

CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE  
PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION: MODERN BUDDHISM

AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS:

**CREOLIZING MODERN BUDDHISM:  
A REPLY TO YARRAN HOMINH & A. MINH NGUYEN**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In reply to Hominh and Nguyen, I argue that “creolizing” methods in the study and practice of Buddhism should not be opposed to historicist and contextualist modes of investigation and understanding. Rather, historicism and contextualism can and should inform creolizing approaches.*

Hominh and Nguyen’s thoughtful and constructive commentary is admirable. It can be read as a response to a question I raise at the end of *Why I Am Not a Buddhist: Can Buddhists today find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists (or fundamentalists)* (Thompson 2020a, 189)? Let me put this question in context.

*Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is a philosophical critique of Buddhist modernism, a culturally widespread form of modern Buddhism that downplays the metaphysical, ethical, and ritual elements of traditional Asian Buddhism, while emphasizing personal meditative experience and scientific rationality.<sup>1</sup> My critique targets the following contemporary Buddhist modernist ideas: (i) “Buddhist exceptionalism,” the idea either that Buddhism is not essentially a religion but instead is essentially a philosophy, way of life, therapy, or “mind science,” or that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being especially rational and empirical in its doctrines and practices; (ii) “neural Buddhism,” the position that cognitive science, especially neuroscience, has corroborated the Buddhist view that there is no self, that mindfulness meditation practice consists in training the brain, and that awakening or enlightenment is a brain

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Buddhist modernism, see McMahan (2009). See also the additional references in Thompson (2020a 193, note 16). For recent North American developments, see Gleig (2019).

state or has a unique neural signature; and (iii) the idea that awakening or enlightenment is a nonconceptual experience outside language, culture, and tradition. I argue that these ideas are mistaken: (i) and (ii) rest on misconceptions about Buddhism, religion, and science, whereas (iii) involves philosophical confusions about the relationship between what is conceptual and what is nonconceptual in experience.

The positive part of my book is an argument for cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings belong to a single community, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. Cosmopolitanist thinking stretches from ancient Greece and Rome through the European Age of Enlightenment and into the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. South Asia and East Asia have their own versions of cosmopolitanism, as does Africa. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2007) has reinvigorated cosmopolitanism by arguing that the values worth living by are many and not one, that different people and societies can and should embody different ways of life, that we ought to care about the welfare of the individuals engaged in those different ways of life, and that the insights of any one tradition are not the exclusive preserve of that tradition or any other. I argue that cosmopolitanism can help us to adjudicate the complex relationship between religion and science, and that cosmopolitanism provides a better way for us to appreciate Buddhism's originality and insights than Buddhist modernist exceptionalism.

In their response, Hominh and Nguyen propose a "creolized" version of cosmopolitanism and suggest that it may enable contemporary Buddhists to be cosmopolitanist and modernist without getting entangled in the philosophical problems with Buddhist modernism that I criticize. I would like to offer a few thoughts about their proposal.

Let me begin with Buddhist exceptionalism. Hominh and Nguyen are right that "exceptionalism in the general sense of believing one's religion to be superior to another" (Hominh & Nguyen 2021, 144) is not what I mean by "Buddhist exceptionalism." I do not mean the traditional Buddhist belief that the Buddha's teaching is superior to other teachings, a belief that runs throughout Asian Buddhist scriptures, from the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas* to the Mahāyāna Sūtras, and that is maintained by Asian Buddhist thinkers from Buddhaghosa, Vasubandhu, and Dharmakīrti to Tsong Khapa, Fazang, and Dōgen, as well as many others down to modern times. Instead, I mean the Buddhist modernist idea that Buddhism is inherently different from and superior to every other religious tradition in being especially rational and empirical according to the standards of modern experimental science. The analogy is with "American exceptionalism." American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is inherently different from and superior to other nation states and not analyzable in terms of the political and sociological concepts (such as class) that apply to them. Similarly, "Buddhist exceptionalism" is the idea that Buddhism is an exception among religions in being inherently rational and empirical according to modern scientific standards, and not analyzable in terms of concepts such as faith, transcendence, or supernatural agency that apply to other religions. It's this distinctively Buddhist modernist way of thinking that I criticize. Hence Hominh and Nguyen are right that I target what they call "scientistic exceptionalism" in its

distinctively Buddhist modernist form, though I also criticize romanticist and transcendentalist versions of Buddhist modernism.

Hominh and Nguyen read me as proposing “deep historicism and contextualism” [“reading Buddhist ideas and concepts in their original (read: classical Indian and Tibetan) contexts” (Hominh & Nguyen 2021, 145)] in place of Buddhist exceptionalism. But, they argue, my cosmopolitanist commitments do not mandate or entail historicist and contextualist methods of interpretation. There are other interpretive methods that Buddhists can use to respond to modernity and to be cosmopolitanist without being scientifically exceptionalist. Hominh and Nguyen single out “creolization” as an alternative method. They follow political theorist Jane Anna Gordon (2014) who develops creolization as a concept to describe ways of mixing, reinterpreting, and reinventing cultural traditions in the context of Caribbean anti-colonialism. In their words: “Descriptively, ‘creolization’ refers to the development of new perspectives and practices by unequal and often opposed groups living ‘within relations marked by mundane dependency, antagonism, intimate and complex interpenetration’ (Gordon 2014, 10) through ‘recontextualization’ (Gordon 2014, 10), ‘reinvention, resituating, and mistranslation’ (Gordon 2014, 170) in ‘contexts of radical historical rupture’ (Gordon 2014, 3). Normatively, creolization describes the generative potential for mutual transformation that may arise from taking such cases of descriptive creolization as a ‘methodological orientation toward the ... future’” (Gordon 2014, 193). (Hominh & Nguyen 2021, 146)

I agree that creolization is or can be cosmopolitanist in both a descriptive and a normative sense: it focuses on processes of transregional affiliation, and it aims to create novel concepts, frameworks, and practices in order to deal with new situations and problems. But I would not oppose creolization to historicism and contextualism for two reasons. First, to understand and investigate first-order creolizing processes, we need historicist and contextualist methods of investigation and understanding. How could we understand either the materials with which creolization works or the novel mixtures to which it gives rise without historicist and contextualist methods? Second, when creolization itself becomes a second-order reflective method or practice, it necessarily participates in contextualist and historicist modes of understanding. For example, the concept of creolization, in Hominh and Nguyen’s usage, belongs to post-colonial discourse and is a critical response to empire, colonialism, and cultural imperialism. Thus creolization itself as a theoretical discourse must be understood from a historicist and contextualist perspective concerned with the particular features of colonialism as part of modernity.

We can appreciate this point by considering “creolization” in relation to “syncretism” and “hybridity.” Although these terms have different linguistic and intellectual heritages, they all refer to mixtures, mergings, fusions, and assimilations. “Syncretism” has been used mostly in discussions of religion. As Robert Sharf argues, however, the term is problematic, because “the category of syncretism presupposes the existence of distinct religious entities that predate the syncretic amalgam, precisely what is absent, or at least unrecoverable, in the case of Buddhism” (Sharf 2002, 16). Buddhism (or any religious tradition, for that matter) has always been inherently

syncretic: it has always been constituted by mixtures, mergings, fusions, and assimilations. This is clear in the case of Tantric Buddhism, Chan (Zen), and Pure Land Buddhism, but the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas* also already contain ideas and practices assimilated from Jainism, Brahmanism, and other early Indian ascetic movements. So should we say that Buddhist traditions are not so much “syncretic” but rather “hybridized” or “creolized”? As Hominh and Nguyen remark, “as a matter of historical fact, Buddhism is already heavily creolized” (Hominh & Nguyen 2021, 148). Although we may wish to reserve the term “creolized” for modern contexts involving colonialism and post-colonial efforts, hybridity is hardly something new or particular to modern Buddhism. As they go on to say, “Buddhism has always mixed with the other traditions with which it has come into contact to form sometimes radically new and different Buddhisms.” A historicist and contextualist thinker, however, would insist that we need to follow the implications of this logic all the way. The very idea of pure or unmixed strains, which the conceptual metaphor of hybrids or creoles might suggest, is inapt. There is no such thing as a pure strain. Hybrids are made of hybrids all the way back and all the way down. We can speak of something as unmixed only in an interest-relative and context-dependent sense. In other words, what counts as hybrid versus nonhybrid, mixed versus unmixed, transgressive versus normative, always depends on the context and frame of reference.<sup>2</sup> It’s precisely historicist and contextualist ways of thinking that enable us to recognize and appreciate this fact.

Hominh and Nguyen interpret my historicist and contextualist sensibility as implying that “the meanings of concepts are *limited* by the contexts in which they were developed” (their italics) (Hominh & Nguyen 2021, 147). But this isn’t my view. On the contrary, although concepts are shaped by the contexts in which they develop, productive concepts go beyond their original contexts and help to create new ones. Concepts and contexts are constantly changing, transforming, and evolving. Historicist and contextualist methods help to bring these facts to light.

Although I would insist that pre-modern Buddhist ideas and concepts must be read in their classical contexts, I would never say that their meanings are limited to those contexts. On the contrary, in my work on the self and consciousness, I draw from pre-modern Buddhist (and Brahmanical) concepts and theories, reinterpreting and deploying them in relation to cognitive science and philosophy of mind (Thompson 2011, 2015a, 2015b, 2020b, 2021a). Other cross-cultural philosophers, such as Jonardon Ganeri (2015, 2017) and Jay Garfield (2015), do the same thing. In some cases, our renderings of Buddhist concepts are idiosyncratic and might not be recognizable if translated literally back into classical Buddhist thought (see Dunne 2016, Thompson 2016, 2020c). But this is allowable because contexts and conversations evolve.

Creole, as a conceptual metaphor, has already arisen in some of these new conversations, particularly in the dialogue between cognitive science and Buddhist psychology about contemplative practices. Cognitive scientist Larry Barsalou proposed the idea a decade ago. As John Dunne reports in a commentary on my *Waking*,

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Robert Sharf for discussion of this point.

*Dreaming, Being*: “At a 2010 ‘Workshop on Exploring the Language of Mental Life,’ sponsored by Stanford’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, Barsalou offered some strikingly insightful comments on the problem of translating between Buddhist and scientific accounts of mind. He suggested that our best option might be to allow a kind of deliberate ‘creole’ to emerge as a product of the dialogue between the systems. This would be a deliberate hybrid that enables the two systems to communicate, but it would not be understood to constitute a new system itself. That is, as theories emerge in the creole language, one would not suppose that one should also create a hybrid investigative method to examine these theories. Instead, the theories are translated back into the respective systems, and the inquiry proceeds there, inspired by new hypotheses, new challenges, and even new methods that emerge through the translation process” (Dunne 2016, 937). In response to Dunne, I affirmed that I was trying to create a new hybrid discourse in cognitive science and philosophy of mind for thinking about the self and consciousness (Thompson 2016, 997). In a later paper, I suggested that Ganeri’s claim to be relating Buddhaghosa’s *Abhidhamma* and the cognitive science of attention via inter-theoretic identities (Ganeri 2017) should be replaced by thinking of Ganeri’s novel, hybrid conceptual terminology as a kind of creole (Thompson 2020c).

Hominh and Nguyen offer two examples of creolized Buddhist modernists who are not Buddhist exceptionalists, do not commit the interpretive errors that I criticize, and “who rethink traditions by combining them with resources from other ways of thinking and being in order to address complex global problems” (Hominh & Nguyen 2021, 154). They are the twentieth-century, Republican-era Chinese monk Taixu and the contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. In a different, secular vein, one could also mention B. R. Ambedkar, as Sonam Kachru does in his commentary on my book (Kachru 2021; see also my response to Kachru in Thompson 2021b). I agree that, for the most part, these Buddhists do not fall within the scope of my critique. As I write in the Introduction to *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, “the scope of my critique... is Buddhist modernism in Europe and North America, since Asia is evolving its own unique forms of Buddhist modernism” (Thompson 2020a, 20).

Taixu belongs to early twentieth-century Asian Buddhist modernism and the unique and tumultuous circumstances of Republican-era China, and so falls outside the scope of my critique (though, as Hominh and Nguyen point out, Taixu does adopt the “justificatory” rhetoric I criticize of using science to corroborate Buddhism while saying that science can never surpass Buddhism).

Thich Nhat Hanh is a complicated case. On the one hand, he uses Yogācāra Buddhist philosophy to present an idealist metaphysics incompatible with scientific naturalism. On the other hand, he frequently appeals to science to justify his views in ways that fall within the scope of what I criticize (see Finnigan, forthcoming). In these ways, his position resembles that of the Dalai Lama, who uses Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism to present a metaphysics of consciousness incompatible with scientific materialism, while appealing to science to justify his views (see Thompson 2020a, 47-50, 53-54).

Hominh and Nguyen conclude by writing that the cosmopolitanist response to Buddhist exceptionalism “need not be, though it may well be, a form of deep historicism and contextualism that emphasizes understanding ideas in their original settings. It can be an intentional creolizing methodology that sees itself as creating something familiar but also new and distinctive by drawing liberally on whatever resources are available, unbound by false norms of purity and authenticity” (Hominh & Nguyen 2021, 154). I agree that this can be done and that it may offer ways of being a modern Buddhist without being a Buddhist exceptionalist (which I consider to be a typical trait of Buddhist modernism: see Thompson 2021b). Nevertheless, as I have argued here, historicism and contextualism should not be opposed to creolizing methods. Rather, they should inform them, otherwise one runs the risk of being shallow in one’s understanding of tradition and of overestimating how “new and distinctive” one’s creations really are. As George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

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