Donald S. Lopez Jr.'s Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed

with Peter Harrison, "A Scientific Buddhism?"; Thupten Jinpa, "Buddhism and Science: How Far Can the Dialogue Proceed?"; Donald S. Lopez Jr., "The Future of the Buddhist Past: A Response to the Readers"

A SCIENTIFIC BUDDHISM?

by Peter Harrison

Abstract. This essay endorses the argument of Donald Lopez's *Buddhism and Science* and shows how the general thesis of the book is consonant with other historical work on the "discovery" of Buddhism and on the emergence of Western conceptions of religion. It asks whether one of the key claims of *Buddhism and Science*—that Buddhism pays a price for its flirtation with the modern sciences—might be applicable to science-and-religion discussions more generally.

Keywords: Buddhism; Donald Lopez Jr.; religion; science

When a distinguished scholar of Buddhism with a reputation for publishing path-breaking works in the field turns his attention to the specific issue of the relations between Buddhism and science, the resulting product is likely to be worth paying attention to. Donald Lopez's book *Buddhism and Science* (2008) will certainly satisfy high expectations, although it may not be quite what its readers expect.

Lopez avoids the well-hewn path followed by previous books on this topic in which various claims for the scientific credibility of Buddhist doctrines and practices are advanced and evaluated. Instead, he offers a fascinating description and analysis of the kinds of claims that have been made over the past 150 years for the compatibility of Buddhism and science and asks what is to be learned from this history. The surprising answer is that

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there is a remarkably consistent pattern in the arguments mounted by advocates of the consonance of Buddhism and science, a consistency that seems unaffected by dramatic changes in the natural sciences. Moreover, if the science has changed, the "Buddhism" that appears in the "Buddhism and science" conjunction is by no means constant, either. Indeed, by posing the question of the identity of this science-friendly "Buddhism" Lopez moves from historical description to the normative question of what counts as genuine Buddhism. Although this question inevitably invites different answers, Lopez wants to suggest that "scientific Buddhism" represents a distortion of the historical traditions from which it arose and has been rendered into a thin, rationalized set of precepts and practices from which significant, indeed essential, elements have been effaced.

The achievements of this book, in my view, are threefold. It offers the first systematic description of the history of the Buddhism-and-science combination. It suggests that although it is widely assumed that Buddhism is somehow elevated by its various transactions with the sciences, we ought seriously to consider the possibility that it has been impoverished by them. Finally, the book is a model of how descriptive historical analysis has a vital bearing on contemporary issues in the field of science-and-religion relations, specifically in terms of how our conceptions of what counts as "Buddhism," and "science" for that matter, are themselves shaped by particular historical exigencies. In what follows I propose to address mostly the second and third points, and discuss the significance of Lopez's arguments for science-and-religion discussions more generally.

Inventing "Religion and Science"

In his prefatory comments, Lopez states that the central claim of the book is a modest one: that "in order to understand the conjunction of the terms *Buddhism* and *Science* it is necessary to understand something of the history of their conjunction" (2008, xi). In this section I borrow from Lopez's general strategy and offer some initial observations about the history of the more general conjunction "science and religion" before returning to his specific arguments about the special case of Buddhism.

The trope "religion and science" emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Before then, no one had used this pairing or had thought in these terms (Roberts in press; Harrison 2006). Of course, there had been considerable discussion about the compatibility of particular scientific theories and specific religious doctrines and, more generally, exploration of the relationship between God's "two books," scripture and nature. But few, if any, had thought in global terms of the relationship between two reified conceptual entities, science and religion. All of this was to change during the second half of the nineteenth century. One indicator of the change was the appearance of the pairing in the title of William Draper's

notorious *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874). As historians of science-religion relations have lamented almost ever since, the enduring legacy of this work, along with Andrew Dickson White's equally influential *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), was the idea that Western history was characterized by a perennial "conflict of two contending powers," as Draper put it (1874, vi), or "two epochs in the evolution of human thought" to use White's expression (1896, vol. 1, ix).

Although much has been written recently by historians seeking to correct the distortions and false contentions of Draper and White, often the impression is given that the relations between science and religion were rather more positive or more complicated than the crude generalizations of Draper, White, and their contemporary disciples have allowed. Yet even these historical critiques, justified though they are, often implicitly rely on the assumption promoted by Draper and White that these reified entities, science and religion, genuinely exist and have had more or less stable identities throughout history. So, while positive accounts of the science-religion relations seek to counter the impression of an ongoing conflict, the alternative that is often presented serves to perpetuate the less explicit elements of the argument of Draper and White—namely, that "science" and "religion" are fundamentally important categories for understanding the history of the West.

The legacy of the late nineteenth century, then, is that this codependent relationship now has been almost indelibly inscribed upon the modern West's sense of itself. For those prone to scientistic excess, the rise of science represents the triumph of human reason over faith and superstition. For these individuals, "science" and "religion" are inevitably bound together in a combative historical process in which the success of one invariably comes at the expense of the other. As Sam Harris—a vociferous, if not always judicious, critic of Western religion—expresses it, "the conflict between religion and science is inherent and (very nearly) zero-sum" (2006b). Richard Dawkins writes, similarly, that "Religions have historically always attempted to answer the questions that properly belong to science." He concludes that religion is just "bad science" (1997).

From the twentieth century onward, then, religion and science have been at least partly defined in terms of each other. Moreover, the progressivist understanding of history implicit in the rhetoric of Harris and his fellow travelers offers the prospect of a future world in which religion has been entirely superseded or displaced by science. This secularized eschatology has parallels with the utopian vision of positivist Auguste Comte, who saw history as passing through successive stages from the religious through the metaphysical to the scientific. White's "two epochs," the religious and scientific, is redolent of the same historicism. Religion, insofar as it has

persisted into modernity, is imagined to be the vestige of a primitive and infantile society, and its undesirable presence signals that society is yet to liberate itself from the shackles of unreason.[1] Science, for its part, is understood in terms of what it is not. It is not religion, and hence not dogmatic, irrational, superstitious, or dispute-engendering. To quote Harris again, speaking of what distinguishes science from religion: "Science, in the broadest sense, includes all reasonable claims to knowledge about ourselves and the world" (2006b). The rational superiority of science is thus dependent upon a specific contrast case—religion. The recent critiques of Western religion that have become a familiar part of our intellectual landscape function partly as attempts to establish the legitimacy of science as an alternative and superior worldview.

There is another side to this conjunction. The relationship between these somewhat artificial entities, "science" and "religion," is genuinely codependent insofar as it can offer benefits to those advocating on behalf of religion. Given the prestige of the modern sciences, attributable at least in part to the benefits of its accompanying technology, appeals to science can make for an attractive strategy for religious apologetic. Regular readers of this journal are familiar with the relevant examples, and Lopez's book provides many more. Whatever the virtues of this strategy, however, it has two consequences that may be less welcome. First, it necessarily reinforces the authoritative status of science and hence indirectly lends credibility to the pronouncements of its practitioners, some of whom are vocal critics of religion. Second, it promotes to some extent a particular understanding of "religion"—most obviously that it is the kind of thing that is open to support from the disciplines of the natural sciences. This openness to scientific support is purchased at the cost of making religion, at the same time, vulnerable to scientific critique.

The relevance of all of this for a discussion of Lopez's thesis is twofold. First, Lopez contends that "for more than 150 years claims for the compatibility of Buddhism and Science have remained remarkably similar" (2008, xii). If we go back 150 years, we find ourselves in the second half of the nineteenth century at precisely the time when the trope "science and religion" was first emerging. This timing, I suggest, is not insignificant, and the history of the conjunction "science and Buddhism," which Lopez makes a central theme of his book, is closely related to the appearance of the more general expression "science and religion." Second, in what I take to be the chief normative claim of the book, Lopez informs us that "in order to make this 'Buddhism' compatible with 'Science,' Buddhism must be severely restricted, eliminating much of what has been deemed essential" (p. xiii). The intriguing question raised by this sobering claim is whether the same might be said more generally of all apologetic attempts to link science and religion. What is the cost to religion, or to specific religious traditions, of traffic with the natural sciences?

Buddhism as a Religion

Some influential scholars of Buddhism have spoken of the nineteenth-century "discovery" or, more tellingly, "invention" of Buddhism (Almond 1988; McMahon 2004; Masuzawa 2005, ch. 4). Buddhism, it is said, was the textual construction of Victorian scholars, who pieced together an ideal Buddhism from a canon of sacred Buddhist texts. This textual Buddhism was assumed to constitute the essence of the various historical forms of the religion found in East Asia. Positive forms of Buddhism, in other words, came to be understood as different, and possibly corrupted, manifestations of an ideal religion found in the "Buddhist scriptures" (writings assumed to be Buddhist equivalents of the Christian scriptures).

If the construction of Buddhism was initially the product of scholars working with texts, it seems also that claims for the scientific status of Buddhism were built into the construct almost from the start. There are a number of reasons for this. As Lopez points out, modern Buddhists themselves were quick to appropriate the idea of the scientific respectability of Buddhism in order to counter claims by missionaries and colonists that their religion was inferior and false. Some Western supporters of Buddhism made similar claims for its unique compatibility with modern science. The controversy in Victorian Britain over evolutionary theory, along with the crisis of faith engendered by the new methods of biblical criticism, also led to the search for an alternative religious tradition that was more enlightened and scientific. Buddhism proved to be an ideal receptacle for the religious aspirations of those who were disenchanted with traditional Christianity. Finally, the newly invented Buddhism needed to be located somewhere within the newly emerged conception "science and religion" where each term was understood as an epoch of human history or a particular mode of thinking. Given its conspicuous differences from Christianity, and the insistence of its more influential advocates that Buddhism was intrinsically more scientific than Christianity, Buddhism henceforth found itself allied with "science" rather than "religion."

It may be said, then, that the remarkable and persistent claims for the compatibility of Buddhism and science that Lopez so carefully documents are a consequence of this compatibility's having been built into conceptions of Buddhism from its very first appearance in the Western imagination. And not only that; it also has been incorporated, to some extent, into some Buddhists' own understanding of their tradition. All that remains is that the specific details of the compatibility be worked out for each generation and in relation to each major scientific advance. One of the great virtues of *Buddhism and Science* is its careful setting out of how this process has taken place over the past 150 years.

The general tendency to ascribe to Buddhism—specifically Tibetan Buddhism—various qualities thought to be lacking in Western religious traditions is the topic of another of Lopez's books, *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan*

Buddhism and the West (1998). In this perceptive and illuminating work, Lopez argues that the image of Tibetan Buddhism cherished by many in the West is an elaborate fantasy, an object of wish fulfillment and the projection of frustrated aspirations (as was James Hilton's original, fictitious Tibetan utopia [1933] from which Lopez's volume takes it title). Tibetan Buddhism in the West, on this thesis, has become a reflection of the deepest desires of its Western admirers, who seek to find in this exotic creation answers to questions that their own culture is seemingly unable to provide. *Buddhism and Science* extends aspects of that thesis to the whole of Buddhism, looking specifically to instances of its supposedly scientific sophistication.

A recent, and striking, illustration of these processes of projection is the advocacy of Harris, the aforementioned "new atheist," of a form of Buddhism. Harris, as we have seen, subscribes to the notion that the science-religion relation is necessarily one of inherent conflict. Yet he contends that Buddhism "represents the richest source of contemplative wisdom that any civilization has produced" and that its global ascendancy would be "a welcome development" (2006a). It is not surprising to learn that one of the features of Buddhism that Harris finds attractive is the apparent scientific validation of its meditative practices. In fact, he helpfully informs us, "In many respects, Buddhism is very much like science," and the "spirit of empiricism animates Buddhism to a unique degree" (2006a). Of course, Harris's Buddhism needs to be filtered through a scientific grid and sanitized to remove residual elements of "faith." In this respect it is even more a fiction than the Buddhism of the Victorians—demythologized, deflated, and evacuated of any inconvenient whiff of theism, and by that reductive process rendered compatible with science.

Harris's reconstruction of Buddhism in the image of science not only provides a graphic illustration of how Buddhism may be allied with "science" against "religion" but also brings us to the second question posed by Lopez's book: What is the cost to Buddhism of an alliance with science? More generally, what is the cost to any religion of an enforced compatibility with science?

Scientific Religion?

In his concluding remarks Lopez observes that the variety of Buddhisms found to have been compatible with the sciences over the years share certain features: "a rather spare rationality, with the vast *imaginaire* of Buddhism largely absent. Each is a Buddhism extracted from the Buddhist universe, a universe dense with deities" (2008, 216). Although much of the book is given over to descriptive, historical analysis, this claim is clearly a normative one. The aim of the historical work, Lopez goes on to say, was to "give pause to anyone who might have thought that Buddhism is modern, au courant, up-to-date with the latest scientific discoveries" (p. 216).

In short, Lopez remains skeptical about the claims for the existence of a special relationship between Buddhism and science. Moreover, he clearly implies that such claims lead to the perpetuation of a distorted conception of Buddhism.

It may seem that such a judgment could be made only by someone possessed of a clear idea of the true essence of Buddhism. Lopez does not pretend to be in this position. Nonetheless, he claims to adjudicate on what, in light of its historical manifestations, Buddhism is not. Ultimately, readers must decide for themselves whether Lopez's implicit conception of Buddhism is authentic.

The broader question of whether engagement with the sciences has the potential to distort religious traditions is well worth asking in other contexts. For example, those involved in the dialogue between science and Christianity (often the default religion in the religion-and-science dialogue) may profitably ask what lessons there are in the example of Buddhism-and-science. It would be easy to think that Western scholars are too familiar with Christianity and its long history for it to be malleable in the way that Buddhism has been for the past 150 years. As I have suggested, part of the reason for the plasticity of Buddhism lies in the history of its recent construction. Yet, the construction of Christianity as a religion predates the Victorian discovery of Buddhism by only two centuries. The idea that there were discrete religions at all is an idea that first appeared during the early Enlightenment (Smith 1978; Harrison 1990). That story is too long to be retold here, but suffice it to say that the emergence of the notion that Christianity was a religion, characterized by a set of beliefs and practices, coincided with the rise of modern science. I have argued elsewhere (Harrison 2008) that the early modern attempt to provide the new science with religious legitimation contributed to the subtle and unintended transformation of the Western conception of religion in general and Christian faith in particular. This was furthered by the subsequent desire, once the new science had more firmly established itself, for a closer alliance between science and religion that would be of mutual benefit. The deep irony of this story is that at the close of the nineteenth century, when scientific self-confidence was at its highest, the ties with religion were severed, and in their place arose the idea of an incessant warfare between science and religion. Also at this time there arose the idea of Buddhism as a kind of negative image of Christianity possessed of an inherent affinity for science that was putatively absent in the latter.

The point is that perhaps science has played an important role in the construction of modern understandings not only of Buddhism but, in a different way, of Christianity as well. Arguably, it continues to do so. Following Lopez, the question can be posed as to whether the Christianity that appears as the corresponding partner in the Christianity-and-science conjunction is similarly possessed of "a rather spare rationality" (Lopez

2008, 216), with the vast *imaginaire* of (in this case) Christianity largely absent. It seems reasonable to ask whether notions of God as the fine-tuner of the universe, or the one who resolves quantum indeterminacies, or who contains the universe within himself (and so forth), represent traditional Christianity or some sparse and rationalized version of that tradition. I do not presume to have an answer to this question, but I certainly believe that it is worth posing. Might it not also be at least possible that advocates of "scientific creationism," for all that their scientific claims are false and absurd, may have better preserved some features of traditional Christianity than their more theologically sophisticated critics? (Not that young-earth creationists have themselves been immune to the lure of an association with modern science, as the term "scientific creationism" bears sufficient testimony.) The issue here, albeit imprecisely formulated, is whether there might not be more important priorities for religious traditions than ensuring their compatibility with contemporary science. My argument is not that there is nothing to be gained from dialogue with the sciences but rather that we cannot simply assume that compatibility can always be purchased without a significant cost.

All that said, crucial differences exist between the cases of Christianity and Buddhism, insofar as Christian thought from its inception has often been articulated in a context of conversation with extraneous traditions—initially with Athens and Jerusalem, in the Middle Ages with Aristotle, and in the modern period with the sciences. Indeed, some have argued that these internal interactions represent a distinctive feature of the West itself (Brague 2002). Moreover, it was the Christian West that gave birth to science. Accordingly, a case might be made that science-and-religion dialogue, or something analogous to it, has always been part of Christianity's self-understanding. So, while it seems that there are helpful parallels between the respective cases of Buddhism-and-science and Christianity-and-science, it also is important to bear in mind the differences.

In conclusion, I should say that I was fortunate to have been able to read this book before its publication. As a consequence, my enthusiastic endorsement appears on its jacket. There are times when a publisher's request to "blurb" a book can present something of a moral dilemma (or so others have told me), in the event that the manuscript does not quite live up to expectations. On these occasions one reaches for such phrases as "one of a kind," "remarkable," "provocative," and "highly original." This book is in fact all of these things, but, as I hope is apparent from this essay, I can wholeheartedly recommend it in less ambiguous terms as well. It is highly illuminating both of how we conceptualize Buddhism and of what is at stake in "Buddhism and science" discussions. More generally, it establishes the vital importance of rigorous historical scholarship for an understanding of the significance of contemporary science-religious dialogue, and on that account it should serve as a model for future studies.

NOTE

1. For a recent restatement of this flawed schema, see Grayling 2008.

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