



This resource examines good practice when using quotations and references to scholars within an A02 answer. Read the following two arguments about the Buddhist response to challenges from secularization and decide which one is a good example and which one is a poor example. Give reasons to justify your decision, particularly in relation to the use of quotations, references to scholars and the style of reasoning.

## Buddhism itself is secular and so faces no challenge from secularization

### Argument 1.

This question is asking me to agree that Buddhism is not challenged by secularization because in itself it is secular. Obviously, this is referring to the idea that Buddhism can be seen as non-theistic and focusing just on the teachings.

First of all, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the Three Marks of Being. Nibbana is not heaven nor a God and it is their ultimate aim. If we stop grasping then we will not suffer. Buddhism is all about the here and now and stopping suffering. It is much more practical than other religions that just pray to a God.

Secondly, because the society we live in is not really religious, then we can see how Buddhism fits into this nicely. People don't want all the hocus-pocus that religion involves – science explains most things today. Buddhism fits in with science and meditation is all about strengthening and bettering yourself just like a secular goal.

In addition, scholars back this up like Stephen Batchelor, Trevor Lings and Dalai Lama who has supported work into science and technology.

In conclusion, because Buddhism is so ideally situated in a non-supernatural world-view, it is therefore easy to see how it escapes any challenges from secularization.



## Argument 2.

In response to this issue one could argue that Buddhism has developed in such a way that it has always absorbed, adapted and adopted the beliefs of the culture in which it becomes embedded. Therefore, as some may argue that modern society is post-Christian, atheistic and secular, Buddhism for the modern world is secular and therefore a religion-less and belief-less form of Buddhism. Don Cupitt (1934-) wrote 'Religion today... has to become an immediate and deeply felt way of relating yourself to life in general and your own life in particular.' Buddhism meets this need and so is not challenged at all by secularization.

Religion also provides certainty regarding life after death, or, the 'other'. Religion is essentially a metaphysical foundation for life. Again, it could be argued that this is not something which Buddhism has. There are a variety of views about what happens when a person dies and Buddha himself was non-committal; for example, the Buddha describes metaphysical questions as unanswered. Scholars such as Batchelor propose that the original Buddha and the authentic and pure Buddhism which they have uncovered is not religious but is wholly atheistic and secular. Secular Buddhism, therefore, is arguably a wholly valid presentation of Buddhism. The Buddhist scholar Trevor Ling influenced the ideas developed by secular Buddhists in the West and even entitled a book 'The Buddha: The Social-Revolutionary Potential of Buddhism' in which he argues that the Buddha was not the founder of a religion and that his teaching was not religious. Ling sees the Buddha's teaching as initially flourishing because it was a time of economic growth and urbanization and a time when tribal republics and autocratic monarchies were establishing their identity. The message of the here and now, of suffering and an end to suffering is very much appealing to the realities of life on earth than a message of future hope and prayers!

However, just because it can be seen as secular this does not necessarily mean it escapes secular challenges! This may seem a paradox but the fact is Buddhism is just 'Buddhism'. In a sense it is so pliable that it can adapt to any cultural world view. Therefore, the many cultural variations and specific types of Buddhism, many of which make metaphysical claims, are also contrary to a secular viewpoint.

An alternative argument could be that what Buddha is describing in the phrase 'there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated' is what theologians might call the Absolute. That being the case, from a certain point of view this could be seen as religious since one understanding of religion is to define it as



the relationship that human beings have with the Absolute, however that Absolute is envisaged.

I would argue that it is dangerous to see Buddhism as simply 'secular' per se. Yes, it can be at its very basic level but that does not mean it adopts a secular stance in rejecting religion! My argument would be that it is dangerous to 'box' Buddhism in as it should and does appeal to all human beings. To identify it as secular also means it rejects the spiritual, which is debatable, but also that it is in danger of adopting philosophies that emanate from a secular world-view such as naturalism and materialism. It could even be argued, in conclusion, that it is Buddhism that challenges secular society to be more selfless, compassionate and less aggressive and greedy but also, more tolerant and open towards the views of others.

## Summary

The second example is the better example of the two. There is a very good introductory paragraph that gets straight to discussing the reasons for the statement being legitimate. It then uses scholarly support to develop a strong supporting argument for the statement. The structure of the debate shows a process of reasoning when it then responds to points made and raises counter points about its pliability and ideas of an Absolute. The argument is then developed into a personal, individually reflective conclusion; the reasoning for the conclusion is supported by the discussion that precedes it about the dangers of defining Buddhism as secular. If we are being really critical, there could be more quotations from texts and scholars; however, this is only a minor matter because references are clear and the skills of evaluation are high. The final point cleverly turns around the initial statement!

## Is Buddhism a religion?

Some would argue that the earliest forms of Buddhism were not religious because they were non-theistic and in addition, some forms of Buddhism, particularly Theravada, still appear to be non-theistic.

Another view is to argue that there is nothing for Buddhism to defend since Buddhism never was, and has never been a 'religion' in the sense that the word is commonly understood. The key feature of the teaching of the Buddha and of Buddhism is that from the outset it separated itself from Brahmanism by rejecting belief in Brahman as the eternal and unchangeable constant reality.



However, when the Dalai Lama encountered a series of unfortunate events, it was believed that an evil demon was on the loose and thus monks specializing in exorcism arrived to exorcise the demon and it was 'sealed with vajras and buried deep in the earth.' This is clearly a religious interpretation of events.

David Brazier also suggests that Buddhism is 'the way that we creatures of this relative, conditional world relate to the absolute: to the unconditional, unborn, undying, that we cannot help intuiting.' One of the titles of the Buddha is Lokavid. The term means 'knower of the world' and Brazier suggests that this is entirely apt because the Buddha could see the two realms.

Ultimately, in the discussion of Buddhism as a religion, everything depends on the person who is discussing it and what they want to see.

One way of understanding why this might be so is the tension between the academic who studies the religion from the outside and the believer who follows the religion from within.

### POSSIBLE QUOTES TO USE:

- This is one way of understanding what Buddhism is. Buddhism is awakening to these two domains. (David Brazier)
- The ultimately empirical and the ultimately noumenal are not graspable with words, but they are real intuitions of great moment to our actual lives. Life is lived in the in-between. In that in-between, out of the metaphysical we crystallise ideals, values, and motives. (David Brazier)
- I have a feeling that Buddhism should be included in, rather than excluded from, any survey of religions, for if it is not a religion, then what is it? (Trevor Ling)
- Most Buddhists throughout Asia are and always have been polytheists. They believe in the existence of a range of spirits and gods whose worlds intersect with our own. These entities do not have a merely symbolic existence; they are real beings with consciousness, autonomy and agency, who can grant favours if pleased and wreak havoc if offended. (Stephen Batchelor)
- Looking at a Buddhist text, the Westerner seems not to notice the references to rebirth, to conversations with deities, to supernatural occurrences, to faith, to past aeons, to celestial Buddhas, and to anything else that does not fit into the modernist paradigm. (Brazier)