Secularism is a point of view that seeks to explain the cosmos, and human interactions within it, in non-religious terms, i.e. without supernatural or ultimately unexplainable phenomena.

Secularism understood in these terms can be said to have arisen in recent western civilization with the Renaissance and the development of science and rational scientific enquiry. Science and related disciplines developed human civilization in Europe by providing ever better standards of living for ordinary people. As problems of transport, health, education etc were improved, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, humanitarian and humanistic ideals also developed. For the educated classes in particular, "Man" and his/her well-being became the measure of all things and, increasingly, the directives and related beliefs of religion seemed at best irrelevant and, at worst, wrong or even bad for humanity.

Continuing arguments over concepts like evolution or whether God has given humanity dominion over the natural environment, have tended to undermine the authority of Christianity for example, by pitting scientific evidence against faith. The obvious and demonstrable success of science as a cogent way of explaining the universe and illuminating the "mysteries" of the cosmos has inevitably added to the demise in western cultures of religion as a powerful force in everyday life.

Yet, for many in our post-industrial, Twenty-first century world, secularism does not provide sufficient "meaning" or answers to our psychological needs; "Man", it seems, is not enough and there is a continuing human need for spirituality. While congregation numbers continue to fall in traditional churches, alternative philosophies are gaining ground. Some are fundamentalist and appeal unashamedly to our undirected, often suppressed emotions whose release (joy, ecstasy etc) seems, in itself, to be an answer or a resolution. Others are classified as "New Age", but often draw on ancient pagan, tribal and eastern religions, whose innate mystery to the modern, western mind suggests answers, without necessarily providing one.

Before the Second World War Buddhism was a religion known only to a few "eccentrics" in the West and much of its practice was misunderstood. Zen Buddhism started to become popular in the United States with the "Beat" generation in the fifties. As young people began to travel in Asia it became one of a range of Eastern philosophies explored and adopted in the sixties and seventies by the "counter culture". Unlike many of those other philosophies however, its popularity has remained steady and has even continued to grow.

As a religion without a God, and one that often presents itself more as a skills manual for living than a gospel, a lot of westerners have embraced it as a spiritual philosophy that will not contradict a rational, scientific world view. Its central tenets of compassion, tolerance, also fit very well with similar western humanist ideals. Its acceptance of and methods for dealing with change has strong appeal for individuals and communities trying to cope in the hectic post-modern world.

Buddhism, like all religions, developed within an historical context - a Hindu state in northern India 2,500 years ago. Once it founder had died and it began to spread into other countries and cultures, the rituals, stories, sacred beings etc were changed, adapted and added to. It is therefore no surprise that Buddhism in the West is also adapting and evolving.

While there are basic doctrines, attributed directly to the Buddha, that do not change, many particularly eastern cultural aspects are being challenged. The secular, humanistic nature of western civilization is particularly noticeable in the current development of Buddhism in the West. In many
instances cultural symbols and devotional rites that are seen as too alien or too suggestive of superstition have been pared away. Vigorous debate on aspects of doctrine and philosophy and a tendency not to venerate teachers unquestioningly is also part of a modern western approach to religion, as is an insistence on the acceptance of women as part of the Sangha (body of monks and nuns) with equal rights to men.

There are ordained western practitioners who are now even beginning to question fundamental concepts like karma and rebirth, because they do not accord with a western rationalist world-view. They are also changing rituals, translating chants from Pali (the ancient language of the scriptures) and altering other traditional practices, such as the rules pertaining to a monastic life, in order to fit in with a western lifestyle. Another example of western change is the greater emphasis put on lay practice and the possibility of enlightenment for a non-monastic.

Western ideals of social change and resistance to oppression or perceived injustices have also found a voice in the order of Engaged Buddhists which seeks to actively go out and help others in the community in a practical way, similar to the active movements and ministries along these lines in the Christian church. In the East there has tended to be a more passive acceptance of the lot of others because misfortune is seen as a result of previously accrued bad karma.

In addition to this almost organic process of adaptation to a new culture, the introduction of western technology, especially in communication (from the printing press to the internet), has created further change while, at the same time, ensuring the religion's promotion at both national and global levels. The ease with which teachers from various branches of Buddhism can travel to different parts of the world, or spread their teachings through various forms of the media has also helped to create another aspect of Western Buddhism; the ecumenical nature of it; the willingness to embrace various schools, to encourage dialogue between them and blend their doctrines in a way never seen before in Asia.

Given that secularism is a world-view in itself, and indeed colours the point of view from which this teacher writes, the rise of Buddhism as one of the fastest growing religions in the West is a phenomenon that is not necessarily explained by pragmatism alone. There is increasing debate inside and outside the Sangha over what directions the religion should take. There has been some resistance to westernized changes, not because of change in itself, but more out of a fear that by chopping and changing aspects of Buddhism to fit in with the western lifestyle, the truth and efficacy of the Dharma (teachings) will be watered down and lost. One recently used term for this was "McDharma" - the globalization of Dharma.

At the present time the fundamental doctrines as laid down by the Buddha himself, the Four Noble Truths, The Noble Eightfold, and the Precepts remain essentially the same for all Buddhist sects. The general consensus in both East and West seems to be that as long as these are held, then continuity for the Dharma will be ensured.

Buddhism has been the subject of a variety of books, films and documentaries. Buddhist temples, centers, monasteries and monastics are now commonly found in many western nations. Monks and nuns provide counseling and welfare roles in places like prisons and hospices. Many psychologists and therapists use Buddhist techniques in their practice and artists have turned to its themes for inspiration. Buddhist terms are used in everyday speech and artifacts are found in a variety of contexts, from art galleries to gardens. For western culture, the impact of the introduction of Buddhist philosophy over the past fifty years has yet to be fully felt. It may well become the religion of the future.

Reference List.


Denoon, Tim "Living with the Devil " Interview with Stephen Batchelor", Dharma Vision, Vol.6, No.1, August-September, 2004, pp.10-12


Kearney, Patrick "Dharma & McDharma" Dharma Vision, Vol. 3, No.6, June-July 2002, pp.3-6


Rhea, Zane Ma "Breaking the Silence on Women's Enlightenment", Women-Church, 18, Autumn 1996

Ven. Tejadhammo "Falling Leaves: drifting thoughts on Buddhism in a secular world" Dharma Vision, Vol.6, No.1, August-September 2004, pp.3-6

Ven. Tenzin Chonyi "Buddhism as a Western Religion", Dharma Vision, Vol.6, No.1, August-September 2004, pp.7-9