A colleague recently took me to task for consulting Jews and Christians on how to keep American Buddhism alive. He didn’t agree with either premise—that Jews and Christians could offer advice to Buddhists, or that Buddhism was in any danger of decline. But he was wrong on both counts. American Buddhism, which swelled its ranks to accommodate the spiritual enthusiasms of baby boomers in the late 20th century, is now aging. One estimate puts the average age of Buddhist converts (about a third of the American Buddhist population) at upwards of 50. This means that the religion is almost certain to see its numbers reduced over the next generation as boomer Buddhists begin to die off without having passed their faith along to their children. And Jewish and Christian models offer the most logical solution for reversing that decline.

The basic problem is that non-Asian converts tend not to regard what they practice as a religion. From the beginning, Buddhism has been seen in its American incarnation not as an alternative religion, but as an alternative to religion. American converts have long held Buddhism apart from what they see as the inherent messiness of Western religious discourse on such issues as faith and belief, and from the violence that has so often accompanied it.

The author Sam Harris, though not himself a Buddhist, is nevertheless fairly representative of this point of view. In his book "The End of Faith," Mr. Harris is strongly critical of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but he gives Buddhism a free pass. "Buddhism has also been a source of ignorance and occasional violence," he concedes, but "it is not a religion of faith, or a religion at all in the Western sense."

Mr. Harris goes so far as to claim that "the esoteric teachings of Buddhism offer the most complete methodology we have for discovering the intrinsic freedom of consciousness, unencumbered by any dogma." He likens the Dalai Lama’s encounters with Christian ecclesiastics to a meeting between Cambridge physicists and Kalahari Bushmen, which is offensive on so many levels—to Christians, to Buddhists, to Bushmen, and maybe even to physicists—that one hardly knows where to begin. And yet most American converts would probably agree with Mr. Harris’s portrayal of Buddhism as an empirically based spiritual practice. In its pure, idealized form (which, admittedly, exists mostly in the minds of Western converts), that practice is relatively free of dogma and superstition. Unfortunately, it is also free of folk tales, family and--dare I say it--fun.

For the most part American converts don’t see this as a problem. When I suggested to my colleague that he might want to think of ways to integrate his Buddhist experience into the long-term life of his family, and that he might look to existing religious models, like his local synagogue, for ideas on how to do that (rather than to the out-of-state monastery where he goes alone on retreat twice yearly), he answered shortly, "When my kids get old enough, they can decide for themselves whether to meditate or not."

It's an argument I have heard before. Having left the religion of their birth, often with good reason, American converts tend to be wary of anything approaching religious indoctrination, even if that means failing to offer their children the basics of a religious education. This has the advantage of giving Buddhist children great freedom of religious expression, with the disadvantage of not giving them any actual religion to express. The result is a generation of children with a Buddhist parent or two but no Buddhist culture to grow up in.

What does this mean for the non-Buddhist culture at large? Why be concerned that so few Buddhist baptisms, weddings or funerals occur among Buddhist converts each year that most of them have no idea what such ceremonies even look like, or that years after their conversion, their extended families persist in thinking of them as basically Jewish or Catholic at heart? The answer is surprising all around.
In the contemporary discourse on religion, it is striking how often Buddhism is privileged over Judaism, Christianity or Islam as a scientifically based or inherently peaceful version of religion. Note that the Dalai Lama (rather than the pope) was asked to provide the inaugural address at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience in 2005, even though, like Catholicism, Tibetan Buddhism includes beliefs (think reincarnation) that are anathema to medical science. Likewise, though Japanese Buddhists melted their temple bells to make bombs during World War II, the idea of Buddhism as a peace-loving religion persists as an enduring fantasy in Western people's minds. And yet, such fantasies are instructive nonetheless.

Though some of my more devout Buddhist associates may balk at the idea, these days I have increasingly come to see Buddhism in America as an elaborate thought experiment being conducted by society at large--from the serious practitioner who meditates twice daily to the person who remarks in passing, "Well, if I had to be something, I guess I'd be a Buddhist." The object of that experiment is not to import some "authentic" version of Buddhism from Asia, as some believe, but to imagine a new model for religion altogether--one that is nondogmatic, practice-based and peaceful.

In that case, all the more reason to keep Buddhism in America alive. But to keep that experiment running (as it must if it is ever to yield practical results for the broader religious culture), it has to get itself grounded in the realities of American family life. That is why I tell every Buddhist I meet these days to make friends with a local priest or rabbi and ask what kinds of programs he (or she) is offering for children and families. For if Buddhism has much to offer the West, it surely has much to receive as well. Whatever new religious model is going to emerge over the next 100 years as the result of the inevitable cross-pollination of religious cultures in America, one can only hope that it will preserve the best of East and West.

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