attempt to move a practice out of the religious category into the secular, availing themselves of the prestige of the dominant construals of science and rationality and the institutional resources available only to secular projects. Secularity, therefore, does not simply displace religion (though in some cases it may); rather, it serves as a driver of change and reconfiguration of religious belief, practice, and interpretation.

The way secularism operates is also a product of its complementary constituting of the realm of religion. “Religion,” in the religious-secular binary, is often modeled largely on Christianity (especially in its Protestant forms) and construed as a matter of private belief, experience, and personal choice, while the secular is construed as a kind of neutral space of rational, public discussion and political activity in which sectarian matters and unfalsifiable matters of faith are purportedly set aside. A naturalistic picture of the world lurks in the background. What is often masked, however, is that the secular is not something that is simply *there* as the natural state of things that remains after we strip away the religious. Rather, it is rooted in a complex of tacit assumptions, views, and social practices that make this position seem “natural” even though it is deeply cultural, contingent, and historically constituted, emerging largely from the European Enlightenment and its intellectual and cultural successors. The categories of religious and secular constitute particular ways of carving up and shaping modes of human life. Moreover, the very naturalization of secularism—its presumption of the rational, empirical, natural, and unbiased stance—masks, while at the same time making more effective, its potential ideological functions, which can sometimes be deployed repressively.

We should be cautious, therefore, about taking religious and secular as descriptive categories adequate to the task of discerning social realities. While we might in a general way use these categories to distinguish certain phenomena—a ritual sacrifice versus a democratic election, for example—we would be misguided in thinking that the world naturally and unambiguously cleaves itself into these two categories, as modern secular states often portray it. Rather, the categories are rhetorically deployed for various purposes by groups—religious institutions, state actors, scientific organizations, etc.—to particular ends within particular sociopolitical contexts. The setting up of religious and secular categories in such contexts opens up certain possibilities and closes down others. These categories, when bolstered by force of law, can have the power to help establish or curtail certain forms of life.

Yet not all “secular” or “religious” forms are uniform across cultures. There are, I would suggest, multiple secularisms that draw upon traditional cultural resources and vary with particular national formations of law and governance. The secular and the religious are configured in ways particular to the sociopolitical configurations of particular states. Different national cultures have taken up this set of categories and adapted it to various indigenous cultural ingredients and different purposes, debates, commitments, and projects.

Secularism and Early Buddhist Modernism

Lest we get too lost in generalities, let us turn our attention to some particular examples to illustrate the porousness, constructedness, diversity, and real-world effects of the religious-secular binary. Buddhism provides illustrations in which particular configurations of this binary have been a significant factor in religious change. The case of Buddhism also demonstrates the inadequacy of a purely oppositional understanding of Buddhism as a religion and secularism as simply the lack of religion. Instead, Buddhism has often been transformed and indeed strengthened through interface with secular discourses, not by resisting them but by incorporating them. Indeed, one of the major ways in which Buddhism around the world has modernized is through its rearticulation in the languages of science and secular thought. This began in the colonial period in Asia, when Buddhists who were either colonized, as in Ceylon and Burma, or concerned about the economic and military hegemony of the West, as in China and Japan, began reinterpreting and representing Buddhism as a system of thought and ethics more attuned than the religion of the colonizers to the emerging scientific worldview. Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933) in Ceylon, Shaku Sōen (釈宗演 1859–1919) in Japan, and Taixu (太虛 1890–1947) in China, all put forward the idea that Buddhism was uniquely compatible with modern science and, further, was itself a kind of scientific endeavor. All three figures developed a similar rhetoric that tapped into Western anxieties about the status of Christianity in the face of an emerging and powerful scientific positivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a rhetoric that in some cases attempted to undermine the power of Christianity and its claims of a God who interfered in the course of natural law, a savior who performed miracles and rose from the dead, and a world that was created in six days. On all of the points upon which modern science was challenging a traditional Christian worldview, these Buddhist reformers claimed that Buddhism was on the side of science (Lopez 2008; McMahan 2004, 2008).

This attempt to ally Buddhism and modern science was an important part of Buddhist reform movements in Asia and of their resistance to colonial powers. All of these early reformers tied karma and rebirth to evolution, and they assimilated the Buddhist doctrine of all things emerging from causes and conditions (*hetupratyaya*) to the modern scientific understanding of causality (Dharmapāla, Shaku Sōen). Attempting to explicitly assimilate Darwin's theory of evolution to the doctrine of rebirth, for example, Taixu described evolution as "an infinite number of souls who have evolved through endless reincarnations" (T'ai hsu 1928: 39–40). He similarly invoked passages from various Buddhist sūtras to suggest that they anticipated modern scientific findings on the infinite vastness of space, the microbial world, and various astronomical phenomena (T'ai hsu 1928: 48–52) and concluded that a "union between science and Buddhism" (T'ai hsu 1928: 49) would not just be of benefit to Buddhism, but even more to science itself. The former, he contended, is actually an extension of the scientific method to the "sphere of supreme and universal perception, in which [Buddhists] can behold the true nature of the Universe, but for this they must have attained the wisdom of Buddha himself, and it is not by the use of science or logic that we can expect to acquire such wisdom. Science therefore is only a stepping stone in such matters" (T'ai hsu 1928: 54).

Taixu was only the most prominent Chinese Buddhist thinker of the early twentieth century to take an active interest in interfusing Buddhism with science. As Erik Hammerstrom shows, other Buddhist thinkers in China similarly promoted parallels between secular science and the Dharma in this period (Hammerstrom 2015). This effort involved navigating the newly established categories of “religion,” “science,” and “superstition” adopted largely from the West. Especially important in early-twentieth-century China was the rejection of “superstition”: science was the road to knowledge, and superstition represented not just a personal weakness on the part of practitioners but also an obstacle to the growth and flourishing of the newly established nation-state. Those articulating a place for Buddhism under the conditions of Chinese modernity were compelled to vigorously differentiate it from superstition and align it with science—science not just as a set of practices or an epistemological approach but also as a “sign of modernity,” an “ideological entity, a reified concept referring to an epistemology and a set of cultural values, all of which had political implications” (Hammerstrom 2015: 4). In navigating these categories, many Buddhist thinkers drew upon Buddhist logic, epistemology, and theories of (especially) the Consciousness-only school. Yet they did not only simply attempt to force Buddhist doctrine into a scientific mold but also used it to critique scientism, materialism, and social evolutionism by suggesting that Buddhism offered a sort of higher empiricism and a more humane, nonviolent philosophy of life.

The case of China was one unique component of an emerging discourse of “scientific Buddhism” in which an initial sorting began within Buddhism between the religious and the secular, as well as the perhaps equally potent categories of the superstitious and the spiritual. Many Asian reformers implicitly accepted some colonists’ critiques of their own tradition in terms of foreign categories of “idolatry” and “superstition” and strove to move Buddhism away from practices that could be interpreted as such and toward an emphasis on philosophy, ethics, and texts. They also made use of interpretations of the “spiritual” emerging in, for example, Transcendentalism, as a transcultural, transreligious reality at once deeply personal and universal, in which all religions participated but to which none could lay exclusive claim. It is no coincidence that this idea of the spiritual mirrored in some respects the notion of the secular as a neutral realm free from sectarian bias. Under colonialism, the threat of colonialism, and European economic hegemony, these Buddhist reformers reformulated their tradition, sorting that which could be interpreted along the lines of scientific rationalism and spirituality away from what the colonists considered superstitious, idolatrous, and primitive. As the emerging categories of religious and secular congealed, therefore, the most prominent Buddhist thinkers of this period drew primarily upon secular discourses like physics, science, psychology, and semisectional schools of philosophy like Transcendentalism and Idealism in their reinterpretations of their tradition (McMahan 2012b). And yet it is important to note that most of these reformers were Asians, not Westerners imposing a “Western” worldview on passive Asian Buddhists. Reformers were creatively combining elements of traditional Buddhist doctrine with selected facets of secularity and science for their own purposes—purposes often at odds with those of the European powers.

S. N. Goenka and the De-Religioning of Meditation

This early alliance of Buddhism and secular thought laid the foundations for the conception of Buddhism as uniquely compatible with modern science, an idea that would contribute to the globalization of Buddhism and the secularization of meditation. The recent global prominence of Buddhist and Buddhist-derived forms of meditation and mindfulness practices is rooted in this history of colonialism and the reframing of Buddhism in scientific and secular language. The laicization and secularization of meditation provide a ready example of: (1) how the categories of religious and secular are blurry and co-constitutive and yet have real effects in the world; (2) the transnational, multinodal manner in which certain features of Buddhism have modernized (3); the importance of different societal configurations of religious and secular in shaping Buddhism in particular countries.

The emergence of the Vipassanā movement and its recent secular descendants is one example, and one that also involves a considerable stripping down of Buddhism. As Eric Braun ably chronicles in his recent work, *The Birth of Insight* (2013), mass lay meditation is a recent phenomenon. It began with Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) in Burma, who, after the British colonized his country, became convinced that the only way to keep the Dharma from dying out was to begin teaching philosophy and meditation—previously the province of monks—to the laity. In the course of the twentieth century, the lay meditation movement, Vipassanā, spread throughout Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. The moment in its development that I want to highlight is in the mid-to late twentieth century, when *vipassanā* began to be promoted as a distinctively *nonreligious* practice. Having moved beyond the monastery, it now began to move beyond Buddhist institutional control altogether. While Ledi's approach was firmly embedded in Buddhist doctrine and institutions, the more recent wave of *vipassanā*, represented by the Burmese-Indian teacher S. N. Goenka (1924–2013), shifted focus both rhetorically and practically. Goenka, a lay Buddhist, was the teacher perhaps most responsible for spreading *vipassanā* meditation beyond the boundaries of Buddhism and promoting it as a technique for living in this world and for revealing to the individual the universal human condition.

Practitioners in the Goenka wing of the Vipassanā movement place a great deal of emphasis on *vipassanā* as a *technique* rather than doctrine and on learning the technique from authorized teachers in highly standardized ten-day retreats. This technique, in Goenka's view, was the essence of the Buddha's teaching. This does not mean Goenka eschewed all other Buddhist doctrine, however. Recognizing impermanence, selflessness, and suffering—the three marks of existence in Buddhism—is, he believed, essential to the gaining of insight. Universal compassion, the Five Precepts, and several other basic Buddhist doctrines also figure prominently in his work. Most of the doctrines he emphasized, however, are those that most comfortably fit within a broadly secular framework of knowledge and a naturalistic picture of the world. There is very little ritual or emphasis on the supernatural, and instead, the language he used to describe *vipassanā* combines traditional Buddhist ideas with many drawn from the lexicon of secularity—*vipassanā* is an *art of living*, a *technique*, a *science*. It discovers the *law of nature* within. It is *result-oriented*, like

physical exercise (Goenka 2002: 15). Goenka insisted that Vipassanā is not tied to any dogma, belief system, institution, or religion. Although he presented the movement as perpetuating a practice developed 2,500 years ago by the Buddha, he displayed an ambivalent relationship to “Buddhism” and indeed all religions. While emphasizing tolerance between religions, he often spoke and wrote dismissively of “gurudom,” cultism, dogmatism, and sectarianism. He often took pains to differentiate *vipassanā* from “magic and miracles.” “*Vipassanā*,” Goenka once insisted in an interview, “is beyond all religion, beyond all sects, beyond all beliefs, beyond all dogmas and cults—it is a pure science of mind and matter.” (2002: 14). Goenka not only repeatedly denied that he was teaching a religion but also denied that the Buddha himself taught one. Instead, Gautama taught the *dhamma* (Sanskrit: *dharma*), the natural order of things. Use of the term “*dhamma*” in this sense frees it from simply being “doctrines” of Buddhism as an institutional religion. According to Goenka, the *dhamma* that the Buddha perceived was not “Buddhism”—it was a universal truth. Goenka, therefore, took the term *dhamma* back to at least one of its original meanings—the way things are, the natural order of things—and quite deliberately attempted to disaggregate it from the “religion” of Buddhism.

Also prominent in Goenka’s teachings is an insistence on universalism paralleling the purported universalism of secular and scientific epistemic orientations. Indeed, part of the skeptical attitude toward “religion” among this branch of Vipassanā is due to its tendency to fracture humanity into competing factions. When he did speak favorably of religion, it was the “quintessence of religion”—morality, discipline, and love—rather than the “outer shell” of religion—“rites, rituals, ceremonies, etcetera, which are likely to turn into different cults” (2002: 49–50). The truth he invited people to partake in was not the truth of a particular religion, but what he insisted was a universal truth revealed not by dogma or religious authorities but by direct experience of a “law of nature [which] is the same for everybody” (2002: 13).

This framing of *vipassanā* as a scientific, universal, instrumental, and empirically based art of living in this world was a pivotal move in the modern history of meditation, one whose consequences have extended considerably beyond the Vipassanā movement itself. It is in no way a coincidence that this framing makes liberal use of the vocabularies of secular disciplines and forms of knowledge, quite consciously placing *vipassanā* outside the realm of the religious and, especially, the “superstitious.” For the first time in history, Buddhist meditation practices were beginning to be taught outside explicitly Buddhist institutional contexts, and to be welcomed into these uncharted territories, it would have to negotiate the boundaries of the religious-secular binary. No doubt this reframing has been an essential factor in the spread of *vipassanā* to, according to the website, over 170 centers in dozens of countries around the world (Dhamma.org n.d.). Perhaps more important to our inquiry than this wide geographical diffusion, however, is that it is also taught in secular institutions like prisons, hospitals, and schools. Goenka advocated the penetration of *vipassanā* into all areas of society and employed the vocabulary of science and universalism over against religion to aid in this effort. “Some people take [*vipassanā*] as a religion, a cult, or a dogma, so naturally there is resentment and opposition. But Vipassanā should only be taken as pure science, the science of mind and matter, and a pure exercise for the mind to keep it healthy. What

could be the objection? And it is so result-oriented, because it starts giving results here and now. People will start accepting this" (2002: 31). And, indeed, many have.

Vipassanā, therefore, was fashioned to resemble the kind of neutrality to which the secular gaze aspires: a nonjudgmental, nonreactive, unbiased observation free of sectarian influence. This, I want to suggest, is neither a seamless convergence of ancient and modern modes of inquiry into one technique nor merely the foisting of modern secular epistemology onto Buddhist ones. Rather, it is a selective bringing forward, reinterpretation, and transformation of specific Buddhist practices that can be made to resonate with modern secular ones and function in secular institutional contexts. No doubt, there is some amount of borrowing from the prestige, legitimacy, and authority of scientific and secular discourses. But the stakes here are not merely rhetorical. They involve the place that Goenka and his movement have hoped to gain for *vipassanā* in Indian and many other societies—the hope that it would filter into every facet of modern life, including government, corporate, and educational life.

The Secularization of Meditation

The new meanings and functions of Buddhist-derived meditation practices have spread around the globe taking up residence in different locations and institutional settings. But this—and other forms of modernization—have not been a simple linear process of the Westernization or uniform secularization. To illustrate this point, let's look briefly at a few examples of how different ways of constituting the religious and the secular have shaped Buddhist practice in different countries. When the mass meditation movement began in Burma, use of secular language was not necessary because Burma was a fairly homogeneous Buddhist society. Ledi Sayadaw was not attempting to take meditation beyond the ken of Buddhism but rather to strengthen Buddhism and its institutions, which were threatened and weakened by colonization. It was when the Vipassanā movement was taken to the far more pluralistic environment of postcolonial India that it had to situate itself in relation to various religions, secular institutions, and a secular government. The idea that Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, and people of all religious traditions could equally benefit from *vipassanā* practice mirrors the very shape of secularism in India, which is not a separation of church and state but a pluralism in which all religions ostensibly have the same rights and are included in the public sphere. But the success of Vipassanā in India depended on a new gambit: to present it not simply as a movement within one of the world's great religions but as something beyond the fray of the multifarious religions jostling for allegiance; something that was at once the essential element of the Buddha's teaching and yet not bound to Buddhism as a "religion," as well as something that could be practiced by people of any religion because of its universality.

Because of the Indian origins of Buddhism and the particular pluralistic conception of secularism in India, incorporating "religious" practices into public life does not pose the same kind of problem that it does in the United States, where the next significant move in the reframing of meditation as a secular practice would take place. In the United States, practices that might be considered "religious" have a greater hurdle for

being promoted in the public sphere. Unlike in India, the US constitution prohibits state establishment or support of any religion. Secularism is interpreted as separation of church and state rather than equal inclusion of all religions in the public sphere. And while it is well known that religious influence (nearly always Christianity) often transgresses the putative boundaries of the secular, there is, in Thomas Jefferson's words, a "wall of separation" between church and state. No state organization is permitted to support, promote, or fund a religious organization.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when *vipassanā* and other Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditation practices came to the United States, they underwent a more radical secularization process. Perhaps the epitome of this process is Jon Kabat-Zinn's highly successful Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program. Kabat-Zinn, who has had extensive training in both *vipassanā* and Zen meditation, combined elements of each into a meditation program that has been quite consciously excised of explicitly religious language in accordance with the particular religious-secular configuration of the United States (Kabat-Zinn 1990).⁴ In his books, talks, and articles, he avoids all but the most vague references to the Buddhist origins of these practices and rearticulates them as secular, therapeutic, clinical, and sometimes "spiritual" practices. "Mindfulness" has subsequently taken on a life of its own in the United States, quite outside any Buddhist organizations, and it is rapidly spreading worldwide.

Perhaps the most striking development in this story is that within the last decade or two, the mindfulness movement has established itself firmly in some of the most powerful institutions in the United States and, therefore, the world. Many major corporations, such as Google, Target, and General Mills, offer their employees courses in mindfulness and meditation. It has become a staple of clinical practice in psychologists' offices and hospitals. Most significant for our purposes, it is being taught in many government-funded institutions as well, including many public universities and high schools, which are forbidden to promote religion. Numerous government grants have been awarded to study clinical applications of mindfulness and meditative practices. Health insurance companies are beginning to cover it, and even the US military has experimented with a mindfulness program.

What are the conditions for the possibility of such a shift in the institutional home of meditation practices from (exclusively) Buddhist monasteries to some of the most prominent and powerful secular institutions in the world? Perhaps the most important is the articulation of mindfulness as something that can be studied scientifically and produce empirically verifiable results. The number of scientific studies of meditation in the West has increased exponentially in the last two decades, many focusing on clinical applications of meditation, brain imaging, and neuroplasticity. Popular media in the United States have reported many of these studies and sometimes inflated their claims, causing a storm of enthusiasm among both clinicians and popular readers. A rash of recent mindfulness literature extols the capacity of a practice originally developed by celibate ascetics hoping to transcend *samsāra* to increase satisfaction in countless areas of worldly, secular life: career, marriage, parenting, sex, business, sports, money management, business acumen, efficiency at work, playing musical instruments, and knitting. It is widely promoted as a form of stress relief and as a therapeutic technique

for the alleviation of various psychological ailments, especially for the professional classes with frenetic work lives.

These radical developments in the history of Buddhist meditation are the result, first, of the Asian reformers' reframing of Buddhism in secular-scientific language beginning over a century ago, and second, of figures such as Goenka and Kabat-Zinn adapting meditative practices to particular configurations of the secular-religious distinction especially in India and in the United States. Thus, the very category of the secular, not just as an abstract conceptual category but as a matter of law, has helped generate a new form of quasi-religious practice tuned to the sensibilities of professionals in the often highly stressful, competitive marketplace of global capitalism and the personalized and tailored demands of consumer society (Wilson 2014). Yet, despite the apparent secularity of the mindfulness movement, it cannot be construed as simply a move from "religion" to the "secular" in some absolute sense. Indeed, this example shows that the line between these two is blurry, ambiguous, and negotiable. Meditation, of course, continues to be practiced in monasteries along with Buddhist soteriological, ethical, and philosophical elements, and a continuum of practice exists between this and the most utilitarian and clinical applications of mindfulness. Many people consider meditation not just a secular, therapeutic practice but as part of "spiritual life," which in its contemporary usage opens up new attitudes, dispositions, beliefs, and practices that fail to conform neatly to the religious-secular binary. There is a sense in many writings on mindfulness that it can re-enchant and sacralize all of everyday life. Through these practices, the literature suggests, the dullness, stressfulness, and meaninglessness of alienated work in a system of utilitarian global capitalism can be reinterpreted as bristling with nuance and hidden meaning, and that it can reinvigorate ethical life and fine-tune one's connections with others. Thus, in many cases it retains concerns that at the very least echo those of religion, inhabiting and helping to constitute an indeterminate zone between religious and secular.

Secularism and the Reconfiguration of Buddhism in China and Tibet

My next example is Mainland China, where Buddhism today is in a state of revival in a country with a very different type of secularism than those of either India or the United States. The uniquely Chinese version of secularism is not just a background of tacit assumptions, nor a political structure that relegates religion to the private sphere, nor a matter of separation of church and state. Nor does the model of religion as private belief derived from Christian nations fit well.⁵ While all secular states play some role in defining religion and thereby determining what is and is not a legitimate religion, Chinese secularism functions as a more aggressive instrument of control, definition, legitimation, and marginalization, than many secularisms of European, North American, and Asian states. Communist Party officials must be atheist, and despite the recent resurgence of religion, official policy, while no longer aggressively dedicated to the destruction of religion, by no means encourages it unless it can be wrapped into

sanctioned political and social agendas. Current policy adopts a managerial approach in which certain expressions of religion are encouraged and others discouraged or outright repressed, depending on whether they can be employed toward larger Party goals (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Ji 2011). And in contrast to India, and to a certain extent the United States, where religion has been a valued part of national culture, in modern China it has been seen largely as an obstacle to progress.

Examples of such management with regard to Buddhism include both overt and subtle forms, which often blur the boundaries between secular and religious in ways quite different than those mentioned in this chapter. They include the often aggressive involvement of the government in Tibetan monastic affairs (Cabezón 2008) and the choosing of reincarnate lamas (Barnett 2012). A more subtle shaping of Buddhism in China is illustrated by a current revival of the theme of scientific Buddhism that we've been addressing. The World Buddhist Forums, of which there have now been four, beginning in 2006 with the most recent in 2015, have served as platforms for the presentation of Buddhism as scientific, "cultural," and aligned with larger Communist Party social and political goals.⁶ A Xinhua News Agency article entitled "China Encourages Buddhism-Science Dialogue to Promote Building Harmonious Society" illustrates this (Li Jianmin 2009). It reports on a seminar at the Second Forum that brought together Buddhist leaders with scientific thinkers. The article mentions "physics, brain science, and psychology" as productive fields for the meeting of Buddhism and science. Zhu Qingshi, a chemist from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, is quoted saying: "If you think Buddhism only means burning incense and praying, then you are going far away from its real spirit" (Li Jianmin 2009). He thinks of Buddhism, he says, as a system of knowledge and "not a religion." The article quotes participants on the compatibility of Buddhism and science; the humanity, rather than divinity, of the Buddha; the atheism and rationality of Buddhism; and its support of science and technology against "superstition . . . the enemy of science." It also lauds Buddhist monks who use technology, learn science, and are "communicating [with] 'this world' via cell phones and promoting their doctrines via computers and Internet" (Li Jianmin 2009), presumably in contrast to those who attempt to communicate with the "other world" of spirits and ancestors. The piece also quite clearly promotes Buddhism as a potential force for contributing to China's creation of a "harmonious society," a concept that floods official media: "China has been committed to building a harmonious society in the country and pushing for building a harmonious world over recent years, and it has been rallying all positive forces to attain the goal, including seeking wisdom and inspiration from its profound traditional culture" (Li Jianmin 2009). Another Xinhua article on the recent Third Buddhist Forum also repeatedly refers to Buddhism as a "science of mind" and emphasizes its usefulness in building a "harmonious society" and promoting world peace (Li Jianmin 2009).

These conferences are organized by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which regulates all recognized religions in China, and the Buddhist Association of China, which often serves as a bridge between Chinese Buddhists and the government and is charged with communicating government regulations to Buddhists.⁷ The themes at the conferences mirror themes publicly articulated by the Chinese Communist Party in recent years (Ji 2011: 43–44). So here we see articles in the state-sponsored media

outlet putting forth not simply a report on a conference but a normative presentation of Buddhism, a sketch of what kind of Buddhism is to be sanctioned and nourished in the building of the harmonious society. This is clearly a rationalized, secularized Buddhism intended to contrast starkly with anything that could be considered “superstitious.” Buddhism is construed as a science of mind, a culture, a traditional moral resource—all terms that surface repeatedly in officially sanctioned descriptions of Buddhism.

While claiming this rationalized Buddhism as a part of its own culture, Chinese media often portray Tibetan Buddhism as an exotic, fascinating but primitive other and Tibetans as subject to irrational religious and separatist passions, a “little brother” to be helped along the road to prosperity and material development by its wiser elder brother. In this sense, it adopts features of the religion-secular binary from the West—as well as an exoticization of the other resembling Western Orientalist representations of the East—but deploys them in service of large-scale, secular, and distinctively Chinese social and political projects.

Meanwhile, outside of China, it is precisely Tibetan Buddhism that currently enjoys considerable attention for its engagement with the sciences and is itself sometimes characterized as a “science of mind.” The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, especially, has been a dialogue partner with physicists and neuroscientists, has been instrumental in promoting the scientific study of meditation, and has written a book and several articles connecting Buddhism and various aspects of the sciences (Dalai Lama 2005). He is often acclaimed by the Western press for his declared openness to revising Buddhist doctrines in light of scientific truth and is seen as a rational reformer pioneering the fusion of ancient wisdom and modern science. All of this has indirectly helped generate more awareness of Tibetan Buddhism among Europeans and Americans and has brought more people into the fold of sympathy with the cause of Tibetan autonomy. The Dalai Lama has also promoted “secular ethics” on the model of Indian secularism. Other Tibetan teachers outside of China have programs that have explicitly “secular” curricula that require minimal adherence to traditional Buddhist doctrines and values and other programs that are more explicitly based on Mahāyāna and Tantric literature (McMahan 2012b).

Thus, we see two distinct communities employing the Buddhist engagement with science and secular modes of knowledge toward two very different ends. Outside of China, Tibetan Buddhism is transforming itself through its ever-closer interactions with scientific and secular institutions in Europe and the United States. Emory University, for example, has an exchange program that sends American students to Dharamsala, India, to study Tibetan Buddhism while monks in monasteries there go to Emory specifically to augment their monastic curriculum through courses in science. Meanwhile, in China, as Ji Zhe puts it:

The political use of Buddhism by the government continuously affects Buddhist discourse and performance. The Buddhist institutions have to adapt themselves as closely as possible to politically correct rhetoric and organize Buddhist collective activities according to the demands of the state. . . . Chinese Buddhism as a social field has been reconfigured and continues to be reconfigured during this process.

because the social reputation and influence of a monastery no longer depends only on its traditional religious prestige, but more and more on its leaders' capacities, and the possibilities and choices for managing its relations with outside secular forces. (2011: 45)

In both cases, Buddhist communities become more intertwined with secular institutions and cultural forces, gaining greater legitimacy and prestige, which does not lead necessarily to the decline of Buddhism as a religion but may indeed be an engine of religious change. Such alliances include both costs and benefits. Buddhism in China enjoys a degree of legitimacy and a public stage afforded by reframing itself in terms of science, culture, commercialism, and secular political forces, but it becomes beholden to those forces and loses autonomy and its more explicitly religious aspects in the process. This is not to say that all of Chinese Buddhist intertwining with the secular is a top-down process imposed by the state, with a population passively accepting state-sponsored iterations of the dharma. Popular Buddhist movements that also respond to and incorporate elements of modernity and secularism also have emerged. Gareth Fisher, for example, discusses groups that creatively blend widely diverse elements in modern Chinese "cultural repertoires," that is, inventories of knowledge and practice that contain "cultural building blocks that active agents creatively combine and recombine as part of their making of self and society" (2011: 347). Such creative combinations might include liturgies of sutra chanters as well as narratives of Mao as a bodhisattva (Fisher 2011). Ji Zhe also discusses popular movements in tension with "official Buddhism" and the possibility that "constraints may be transformed into resources" in a secularism that constitutes a "dialectical process for deconstructing and reconstructing religion" (2008: 260).

For Tibetan Buddhists outside of China attempting to preserve their tradition in exile, alliance with secular discourses and institutions is less a matter of necessity and more a matter of highlighting certain elements of the tradition—philosophy, ethics, meditation—that resonate with the cultures in which exiles live. While free from the politically repressive forces within China, Tibetan Buddhists in exile still must navigate social imaginaries quite different from their own and make difficult choices about which seeds of the dharma will likely flourish and which might wither in the West. In the broadest sense, this is not historically unique. Buddhists have always had to negotiate with larger social and political forces. What is unique about this period is that Buddhists of different schools and in widely divergent locales must all position themselves in relation to the same discourse that constitutes the various configurations of the religious-secular binary.

Buddhism, Binaries, and Ironies

These cases of Buddhist communities and individuals navigating the boundaries of religious, secular, spiritual, and superstitious illustrate the intertwining of secular and religious motivations, the co-constituting of the very categories of religious and secular, and the porousness of the boundaries between them. While the secular may have

been invented to keep the supposedly irrational realms of religion and superstition at bay, it is also deployed for particular social, political, and indeed *religious* ends. The essential irony of secularism is that its rhetoric paints it as a neutral, authoritative space of nonsectarian rational discussion—a common ground upon which all can stand in order to come to unbiased conclusions—yet the secular itself becomes a realm of contestation, a discourse of power, and in some cases a mode of quasi-religious ideological formation. The search for a common rational framework in which the passions of the religious imagination are set aside remains elusive. Secularizing modes of Buddhism can acquire a similar irony. They can appear as forms of Buddhism that, following the classical narrative of secularism, have simply cast off outdated rituals and beliefs leaving the essentials. Yet if we take into account the more complex narrative of secularism—that it is not simply the “subtraction” of religion; that it is not a neutral space but a family of value-laden discourses with their own histories, cultures, and sociopolitical projects; that it is not simply the opposite of religion but is co-constitutive of the very concept of “religion”—then these new forms of secularizing Buddhism also become more complex and incapable of fitting a narrow model of either “religion” or “secularism.”

Yet, despite the limitations of these categories, their deployment in various state contexts has had profound real-world effects on Buddhist traditions. The particular ways in which secularism and religion have been configured in the United States, for example, has provided the background conditions for a radically new chapter in the long history of Buddhist meditation traditions. For the first time in history, these practices have taken on a life outside any Buddhist institutional control and have taken up residence in some of the world's most prominent secular institutions. They are utilized to ends in some cases peripheral or even antithetical to those of “traditional” forms of Buddhism. Buddhist institutions, in turn, draw from the prestige of scientific studies of meditation and in some cases offer explicitly “secular” programs. In the Chinese case, Buddhist institutions have significantly transformed themselves under pressure of the managerial secularism of the Communist Party, having to carve out places within the narrow space of legitimate, state-sanctioned “religion” while avoiding falling into the realms of “superstition.” In all of these cases, the categories of religious and secular pose particular problems and provide concrete opportunities and limitations that vary significantly depending on national context. Rather than a singular, monolithic secularization process spreading across the globe uniformly, we find multiple secularisms and multiple configurations of the religious-secular binary—in our examples, in India, the United States, and China—each of which nourishes certain forms of religion, discourages others, fosters new movements, and encourages others to wither. The field of tensions erected by the religious-secular binary drives transformation of religious traditions as they must navigate these tensions and refashion practice in diverse and rapidly changing sociopolitical landscapes.