

Killing the Buddha



By Sam Harris

“Kill the Buddha,” says the old koan. “Kill Buddhism,” says [Sam Harris](#), author of [The End of Faith](#), who argues that [Buddhism’s philosophy](#), insight, and practices would benefit more people if they were not presented as a religion.

The ninth-century Buddhist master Lin Chi is supposed to have said, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Like much of Zen teaching, this seems too cute by half, but it makes a valuable point: to turn the Buddha into a religious fetish is to miss the essence of what he taught. In considering what Buddhism can offer the world in the twenty-first century, I propose that we take Lin Chi’s admonishment rather seriously. As students of the Buddha, we should dispense with Buddhism.

This is not to say that Buddhism has nothing to offer the world. One could surely argue that the Buddhist tradition, taken as a whole, represents the richest source of contemplative wisdom that any civilization has produced. In a world that has long been terrorized by fratricidal Sky-God religions, the ascendance of [Buddhism](#) would surely be a welcome development. But this will not happen. There is no reason whatsoever to think that Buddhism can successfully compete with the relentless evangelizing of Christianity and Islam. Nor should it try to.

The wisdom of the Buddha is currently trapped within the religion of Buddhism. Even in the West, where scientists and Buddhist contemplatives now collaborate in studying the effects of meditation on the brain, Buddhism remains an utterly parochial concern. While it may be true enough to say (as many Buddhist practitioners allege) that “Buddhism is not a religion,” most Buddhists worldwide practice it as such, in many of the naive, petitionary, and superstitious ways in which all religions are practiced. Needless to say, all non-Buddhists believe Buddhism to be a religion—and, what is more, they are quite certain that it is the wrong religion.

To talk about “Buddhism,” therefore, inevitably imparts a false sense of the Buddha’s teaching to others. So insofar as we maintain a discourse as “Buddhists,” we ensure that the wisdom of the Buddha will do little to inform the development of civilization in the twenty-first century.

Worse still, the continued identification of Buddhists with Buddhism lends tacit support to the religious differences in our world. At this point in history, this is both morally and intellectually indefensible—especially among affluent, well-educated Westerners who bear the greatest responsibility for the spread of ideas. It does not seem much of an exaggeration to say that if you are reading this article, you are in a better position to influence the course of history than almost any person in history. Given the degree to which religion still inspires human conflict, and

impedes genuine inquiry, I believe that merely being a self-described “Buddhist” is to be complicit in the world’s violence and ignorance to an unacceptable degree.

It is true that many exponents of Buddhism, most notably the [Dalai Lama](#), have been remarkably willing to enrich (and even constrain) their view of the world through dialogue with modern science. But the fact that the Dalai Lama regularly meets with Western scientists to discuss the nature of the mind does not mean that Buddhism, or [Tibetan Buddhism](#), or even the Dalai Lama’s own lineage, is uncontaminated by religious dogmatism. Indeed, there are ideas within Buddhism that are so incredible as to render the dogma of the virgin birth plausible by comparison. No one is served by a mode of discourse that treats such pre-literate notions as integral to our evolving discourse about the nature of the human mind. Among Western Buddhists, there are college-educated men and women who apparently believe that Guru Rinpoche was actually born from a lotus. This is not the spiritual breakthrough that civilization has been waiting for these many centuries.

For the fact is that a person can embrace the Buddha’s teaching, and even become a genuine Buddhist contemplative (and, one must presume, a buddha) without believing anything on insufficient evidence. The same cannot be said of the teachings for faith-based religion. In many respects, Buddhism is very much like science. One starts with the hypothesis that using attention in the prescribed way (meditation), and engaging in or avoiding certain behaviors (ethics), will bear the promised result (wisdom and psychological well-being). This spirit of empiricism animates Buddhism to a unique degree. For this reason, the methodology of Buddhism, if shorn of its religious encumbrances, could be one of our greatest resources as we struggle to develop our scientific understanding of human subjectivity.

The Problem of Religion

Incompatible religious doctrines have balkanized our world into separate moral communities, and these divisions have become a continuous source of bloodshed. Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it has been at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews vs. Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians vs. Catholic Croatians; Orthodox Serbians vs. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants vs. Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims vs. Hindus), Sudan (Muslims vs. Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims vs. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists vs. Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims vs. Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite vs. Sunni Muslims), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians vs. Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis vs. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. These are places where religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in recent decades.

Why is religion such a potent source of violence? There is no other sphere of discourse in which human beings so fully articulate their differences from one another, or cast these differences in terms of everlasting rewards and punishments. Religion is the one endeavor in which us–them thinking achieves a transcendent significance. If you really believe that calling God by the right name can spell the difference between eternal happiness and eternal suffering, then it becomes quite reasonable to treat heretics and unbelievers rather badly. The stakes of our religious differences are immeasurably higher than those born of mere tribalism, racism, or politics.

Religion is also the only area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defense of their strongly held beliefs. And yet, these beliefs often determine what they live for, what they will die for, and—all too often—what they will kill for. This is a problem, because when the stakes are high, human beings have a simple choice between conversation and violence. At the level of societies, the choice is between conversation and war. There is nothing apart from a fundamental willingness to be reasonable—to have one's beliefs about the world revised by new evidence and new arguments—that can guarantee we will keep talking to one another. Certainty without evidence is necessarily divisive and dehumanizing.

Therefore, one of the greatest challenges facing civilization in the twenty-first century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns—about ethics, spiritual experience, and the inevitability of human suffering—in ways that are not flagrantly irrational. Nothing stands in the way of this project more than the respect we accord religious faith. While there is no guarantee that rational people will always agree, the irrational are certain to be divided by their dogmas.

It seems profoundly unlikely that we will heal the divisions in our world simply by multiplying the occasions for interfaith dialogue. The end game for civilization cannot be mutual tolerance of patent irrationality. All parties to ecumenical religious discourse have agreed to tread lightly over those points where their worldviews would otherwise collide, and yet these very points remain perpetual sources of bewilderment and intolerance for their coreligionists. Political correctness simply does not offer an enduring basis for human cooperation. If religious war is ever to become unthinkable for us, in the way that slavery and cannibalism seem poised to, it will be a matter of our having dispensed with the dogma of faith.

A Contemplative Science

What the world most needs at this moment is a means of convincing human beings to embrace the whole of the species as their moral community. For this we need to develop an utterly nonsectarian way of talking about the full spectrum of human experience and human aspiration. We need a discourse on ethics and spirituality that is every bit as unconstrained by dogma and cultural prejudice as the discourse of science is. What we need, in fact, is a [contemplative science](#), a modern approach to exploring the furthest reaches of psychological well-being. It should go without saying that we will not develop such a science by attempting to spread “American Buddhism,” or “Western Buddhism,” or [“Engaged Buddhism.”](#)

If the methodology of Buddhism (ethical precepts and meditation) uncovers genuine truths about the mind and the phenomenal world—truths like emptiness, selflessness, and impermanence—these truths are not in the least “Buddhist.” No doubt, most serious practitioners of meditation realize this, but most Buddhists do not. Consequently, even if a person is aware of the timeless and noncontingent nature of the meditative insights described in the Buddhist literature, his identity as a Buddhist will tend to confuse the matter for others.

There is a reason that we don't talk about “Christian physics” or “Muslim algebra,” though the Christians invented physics as we know it, and the Muslims invented algebra. Today, anyone who emphasizes the Christian roots of physics or the Muslim roots of algebra would stand

convicted of not understanding these disciplines at all. In the same way, once we develop a scientific account of the contemplative path, it will utterly transcend its religious associations. Once such a conceptual revolution has taken place, speaking of “Buddhist” meditation will be synonymous with a failure to assimilate the changes that have occurred in our understanding of the human mind.

It is as yet undetermined what it means to be human, because every facet of our culture—and even our biology itself—remains open to innovation and insight. We do not know what we will be a thousand years from now—or indeed that we will be, given the lethal absurdity of many of our beliefs—but whatever changes await us, one thing seems unlikely to change: as long as experience endures, the difference between happiness and suffering will remain our paramount concern. We will therefore want to understand those processes—biochemical, behavioral, ethical, political, economic, and spiritual—that account for this difference. We do not yet have anything like a final understanding of such processes, but we know enough to rule out many false understandings. Indeed, we know enough at this moment to say that the God of Abraham is not only unworthy of the immensity of creation; he is unworthy even of man.

There is much more to be discovered about the nature of the human mind. In particular, there is much more for us to understand about how the mind can transform itself from a mere reservoir of greed, hatred, and delusion into an instrument of wisdom and compassion. Students of the Buddha are very well placed to further our understanding on this front, but the religion of Buddhism currently stands in their way.

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