

# Truth Is Within

Just Another Buddhist Monk's Weblog

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Friday, November 08, 2013

## Science, Religion, and Culture

I was thinking to write an article about the difference between religion and culture, but it doesn't seem like the discussion would be complete without including religion's best frenemy, science. So, here goes.

I'm writing this article both because these three topics are of course of great professional interest to me as a Buddhist monk, but also because of how heavily they weigh upon my practical life. Culture, especially, has been the bane of much of my monastic life and I have yet to find much positive to say of it.

First, some definitions. I'm defining the three terms as follows:

**Science** is the pursuit of knowledge.

**Religion** is taking something seriously.

**Culture** is habitual behaviour.

These are purposefully bare definitions that I doubt would satisfy the proponents of any of the above. The point is to contrast and demarcate the boundaries between the three.

Science and religion can be best friends or worst enemies; if you take science seriously, it becomes religious. This is great when you also take happiness and suffering seriously, as that will help limit your scientific pursuits to those that are of actual benefit. Science without religion is lame, as Einstein famously said. This is true, I think, but I would say it is more importantly *untrained*. Science can be incredibly beneficial but it requires beneficial religion (i.e. taking beneficence seriously) to train it to be consistently so, otherwise it is unpredictable and mostly useless. Bad religion, of course, makes science a tool for supreme evil, whereas science without religion can only be accidentally evil.

Where science and religions are worst enemies is where religion is blind. Most religions

eschew science for this very reason, since they are formed from culture, rather than science.

Culture becomes religion when it begins to be taken seriously, in the same way as science does. Unlike science, however, culture is only accidentally purposeful - though it may seem scientific, it is not purposefully so. Much of the Jewish culture I grew up with is of this nature - some of it, like not eating cloven-hoofed animals, may have been informed by science, and some of it, like not eating meat with milk, seems to be purely religious in origin, but much of it, e.g. holiday rituals like Pesach and Hanukkah, is simply historical tradition that has come to be taken seriously.

Buddhism is similarly plagued by culture; I can't in fact think of any instance where culture has turned religious to the benefit of Buddhism, and have a library full of examples of where it has caused harm.

Take the offering of rag robes to monks, for example. 9 out of 10 Buddhists haven't a clue I'm sure what this tradition means or where it came from; not many Buddhist monks wear rag robes anymore, after all. We are supposed, of course, to try our best to be content with rags for robes; way back when, this lead lay people to seek to gain merit by throwing away good cloth in a place where they knew the monks would find it. The practice grew into a tradition of draping good cloth over the branches of trees by the path monks were known to walk to and from the village on. Eventually, people began to take this practice seriously and voila it became religious.

Now, this wouldn't have been a bad thing if it had stayed simply at throwing robes into the forest but the thing about taking things seriously is that they therefore require structure. Given that there is nothing in Buddhism to provide a set structure for throwing rags into forests, havoc ensueth. One of my most memorable experience of a rags-robe offering ceremony was where the entire village showed up, mostly drunk, with a dead tree in a bucket of sand with money dangling from its branches and... no robe. Seriously, they prepared the ceremony and I asked where the robe is and they didn't know what I was talking about - they thought it was all about money.

Mostly it is, in Thailand. "Discarding a forest robe" has become one of the greatest money-making endeavours for monasteries today. Now, far be it for me to criticize those who would support Buddhist monastic institutions, but it is a bit of a leap from monks scrounging for discarded cloth to cover their private parts to monks scrounging for bills and coins to cover their satellite television costs...

But I digress. The point is that culture seems destined to ruin religion - given our confidence that Buddhism is pretty much perfect, it seems apt to ask how culture could

possibly improve it? I suppose the same could be said for science, for that matter - certainly, materialist science has done its share in blinding Buddhist practitioners to, for example, the reality of rebirth. But this seems unfair to science; science is, after all, about knowledge and knowledge and truth are inseparable. That materialist science is blind to certain truths merely makes it unscientific.

The same cannot be said about culture. Culture is habit, which can be wholly detrimental to religion and yet remain cultural. Another example I'm fond of regaling my students with is about a monastery I once stayed at that holds yearly beauty pageants as part of their cultural show. Somehow, culture has eclipsed religion making us blind to the very teachings we are supposed to be promulgating.

On a personal level, culture-turned-religion has made it ever difficult to live among "Buddhists", as they are unable (or unwilling, I guess) to distinguish the aspects of their religion that come from science (i.e. the Buddha's enlightenment) and those that stem from culture. The Buddha himself employed culture, I suppose; the rains retreat, the holy days, the kathina ceremony, etc. could be seen as a sort of Buddhist culture that, while not improving on the religious teachings themselves, may be seen *supporting* the religion.

Maybe a model could be found here; culture is to be allowed where it supports the teaching without becoming religious. Meaning, it is a merely a tool and should not be taken too seriously, and should **absolutely never** be used to alter the teachings in any way. Meaning, culture should never be a reason to act, speak, or think in a way that is at odds with religion (at least as far as Buddhism goes, of course).

This seems to be the missing wisdom in Buddhist cultures today, where we find Buddhist monks praying for warlords to be victorious and calling for jihad against non-Buddhist immigrants; where we find lay people controlling monks and forcing them to adjust their practices to fit cultural whims; where we find that Buddhists of all stripes have turned Buddhism into a ritualistic orgy of food, money and power.

I'm hyperbolic, of course. While is much that has crept into Buddhism to make one's skin crawl, I don't personally have to deal with orgies on a regular basis. Still, it is enough to make one want to avoid Buddhists entirely, both Eastern and Western, when one sees how easily they turn culture into religion and use their new religion to turn against Buddhism. As other Buddhist teachers can surely attest, there is something refreshing about teaching non-Buddhists; they are a clean slate, as it were, on which your teaching can be inscribed in unadulterated form. Those indoctrinated in some form of Buddhism through their culture (and here I include Western Buddhist culture insofar as it exists) are often unable to see the forest for the trees.

I guess I would like this article to encourage people to question their steadfast adherence to culture; I doubt that it will, though. There's something comfortable about habits, especially when they "work". Much of "Buddhist" culture is pleasant and non-threatening; it allows us to think we can have our omelette without breaking any eggs. In fact, it seems to actually hinder the breaking of eggs - any part of the religion that threatens the cultural norms is shunned like heresy.

More commonly, though, culture simply makes religion practice awkward. Cultures where societal interaction is important, for example, make a mockery of things like meditation and monasticism; monks are seen as little more than priests or, at best, social workers whose duty it is to solve the problems of the laity. Cultures that emphasize money and power turn monks into politicians and kings. Etc.

Mostly, I think we should be able to expect Buddhists to keep their cultures to themselves, just as we expect people of other religions to keep their religion to themselves. This is the most trying aspect of cultural Buddhism, that Buddhists seem bent on enforcing their culture on people like me who are just trying to practice the teachings of the Buddha. Certainly, I must have my own cultural ideas about Buddhism that colour my own practice; this article is not meant to point fingers, but to argue against those who believe (consciously or not) that culture is somehow an integral part of religion.

Believe me, having travelled around the world and seen Buddhism practised in more varied ways than I can count, I can say for certain that Buddhist culture can never and should never be more than the shell of an egg - it can protect its charge but can never improve upon it. And if it's too thick in its application, it can stifle and kill that which it is meant to protect.

So, there you go. Peace :)

Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu at 10:43 PM

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**Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu**

5 years ago +14

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### Science, Religion, and Culture

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**Michael French** 5 years ago +2

Right off the top, let me say I appreciate that you defined your terms, and I will try to stay within those.

[Read more \(36 lines\)](#)



**Hasaka Ratnamalala**

5 years ago

Shared publicly

Even though my "Cultural Buddhistness" do not allow me to go in to an argument with a Buddhist monk, the importance of this subject force me to add my two cents to this

[Read more \(38 lines\)](#)



**Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu**

5 years ago (edited)

First, I'm not sure how my post could be considered a declaration of war against "cultural Buddhists" - I didn't use the term

[Read more \(58 lines\)](#)



**belaghoulashi**

5 years ago

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Some thought-provoking comments here in both the blog and the comments.

Culture, naturally, is what varies and changes

[Read more \(63 lines\)](#)



**kalyana wolf**

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5 years ago

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Happy to read the thoughts of another striving for balance in this challenging world. Repeated application of mind to moment and compassion generosity and wisdom are all we have in the sweeping sea of cultural garbage. Many more of us are in the same boat, or at least near it, like survivors of the Titanic.  
Samaneri Kalyana



**Metta Bhavana**

5 years ago

Shared publicly

Bhante, when I read your informal impressions, which I don't believe you meant to be more than that, the phrase that came up for me was: "Eko care khaggavisāṇakappo." You, of course,  
[Read more \(47 lines\)](#)



**Darwen Masterson**

5 years ago

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"Buddhism is pretty much perfect." I agree completely! But...you can have the best religion in the known universe, ultimately it's up to the people and individuals to be vigilant on walking  
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**Mogharaja** shared this via Google+

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**Douglas Dobchuk**

5 years ago +2

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Hello Bhante,  
I have only read your article quickly but I feel compelled to make several observations/comments.  
[Read more \(16 lines\)](#)



**Mauricio Mota**

5 years ago

Shared publicly

Sadhu



**Vino Wijeratne**

5 years ago +2

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You said it all when you said, quote, "This is the most trying aspect of cultural Buddhism, that Buddhists seem bent on enforcing their culture on people like me who are just trying to practice

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Saturday, November 23, 2013

## More On Culture

Really, it's not that I have a problem with culture, per se... I think that was a misunderstanding with my last post, though I have to assume it was willful since I'm pretty sure the article was clear that the problem isn't with culture, but with religion that stems from culture.

Hints that attacking culture-based religion is somehow ungrateful or disrespectful. The idea that criticizing the adherence to Buddhist culture of one's supporters might be somehow be "biting the hand that feeds you" is familiar, if somewhat disheartening - comparing as it does monastics with domestic animals. I'm not sure how to best respond to such accusations, except to point out that the analogy goes both ways; treat someone like a dog and you might just get bitten.

Harsh? By dog, I mean in the best sense possible... a domesticated wild animal that is forced into obedience by threat of starvation. Familiar in all the wrong ways...

Monks aren't dogs, of course... well, not 'of course', really, and that's the disappointing thing, that there might be an expectation for monks to pander to the whims of culture or even worse, the whims of secular materialist society. I would say this only happens when culture or consumerism become religious.

So there, the point isn't that culture is bad or ugly or whatever; as long as you keep it to yourself, it shouldn't ever become an issue. The point is that religion (i.e. that which we take seriously) should never, ever, ever, never be based on anything but scientific observation of reality. Culture and secular affairs have no right to be taken as seriously as they have by otherwise rational religious individuals.

In Thailand the greatest difficulty was in regards to money; many Thais have quipped to me in the past that there are two lords in Thailand - the Buddha and money. Again, this

isn't about people, but about the pressure culture places on religion - Thailand abounds with generous individuals. Unfortunately their generosity is routinely reduced to economic terms where giving equals giving money.

Giving money is about the lowest form of giving in my estimation; sure, you've worked hard to produce the money, that should count for something, shouldn't it? Not in a karmic sense, I would argue, since one's mindset while performing the work wasn't likely to be inherently wholesome. Compare to offering a home-cooked meal to religious mendicants, where the entirety of the work performed is related to the act of giving. Or, compare to giving instruction on meditation practice, where the benefit is an order of magnitude greater than a full stomach. Unfortunately, the blinders of materialism have created a sort of tunnel vision that is only able to see value in economic terms.

This isn't really a problem for lay people; the exchange of material goods is a part of secular life. As a monk, however, the culture of giving (money) presented practical problems on a routine basis; bribes to local monastic and governmental officials, donations to abbots, and monetary support of workers and underlings are all activities that, even if one were inclined towards them, do not lend themselves to easy performance by Buddhist monastics. Simply put, it always felt like money was the only currency in Thai culture, and being a penniless mendicant put one at a distinct disadvantage in a society where most mendicants were not so penniless. Culture got very much in the way of religion, as far as I could see.

In dealing with Sri Lankan culture, there was less of an issue; for the most part because of far less interaction between monastics and laity. I'm not sure whether that means Thai Buddhists are overly concerned with monastic activities or that Sri Lankan Buddhists are overly neglectful. Neither one seems problematic in itself. It's the nature of the interaction that rubs errant, so to speak.

It was a shock to see how critical some Sri Lankan Buddhists were of monastics in Sri Lanka, after the overly polite Thai culture; but over time, that too began to seem innocuous - as a Canadian, politeness is more familiar, but a slap in the face can be refreshing as well, *de temps en temps*. No, the issue again is what is behind all the slapping. Being called ungrateful is one thing; certainly a serious charge, but therefore all the more worth taking seriously. When the evidence of ingratitude is an unwillingness to perform certain rituals or provide certain services, it again becomes an issue of religion.

Simply put, when I am supported by Thai people, I am expected to adhere to Thai culture; when I am supported by Sri Lankan people, I am expected to adhere to Sri Lankan culture. For students and devotees, this can easily be remedied by explanations and injunctions - those who hold respect are ever pliant; for others (those with money, power, etc.), there

is an ever-present expectation of compromise.

Compromise. An interesting word. Being uncompromising is dangerous. Certainly, every time culture rears its foreign head, we have to ask ourselves whether and how to compromise our practices to fit the culture. Where our practices are as well cultural, it may certainly do to compromise them in favour of assimilation; where our practices are religious (at least scientifically so), I would beg to differ.

That meditation practice is a subtle thing goes without saying; it's clearly more than just sitting cross-legged with one's eyes closed. Cultivating a proper meditative environment is important for all concerned; one where giving is without expectations, morality is without conceit, and meditation practice is without views. Attachment to rites and rituals (which, it must be admitted, culture of all sorts is) for their own sake is a danger to proper meditation practice and therefore true religion.

I guess that's it, then; culture seems to have a way of weaseling its way into religion, conflicting with and even supplanting more scientific-based practices. That's why I find it problematic. But the worst is that this sort of reasoning is likely to fall on deaf ears; we are all blind to our own love of our own culture.

So, for the record; I have no problem, personally, with Thai people or Sri Lankan people; I don't think Canadian people are better or worse than either. I favour Canadian culture, probably because I'm Canadian, but I would never think to let it consciously interfere with my practice of the Buddha's teaching. On the other hand, this isn't about me or you or anyone in particular; it's about the difference between culture and science and how seriously we take them. I am of the opinion that culture is a danger to science and of no intrinsic benefit to religion; at best it can be a benign structural support, if and only if it is not taken too seriously.

Finally, for the record, all is well here. I write these things because I think about them, not because I'm drowning in cultural oppression :) In December I'll be heading back to Ontario and New York to visit Wat Khmer Krom and my parents. In January, I'm off to Thailand and maybe Sri Lanka - being a visitor in a foreign culture is pleasant enough and both countries have hordes of pleasant people (to say the least).

Thank you to everyone who has supported me and my work, especially those who have sent things from my wishlist, since I am normally unable to express my thanks directly (often I don't even know who it was who sent the item). I may have need of a means of at least one-way transportation from Ontario to Rochester, NY to see my mother; any support in the form of a bus ticket would be much appreciated.

Tonight is Monk Radio at 7 PM Winnipeg time. Dhammapada videos and Sutta study are back on schedule until at least Ontario. Otherwise, it is quiet here.

Be well :)

Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu at 7:09 PM

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**Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu**

5 years ago (edited) +4

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#### More On Culture

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**Alexander Genaud** 5 years ago

Agreed with both of you.

As one who has been both poor with lots

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**Alexander Genaud** 5 years ago

Like any skill, one must recognise one's own weaknesses along the path of improvement. In many situations there

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**Sri Lanka Yoga Villa De Zoysa**

5 years ago

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If you visit Sri Lanka, will you please visit south, near Galle where i am based and runs a meditation/yoga center. I would be happy to organize a discussion/workshop with the participants here on Buddhism, a critical/intellectual view, not just what is practiced here. Thank you



**Mogharaja** shared this via Google+

5 years ago

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**Swami Shivakti Devi**

5 years ago

Shared publicly

Very well put Bhante, and I wish you a safe trip. Did your mother move to New york recently or has she lived there for a while?



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