

Batchelor on the Sangha (2017)

a selective review of Stephen Batchelor's *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, 2017, Yale University Press.

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Other reviews of this work have missed what I think is the main arc of this book, its thoughts on the nature of the Buddhist community, on the fourfold assembly, on monasticism, on Buddhist institutions and on what a modern “secular” Buddhist community will look like. The scope of the book is, however, much broader: “truth” and “belief” and their relation to practice, the Buddha's understanding of emptiness, ethics as the basis of Buddhist practice, the ins and outs of Buddhist psychology, and much more. Much of this discussion is worthwhile, particularly his discussion of the practical basis of Buddhist doctrine as opposed to view of it as a belief-system,¹ and his strong emphasis on ethics as foundational for Buddhist practice and understanding.

I will, in this review, focus on what he writes about the Buddhist community, which I find is also the weakest part of his exposition. For Batchelor, “after Buddhism” is achieved by going back to the early teachings of the Buddha, that is, “before Buddhism,” whose ancient teachings, astonishingly, resonate with modern ways of thinking. As Batchelor puts it,

“Paradoxically, to imagine what might emerge after Buddhism, we need to go back to the time before Buddhism began” (p.28).

In Batchelor's account of early Buddhism he attempts to show that there was no organized monastic community within the *Sāsana* during the life of the Buddha. If this were true, it would remove the tag “organized religion” from “before Buddhism,” and place it on the doorstep of “Buddhism.” It would also removing the imperative from “after Buddhism” of establishing a modern organized monastic community.

The reliability of early Buddhist texts (EBT). His position on this issue forms the framework of Batchelor's entire discussion of early Buddhism, so let's begin here. Batchelor writes,

“The early canonical texts are a complex tapestry of linguistic and rhetorical styles, shot through with conflicting ideas, doctrines and images, all assembled and elaborated orally over about three or four centuries before being committed to writing. Given the chorus of voices, how are we to distinguish between what is likely to have been the Buddha's word as opposed to a well-intentioned 'clarification' by a later editor or commentator? We are not yet—and may

1 See my recent essay “Take Seriously But Hold Loosely,” posted at bhikkhucintita.wordpress.org, for more on this topic and its relation to secular Buddhism.

never be—at a point where such questions can be answered with certainty.”²

This is quite accurate as far as it goes, but I believe the Buddha's voice can be heard much more clearly than one is likely to infer from this statement. This is an important issue, because throwing up our hands as saying, “We really don't know what is authentic!” is an invitation to cherry-pick evidence for any particular interpretation of the EBT that we like, declare this evidence as authentic and dismiss any counter-evidence as the product of a later editor or commentator.

The level of authenticity of the EBT can be fairly reliably assessed because the same early corpus of texts was preserved separately from earliest times in many parallel early sects in diverse regions of the Buddhist world and in diverse languages. The Pali corpus of the early Theravada sect is the best known today, but only one of many of what constitute the EBT. Comparative studies of the existent redactions of the early Buddhist Texts give us a good tool for determining what has been altered and what is likely authentic. We find, for instance, that background stories found in the discourses can vary in details among redactions, but the words of the Buddha seem generally to be surprisingly close in content and remarkably uncontaminated by later doctrinal developments within the various sects. In general we can be confident – and this has been recognized since the nineteenth century – that these texts were preserved remarkably well given their complex history.³

Furthermore, once the adept Buddhist practitioner becomes thoroughly familiar with, and puts substantially into practice, the EBT in any one redaction (e.g., the Pali canon), he will appreciate how systematic these texts are and realize that they must be primarily the work of a single genius. His task is like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle in which some authentic pieces are missing, and in which other inauthentic pieces have been mixed in from other jigsaw puzzles. At some point he nevertheless recognizes in the unfinished puzzle, “Oh, I get it: This is the Golden Gate Bridge!” A systematic interpretation of the whole has shone forth that he cannot easily back out of.

Although any specific claim about the EBT cannot be proven decisively, and might still admit debate among scholars, the convergence of evidence from many sources can give the practitioner considerable confidence about what is authentic. In the long history of scholarship around these texts, I am not aware that anything fundamental that is repeated frequently in a range of texts has ever been overturned, certainly nothing as fundamental as the existence of an organized monastic community at the time of the Buddha.

Equality in the Buddhist community. One of Batchelor's more puzzling statements is critical for the conclusions he wants eventually to make about modern secular Buddhism. It is the following:

“Gotama clearly envisaged a community in which all members – irrespective of their status as men or women, monastics (mendicants) or laity (adherents) – are entirely equal in the training they receive in the dharma, the practices they undertake to master and understand it, and the responsibility they have in communicating its message. Such an egalitarian community is a far

² p. 21.

³ Sujato and Brahmali (2014) provide detailed criteria for assessing the authenticity within the EBT, which justifies a high degree of confidence in the general quality of these texts.

cry from what is normative in many Buddhist traditions in Asia today.”⁴

A famous EBT passage he quotes from the *Parinibbāna Sutta* in defense of this states that the Buddha would not be ready to attain *parinirvāna* until there are trained and accomplished disciples who can take on teaching responsibilities in each of four categories: male and female monastic disciples and male and female lay disciples. However, his radically egalitarian conclusion does not follow even closely from the passage he cites, which does not state *all* members of these four groups have all of these qualities, only that *some* members of each group have all of these qualities. Moreover, Batchelor's interpretation would make no sense, because not all members can possibly possess these qualities equally, for:

1. Not everyone has equal access to training.
2. Not everyone chooses equally to receive such training,
3. Not everyone chooses to undertake the same practices,
4. Monastic disciples and lay disciples already differ, by definition, in the nature of their practices; to say they are entirely equal in practices they undertake is analogous to saying meditators and non-meditators are entirely equal in their practice.
5. Disciples, even if they have the same training and practices, will differ in opportunity, motivation and disposition, and will exhibit a markedly wide range of practice attainments, and therefore:
6. Disciples will differ widely in their capacity for understanding or communicating the message of the Buddha.

Batchelor himself refers to the *noble disciples* as those distinguished from common members of the Buddhist community in their practice attainments. Noble disciples have reached at least the first level of awakening, called stream-entry, before which a disciple is considered, in the Buddha's terminology, an ordinary person or a worldling (*puthujjana*). In short, the Buddhist community varies enormously in all the criteria Batchelor mentions.

Although the point that many noble disciples, whether monastics or lay, whether men or women, are strong in training, practice, attainment and teaching is well taken, the egalitarian community Batchelor describes makes as much sense as lumping all baseball players together, whether major league, minor league, little league or amateur and then claiming that they are equal in entirely equal in training and practice, and equally qualified to coach a major league team. We will see how Batchelor's uses his weak egalitarian conclusions for early Buddhism to justify elements of his vision of “after Buddhism.”

The status of monastics. Batchelor makes another remarkable claim,⁵ that no formal distinction between the monastics (*bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*) and the lay adherents (*upāsakas* and *upāsikas*) existed in early Buddhism. He offers no support whatever for this claim, a claim that would surprise any student or scholar even casually familiar with the early texts. Let me itemize some obvious problems with his claim:

First, the words *bhikkhu* and the feminine *bhikkhuni* seem to have been introduced by the

4 p. 12.

5 p. 47.

Buddha and was not used for ascetics of other traditions, nor applied to Buddhist householders.⁶

Next, the Buddha's earliest disciples, including himself, of other traditions; it was initially a movement among *bhikkhus*. One of the Buddha's earliest disciples was a nobleman, Yassa, a young man who left home and showed up where the Buddha was staying, but with his father in hot pursuit. When the father arrived at the encampment, the Buddha sorted things out such that Yassa received permission from his father to become a *bhikkhu* and was ordained by the Buddha and remained with the Buddha as a trainee, while the father became a lay follower of the Buddha and returned home. It is clear that there is at this very early time a formal difference in the status of father and son in terms of the manner of commitment each has made, the younger leaving the household life to follow the Buddha and live, like the Buddha, as a renunciate.

Some of Yassa's friends subsequently decided to follow his example, and are reported to have shaved their heads and beards, put on yellow robes and left home for homelessness. It is clear that the early monastic community had a “dress code” in the EBT that distinguished them from the mendicants of other schools as well as from Buddhist laity.

Requesting and granting monastic ordination occurs frequently in the EBT. This was a first accomplished by the Buddha with the words, “Come, bhikkhu!” but involved an increasingly elaborate procedure with time. Eventually the Buddha also authorized other monks to perform ordinations so that candidates would not have to make the oftentimes long journey to see the Buddha in person. It is also said that people were prohibited from monastic ordination as a means of avoiding social responsibilities such as debt, military service or punishment for a crime.

Throughout the discourses, new disciples most typically declare their conversion to the Buddha's way by taking refuge in the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Bhikkhu-Sangha*, not simply the Sangha. Clearly the *bhikkhu* community has a formal status even in the rite of becoming an adherent as a householder. Probably at about forty years of age, the Buddha founded the *Bhikkhuni-Sangha*, the nuns' community, with new concerns reported around ordination.

The Buddha produced at least the core of the *Vinaya*, the disciplinary code, during his lifetime expressly for *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. The life of the *bhikkhus* was initially taught implicitly by example, but as the *bhikkhu* community began to grow and vary the Buddha laid down specific standards of discipline. The result was the quite extensive *Vinaya*, as far as we know, an entirely novel accomplishment for that time. As Richard Gombrich put it, “... among all of the bodies of renouncers it was only the Buddhists who invented monastic life.”⁷ The *Vinaya* is the body of teachings that define the monastic what it is to be a monastic, as distinct from a householder.

That the *Vinaya* was conceived and developed – although not fully brought to its complete canonical form– during the life of the Buddha is clear in the Buddha's frequent use of the term *Vinaya* in the discourses. In fact, the Buddha repeated refers to the body of his teachings as the *Dhamma and Vinaya* (Doctrine and Discipline), or simply as the *Dhamma-vinaya*, highlighting the importance of the

6 If anyone should know of an instance of these terms applied to ascetic of other traditions, please let me know.

7 Gombrich (2006), p. 19.

monastic code relative to the Dhamma. For instance, a Digital Pali Reader search over the four main discourse collections shows the following number of occurrences for only one of the expressions used to refer to the Doctrine and Discipline;

dhammavinay- 274

Moreover, all Buddhist traditions agree that the *Vinaya* was recited along with the discourses at the first council shortly after the Buddha's death. Although Batchelor gives an account of the first council and of the recitation of the discourses by Ānanda, he makes no mention the recitation of the *Vinaya*, which was accomplished by Ven. Upāli.

All of this evidence overlooked by Batchelor when he makes his unsubstantiated claim that the monastics had no formal status in the EBT. Together it provides overwhelmingly evidence that there was a formally distinguished bhikkhu community during the life of the Buddha.

Following up on this claim, Batchelor maintains that designating someone as a monk or a nun would not be appropriate, in any case, until a later time in history, “when mendicants came to live apart in monasteries, functioned as priests, and depended on the laity to provide not only daily alms food but the upkeep and protection of their institutions.”⁸ In fact, it is clear that most of these conditions were already in existence at the time of the Buddha. Although the Buddha continued to extol the mendicant life, there are many reports in the EBT of land being granted to the monastic community: The first was a park donated by King Bimbisara of Magadha on the outskirts of Rājagaha shortly after the Buddha's awakening. The best known was the Jeta grove donated by the wealth banker Anāthapindika near Sāvatti the capital of Kosala. Often donors had residences and other structure build on the land, which the Buddha explicitly permitted monastics to accept, but not to request. Lamotte calculated twenty-nine monasteries explicitly mentioned at the time of the Buddha.⁹ Monastics are reported to have built modest shelters on their own for temporary residence and the Buddha placed restrictions on how substantial these shelters could be. The Buddha also stipulated that monks and nuns should stay in residence in one place during three months of the rainy season each year. He also authorized the residents of monasteries to elect officers to handle the allocation of housing, the acceptance of robe donations to the community, etc.

Batchelor is, however, correct in his statement that the monastics only later took up priestly functions. That the Buddha could prohibit this also speaks of the existence of a distinct disciplined monastic community for whom this stipulation would apply.

The meaning of “Sangha.” Batchelor defines the word the word *sangha* in a way that is poorly supported in the EBT.¹⁰ Specifically, he defines it as the fourfold assembly of male and female, mendicants and adherents (monastics and householders). Now, in Western circles the word *sangha* indeed most generally refers to the entire Buddhist community, so Batchelor's claim will make sense to the casual reader, but misleadingly so. In the EBT the fourfold assembly is almost always designated as

⁸ p. 47.

⁹ Wijayaratna (1990), p. 23.

¹⁰ p. 314.

catu-parisā in Pali, and in the Pali canon the word *sangha* is *never* used for the fourfold assembly.¹¹ In fact, I am unaware of any precedent for the common Western usage anywhere in pre-modern Buddhism (although I've noticed Thich Nhat Hanh often uses the word in this way, apparently in conformity with Western usage). Knowing that this usage is never found in current Asian Theravada Buddhism, I once asked the late scholar John McRae if *sangha* ever refers to the general Buddhist community anywhere in East Asian Buddhism, his area of expertise, and was told that this would be an “unusual and idiosyncratic” use of the term.

The base meaning of *sangha* is “group.” However, the word was used in a specific sense prior to the Buddha to refer (as Batchelor correctly points out¹²) to the clan-based governing bodies of the Indian republics at the time of the Buddha, generally in the compound *gaṇa-sangha*, “assembly of equals.”¹³ In the EBT two compounds are commonly formed from *-sangha*: *sāvaka-sangha* and *bhikkhu-sangha*. We have already seen that *bhikkhu-sangha* (monastic *sangha*) is common in the formula for going for refuge. *Sāvaka-sangha* (community of disciples, or “hearers”) is generally used to refer specifically to the community of *ariyas* or noble disciples, that is, those who have attained at least the first level of awakening, stream entry. One might expect to see the term *ariya-sangha* as well in the place of *sāvakasangha*; although it would seem to mean the same thing, *ariya-sangha* is in fact very rare in the EBT.

So, it seems that *sangha* has two technical meanings in the EBT, one referring to the community of noble disciples and the other referring to the community of monks and nuns. Running the Digital Pali Reader on the four main collections of discourses yields the following numbers of occurrences:

bhikkhusangh-	270,
sāvakasangh-	61,
ariyasangh-	1.

There are no occurrences of *upāsaka-sangha* in the corpus, which would be the lay sangha if one existed. Batchelor's further claim¹⁴ that the monastic community only later monopolized the use of the term *sangha* is therefore belied by the EBT, in which the term refers almost always either to the monastics or to the noble disciples, with the monastic reference seeming to be more common.

Moreover, we are justified in inferring that the meaning of *sangha* in reference to the monastics is *primary* meaning of *sangha* in the Buddhist context, because of the origin of the term as the assembly of equals in the republics. First, *as we will see*, the early monastic sangha as described in the *Vinaya* was a non-hierarchical, non-autocratic democratic institution like the republican councils. Second, neither the lay community, nor the community of noble disciples was organized at all by the Buddha institutionally.¹⁵ Finally, in a famous series of similes, the Buddha drew an explicit seven point-by-point comparison between the basis of welfare in the Vijjian Republic and the monastic Sangha,¹⁶ suggestive

11 E.g., Wijayratna (1990, 1) gleens that in the Pali texts lay people are *never* included in “sangha” in this way.

12 p. 314; see also Ling (2013), p. 68.

13 Thapar (2002), pp. 146-50.

14 p. 314.

15 Ling (2013, p.152) makes the same point.

16 DN 15.

of the close kinship of the monastic organization to the republican.

Moreover, taking the monastic community as the primary meaning of *sangha* explains the use of *sāvaka-sangha* as a derivative meaning. Whereas almost all of the early monastics quickly became noble disciples (*ariyas*) – in fact the first sixty are reported to have become *arahants* – as the number of householders began to grow, many lay disciples soon achieved high levels of attainment resembling expected monastic levels of attainment. Therefore, we can see how meaning of *sangha* in reference to noble disciples might easily arise as a way of grouping such householders with the monastics as adept upholders of the Dharma. The term *sāvaka-sangha* (disciple, or “not necessarily a monk or nun,” *sangha*) thus makes sense, suggesting an extension of the *bhikkhu-sangha*. *Ariya-sangha* would be more precise, suggesting a group that only intersects with the *bhikkhu-sangha*, but appears not to be preferred in the EBT.

In summary, Batchelor seems to be falsely and without evidence projecting an apparently uniquely modern usage of the word *sangha* onto early Buddhism. The base technical meaning of *sangha* in the EBT is an organized monastic community, the secondary meaning is the community of noble disciples, and a meaning that includes the entire lay community is unknown. As far as I can determine, this has consistently been the usage in Asia until modern times.¹⁷

Batchelor's origin story. Batchelor, in fact, attributes the creation of the monastic order to the senior monk Mahākassapa. Now, Kassapa is remembered in every Buddhist tradition for taking the lead in arranging the first Buddhist council shortly after the Buddha's death, at which a group of *arahants* heard a recitation of the complete corpus of the *Dharma-Vinaya* to make sure that they were all on the same page. The Zen tradition would later compose the story about him in which the Buddha holds up a flower and Kassapa smiles, and then assign him second place after the Buddha in the fabricated early Zen lineage. Batchelor creates his own speculative tale about Kassapa that casts him in a less favorable light. This is apparently by way of attributing the monastic institution to the later “Buddhism” period under his guidance.

Batchelor's is a tale of good monk/bad monk, in which Ānanda represents the former and Kassapa the latter. Batchelor describes Kassapa at the time at which he arrived at Kusināra to witness the Buddha's funeral as,

“... a stern, intimidating ascetic who immediately imposes his authority on the proceedings. He seems to embody everything that Gotama warned against as he lay dying. He is 'chief among those who expound the ascetic practices' and does not hesitate to declare how enlightened he is and that he is the Buddha's appointed successor. He is the very antithesis of Ānanda, but Ānanda seems powerless to resist him.”¹⁸

He states that Kassapa's arrival at Kusināra marks the beginning of a struggle to determine the nature of orthodoxy and ecclesiastical authority.¹⁹ He even calls Kassapa an “insufferable prig” at one point,

17 In understand that the modern Japanese school Soka Gakai uses *sangha* to refer to the whole community, but they do not have a monastic component.

18 pp. 282-3.

19 p. 284.

suggests that the Buddha was trying to get away from Kassapa in traveling to Kusināra and smears him through a vague association with the evil monk Devadatta through a connection to King Ajātasattu of Magadha, who agreed to sponsor the first council.²⁰

Let's compare this with what we find in the EBT. First, there is nothing about Kassapa imposing his authority of the funeral proceedings. Anaruddha, the Buddha's cousin and Ānanda's half-brother, seems to have taken on a leadership role in this regard before Kassapa's arrival. What is reported is that deities who were present, visible only to Anaruddha, would not allow the Buddha's pyre to be lit until after Kassapa and his party of monks had arrived and paid respects, after which the pyre spontaneously burst into flames. This is clearly a later embellishment that attributes no active role to Kassapa at all, other than paying proper respect to the deceased Buddha.

Second, the Buddha is consistently reported to have had the highest regard for Kassapa, and in fact for his observance of very strict discipline, for his very simple contemplative life-style and for being content with whatever was offered to him. This is why the Buddha named him “chief among those who expound the ascetic practices.” There is no indication that the Buddha warned anybody about monks like Kassapa; quite the contrary.

Next, there is indeed a bit of evidence in the EBT that a tiff arose between Ānanda and Kassapa during this period. Apparently after the Buddha's death and before the First Council, Kassapa admonished Ānanda for allowing a group of young *bhikkhus*, students of Ānanda, to run around in an undisciplined manner and called Ānanda a “youngster.”²¹ There are parallels to this discourse in the Chinese canon, but I understand that none of them mention this tiff, which makes its authenticity suspect. Even if Kassapa did in fact call Ānanda a youngster, this actually makes sense as a means of admonishing Ānanda for behaving like a youngster in running around with undisciplined youngsters; monks are expected, according to the Vinaya, to admonish and accept admonition for infractions of discipline. The passage, if authentic at all, admits to even more alternative interpretations. For all we know, Kassapa and Ānanda were the best of friends and were in the habit of exchanging friendly barbs. Or, Kassapa, the *arahant*, was trying to shock Ānanda, the steam enterer, into taking his practice more seriously. In fact, the Zen tradition maintains that Kassapa became the teacher of Ānanda and succeeded in bringing him to full awakening where the Buddha had failed. In the Pali, Ānanda is said to have attained awakening just prior to the first council. In short, it is easy to read too much into a tiff.

Next, “does not hesitate to declare how enlightened he is” refers, apparently, to a (single) incident in which a *bhikkhunī*, Thullatissā, well known as a trouble-maker in the *Vinaya*, accuses Kassapa of being unqualified to teach *bhikkhunīs*. Kassapa, though of greater attainment, was apparently a less talented teacher than Ānanda, and had initially resisted Ānanda's invitation to teach on this occasion. Kassapa defends himself from Thullatissā's attack by recounting a circumstance in which the Buddha praised him rather effusively.²² Although the phrasing of this discourse indeed makes Kassapa sound like something of a braggart to the modern reader, this kind of language is common in the discourses; in many passages the Buddha sounds like a braggart as well when he extols his own qualities. I suspect

²⁰ pp. 184-6.

²¹ SN 16.11.

²² SN 16.1.

this impression is the product of a natural tendency toward embellishment during the generations of recitations of these texts, and toward normalizing the wording of similar passages taken from different contexts.

Finally, there is no mention in EBT of a “struggle to determine the nature of orthodoxy and ecclesiastical authority.” Batchelor does not tell us what the specific issue or result of this struggle might be, though he seems to suggest it was the creation of the monastic order, which, as we have already seen, occurred at an earlier time. He mentions²³ Kassapa's vision of a top-down hierarchy, which is nowhere mentioned in the texts and which would be hard to reconcile with Kassapa's personal dedication to a pure and simple ascetic lifestyle, or with the decidedly non-hierarchical structure of the early sangha as it is described in the early Vinaya and carried forth in the centuries after Kassapa.

What is reported in the EBT about Kassapa's role during this period is very limited. The Buddha had just died. He as well as everyone else involved would clearly have been concerned about the survival of the *Sāsana*, including the integrity of the Dharma and the discipline of the monks. Since monks had undoubtedly been meeting for recitations of earlier discourses for many years to keep them in memory, it would have been quite natural to convene a group of very highly regarded, senior and therefore influential monks for however many months it would take to recite the Dhamma and the Vinaya in their entirety, in order to make sure that they remembered these accurately at this critical juncture and could each teach them to others accordingly. Ānanda was invited to recite the discourses, for he was renowned for his great memory and had been the Buddha's constant companion for the last twenty-five years. Then Upāli was invited to recite the *Vinaya*. After a couple of disciplinary issues, the monks went on their way, and that was that.

Batchelor's account is otherwise a fantasy. At no point is Kassapa known to have declared himself the successor of the Buddha. What might actually have happened at the council to trigger “Buddhism” is left entirely unclear in Batchelor's account.

The need to organize Buddhism. Like-minded people tend to organize things at a social level. A group of stamp collectors are likely to organize a stamp club, with a regular venue and regular meeting times where people can get together to talk about stamps, or even organize stamp expositions or a local stamp convention. In the case of religion, at what point does such a thing become a problem? When I lived at the Austin Zen Center I would often point out to my grown daughter events that she might like to attend, to which she would generally say, “I don't like organized religion.” However, if we held a potluck or anything involving food she would eagerly attend, even though, as I would point out, someone had to organize *that*. Why must the spiritual but not religious eschew organizing, if wine tasters, star gazers and tango dancers don't?

This makes one curious about why Batchelor is so intent in arguing that the Buddha did not create the monastic institution. One of the great weaknesses of secular Buddhism as it has developed so far in the West is that it is seldom self-reflective with respect to its own orthodoxy. What it generally takes as common sense often has, in fact, a relatively recently history in Western thought, a history not shared in

23 p. 315.

the early roots of Buddhism. Secularization for many, beginning with John Locke, who wrote in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, meant that religion became a private concern without an institutional presence in society, sometimes now described as being “spiritual but not religious.” For many, the role of God in the following centuries faded, particularly with the ascent of science. With the marginalization of God, particularly in European romanticism and psychotherapy, and among the hippies, some inner core within each of us became the source of spiritual energy as well as creativity, under constant threat by social convention and institutions. A product of all this has been a general suspicion of organized religion.²⁴ What does this have to do with Buddhism? Absolutely nothing, and that is the point. The Buddha would have hesitated to engage in organizing no more than star gazers or boomer singles.

Batchelor takes up what religion means early in the book,²⁵ distinguishing two primary definitions. First, religion is the “ultimate concern,” as Paul Tillich defined it. This is, in fact, the only reasonable definition I know of religion that would include Buddhism. Indeed, we might characterize both Buddhism and Christianity as the ultimate concern for their adherents. Second, religion is the “formal means” that enact these ultimate concerns. He lists as examples sacred texts, submission to the authority of monastics or priests, rites, rituals and spiritual retreats. “Formal means” is a bit vague – when I sit by myself to meditate, is that a formal means? – but the examples he provides suggests that by “formal means” he means “public means.” He points out that one can be religious in either sense without being religious in the other. He then states that a secular person can be religious in the first sense, which I would take to mean that a secular person cannot be religious in the second sense. Although this is all very orthodox from a secular point of view, a couple of pages later he promises not to fully expunge all of “religiosity” from his vision of modern secular Buddhism.

One would think he has a clear problem with institutionalization, but it is unclear to what extent. In *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* he writes,

“To reject organized religion in favor of a nebulous and eclectic 'spirituality' is not a satisfactory solution either. ... As social animals we invariably organize ourselves into groups and communities.”²⁶

In any case, as organizations go, the monastic sangha of the *Vinaya* is completely benign. Batchelor writes about hierarchy, power structures and uses terms like “ecclesiastical” evocative of the Catholic church in reference to whatever came after the Buddha, beginning with Kassapa. In fact, the early monastic *sangha* was not a church. It had no hierarchy nor individual power whatever. and provided no opportunities for consolidation of power. It was democratic and highly decentralized, upholding the standards the “assembly of equals” of the early Indian republics on which it was based.

Sociologists of religion generally distinguish two kinds of institutions, at least within Christianity, but this is also helpful here: churches and sects. Whereas churches tend to large and hierarchical, sects tend to be democratic meetings of like-minded people. Whereas a church generally aims at growth and

24 McMahan (2008,) p. 220.

25 p. 15.

26 Batchelor (2010), pp.236-7.

political influence in the wider society, a sect generally tends to focus on the purity, spiritual growth and common values of its members as its primary concern. A sect represents a kind of counter-culture, a refuge away from the perceived depravity of the wider society or oftentimes of the church from which it once spun off. The Quaker Friends and the Amish are examples of long-enduring Christian sects, robust sects that have maintained their internal integrity and somewhat radical messages over a long time in spite of the perceived corrupting tendencies of the wider society. The monastic sangha is like this. It is interesting that Batchelor mentions the Quakers favorably in the context of envisioning a modern Buddhism.²⁷ It astonishes me that Batchelor, given his background, has so little understanding of what the traditional monastic sangha is, a sangha that persists in something remarkably close to its early form in most Buddhist countries to the present day.²⁸

Conclusion. In Batchelor's account of early Buddhism he attempts with considerable effort to show that there was no organized monastic community during the life of the Buddha. However, much of Batchelor's account is hugely disappointing in that it relies on faulty or simply false interpretations of many of the passages he quotes, on many rather bold and dubious claims that he presents with no evidence, and neglect of abundant, well-known and uncontested evidence against the account he proposes, and on a highly speculative narrative about the the actors involved in shaping that community. This is a misdirected attempt to rewrite the history of the early Buddhist community.

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²⁷ p. 315.

²⁸ This is not to say that the sangha has not also devolved in many places into church-like forms, or been embedded into (often significantly lay-based) church-like institutions.