

Introduction to the Special Section on Buddhist Apologetics

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As some readers of this journal may be unfamiliar with the term “apologetics,” let me begin by introducing the basic concept. Far from an expression of remorse over past actions, apologetics in religion harkens back to the older meaning of the Greek *apologia* as a legal defense against accusations. In Christianity, it became a branch of theology concerned with meeting the objections of detractors with reasoned arguments. It is in this sense that we find the word in 1 Peter 3:15–16: “Always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.” Like many theological terms, “apologetics” has been adopted into religious studies more broadly as a term covering any literature or speech that defends a specific religious point of view against objections and criticisms.

All three of the articles that follow examine ways in which a Buddhist figure or group has mounted a defense against outside objections or a justification for fellow religionists. Thomas Calobrisi analyzes the ways in which Jon Kabat-Zinn maintained that his mindfulness practice, while isolated from its traditional Buddhist cosmology and doctrinal framework, did not on that account represent a purely secular therapeutic technique divorced from Buddhism altogether. Kwi Jeong Lee looks at the arguments that Buddhists in medieval China used to counter claims that the Buddhist idea of “merit” made no sense and served only as a grift by which monks could con lay believers into donating funds. Finally, Wei Wu takes the reader through the process whereby the terms “religion” and “superstition” entered the Chinese political lexicon in the late Qing and early Republican periods (especially during the 1920s), and how Buddhism struggled for acceptance as a legitimate religion and avoid designation as a superstition. Any

one of these articles would serve its purpose as a stand-alone essay in any academic journal, but in this issue of *Pacific World* they have been grouped together in a special section. This may seem puzzling, since the topics have nothing more in common with each other than their focus on Buddhist apologetics in some specific context or another. What holds them together?

They were initially accepted as part of a panel proposal for the 2020 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. If things had gone to plan, then this introduction would have served as the discussion that normally follows the paper presentations. Thus, they were conceived as part of a unified project. Beyond that, I believe there are some common threads that we may discern upon reading the three essays together. From these we may glean some insight into apologetics more broadly conceived. We will begin with the individual papers, and then try to draw these threads together.

In Calobrisi's article, we find that John Kabat-Zinn, a doctor and meditator, saw the possibility that the Buddhist practice of mindfulness could help his patients, but judged that the premodern trappings and arcane philosophy of Buddhism impeded its acceptance and adoption. In response, he extracted the techniques of mindfulness meditation from their traditional doctrinal moorings and presented them as efficacious medicine on their own. Nevertheless, he still saw the practice as Buddhist in nature and never desired to divorce it entirely from its native tradition. He thus set about disguising its roots by various means (such as refusing endorsements from known Buddhist figures) while insisting that his staff and other therapists learn about Buddhism so that they would know its origins and rationale even if their patients did not. This set him up for accusations that he was being duplicitous or disingenuous. Either it was a Buddhist practice and he was deceiving his patients, or it was not Buddhist and he was deceiving himself and his staff by maintaining that it was. As Calobrisi shows, he accomplished this balancing act by claiming that mindfulness meditation represented Buddhism's essence, which could be safely extricated from its tradition. After all, not even the Buddha himself was a "Buddhist," so one should not worry that the technique of mindfulness either does or does not fit into some artificial category called "Buddhism." What we want to notice in this article is the way in which Kabat-Zinn's *apologia* for mindfulness as not "Buddhist" and yet truly Buddhist evolved over time.

Kwi Jeong Lee's essay points out that medieval Chinese critics of Buddhism in the sixth and seventh centuries objected to the idea of merit as deceitful and futile. Buddhist monastics, they claimed, used the idea of merit to elicit donations from credulous followers. They also found the Buddhist explanations of merit unconvincing. Lee reports on the various ways in which Buddhist defenders sought to counter such criticisms: they showed Buddhist teachings on karma to be compatible with indigenous (Confucian and Daoist) classics, Buddhist practices for making merit are as efficacious as imperial rites in bringing blessing, the merit one earns does not necessarily show in an outwardly observable way, and so on. In meeting these objections, the Buddhist side recast merit as a kind of moral causation, subject to all the ambiguities in the relation of deed to reward already acknowledged long ago by China's ancient sages.

Jumping ahead to the turn of the twentieth century, Wei Wu discusses how Chinese Buddhists adjusted to new government policies directed at organizations sorted into the newly-adopted categories of "religion" (*zongjiao* 宗教) and "superstition" (*mixin* 迷信). Both categories stood in opposition to "science," but "religion" had more legitimacy and legal protection, while to be classed as a "superstition" exposed groups to persecution, proscription, and confiscation of property. Thus, Buddhists tried various apologetic strategies to avoid official classification as superstition and to show that it was a religion compatible with China's project of modernization. Wu details these strategies in his article.

As stated earlier, reading them as a group reveals some details and patterns that would not be so apparent if one read any one of them in isolation. They all show Buddhism dealing with a transition of some sort; none shows Buddhism having to defend itself during a period of stability and wide acceptance. As a result of this, they are as much about Buddhism's adaptation as its self-defense.

In two instances, the transition is from one cultural setting to another. The Mindfulness movement came about as a result of John Kabat-Zinn's desire to make Buddhism work in a modern North American setting. Similarly, Lee looks at Buddhism in the early stages of its adaptation to Chinese culture. In both instances, the strategy Kabat-Zinn and early Chinese Buddhist promoters adopted was to emphasize certain aspects of Buddhism as compatible with the culture of its new home while downplaying aspects that did not seem so acceptable. They

might even go beyond a bare assertion of compatibility and try to show that elements of Buddhism were already present in the new host culture, as when the Chinese pointed to similar teachings in normative Confucian and Daoist texts.

In two cases the transition involves a move from a pre-modern to a modern setting. Mindfulness practice as repackaged by Kabat-Zinn and the defense of Buddhism as a religion rather than a superstition in Republican China both aimed to show that Buddhism has a place in the modern world. In both these cases, the strategies mirror those used to show that Buddhism can work in a new cultural setting. Buddhist thinkers play up the elements of Buddhism that can work with modern values (its philosophy, compatibility with science, pragmatism, and so on) and seek to distance Buddhism from past elements and practices that seem retrograde (ritualism, “folk” elements, etc.).

Seeing these strategies at play in these various settings affords us another insight into the nature of apologetics. It is not like the defense of a walled city or a fortress; a successful defense does not merely repulse an attack while leaving Buddhism unscarred and unchanged. Apologetics in these instances constitute tactics of proactive adaptation that leave Buddhism not just defended, but altered. However, the apologetic strategy rarely acknowledges that it is making changes to Buddhism in order to help it survive. Rather, it tends to deny that any alteration is taking place. John Kabat-Zinn does not seem to admit that he is changing Buddhism as such; he claims that his Mindfulness practice encapsulates the “essence” of Buddhism and carries it intact into the modern age. The Buddhist apologists of the 1920s in China pulled forward threads of Buddhism that had been present for many centuries and characterized them as “real” Buddhism while claiming that the equally venerable rituals and folk practices that might merit the designation “superstition” were not essential.

Thus, the comparative reading of these three essays yields new insights into apologetics. It is an art often deployed at transition points in a religion’s history, whether from one culture to another or from one historical moment to another. It is a way of avoiding saying that the religion is deficient in any way and needs to be changed or improved. Rather, it says that the religion has always been eminently suited to the present circumstances as long as one knows which elements are “essential” to it (that is, acceptable in the present circumstances) and which are mere accretions or degradations (and can thus be safely

jettisoned without altering the religion in any meaningful way). This double move allows the apologists to change and adapt their religion while denying that they are doing any such thing. This invites further theorizing.

Thus, I encourage the reader to read all three of the following essays together, and then take these insights into other investigations of religious apologetics. Doing so will shed light on the larger category “apologetics” and provide greater analytic depth to future studies.

