

How science influences religion

An excerpt from SD 60.1e Delusion and Experience © Piya Tan, 2023b (forthcoming).

12.6.1 The Scientific Revolution began in 1543 when Nicholas Copernicus published his heliocentric theory of the solar system, marking the dramatic beginning of European acceptance and rise of the scientific theory. By the time Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution—which effectively debunked the idea that God created Man and that the human race descended from an initial man and a woman cloned from him.

The modern Church generally reacts with lukewarm opposition. The trend today is for the Church to project the catholic notion that it was never against science, but, on the contrary, promoted it, and had many Catholics who were great scientists. There is also the apologetic claim that God still created man with evolution as the means! We can thus happily see that even religion must undergo evolution in its own way, which promises a more life-affirming future.

Although Buddhism has its own mythical view of the universe,¹ Buddhists, as a rule, have always accepted science, and show keen interest in new scientific developments. The 14th Dalai Lama of the Gelugpa order, declares that science and Buddhism share the same commitment:

My confidence in venturing into science lies in my basic belief that as in science so in Buddhism, understanding the nature of reality is pursued by means of critical investigation: if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims.”²

12.6.2 Religion, as we have seen in history, tends to become an effective means of social control by the powerful elite (who define religion, including Buddhism), where there is a class system (like in the feudal West) and schooling is limited to the higher classes in the social pyramid. Now that accessible education and the free economy have largely levelled social classes,³ religion has to legitimize itself in new, even non-religious, ways. We are in fact seeing a growing secularization of God-centred or god-based religion: religion is devolving closer to its skin and bones as **economic religion** or a wealth gospel. Religion is, as a rule, overtly or covertly, about power and wealth.

Hence, we see many religions today projecting themselves in more sophisticated and subtle ways, venturing into education (especially mission schools), charitable projects, social work, even interfaith dialogues. Religion, as before, continues to attract and hold great

¹ See **Early Buddhist cosmology**, SD 57.10.

² T Gyatso, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*, Morgan Road Books, 2005:2 f; See also D Lopez, Jr, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*. University of Chicago Press, 2009:136.

³ This is not to say that the class system has been fully eradicated. In recent times, we read of Elon Musk's immense wealth, and the coronation of Charles III as the British King, which affirm class in terms of *wealth* and of *lineage*, not merit (or merit alone). Considering how most Buddhists regard monks (and nuns to a lesser extent) as the wealthy elites (esp in Asia), even fear them, we must say that traditional and ethnic Buddhism are *socially structured religions* (defined by wealth, titles and class).

wealth, such as in urban and global Buddhism, where even monks and priests have set up their own trusts and foundations for “charity.”

True charities put the people first; a religious charity, even a Buddhist one, would understandably put itself first; otherwise, why not be a fully secular charity run by experts and specialists? In a world where those who lack basic amenities (like clean drinking water and proper food) still hugely outnumber those who have them, even “guilt charities” are better, assuming that they are non-charities.⁴

12.6.3 These examples are relatively worldly ones, and reflect how the world and worldliness have transformed and shaped religion (including Buddhism) today. Perhaps we are seeing the slow but sure demise of God-centred religion—beginning with the publications of Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (“On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres,” 1543)⁵ and Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859).⁶

Buddhism, which is not God-centred, is today as good as dead as a religion or non-religion. It clearly serves as a way of life for many clerics and priests, leaving their homes for greater things and better lives. Many clerics tend to feverishly seek the salve of scholarship as more practical than nirvana, which can wait. Buddhists also tend to devoutly follow a revered teacher (than a teaching), as in other religions; and to expertly disagree with one another without any deep or careful study of the topic. Are these the hallmarks of a past-time for the leisurely, the affluent, the narcissist? Perhaps their Buddhism may be described as an ideal diversion in crosstalk where they agree to disagree while waiting for the next celebrity Buddhist to come to town.

Yet, the ancient and profound wealth of Buddhist wisdom continues to attract and transform modern psychology, like the dawn of a new Renaissance. Some may see this amalgamating of Buddhist **mindfulness** teachings and practices into modern psychology as a kind of professional looting of Buddhism now that “the Buddha is dead,” and the Sangha (with the big S, not the noble sangha) in dissolute disarray.

Yet here I am writing this concerned essay on “Ignorance and Mindfulness” (as part of a 6-volume study of contemporary Buddhism). This is possible because of the Dharma legacy the Buddha has left us. The teachings are today freely and easily available, an open-source Dhamma, accessible to all who seek wisdom. Many are drawn to the excitement of the Buddhist crowds, but when we look deep enough, we see a “wise fellowship” spirit centering on the Buddha, his Dhamma and the noble sangha. Let us then gather together to commune and practise for the love of Dhamma and journey together.

R817 Inspiration 475

TAN Beng Sin ©2023

⁴ See eg F Menga & M K Goodman, “The High Priests of global development: Capitalism, religion and the political economy of sacrifice in a celebrity-led water charity,” *Development and Change* 53,4 July 2022:705-735. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/dech.12723>.

⁵ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/copernicus/>.

⁶ <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsnr.2018.0015>.