

Special Focus:  
Buddhists and the Making of  
Modern Chinese Societies



***Buddhism and Global Secularisms***

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**Abstract:** Buddhism in the modern world offers an example of (1) the porousness of the boundary between the 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. Drawing on a few examples of Buddhism in various geographical and political settings, I hope to take a few modest steps toward illuminating some broad contours of the interlacing of secularism and Buddhism. In doing so, I am synthesizing some of my own and a few others' research on modern Buddhism, integrating it with some current research I am doing on meditation, and considering its implications for thinking about secularism. This, I hope, will provide a background against which we can consider more closely some particular features of Buddhism in the Chinese cultural world, about which I will offer some preliminary thoughts.

**Keywords:** secularism; modern Buddhism; meditation; mindfulness; vipassanā

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**The Religious-Secular Binary**

The wave of scholarship on secularism that has arisen in recent decades paints a more nuanced picture than the reigning model throughout most of the twentieth century. 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. In this view, 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-century, 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

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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, 1998; 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 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 nuanced picture of the complex interlacing of secular forces with religious ones, along with an 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 shaped by 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 process 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. Rather, it is something constantly renegotiated in various national and legal contexts.

The contemporary compulsion to put secularism and religion in scare-quotes betrays a meta-reflective stance that recognizes the extent to which the very categories of religious and secular are modern and co-constitutive, and do not simply refer to natural, unambiguous species of phenomena. 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, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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1 For a sampling of recent work reflecting these new articulations of secularism, see Asad, 2003; Bender and Taves, 2012; Butler, Habermas, Taylor, and West, 2001; Bubandt and von Beek, 2012; Taylor 2007; and Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, 2010.

have profound real-world effects on nations, communities, and individuals, since they are matters not only of rhetoric but 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 the boundaries of what is considered legitimate religious expression. In other cases (for example meditation, as I shall discuss below), 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 constitution with the realm of religion. In the religious-secular binary, “religion” is often modeled 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 masked is that the secular is not something that is simply *there* as the natural state of things that is revealed after one strips away the religious. Rather, it is rooted in a complex of tacit assumptions, ideas, 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 successors. The categories of religious and secular are particular ways of carving up and shaping modes of human life. Moreover, the very naturalization of secularism—its presumption to be the rational, empirical, natural, and unbiased stance—masks, while at the same time making more effective, its potential ideological functions, which are sometimes 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 socio-political 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, have the power to help establish or curtail certain forms of life.

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 and intermixed in ways particular to the socio-political configurations of particular states. Creating these categories is not a matter of identifying timeless essences but rather of demarcating certain modalities of thought, practice, and social engagement. In this sense, the religious-secular binary has created various new forms of life as 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 impacts 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 re-articulation in the languages of science and secular thought. This began during colonial period in Asia, in the nineteenth century, 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 to the emerging scientific worldview than the religion of the colonizers. Anagārika Dharmapāla in Ceylon, Sōen Shaku in Japan, and Taixu 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 in 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 with 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, 1965; Sōen, 1913). 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" (1927: 39-40). He similarly invoked passages from various

Buddhist sutras to suggest that they anticipated modern scientific findings on the infinite vastness of space, the microbial world, and various astronomical phenomena (48-52) and concluded that a “union between science and Buddhism” (49) would not just be of benefit to Buddhism, but even more to science itself. Buddhism 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” (1927: 54).

Taixu was the most prominent of several Chinese Buddhist thinkers of the early twentieth century to take an active interest in interfusing Buddhism with science. As Erik Hammerstrom shows (2015), other Chinese Buddhist thinkers similarly promoted parallels between secular science and the Dharma in this period. 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 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—not just science as a set of practices or an epistemological approach but as “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 on Buddhist logic, epistemology, and theories of (especially) the Consciousness-only School. Yet they did not 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, non-violent 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 categories of 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 like “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 trans-cultural, trans-religious 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.<sup>2</sup> Under colonialism and

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the emerging use of “spiritual” among Buddhist reformers of this period, see McMahan, 2012a.

European economic hegemony, these Buddhist reformers reformulated their tradition, sorting that which could be interpreted along the lines of scientific rationalism and spirituality 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 physical science, psychology, and semi-secular schools of philosophy like Transcendentalism and Idealism in their reinterpretations of their traditions (McMahan, 2012b).

### **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 later 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. It provides a ready example of how the categories of religious and secular are blurry and co-constitutive, and yet have real effects in the world.

The emergence of the Vipassanā movement and its recent secular descendants is one example. As Eric Braun ably chronicles in his recent work, *The Birth of Insight* (2014), 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 the mid-to-late twentieth century, when Vipassanā began to be promoted as a distinctively *non-religious* 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 central 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. And 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 2500 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” (2002: 15). “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, he 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 towards “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, that is, the “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. This is 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 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 official website, over 150 centers in dozens of countries around the world.<sup>3</sup> 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 religion to aid in this effort. He states,

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 non-judgmental, non-reactive, 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 is it merely the foisting of modern secular epistemology onto a Buddhist one. Rather, it is a selective bringing forward, reinterpretation, and transformation of specific Buddhist practices that can be made to resonate with modern secular practices and to 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 include the place that Goenka and his movement 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**

Part of what was necessary for making the momentous shift from meditation being centered exclusively in the monastery as a distinctively Buddhist practice to its current practice in contexts often completely outside the sphere of Buddhist institutions was this reframing of meditation in rigorously secular language. When the mass meditation movement began in Burma, the 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 post-colonial 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

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dhamma.org/en-US/locations/directory>. Accessed 4-7-2014.



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," and 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 face 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 Christian) often transgresses the putative boundaries of the secular, the general idea (granted, not uncontested) is that 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 US, 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 was quite consciously excised of explicitly religious language, in accordance with the particular religious-secular configuration of the United States (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).<sup>4</sup> In his books, talks, and articles, he avoids all but the vaguest references to the Buddhist origins of these practices and re-articulates them as secular, therapeutic, clinical, and sometimes "spiritual" practices. Mindfulness has subsequently taken on a life of its own in the US, 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 US, 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 that now have graduate programs in contemplative studies, and public middle 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

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<sup>4</sup> For Kabat-Zinn's own account of how he adapted Buddhist meditation techniques to clinical practice, see Kabat-Zinn, 2011.

companies are beginning to cover it, and even the US military has experimented with a mindfulness program.

What conditions allow for 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 US 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 books extoll 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. Mindfulness 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 meditation to particular configurations of the secular-religious distinction functioning in India and the US. Thus the very category of the secular, not just as an abstract conceptual entity but as a matter of law, has helped generate a new form of quasi-religious practice that is tuned to the sensibilities of professionals in the often highly stressful, competitive marketplace of global capitalism and the personalized demands of consumer society (Wilson, 2014). Yet despite the apparent secularity of the mindfulness movement, it cannot be construed as simply a move from the "religious" to the "secular" in some absolute sense. Indeed, this example shows that the line between these two is blurry and ambiguous. Meditation, of course, continues to be practiced in many 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 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 popular 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 meditation can reinvigorate ethical life and fine-tune one's connections with others. Thus in many cases meditation practice 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**

So, new conceptions of scientific Buddhism develop in Japan, Ceylon, and China as part of the resistance to colonial and hegemonic western powers; these conceptions spread to western Victorians who are restless to find a spiritual perspective harmonious with modern science; this establishes popular images of Buddhism as a kind of internal, spiritual science; the Vipassanā movement begins to promote Buddhist meditation outside the boundaries of Buddhism; this movement spreads to the US, where it attracts more non-Buddhists; innovators like Jon Kabat-Zinn attempt to separate “mindfulness” from Buddhism altogether, making it a secular and “spiritual” endeavor; scientific studies of meditation increase the prestige and legitimacy of mindfulness in secular realms; and finally, this tradition is exported back to Asia. Recently, Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness program has been established in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Taiwan, where it joins a number of Vipassanā centers already in operation, and where many of the cultural conditions that first made mindfulness viable in the West now exist, such as a capitalist economy and a rising professional class.

We need hardly note the irony that the initial reframing of Buddhism in scientific language among figures like Taixu, Dharmapāla, and Sōen Shaku was connected to projects to strengthen Buddhism and its institutions, while the distant descendant of this discourse, the mindfulness movement that now returns to Asia from the West, has shucked off most of the Buddhist doctrines, ethics, and institutions in which meditation was embedded for centuries.

Let us look specifically at China for a moment, where descendants of Asian Buddhist reform movements find Buddhism today in a state of revival and re-negotiation regarding its place in the modern life of a country with a very different type of secularism than those of either India or the US. 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.<sup>5</sup> While all secular states play some role in defining, 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. While there are ideological elements in virtually all secularisms, in contemporary China secularism has a privileged position at the state level. 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

<sup>5</sup> For a thoughtful analysis of uniquely Chinese processes of secularization, see Ji, 2008.

outright repressed, depending on whether they can be employed toward larger Party goals (Goossaert and Palmer, 2013; Ji, 2011). And in contrast to India (and to a certain extent the US), where religion has been a valued part of national culture, in China, it has been seen largely as an obstacle to progress.

Examples of such management regarding Buddhism include both overt and subtle forms, which often blur the boundaries between secular and religious in ways quite different from those mentioned above. 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 the current revival of the theme of scientific Buddhism that we have 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.<sup>6</sup> A Xinhua New Agency article entitled “China Encourages Buddhism-Science Dialogue to Promote Building Harmonious Society” illustrates this (in Li, 2009). It reports on a seminar at the second Forum that brought together Buddhist leaders and 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.” 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,” 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 toward 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.” 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup> My discussion of these conferences recapitulates and updates my treatment of them in McMahan, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-04/26/c\\_131552981.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-04/26/c_131552981.htm). Accessed 29-4-2014.

and is charged with communicating government regulations to Buddhists.<sup>8</sup> The themes at the conferences mirror themes publically 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 neutral 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 the mind, a culture, and 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 portrays Tibetan Buddhism as an exotic, fascinating but primitive other and Tibetans as subject to irrational religious and separatist passions. Tibetan Buddhist is 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, it is noteworthy that 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.<sup>9</sup> The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, especially, has been a dialogue partner with physicists and neuroscientists, and 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, in some cases offering more sophisticated articulations of arguments initially made by Taixu and some of the early framers of the relationship between Buddhism and science (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.

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 being transformed through its ever-closer interactions with scientific and secular institutions in Europe and the US. Emory University, for example, has an exchange program that sends American students to Dharamsala, India to

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<sup>8</sup> Ji Zhe suggests that the conference co-organizer, China Religious Culture Communication Association, is a front for the RAB (2001: 43) and that the conferences are essentially a matter of the Communist Party of China’s use of Buddhism for political purposes. Nevertheless, he argues, Buddhists do get some benefit from it as well in that it allows them a public forum otherwise unavailable (2001: 43-44).

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this is beginning to happen inside China as well. See Smyer Yü and Sodargye chapter in this issue.

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. This 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 the intertwining of Chinese Buddhism and 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 similarly 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." These are inventories of knowledge and practice which contain "cultural building blocks that active agents creatively combine and recombine as part of their making of self and society" (2011: 2). Such creative combinations might include liturgies of sutra chanters together with 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 the 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 socio-political projects; that it is not simply the opposite of religion but is also 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 US, 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 (McMahan 2012b). 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 US, and China—each of which nourish certain forms of religion, discourage others, foster new movements, and encourage 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 socio-political landscapes.

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