



Confession of a Buddhist Atheist

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Written with the same brilliance and boldness that made "Buddhism Without Beliefs" a classic in its field, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* is Stephen Batchelor's account of his journey through Buddhism, which culminates in a groundbreaking new portrait of the historical Buddha.

Stephen Batchelor grew up outside London and came of age in the 1960s. Like other seekers of his time, instead of going to college he set off to explore the world. Settling in India, he eventually became a Buddhist monk in Dharamsala, the Tibetan capital-in-exile, and entered the inner circle of monks around the Dalai Lama. He later moved to a monastery in South Korea to pursue intensive training in Zen Buddhism. Yet the more Batchelor read about the Buddha, the more he came to believe that the way Buddhism was being taught and practiced was at odds with the actual teachings of the Buddha himself.

Charting his journey from hippie to monk to lay practitioner, teacher, and interpreter of Buddhist thought, Batchelor reconstructs the historical Buddha's life, locating him within the social and political context of his world. In examining the ancient texts of the Pali Canon, the earliest record of the Buddha's life and teachings, Batchelor argues that the Buddha was a man who looked at human life in a radically new way for his time, more interested in the question of how human beings should live in this world than in notions of karma and the afterlife. According to Batchelor, the outlook of the Buddha was far removed from the piety and religiosity that has come to define much of Buddhism as we know it today.

Both controversial and deeply personal, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* is a fascinating exploration of a religion that continues to engage the West. Batchelor's insightful, deeply knowledgeable, and persuasive account will be an essential book for anyone interested in Buddhism.

"From the Hardcover edition."

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist Details

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From Reader Review Confession of a Buddhist Atheist for online ebook

Vegantrav says

First, I should say a brief word about the title: Buddhism is an atheistic religion, so being a Buddhist atheist is not anything at all unusual. Now, granted, many sects of Buddhism believe in various deities and spirits; however, one of the key teachings of Siddhattha Gotama (Batchelor uses the Pali spellings) was his rejection of the theism--his rejection of the existence of Brahman and Atman: God, The Absolutle, the Self--of the Hindu culture in which he lived. Gotama's atheism, as Batchelor points out, was not an explicit argument against the existence of God but rather a recognition that the existence of God is not relevant to the human condition.

Batchelor's confession leads us down two intertwining paths: Batchelor's own personal spiritual journey and a biography of the life of Siddhattha Gotama.

Batchelor relates his initiation into Tibetan Buddhism and his life as a monk and his eventual "disrobing"--giving up the monastic life to become a lay Buddhist teacher. Despite belonging to a branch of Buddhism that retains many superstitious beliefs, Batchelor never had much, if any, affinity for the supernatural elements of that sect but rather sought the peace and truth to be discovered in meditation and in following Gotama's Dhamma (the Pali spelling of Dharma).

The real interest in this book, for me anyway, is Batchelor's quest for the historical Gotama, which is not unlike the quest for the historical Jesus in which biblical scholars are engaged. The Gotama whom Batchelor finds is a man who teaches some things that many Buddhists would find shocking: for example, Batchelor argues that Gotama rejected the belief in karma and reincarnation.

Batchelor's Gotama, though, is not terribly unlike other portraits of the Buddha (I am thinking here of Karen Armstrong's biography of the Buddha): Gotama is a wise and witty man who urges his followers to think for themselves, who urges them to take nothing on faith or on authority or even on his own word but to test all things for themselves. Yes, Gotama does think he has found the answer to salvation in this life, but nibbana (Pali for nirvana) is not some heavenly bliss or even just escape from samsara; rather, nibbana is the condition that is attained upon a recognition and acceptance of the contingency of one's existence and an acceptance of the suffering of life, an embracing of this suffering, and then a transcending of the suffering so that, despite its existence, there is a cessation (a blowing out: nibbana) of the effects of suffering and of one's contingent status upon one's life.

The biography of Gotama that Batchelor provides is drawn from the Pali Canon, and Batchelor uses many of the same critical methods that biblical scholars use in approaching the historical Jesus. Batchelor gives readers a great perspective on the political and social world in which Gotama lived. I am certainly no scholar of Buddhism or of the life of Siddhattha Gotama; however, it seems to me that Batchelor does a great job of providing an accurate portrayal of the life and times of Siddhattha Gotama, and he does so without trying to persuade anyone of any particular religious or philosophical beliefs.

Batchelor is simply telling us the story of the life of the Buddha, and for anyone interested in that story, I would highly recommend this book. The figure of Siddhattha Gotama who emerges in this book is one of who was far more of a philosopher than a religious figure, and Gotama was certainly not dogmatist and seems to have little interest at all in organized religion or in the supernatural elements (God, life after death,

karma, spirits, etc.) with which many religions are deeply concerned.

What I found most attractive in this portrait of Gotama (and this feature is born out in other biographies of Gotama) was the emphasis on the individual finding truth for herself or himself. Gotama had attained enlightenment for himself, but he did not ask us to take anything that he taught on faith but rather to seek the truth for ourselves and even to put to the test the core teachings of his Dhamma.

David Teachout says

There are some reviews describing the book as a meandering and sometimes confusing foray into Buddhism and quote the author in his confession of taking on projects in an erstwhile and haphazard fashion. I won't go against the author in his self-description but I will note that the result is neither confusing nor meandering, if anything it achieves exactly what it declares itself to be, a journey of confession where searching for the man behind the myth, the Gotama behind the Buddha, becomes an ever-present shadow stemming from Batchelor's own life. The honesty and humility consistently exhibited here, combined with a deeply personal and committed understanding of the Buddhist experience and doctrine, is refreshing and deeply spiritual. There is never a sense in which the author fails to get to his point, any more than life is ever a failure for continuing. To dwell in the dhamma, to tread peacefully within the truth of uncertainty and take on the mentality of impermanence, this is precisely what is accomplished here and it is a journey that was a joy to walk with the author on.

Teresa says

Is Buddhism without beliefs ever really possible?

I think I may be going through an existential crisis right now in my life. Perhaps I have become too much of a jaded cynic, and I occasionally experience empathy fatigue, but I want to believe in something, only that I am not sure in what.

While I typically feel sufficiently content in my beliefs, or lack thereof, I have started to notice lately that I hold in consciousness some pockets of something that I can only describe as "emptiness", or "confusion" or "existential restlessness" or call it what you may, that I have chosen to try to explore further. This book has been tremendously personally meaningful for me in this quest, as it has helped me to refine and clarify my own belief system.

I have bought it about 6 or 7 years ago, but only read it this past week during the first ever one-week Buddhist retreat that I have attended.

Since instinctively rejecting Catholicism as a plausible belief system in my very early teens, and after further painful reflection, also by extension, rejecting any other theist doctrine too, I got to the conclusion, circa age 14-15, that I was an atheist. Also around the same time, and looking for tentatively satisfactory answers to way too complex existential questions that until then I had only encountered in literature besides in my own head, (as it didn't feel "safe" to discuss this with anyone), I became very interested in Buddhism as a potentially plausible belief system. How fantastic, a religion without God. Could this be the right one for me? Do I even need a religion at all?

However, I soon encountered the doctrines of rebirth and reincarnation as a massive brick wall that I could not negotiate. It felt too much like substituting one dogma I could not accept for another, out of desperation and delusion, and I abandoned it without ever going too deep.

I have practiced secular meditation (on and off) for about 15 years, mostly the version of mindfulness that is so relevant for several different models of psychotherapy nowadays. I have trained in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, and I have had the unbelievable privilege of training with Jon Kabat-Zinn for a few days about 10 years ago, and to become acquainted with the teachings of Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Stephen Batchelor, Christina Feldman, etc, etc. I often listen to talks held at the Dharma Seed archive, so I remain interested, as Buddhism is the belief system most closely aligned to most of my life values, but I never considered myself a Buddhist after dabbling with it in my late teens-early 20s.

Coming out as an Atheist is often quite difficult to negotiate too and there is, still in the 21st Century, some stigma related to it. The perplexity that one can encounter when forced to disclose their belief system (which I always try to avoid or delay) is much discussed among “us”. People that previously related in a “normal” way to you may start looking to see whether there are horns attached to your head once they know you do not believe in any god.

But I am still the same decent human being I was before the disclosure. I do not need a divine metaphysical being to dictate my inner sense of morality. I follow the principle of “*do no intentional harm*” both physically, and emotionally, I support charities, give my time to just causes, practice committed self-awareness and being a psychologist, I dedicate my whole life to help others to bring greater levels of self-acceptance and be happier in theirs.

If a lot of people would take the Humanist test <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/how-...> they may also discover perhaps that they have more secular views in some areas of life, death and ethical behaviour than they may have previously thought.

So I am first and foremost an Atheist, a Humanist. But could it also be that I am also a Buddhist?

Stephen Batchelor’s wonderful and tremendously thought provoking little book is firstly an autobiography. He describes his own path in life seeking to discover his own belief system. He was a Tibetan Buddhist monk for ten years, then following his dissatisfaction with some of the teachings, he moved to Zen Buddhism and was a Zen Buddhist monk for some time too, but eventually ended up disrobing and focusing on secular Buddhism, living for 15 years at the very same organisation where I spent a week at a retreat.

The fact that he struggled precisely with the doctrines of the permanence of consciousness in reincarnation was very telling to me, as this is the same area that kept me away from Buddhism as a serious plausible belief system that I could embrace.

His book is also a modern biography of the Buddha. After learning Tibetan and Pali, he dissects the most ancient texts and undertakes a labour of love in painstakingly teasing apart the teachings that can confidently be traced back to the Buddha himself, from those reinterpreted from much later commentaries of his teachings. He finds proof that Buddha was an atheist himself and that he specifically taught the ultimate impermanence of consciousness.

So, if Batchelor can reinterpret Buddhism in these terms, loosely around the idea that **Buddhist is as Buddhist does**, could it be the case that after so much struggle and doubt, I am, I can *really be* a Buddhist?

I am still not completely sure.

I wholeheartedly believe in the 4 Noble Truths, and I hold the 8-fold pathway for life in my utmost regard as a worthy aspiration, a model for behaviour that matches many of my most esteemed values in life. But you see, there are still at least 5 spheres of my behaviour that don't fully fit the strict Buddhist ethos:

1. *** I still kill bloodsucking insects from time to time.** Mostly in Summer, obviously, and mostly only whenever they have invaded my space uninvited, and only when it is obviously apparent that they are out there to get me. Still, not very Buddhist of me, I know.
2. *** In the same vein, I could never be a fully committed vegetarian.** Still, neither was the Buddha. But the smell of my husband frying bacon on a Saturday morning while I am still in bed resting the week away, is just too tempting to resist. After much reflection on animal suffering and wanting to actively engage in behaviours to prevent further damage to the planet, I am now only having meat a couple of times a month. But still, 100% vegetarian me is very far away from current intention *shrug*.
3. *** I am a pacifist, but I enjoyed Game of Thrones too much.** Would that automatically disqualify me? *scratches head* I may need to continue philosophical enquiry on this one, bear with me.
4. *** While I do not lie fully intentionally, I do not believe in the *Radical Honesty* movement either.** I believe in, and are fully committed to personal honesty and congruence, in cultivating self-awareness, in being truthful about my emotions, and in following in Socrates footsteps and aspiring to live a fully examined life. But when my emotions, if fully disclosed, have the slightest potential to harm other people, then I do not agree with this approach of letting hurtful words out into the air willy-nilly. Then I have to choose silence, or if not always possible, revert to little white lies to avoid causing harm. This is one of the Buddhist precepts that is perhaps most personally relevant to me. I have had the tragically ill fortune of having a malignant narcissist for a father. I do not doubt that his attitude and feelings for other people and his perpetual anger and hatred was genuine. Only that he left many emotionally damaged people in his callous wake. In that way, he was most likely "radically honest", but I would rather he had not been.
5. ***After trying and trying and trying for years, I still cannot bring myself to conjure fully heartfelt *metta sutta* (loving kindness) for people like multiple serial killers, Donald Trump, fundamentalist muslims who preach hatred and murder, or the Taliban who destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas, etc, etc, etc, or more disturbingly, errr. . . my own father.** There, I said it. That is my confession. No commentary necessary or available. I just can't.

So, being an imperfect, fully flawed, often ego-centric human being, these are my most glaring shortcomings as an aspiring Buddhist. Finally getting to read Batchelor's book and spending a week in communion with nature and like-minded people with similar existential questions and struggles has energised my curiosity and interest in this belief system. I think am finally ready to start the journey. Perhaps I'll have the chance of revising this book review in 10 years and then reflect some more about my trajectory. I may not be a Buddhist yet, but I totally want to be.

Bookish Reading Challenge 2018 #9. A book you picked up based on the title.

Pooja Kashyap says

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist is beautifully woven and presented by Stephen Batchelor in form of a written collage, as he himself mentions at the end of the book. Although the book is in narrative mode yet nowhere we found it a story presented by the writer in fact, while I was into the book, I felt as if Stephen is talking to me and describing the sequence of his life's events which led him towards Buddhism and finally his discovery of motif in life.

Having scant religious indoctrination the young lad of eighteen, he wanders from his native country England towards eastward and settles in Dharamsala, North of India. It is here that Stephen feels in sync with the teachings that satiates his questioning mind. He is first introduced to Geshe Rabten who left an important mark in the impressionist mind of Stephen. Although after couple of years, he feels certain disagreement with his teachings yet the effect didn't diminish his respect towards him, admitted Stephen.

Mindfulness meditation is the first technique that he imbibes through Geshe Rabten and S.N. Goenta both in India and later in Switzerland, where he went for dispersion of Buddhism. While in Switzerland, Stephen started feeling restlessness as he no longer felt convinced about the dogmatism being presented by the school of religion. Along with this, he discovered insatiable thirst of questioning and skeptical mind. Finally, he confronts his teacher and asks his permission to leave for Songgwangsa, South Korea to learn Zen Buddhism under Kusan Sunim. Within some time, it dawned upon Stephen that his new teacher is more inclined towards rituals and traditional scriptures and that there is insignificant place for Dharma, an outlook, which Stephen found difficult to assimilate consequent upon which he decided to disrobe.

In Songgwangsa, he also met a French woman, Songil, who happened to be a nun at the place. Having the same line of thought towards Buddhism, both decided to leave the monastery and converging their relationship into marriage.

Stephen and Martine (Songil's new name) travelled to Hong Kong, China, Lhasa and finally to West. There they decided to delve more into Buddhism and its fundamental message. Accordingly, Stephen was able to surface the hidden messages and sequences that led to the development of Siddhattha Gotama awakened as the Buddha via Pali Canon. Surfacing this aspect of Buddha, the writer gave the entire book structure and thrust.

Neatly, Stephen has been able to present the very message of Buddhism, which is, it is not about religion rather a methodology of living. This book has openly diluted the orthodoxies and mythologies that still exist with the life of Gotama Buddha. His journey and research in this book has acted as a guiding light for those who are completely new to Buddhism and for those who know something about it, this book will illuminate more knowledge. The book is engrossing, after all, its peeping through the chinks into a living life that existed around 2,500 years ago.

Michelle says

While this book was a bit scattered, it was well worth reading.
Full review: <http://bit.ly/ZGcl8E>

Suzanne says

I'd give Part One, the autobiographical section, a four; my only criticism is that it is too short and lacks detail. Part Two, however, merits at most a two. It is the bulk of the work, and should really be called "In Search of the Historic Buddha." Other reviews have commented that they are not historians and so don't feel that they can judge. I, on the other hand, am an historian, and can and do judge it. This is not a work of history; it is, at best, a speculative work. It is a work written by someone who, while rejecting the supernatural origins of his religious belief, still wants historical authority for what he does believe.

His only source is the Pali canon, which is not a reliable, authentic, or valid historical source. I looked in vain for any objective evidence that there even was such a person as Siddhartha Gautama. His method is completely invalid; he decides a priori what the Buddha's authentic voice would have been, goes looking for it, and finds it. He dismisses any account that does not meet his preconceptions for no other reason than that it does not meet his preconceptions.

He also lacks an adequate understanding of the historical context. For instance, he goes to great lengths to speculate about why Gautama did not have a son until he was nearly 30, yet it never occurs to him that Gautama may have had daughters before that. The text, as he quotes it, says "a son," not "a child." And historically, it is not unlikely that daughters would not have been noted.

I haven't finished it, and doubt that I will. I find it a pointless exercise. Why does it matter whether the Buddha was an historic figure, and if so, exactly what his personality and biography were? Like Jesus, like King Arthur, like any number of saints and martyrs, there probably was a man around whom these legends and myths accrued and to whom these sayings were attributed. If I'm interested in anything in this area, it is in the history of the accumulation of those legends and myths and what they tell us about the societies and cultures that created them, and ultimately what they tell us about the human condition.

We live in a free society in a free age. Extract from those teachings and practices what works for you. There is no need to attempt to justify it by recreating a historical authority. Have the strength and courage of your convictions.

Christopher says

Stephen Batchelor has been an advocate of Buddhism for several decades, but his thought has turned to stripping away from Buddhism what he feels are extraneous beliefs and practices. His book *Buddhism without Beliefs* caused a firestorm for suggesting that the doctrines of rebirth and karma, present in all historical expressions of Buddhism across Asia, are not essential to the religion. In *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, he expands on this new viewpoint.

This is essentially two books in one. Batchelor chronicles his life as a Buddhist, and then presents his new interpretation of the Pali canon. This double theme has irked some previous reviewers, but I think it makes sense. Batchelor's view of the Buddha's teachings has evolved as he moved from Tibetan Buddhism with its magical rituals and emphasis on the supernatural, through Korean Zen with a more austere but still arcane and unquestioning doctrine, to finally his late acquaintance with the Pali canon that he believes hides within it the truth of Gotama's life and teachings.

I quite enjoyed the memoir portion of the book. I knew that he was one of the late 1960s/early 1970s overland travellers to India, as he contributed a few remarks to David Tomory's oral history *A Season in Heaven*, but here we get a fuller account of his experiences on the overland trail and how he ended up

becoming a Buddhist monk among India's Tibetan exile community. His account of his Buddhist career after leaving India offers some enjoyable anecdotes about the spread of the religion among Westerners, as well as an insight onto ideological rivalries among Tibetan Buddhists (namely whether to venerate a certain protector god or not) that have torn that community apart.

I found Batchelor's reconstruction of the life of Gotama generally interesting. Batchelor believes that Gotama depended heavily on the patronage of contemporary rulers, and that the abandonment he felt in the final years of his life were due to regional political intrigues in which he played some part. Batchelor in fact constructs an elaborate biography for Gotama, and though I'd like to see it confirmed by trained historians before I fully swallow it, I appreciated hearing something of the fifth-century BC North Indian society in which Gotama lived.

When it comes to reconstructing what Gotama really taught, however, Batchelor's method is suspect. He aims to establish the Buddha's original teaching by removing all elements present in other religions of India at the time. Thus in translating the Buddha's first sermon, he leaves out the phrase "This is the last birth", as he assumes the presence of the doctrine of rebirth is a later corruption of the Buddha's teachings. But who is to say that the Buddha didn't believe in a few of the typical beliefs of contemporary Indian religious thought? Batchelor claims that he wants to remove all the mythology of Buddha as a perfect man, but he still assumes that the Buddha taught a doctrine that was wholly original and in no way mistaken, which to me seems the same kind of faith-based mythologising. Maybe the guy just didn't have it right after all and it was a mistake for a religion to pop up around his teachings.

Batchelor in fact tries to defend the reconstructed beliefs by claiming that what really matters is if they work to prevent suffering, not if they are "right" or "wrong". But if such is the case, why advocate Buddhism as opposed to astrology, Transcendental Meditation or myriad other practices that their adherents claim offer peace of mind? Ultimately this feels like the desperate thoughts of a man who has become so invested in Buddhism over his life that he has to, to save face, prove there is really something in it.

James says

I gave up. He lost me when he ran out of stuff to say, but still had half the book left to write.

Rebecca Dobrinski says

Atheism is NOT About You

Really, it's not. It is not an affront to your existence. It is about science. It is about questioning and searching for answers. It is about thinking for oneself.

For the God-themed issue of *Zen Dixie*, I read three books on atheism. No, these books did not provide me with any life-changing realizations – it was more like, as “they” say, “preaching to the choir.”

Yes, I am an atheist. No, I do not believe in anyone else's God. And, like I said in the opening paragraph, my atheism is not about anyone else but me.

After reading these books, I feel as though the world needs to be reminded that when someone realizes she is an atheist, it is not an attack on everyone else in the world that believes in God. This is the first striking lesson I learned from reading these books. People, even total strangers, take one's atheism personally.

Next, I am still the same person you knew the minute before you read the words "I am an atheist." Yep, still the same brunette with brown eyes, tattoos, and (multiple) degrees, who cares for her friends and volunteers for good causes. This is no different than if you never knew I had a cat.

This is another reminder the world needs after being told someone is an atheist. They are still the same person you liked, loved, and respected before you found out. Yes, you may be concerned that he will not be joining you in the afterlife, but he does not join you for dinner every night either. So, remember, it's OK. The world will not end if your friend is an atheist.

And now, onto the show...

To start this themed review, I began with Seth Andrews's *Deconverted: A Journey from Religion to Reason*.

Seth Andrews is the founder of The Thinking Atheist (TTA) community. You can find TTA at the web site (www.thethinkingatheist.com) and on Facebook. Andrews has a number of volunteers who help with the web site and Facebook page. Before he founded TTA, Andrews led a very different life – he was a Christian radio broadcaster and one of the outspoken faithful.

Andrews likened announcing one's atheism to "dipping yourself in jet fuel and showing up for a candlelight church service. The crowd is convinced you're going up in flames, and they're terrified that you'll take others with you."

Deconverted was the story of Andrews's journey from believer to atheist. He chronicled the doubt and questioning, the frustration, and ultimately his desire to "expose the flaws in the very teachings I once held so dear."

He admitted to writing it in what he calls "plain English," making the tone and language very accessible. Andrews also provided some insight into what many Americans have experienced when "coming out" as an atheist. He questioned the indoctrination of children into religion before they are mature enough to make the decision on their own. He pointed out the misogyny in the bible as well as the contradictions from book to book. All of these were the little things that planted the seeds of doubt and pushed Andrews to seriously consider the role religion played in his life and in society as a whole.

All in all, Andrews offered the following advice both in *Deconverted* and at The Thinking Atheist: Assume nothing. Question everything. Challenge the Opposition. And start thinking.

From *Deconverted*, I picked up Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*.

Richard Dawkins came to atheism with the mind of science. Being a historian rather than a scientist, I admit that I found Dawkins to be somewhat dry in places. *The God Delusion* was an excellent book – and one I highly recommend – but, if you are like me, do not expect it to be a quick read.

Dawkins, much like Andrews, highlighted the many inconsistencies of the world's religions. (Yes, I know that Dawkins wrote *The God Delusion* before Andrews wrote *Deconverted*, but I read Dawkins after Andrews – so, for me, this is an accurate statement.) He dove into the roots of religions and tackled the

constant claim that “Hitler was an atheist.” (spoiler alert – he wasn’t)

Dawkins is one of the most widely read published atheists. Both believers and atheists read these books, which can be seen on the Amazon reviews. As I am sure you would expect, the reviews were either strongly for or against Dawkins’s book. *The God Delusion* is not geared toward converting those strongly attached to their faith, but it certainly reminds those questioning that they are not alone.

One of the parts that sticks with me most from Dawkins’s book is the “New Ten Commandments” he found on the ebonmusings.org web site. He calls them an expression of consensual ethics. Here are a few to ponder:

In all things, strive to cause no harm.
Live life with a sense of joy and wonder.
Always seek to be learning something new.
Question everything.

To these he added, along with three others, “Value the future on a timescale longer than your own.”

These commandments helped lead me to the third book, Stephen Batchelor’s *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*.

I will admit, out of the three books this was the one I was most looking forward to reading. After being raised Catholic, I had more than a passing fancy for Buddhism. I read a lot and appreciated even more the ideals and guides for living that Buddhism provides.

Stephen Batchelor left his home in England and wound up in India, studying Buddhism where the exiled Dalai Lama resided. He became a monk and began working on translations of Buddhist texts into English. The more he learned, the more he taught others, especially westerners who were flocking to Buddhism in droves in the late 1960s.

Even before he made the decision to de-robe, Batchelor questioned the organization of Buddhism. He researched and read the ancient texts of Siddhattha Gotama and learned that the way the Buddha taught was unlike the religion Buddhism had evolved into. As he explained, he wrote *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* “from the perspective of a committed layperson who seeks to lead a life that embodies Buddhist values within the context of secularism and modernity.”

Batchelor was heavier on the Buddhism and lighter on the atheism, but that is not as bad a thing as I had originally thought. Upon finishing the book, I was somewhat disappointed that he devoted so much of the narrative to the history of Buddhism. After digesting the work for a day and pondering the ideas, I can see how the reader would need a greater understanding of the Buddha as Batchelor “knew” him.

Because of this, it is easier to not only grasp Batchelor’s de-robing, but to understand how and why he could not continue as a monk. It is also easier to understand that the Four Noble Truths and the eightfold path are not only tools of becoming enlightened, but are ways to creating a more civilized world and dealing with the pain and suffering of life.

With Buddhism, though, it is easier to grasp the transition from Buddhist monk to Atheist as early Buddhism is similar to the Ten Commandments Dawkins found.

There are some interesting observations to be made from these three books. On the surface, both Andrews and Batchelor were part of their respective clergy. Dawkins and Batchelor are both British. When broken down, each likely had similar paths of thinking that are quite compatible with each other.

This review (as a combination review/essay) originally appeared at Zen Dixie,
<http://www.zendixie.com/read.html>

ShriDurga says

"To practice the Dharma is like making a collage. You collect ideas, images, insights, philosophical styles, meditation methods, and ethical values that you find here and there in Buddhism, bind them securely together, then launch your raft into the river of life. As long as it does not sink or disintegrate and can get you to the other shore, then it works. That is all that matters. It need not correspond to anyone else's idea of what "Buddhism" is or should be." P229

So concludes Stephen Batchelor's *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, a manuscript-as-collage made up of equal parts autobiography, a reconstruction of the life of the Buddha, and the search for "true" Buddhism, the teachings of the Buddha shorn of the ideas of his age (and those that have followed). Holding Batchelor's raft together is his quest for a Buddhist Third Way, a path for an educated laity with leisure time to study and meditate.

Perhaps the most intriguing portion of the book is the story of the Buddha. Typically presented as an enlightened being above the fray of worldly affairs, Batchelor puts the Buddha back into the political and economic milieu of his day. As the son of a highly placed member of the ruling class, it is likely Gotama held some administrative or military post. He may have even attended college at Taxila. Either possibility might explain why he married and fathered late in life; the latter may explain why as soon as he began teaching he seemed to speak in such a confident and unique voice. In either case, the story of the four sights is most likely a later addition (and one that appears in the original cannon only in reference to a previous incarnation of the Buddha).

Following his enlightenment and his decision to teach, the Buddha soon realized he needed more than disciples, especially if he was to create more than just another religion. To make a new way of being and living, to make a new civilization, required protectors and benefactors. He enlisted in quick succession the kings of Magadha and Kosala, as well as a banker to finance the construction of a monastic center. And so began his life work. The whole thing came undone several decades later when the King of Kosala found the wife sent by the Buddha's tribe, the Sakyans, to be of slave blood rather than royal. Batchelor contends that even if the Buddha was not part of the conspiracy, there is no way he could not have known about it. The King's son by the slave girl returned the insult by sending an army to wipe out the Sakyans, leaving the Buddha without a home or relatives. All of his benefactors have passed away, replaced by younger men eager to expand their empires. And so in his final years the Buddha wandered alone with just a few of his remaining students and aides, left to die of food poisoning (perhaps a plot by the Jains) in the dusty hamlet of Kusinara.

Less dramatic than the Buddha's life is that of the author, which in its main themes accords with the experience of many European and North American Buddhists. In search of a dharma for a post-modern age, Batchelor finds himself at loggerheads with orthodoxy, forced to build his own theology out of experience and study. Along the way he discovers some odd things about himself. He reflexively bows to Buddha

images and enjoys circumambulating stupas. Many of the aspects of traditional practice he thought superfluous have in fact become essential to his being and to his happiness.

Others are less so, including "belief" in rebirth or karma beyond this life. In doing away with core tenets a bit of tinkering and rethinking is required, for which Batchelor has gone back to the Pali sources to find evidence and justification. As someone from a similar background and of like mind, I appreciate Batchelor's willingness to question his experience, to question his understanding of experience, and to question the traditional interpretations of experience. He is correct in observing that all schools of Buddhism have been selective in their presentations, and that his own is no more objective than any other. But in at least one instance he seems deliberately dishonest, reinterpreting the Buddha's words to create a meaning that is not intended.

He quotes the Mahasihanada Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Lion's Roar) as supporting a kind of "belief-free" Buddhism. The sutta begins with a critic denouncing the Buddha as a teacher who "does not have any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. The recluse Gotama teaches a Dhamma hammered out by reasoning, following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him, and when he teaches the Dhamma to anyone, it leads him when he practices it to the complete destruction of suffering." To which the Buddha says to his disciple Sariputta, "the misguided man Sunakkhatta is angry, and his words are spoken out of anger. Thinking to discredit the Tathagata [the Buddha:], he actually praises him..." Batchelor ends the quote prematurely to draw the conclusion he desires, that a Dhamma hammered out by reason is praiseworthy. The remainder of the Buddha's remark points to something different, that what is of value is the effectiveness of the teaching. "It is a praise of the Tathagata to say of him: 'When he teaches the Dhamma to anyone, it leads him when he practices it to the complete destruction of suffering.'"

In the same sutta, the Buddha goes on to expound his many supernormal powers and concludes with a warning to all who claim his Dhamma is nothing more than a Dhamma of reason: "Sariputta, when I know and see thus, should anyone say of me: 'The recluse Gotama does not have any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. The recluse Gotama teaches a Dhamma (merely) hammered out by reasoning, following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him' -- unless he abandons that assertion and that state of mind and relinquishes that view, then as (surely as if he had been) carried off and put there he will wind up in hell."

Clearly the Buddha saw himself as something more than just an ordinary human. He was someone who experienced the equivalent of a revelation, an extraordinary event that conferred superhuman powers of understanding and insight. But as much as he spoke of himself in this way, he did not, as Batchelor observes, discourse on metaphysics - a first cause, a creator, the soul, the eternal - except when such issues were forced, on which occasions he replied as something of an "ironic atheist," poking fun at those who persist in debating the improvable and unknowable.

Perhaps this has encouraged Batchelor to ignore the Buddha's superhuman qualities to see instead something of Iron Age psychologist, a man concerned solely with the suffering of here and now, in which all experience is of equal ontological value. Contrary to Buddhist orthodoxy, Batchelor says the Buddha did not speak of relative and ultimate truth. He did not privilege mind over matter, consciousness over form. He was not just another Indian sage infatuated with Brahma or Atman, which is much of what Buddhism has since become, with its worship of the Undivided, the Ground of Being, or Original Mind.

For Batchelor Buddhism becomes a tool for exploring existential groundlessness, a call for action in the Four Noble Truths: Embrace (suffering), Let Go (of craving), Stop (and experience cessation of craving), and Act (to cultivate the path). While emphasizing the absence of "belief" and reliance on the power of the self, at the

same time he recognizes the need to find a way to live "ironically" with dogmas, orthodoxies and institutions, "to appreciate them for what they are - the play of the human mind in its endless quest for connection and meaning - rather than timeless entities that have to be ruthlessly defended or forcibly imposed."

"If 'secular' religion were not considered a contradiction in terms," he concludes, "I would happily endorse such a concept."

#

Nandakishore Varma says

*This we may term the fundamental posture of the Buddhist mind. The serious commitment of the Occidental mind to the concerns and value of the living person is fundamentally dismissed, as it is in Jainism, and in the Sankhya too. However, the usual Oriental concern for the monad also is dismissed. There is no reincarnating hero-monad to be saved, released, or found. **All life is sorrowful, and yet, there is no self, no being, no entity, in sorrow. There is no reason, consequently, to feel loathing, shock, or nausea, before the spectacle of the world: but, on the contrary, the only feeling appropriate is compassion (karuna), which is immediately felt, in fact, when the paradoxical, incommunicable truth is realized that all these suffering beings are in reality - no beings.***

...

The main point of the doctrine is clear enough, however, which is, namely, that, since all things are without a self, no one has to attain extinction; everyone is, in fact, already extinct and has always been so. Ignorance, however, leads to the notion and therefore the experience of an entity in pain. And not disdain or loathing, but compassion is to be felt for all those suffering beings who, if they were only quit of their ego-nation, would know-and experience the fact-that there is no suffering person anywhere at all.

- Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God, Vol. III – Oriental Mythology*

The above quote from Joseph Campbell (especially the highlighted portion) delineates the core concept of the philosophy propounded by Gautama Buddha – the non-existence of the soul. Here is where the Buddha takes off from the philosophies extant in India until that point of time, and takes the radical step of the killing off of the soul. Traditional Hindu thought posits the *Atman*, or individual soul, as an expression of the *Brahman*, the World Soul: the self and the Self. The aim of enlightenment is to realise that worldly existence is illusory: the “real” existence begins when one’s ego is extinguished and the oneness with the *Brahman* is known. This frees the soul from the cycle of karma, birth, rebirth and worldly existence.

The Buddha took this philosophy and stood it on its head. He agreed that suffering arises because of the attachment of the ego to the world – the basic illusory nature of the ego is to be understood, and let go. However, after this event, there is no unveiling of a beatific existence in an everlasting garden of the eternal bliss of oneness with the Brahman – because it doesn’t exist. In fact, nothing exists other than this fleeting moment, this here and the now. This is the liberation, the Nirvana.

On the practical front, the Hindu philosophies reinforced the existing political system. If one’s existence on

this earth is illusory, it does not matter whether one is a Kshatriya king enjoying all the palace delights or a lowly untouchable scavenger carting away human excrement – the souls of both these people are parts of the same Brahman. In another life with different karma, they can be reversed until ultimately they merge with the world soul. The duty of the individual was to realise this and be a faithful cog in the machine, all the time trying to attain a higher plane of existence.

The Buddha did not question the fact that one is only a cog in the machine – however, by denying the existence of the soul, he proposed a different solution for the ending of pain: that of the cog to stop functioning as a cog. This was revolutionary in the sense that it threatened the existence of Indian society as one knew it at that point of time.

However, as Buddhism grew and spread as a religion, Gautama's teachings were coloured and corrupted by the local beliefs wherever it reached. It seems that man's need for transcendence proved stronger than his need for an earthly nirvana – the result is the religion which the world knows today as "Buddhism", which is ridden with rituals and superstitions, and the very beliefs in karma and rebirth which the Buddha rejected. And in its birthplace in India, Buddhism was assimilated into Hinduism and the Buddha was transformed into an incarnation of Lord Vishnu!

In *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, internationally reputed Buddhist scholar and former monk Stephen Batchelor analyses this transformation. He does it as he recounts his career transformation from monk to layman; from his initiation into Buddhism under the Dalai Lama, to his loss of faith in its polytheistic worldview and subsequent shift to Zen Buddhism in Korea; his disenchantment with its worship of emptiness and hollow rituals which led to his eventual disrobing and marriage to a fellow bhikhuni (nun); his retracing of Siddhartha's life journey geographically and historically while researching the Buddha's discourses at the same time; and his ultimate realisation of its essential atheism.

The full review is available on my blog.

Lori says

This is the first Stephen Batchelor book I have read, and it definitely won't be the last. It's exactly what I was looking for. The first half of the book describes his own experience as a Buddhist monk primarily in Tibet and Korea, up until he disrobed. The second half focuses on the Buddha's life and teachings, based on Batchelor's research of the Pali Canon and his own experience in Asia as a lay practitioner.

I think it's safe to say that Batchelor is a representative of Western Buddhism, which can be a controversial subject in and of itself. It was my most concrete introduction to Western Buddhism, of which I apparently associate with the most. I like that he puts some of the Asian cultural influences into context for the Western mind. In the past, I have struggled with some Buddhist concepts because of those cultural differences. Batchelor's teachings of Buddhism resonate with me more than any other author has thus far - it has sparked something within me, and I am now very anxious to get my hands on more of his books.

Caitlin says

Not since Chogyam Trungpa's "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism" has an analysis of Buddhism had

such a profound effect on me. Part spiritual autobiography, part scholarly text. Batchelor's monastic journey led to studies and work with many important teachers (the Dalai Lama, for one). But his quest became stymied by increasing unease, due to unquestioning allegiances, archaic conventions and, eventually, as he dug deeper into the Pali Canon (bless his patience), contradictions about the historical (romanticized) Buddha and what it appeared the Buddha was actually doing out there under that Bo Tree. It seems that Gautama, the existentialist, was caught in the midst of serious political struggles and cranky benefactors, never out to found a religion at all, but wishing to build community and share his prescription for removal of suffering (the Four Noble Truths). Only later, has the concept of enlightenment become synonymous with struggle and exclusivity, thanks to his vision having been hijacked and fractured by so many splintered schools of thought. That said, even Batchelor doesn't throw baby out with bathwater, and shows the utmost respect for different perspectives. In the end, though he doesn't remain convinced that there is anything beyond this life, he feels that Buddhism offers a tremendously sane and compassionate way to live, whether or not nirvana exists. Even if one doesn't agree with Batchelor, this is a highly important book on Buddhism, and should be read by all who practice Buddhism or wish to further understand this philosophy.

Frank Jude says

This is simply a wonderful book! The reaction to it from the more 'conservative' Buddhists (like B. Allan Wallace, from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and others from the Theravada) is all the evidence one would need to prove Batchelor's point: there are all too many Buddhists who praise the Buddha and the Buddhist traditions for it's rationality and critical questioning, but keep their questioning from reflecting back on the tradition. For such people, it's as though their understanding of what the Buddha is alleged to have taught is the limit of their imagination and curiosity!

And so, countless Buddhist teachers 'tow the party line,' repeating -- regurgitating -- pat formulas, including the dogma that what they are teaching is not dogma! And Batchelor speaks from his experience, and from his understanding and places all his cards on the table. He evidences more humility than many of his critics, and says up front that he is constructing an understanding of the Buddha that speaks to him -- and to those of us with a more secular temperament.

Such a 'secular religion' (and though Batchelor shies away from this term as a 'contradiction in terms -- which is just why I utilize it!) speaks to many today who reject the claustrophobic atmosphere of much religion, and will continue to do so as 'non-believers,' at least according to many recent polls, is the group growing at the fastest pace in the US.

Jim Coughenour says

"I am glad I belong to a religion that worships a tree." No, this is not Jake Sully saluting the Na'vi in *Avatar* -- it's Stephen Batchelor explaining his "Buddhist atheism." But in this case, 3D means dull, dispiriting and diffuse.

I enjoy confessions, especially when they involve spiritual conturbation: Mark Matousek's *Sex, Death, Enlightenment*; Andrew Harvey's *The Sun at Midnight*; even Frank Schaeffer's half-cocked *Crazy for God*. I also (if rarely) appreciate oblique approaches to spirituality, as in Jacob Needleman's *Lost Christianity* or Pankaj Mishra's *An End to Suffering*. What I don't enjoy or appreciate is a book by someone whose journey

is as entropic as my own.

Batchelor (who, I have to say, sounds like a genuinely pleasant fellow) wanders through his story like a beggar with his bowl. He aims to recover the genuine teaching of the historical Buddha, but the closest he can get is the jumble of Pali palm-leaf manuscripts, compiled in Siam hundreds of years after Gotama's death. (By comparison the Christian Gospels are terse documentary footage.) He wants to purge Buddhist religiosity of its "supernatural" Hindu elements, yet the Dhammic tenets he retains are as generic and insipid as a fortune cookie.

"I think of myself as a secular Buddhist who is concerned entirely with the demands of this age (*saeculum*) no matter how inadequate and insignificant my responses to these demands might be. And if in the end there does turn out to be a heaven or nirvana somewhere else, I can see no better way to prepare for it." Astringent radicalism or cutting critique this is not, even with that pointless pinch of Latin.

Batchelor admits he assembles his books like a collage – his *Confession* bears him out. It's composed of aleatoric autobiography, theological deconstruction, sectarian reconstruction, pilgrimage/travelogue, and tortured, puerile affirmations. One night as he steps into the courtyard of the Lotus Nikko Hotel in Kushinagar, he reflects, "I will never see what Gotama saw, but I can listen to the descendants of the same cicadas he would have heard when night fell in Kusinara all those years ago." Like the Christian hymn "I walked today where Jesus walked," this is kitsch on the verge of nonsense.
