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# Non-Violence, Asceticism, and the Problem of Buddhist Nationalism

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**Abstract:** Contemporary Buddhist violence against minority Muslims in Myanmar is rightfully surprising: a religion with its particular moral philosophies of non-violence and asceticism and with its functional polytheism in practice should not generate genocidal nationalist violence. Yet, there are resources within the Buddhist canon that people can draw from to justify violence in defense of the religion and of a Buddhist-based polity. When those resources are exploited in the context of particular Theravāda Buddhist practices and the history of Buddhism and Buddhist identity in Burma from ancient times through its colonial and contemporary periods, it perpetuates an ongoing tragedy that is less about religion than about ethno-nationalism.

**Keywords:** nationalism; Buddhism; Theravāda; non-violence; asceticism; polytheism; Burma; Myanmar

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What accounts for a non-violent religion's turn to nationalist violence? This question is prompted by persistent and shocking genocidal violence by Buddhist groups in Myanmar (Burma) against minority Muslim Rohingya over the past decade.

In the West, the virulence with which religion and nationalism converge is associated primarily with the fervor of Abrahamic religions, which only heightens the incongruence of Buddhism's teachings of and reputation for non-violence with grotesque uses of force in its name.

I argue that Buddhist nationalist<sup>1</sup> violence in Myanmar should be both more and less surprising than it is, and address two major elements of Buddhist philosophy at the root of this incongruity: non-violence and asceticism. To be clear, Buddhism is not unique in espousing these philosophies—these elements can also be found, singly or in some combination, in various strands of all the other major world religions (Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism)—but Buddhism is the only major religion whose dominant strands make both philosophies the centerpieces of its belief system.

This article first looks at the precept of non-violence in Buddhism and the function of asceticism in overcoming inevitable human suffering and avoiding the entrapment of worldly concerns, and discusses these philosophies in light of historical texts and experiences. Then, it explores these elements within the context of Theravāda Buddhism in colonial Burma and contemporary Myanmar.

## 1. The Precept of Non-Violence and the Philosophy of Pacifism

Buddhism's first precept is to avoid killing any living being, not just people but even the most insignificant of animals. This pushes adherents toward vegetarianism, of course, as well as pacifism, and this precept is commonly interpreted to prohibit suicide, abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment. Yet, the resulting positions—vegetarianism, anti-abortion, pacifism, etc.—are not

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I rely on Anthony D. Smith's definition of nationalism as "an ideology and a movement, seeking to attain and maintain autonomy, unity, and identity for a social group deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential 'nation'" (A. Smith 1999, p. 46).

absolutes. For example, Buddhists are not to intentionally harm animals, but if mendicant monks who beg for their food are given meat, they are permitted to eat it so long as the animal was not slaughtered specifically to feed them.

The Buddha's directive of non-violence intends to guide individuals in their moral development: it helps free people's minds from thoughts and emotions that would prompt violence as much as it directs them to act in accordance with empathy that all beings fear death. While the precept of non-violence is commonly interpreted to mean pacifism and the rejection of warfare, the edict is complex. Buddhism does overwhelmingly reject the use of violence; but non-violence as a political and social philosophy—pacifism—is a separate matter, and there, Buddhist doctrine and history are more ambiguous.

Buddhist lore, for example, is not devoid of violence or warfare. The *Ārya-Satyakapariivarta*,<sup>2</sup> an early<sup>3</sup> Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist *sūtra* of some influence, describes various kings as righteous, including the legendary Aśoka and King Harṣa who killed tens of thousands of non-Buddhists.<sup>4</sup> After Aśoka, in India, converted to Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE, he rejected future violent conquest, decreeing that:

all my sons and grandsons may not seek to gain new [military/territorial] victories, that in whatever victories they may gain they may prefer forgiveness and light punishment, that they may consider the only victory the victory of Righteousness, which is of value both in this world and the next . . . [From Thirteenth Rock Edict]<sup>5</sup>

Yet, domestically, Aśoka never abolished the death penalty.<sup>6</sup>

Other works, including influential Theravāda text *Milinda Pañha* (circa 2nd century BCE), interpret some acts of violence and punishment as resulting from one's karma and consider the actor who imposes violent punishment a mere facilitator of that karma.<sup>7</sup>

Far from being completely pacifist, Buddhist teachings make some allowance for war, albeit under limited conditions, including first attempting to win through intimidation rather than actual force, trying to capture enemies alive, and not harming non-combatants or those who have surrendered or are fleeing.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.1. Religious Competition, Political Realities, and Geopolitical Pressures

Although the Pali canon recounts the Buddha as a compassionate tamer of animals, the epic poem *Mahāvamsa* ("Great Chronicle", written in the 5th or 6th century CE)<sup>9</sup> calls the Buddha a "conqueror" who forcibly expelled the powerful but sometimes dangerous nature-spirits (yakshas, yakkhas,<sup>10</sup> or yakkas) from the Lanka island by cursing them with "devious afflictions", in order to prepare the land for the later introduction of Buddhism; this story is frequently interpreted to justify defensive war to protect Buddhists.<sup>11</sup>

This mythical tale reflects a historical truth, however, that there is vigorous competition between religions for a population's devotion; individualistic religions, too, will attempt to convert adherents

<sup>2</sup> Complete name: *Ārya-Bodhisattva-gocara-upāyaviśaya-vikurovāṇa-nirdeśa Sūtra*.

<sup>3</sup> Timeframe of origin is uncertain, but it was cited by another work by 2nd century CE.

<sup>4</sup> (Jenkins 2010).

<sup>5</sup> (de Bary 1972, p. 53).

<sup>6</sup> (de Bary 1972, p. 54).

<sup>7</sup> (Jenkins 2010, pp. 64–65).

<sup>8</sup> (Jenkins 2010, p. 67).

<sup>9</sup> (Geiger 1912) This Pali-language chronicle of Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) was written in the 5th or 6th century CE, and recounts the history of Buddhism.

<sup>10</sup> Not to be confused with the Yakkha people, an indigenous ethnic group on the Indian subcontinent (mostly in modern-day Nepal and India).

<sup>11</sup> Sinhalese Buddhists will also refer to the canonical *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* to justify defensive war. (Bartholomeusz 2002, p. 22).

and even non-violent religious groups will resort to assault to secure their dominance. The Gelug sect, for example—the prevailing strand of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Tibet and the school of the Dalai Lama, whose contemporary incarnation has a sterling reputation for his teachings on ethics, compassion, and non-violence—fought extensively with competing sects in the 14th through 16th centuries to become the principal religious order in the region.<sup>12</sup> Militancy in Buddhism has, unfortunately, ample historical precedence.

Religious competition can take place at the levels of individual and/or private proselytization and does not have to be political in nature, but the realities of political society and social attachments mean that it often becomes so. Like other religions, Buddhism can both be exploited by political forces or attempt to exploit available political tools, and religious practice commonly intertwines with political goals.

For centuries after Aśoka, in kingdoms run by adherents of Theravāda Buddhism, political and religious elites promoted the interdependence between the political entity's strength and the religion's well-being. To defend the religion, therefore, one must also—perhaps, first—defend the state, and textual evidence can be found for this position and for defensive wars.<sup>13</sup>

To that end, Buddhist monks in many societies throughout history have been known to serve in various political positions, and have sometimes developed prayers and rituals for the well-being of the nation or country.<sup>14</sup>

Buddhism is hardly the first or last religion to be co-opted for political purposes, and like every other faith, it has varied practices and diverse doctrines. So one finds many stories of compassion and pacifism—but militancy and violence are also available in the history and literature for people to draw on if they so wish.

In the contemporary period, Buddhists continue to grapple with the dilemma posed by non-violence in the face of unavoidable geopolitical pressure, which has sometimes led them to massage the doctrine to accommodate.

For example, during the Sino-Japanese war (1930s–1940s) and the Korean War (1950–1953),<sup>15</sup> Buddhism struggled to come to terms with authoritarian government mandates and became entangled with nationalism, for example when the threat from Japanese invasion superseded existing conflicts between Buddhist orders and the Chinese government (including over property seizures, taxes, and religious freedom), and Buddhist survival became dependent on China's national survival. Some Buddhists thought they could better protect Buddhists and Buddhist institutions by working with the government, and were driven by pragmatic calculations of survival to reinterpret sacred texts to argue for compassionate killing.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1970s, communist victories in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia spawned a militant anti-communist Buddhist nationalist movement in Thailand, led by monk Phra Kittivuddho, whose “Nawaphon” movement considered it a monk's sacred duty to defend the Thai nation and religion with violence if necessary. His slogan “Killing Communists is Not a Sin” was an exception due to national emergency, he contended, as communists were “not complete persons” but rather “destroyers of

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<sup>12</sup> As calculating as it may be to put it in these terms, religions compete with each other for “market share,” and they will use violence to both expand their presence and protect their membership. For example, (McCleary and van der Kuijp 2010) found that the Gelug religious sect operated like a “club” in that it sought to generate benefits for members through greater participation and size of membership. It utilized doctrinal innovation—including imitating its major competitor the Karmapa sect by creating an incarnate Dalai Lama and developing its own unique practices such as allowing only ordained abbots, in order to reinforce religious activity and monastic community—and, in the absence of a political authority, fought and killed in order to become the monopoly religion and thereafter maintain “club benefits” for its members.

For more on the Gelug school's historical rise to prominence, see also (Maher 2010). On club models of religion and “participatory crowding”, see also (Iannaccone 1992).

<sup>13</sup> (Walton and Hayward 2014, p. 21; Bartholomeusz 2002).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., (Yu 2005, pp. 54–55).

<sup>15</sup> (Yu 2005; Yu 2010).

<sup>16</sup> (Yu 2005, pp. 52–53).

nation, religion, or monarchy who are bestial”; and he also offered a form of “double effect” argument in advising that monks “must not intend to kill people, only to kill the Devil” presumably residing within the offenders.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.2. Double Effect

Pacifism does not mean passiveness, for Buddhism mandates not just refraining from evil deeds (*discipline*), but also doing good (*kindness, compassion*) and benefitting others through skillful means (“Text of Bodhisattva Disciplines”, *Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra*).<sup>18</sup> Acts must be judged by both the motivating intentions (compassion for saving others or even the person being killed) and the ensuing consequences.<sup>19</sup> This opens the door to *properly-motivated* utilitarian calculation: for example, one story of a bodhisattva who saved 500 merchants by slaying dozens of pirates is commonly interpreted to mean that one is permitted to kill “with compassion in order to save many” (一殺多生, *yisha duosheng*).<sup>20</sup>

There remains, however, innate tension between the act of killing (and the politics that often entangle it) and fundamental Buddhist ethics such as non-violence. In a move that should be familiar to scholars of Christian just war theory, resolution is attempted by focusing on the compassionate intent with which one should wage war. There is, various sūtras say, merit in suffering and sacrificing oneself and one’s worldly comforts and wealth for the sake of protecting one’s family or other living beings: for example, says the *Ārya-Satyakaparivarta*, when “the action [is] conjoined with intentions of compassion and not abandoning”, then warfare may become meritorious.<sup>21</sup>

These doctrinal developments do not satisfactorily resolve the inherent tension between violent act and Buddhist principle any more than the doctrine of double effect reconciles the same problem in Christian just war ethics; many adherents of both religions would agree with this statement, even as some of their co-religionists take up arms for various causes. The parallel doctrinal elaborations, however, show that religious creeds have always struggled with the demands of human society, and I will return to this in the discussion of Burma/Myanmar.

## 2. Asceticism to Overcome Human Suffering

The practice of rigorous self-discipline or self-denial appears in many religions and can take different forms, including meditation, fasting, and isolation; its primary purpose is to overcome the confines of human nature and the suffering that inevitably follows from it.

Of the different Buddhist schools, the Western world is probably most familiar with Mahāyāna, which dominates northern Asia (especially Tibet, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan), or secondarily with Vajrayana, which is mostly practiced in India. Theravāda is the major strand in southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka). All three schools share core Buddhist beliefs,<sup>22</sup> including the Four Noble Truths: life inevitably entails suffering, which is caused by ignorance and unsatisfied craving and can breed vices such as anger, hatred, greed, and envy; this suffering can only be alleviated with enlightenment and overcoming of desire, which is achieved “by a course of carefully disciplined and moral conduct, culminating in the life of concentration and meditation led by the Buddhist monk.”<sup>23</sup> This process is the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment, which entails

<sup>17</sup> (Rackett 2014).

<sup>18</sup> (Yu 2005, pp. 48, 224n11–12).

<sup>19</sup> (Yu 2005, p. 50).

<sup>20</sup> ((Yu 2005, pp. 48, 224n13: *Āgamas, Fo hai deng* 佛海燈 Land of the Buddha-Sea, v. 2 n. 4 (1937): pp. 3–6)).

<sup>21</sup> (Jenkins 2010, pp. 68, 74n34).

<sup>22</sup> These major branches of Buddhism differ in significant ways, as well. Theravāda Buddhism is grounded in the extensive and varied *Pali* canon, which includes some works of uncertain origin but is generally considered to have derived from the Buddha and his own disciples. The canon is usually divided into “three baskets” (*Tipitaka*): the Basket of Discipline (*Vinaya Pitaka*) covering the rules of the *sangha* and its monks and nuns, the Basket of Discourses (*Sutta Pitaka*) recounting Buddha’s teachings, and the Basket of Higher Teachings (*Abhidhamma Pitaka*) providing philosophical and scholastic underpinnings and explanations, each of which consist of multiple works.

<sup>23</sup> (de Bary 1972, p. 9).

right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration; these eight paths fall into three different themes—conduct, mental development, and wisdom.

To help one follow the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment,<sup>24</sup> the *Pali* canon advocates *dhutanga* (renunciation), whose accompanying practices include wearing only robes of secondhand clothing, fasting intermittently, eating only food offered as alms, living in seclusion or away from people and distractions, and living simply by sleeping anywhere that can be used as a sleeping place, among other behaviours.

*Dhutanga* is not required for all people, but it is common for laity to adopt some of its measures temporarily, whether in the letter of *dhutanga* or with actions in the spirit of its guidance. In Theravāda practice, including in Myanmar, many if not most males become novice monks for a period of time.<sup>25</sup>

The path to enlightenment is ultimately a personal one, and the earliest Buddhist monks were “wandering mendicants” and thus more individualistic, as they were not part of “orders” in the sense of being in organized communities.<sup>26</sup> Buddhist monks eventually formed groups, however, which yielded both internal hierarchies amongst the monks as well as a structure for relating to the laity.

With society comes not only social hierarchy but also physical infrastructure such as temples. While Buddhist temples are intended to inspire and promote practices that can lead to enlightenment, they—like most religious architecture—have evolved in ways that inadvertently promote the achievements of men. In part, this is because religion is only one of many claimants on society, and even individualistic, ascetic religions can be used as vehicles for exerting influence on others.

Here, one broad difference between Mahāyāna and Theravāda is worth noting: Mahāyāna doctrine encourages everyone, including lay people, to reach Enlightenment and to follow the Bodhisattva’s Eightfold Path by also teaching others, because aspirations for mere personal liberation from earthly impurities and wanderings can be selfish. (This process often includes lay people entering retreats.) Doctrinally, Mahāyāna is more spiritually-egalitarian.

In contrast, Theravāda thought focuses on meditation and one’s own achievement of *arhat* and subsequent freedom from rebirth after death, which has the tendency to exclude laity from achieving *arhatta*.<sup>27</sup> In comparison to Mahāyāna practice, these aspects of Theravāda doctrine might lend itself to greater hierarchy and tribalism. (These are relative differences, of course, and we will see how Theravāda Buddhism in Myanmar attempts to bridge the gap between clergy and laity).

### 3. Limits of Ascetic Withdrawal from Worldly Societal Concerns

Buddhism originated partly in response to existing social and political circumstances: Buddhist doctrine rejected the Hindu caste system by deeming the different classes and castes all equal, because men achieve respect with their moral virtue and spiritual merit, and not by accident of birth. It also denied the divine right of kings and monarchical divinity, as sovereign legitimacy depends instead on one’s ability to protect and lead the people.<sup>28</sup>

Obviously, this had limited effect in practice. Buddhist aloofness from society sits in tension with political demands and natural social attachments, and even the Buddha could not escape this dilemma: there is a canon story in which the Buddha, although he had already renounced his place in and ties to the Śākya clan into which he was born, once rushed to the clan’s assistance and put himself in danger

<sup>24</sup> Despite the precept of non-violence in Buddhism, some might interpret certain ascetic practices such as fasting as doing violence to one’s body in pursuit of liberating one’s mind, e.g., (Olson 2014).

<sup>25</sup> See fn97 on temporary novitiation practices.

<sup>26</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 5).

<sup>27</sup> (Katz 1989, p. 280).

<sup>28</sup> (de Bary 1972, p. 45).



in order to protect his kin from attack by the kingdom of Vaisana (*Ekottarāgama*, chap. 26), and he was saddened and disturbed when the clan was later destroyed.<sup>29</sup>

Both physical and spiritual withdrawal from society should follow from renouncing its existing social and political structure. But despite the apolitical essence of Buddhist doctrine and its emphasis on individual enlightenment, Buddhist monks eventually formed communities with each other and organized over time. In a sense, these monastic communities function as substitutes for familial and tribal communities, and it is not uncommon for monks who give up their family names to consider themselves “sons” of the Buddha—to enter into his lineage, so to speak. Especially in community form, even ascetic Buddhism must come to some accommodation with broader society’s social and political arrangements, and sometimes draws from those structures to do so.

### 3.1. Syncretizing Social Influences

Religious doctrine is often perceived as a Platonic Form—a timeless and immutable idea that transcends and shapes the essence of objects on this earth—but religious insights are also influenced and manipulated by circumstances, and religious doctrines and practices evolve over time as people contest them. One common adaptation is accommodation with existing folk and pagan religions in various ways, perhaps by scheduling major holy days to coincide with events that are already significant (e.g., Jesus was unlikely to have been born on December 25, or even in the winter).

### 3.2. Functional Polytheism and Its Influences

Buddhism, too, is influenced by external forces: in contemporary practice, Buddhism is a moral philosophy to which a syncretic polytheistic religion became attached. This is more obvious in Mahāyāna practice, for example, in which Bodhisattvas are worshipped in addition to the Buddha. In contrast, Theravāda deifies the Buddha while all others aspire to become *arhats*, but it still acquires polytheistic elements in practice when it mixes with animism, as in Myanmar, where ancestors, spirits, and personified universal forces (*nats*) are given supernatural abilities and worshipped within Buddhism.<sup>30</sup> So even if Buddhist doctrine constitutes a moral philosophy more than a religion, it would be a disservice to ignore the functional polytheism with which it is often practiced.

Given the non-violent and ascetic content of Buddhist credo, one might assume that any such deviation from pure doctrine would largely explain Buddhist turns to nationalist violence. But religions do not operate by doctrinal content alone.

I argue that the merger with folk religion should counter-intuitively mitigate against Buddhist absolutist violence, because an overlying polytheism *may* serve as a structural check. In polytheism, gods come in all different kinds: there are “high gods” who created the universe, gods that look after more or less literal realms (e.g., sky, ocean, winds, hearth, other gods), gods that inhabit even the smallest of things (e.g., trees, reeds, animals), and gods of abstract concepts (e.g., fate, love, wisdom, compassion, justice).

While there have always been gods who accept or advocate violence in their service, the call to arms is even more threatening when it comes from moralizing gods, who will punish moral transgressions between human beings. Moralizing gods appear in some local religions as early as 2800 BCE, but they spread more widely during the Axial Age (1st millennium BCE) and in the post-Axial Age with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, in response to the growth of large societies

<sup>29</sup> (Yu 2005, pp. 53–54).

<sup>30</sup> Anawrahta Minsaw, the first king of a united Burma (1044–77 CE), helped ease the imposition of Theravāda Buddhism on his people by officially promulgating the assimilation of 37 *nats* into Buddhist worship. The admixture continues to this day, but recently to the increasingly violent consternation of some fundamentalist Buddhists, bearing some resemblance to ongoing anti-Muslim campaigns there (Economist 2019).

of around one million or more people, and their accompanying social complexity.<sup>31</sup> When violence is condoned not to appease the gods' personal interests but rather to fulfill some mandate of earthly justice and morality, it can take on particularly dangerous, millenarian forms.

*Disagreement* among moralizing gods, however, can mitigate this by demonstrating the possibility that one's preferred god (and therefore oneself) might be incorrect in the moral judgment. This is only possible where there are multiple gods within a religion, even if those gods sit in hierarchical relationship with one another.<sup>32</sup>

Monotheism, in contrast, does not require that its one god be infallible, but that is the dominant approach to monotheism.<sup>33</sup> Polytheism's inherently competitive structure permits gods to be mistaken, whether they are moralizing or not; after all, they will disagree with each other, and they cannot all be right all the time.<sup>34</sup>

The syncretic plethora of gods disagreeing with each other and therefore demonstrating reasonable pluralism within the structure of the religion itself *should* naturally raise doubts about the absolutism of any religious proclamation. Gods in polytheistic universes compete and/or overlap in their jurisdictions. Few, if any, of them are omni-anything: omniscient, omnipresent, or omnipotent. As a result, although polytheistic religions have no shortage of moral precepts, no single answer and few absolutes are possible. Both circumscription and circumspection are built into the structure of polytheistic religious belief.

Do polytheistic religions actually yield less nationalist religious violence, however? Knowing the history of Hindu nationalist violence (e.g., pre-partition and contemporary India) and Buddhist nationalist violence (e.g., Myanmar today), it is a difficult claim to make—save for the comparison to monotheistic nationalist violence, which has seen arguably even more brutality against both adherents of other religions and those who interpret their shared religion differently (e.g., sectarian vendettas between fellow Christians or fellow Muslims).<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Religion as Lived Experience

Circumstances sometimes render it impossible for religion to avoid political entanglement, through no fault of the religious adherents, especially with the effective monopoly of nation-states on forms of legitimate political organization in modern international politics.

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<sup>31</sup> The association between large, complex societies and adherence to moralizing gods has long been noticed, but the causality has been difficult to determine; recent research, however, shows that moralizing gods and their "prosocial" supernatural punishment have followed large increases in a society's social complexity (at around a population of one million), rather than the other way around, perhaps because they help sustain and order those societal intricacies and reduce free-riding (Whitehouse et al. 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Because monotheistic religions' gods tend to be both "high gods" and moral arbiters, they are more easily co-opted for extreme moralistic judgments, and the violence that can accompany them.

<sup>33</sup> Fallible monotheism is a decidedly heterodox approach. For example, (Segal 2007)'s interpretation of the Old Testament is considered radical, because he portrays God himself developing, learning, and changing his ways through the course of his struggles with humanity, e.g., when Abraham tries to persuade God to uphold a justicial principle of sparing the innocent and challenges God to be a just deity, both of which God does not immediately take onboard (Joseph's Bones, pp. 58–69).

<sup>34</sup> For example, both deities and demons fought wars against each other in ancient Greek, classical Roman, and Hindu mythology.

<sup>35</sup> Theocratic political rule is likelier to emerge when the religion in question is monotheistic. (Coggel and Miceli 2013) found that theocracies are more likely to be established where religion can serve to legitimize the state and where the society's religious market is monopolized by one dominant religion. They found that monotheism alone seemed to be a robust (but not necessarily statistically significant) factor in contributing to the development of theocratic rule; although, unsurprisingly, if the ruler was also considered a god, then the results became significant. They speculate that the insignificance of monotheism alone as a factor may result from the scarcity of monotheistic religions in their sample, constituting only 8% of the ancient polities in their dataset, as the effect of monotheism became clearer and more consistent when looking just at contemporary societies, after the development of the major monotheistic religions.

I would maintain that one reason monotheism becomes a significant factor once it develops as a serious competitor to polytheistic religions is because the structure of monotheism functions equivalently to monopolizing the religious market.

Buddhism has other-worldly and inner-worldly, as well as world-rejecting, principles and practices,<sup>36</sup> and while it advocates freeing oneself from natural desires and earthly temptations and suffering, it does not fall into nihilism,<sup>37</sup> so its practitioners must find a way to live in this world.<sup>38</sup> All non-nihilistic philosophies of asceticism (e.g., Buddhism, Stoicism) advise people on how to live in and engage with the world, and that generates internal tensions that are perhaps easily exploited by political interaction.

So it should disappoint, but not surprise, when non-violent religions resort to force: they, too, compete not only within themselves, as we have seen, and with other religions, but also with other objects of allegiance and centers of power, including familial, tribal, and political units.

For example, during Cambodia's short-lived Khmer Republic (1970–1975), general-turned-president Lon Nol, who seized power in a military coup, cultivated a reputation as a devout Buddhist,<sup>39</sup> and his regime sought legitimacy against both monarchical and communist challengers by employing Buddhist iconography and public displays of Buddhism and by claiming support from the country's two major Buddhist sects (Mohanikay, Thommayut).<sup>40</sup> A crucial difference between Myanmar today and Cambodia then, however, is that Buddhist monks in Cambodia during that time were only "passively" important politically,<sup>41</sup> as "it was mostly the army that did the killing then—Buddhist monks were not leading the charge there",<sup>42</sup> in sharp contrast to present-day Myanmar.

Other examples of militant, nationalist Theravāda Buddhism include aforementioned Thai monk Kittivuddho's anti-communist Nawaphon movement in the 1970s, as well as the ongoing persecution the largely-Hindu Tamil population in Sri Lanka by the predominantly-Buddhist Sinhalese, especially by Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and other nationalist organizations. Sri Lankan Buddhists sometimes interpret the epic *Mahāvamsa* to claim that the island of Sri Lanka itself is sacred because the Buddha made three "magical" visits, clearing and unifying the island by force in anticipation of the introduction of Buddhism there after his death, and therefore, the island is the Sinhala sacred home in a way that ties the territory to Buddhist religion.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.1. Religion, Nationalism, and Modernity

All religions can be manipulated for nationalist purposes. Ironically, Donald Eugene Smith argues that Buddhism's lack of worldly attachments may render it more susceptible to nationalism: while Hinduism and Islam, for example, have their own primary loyalties (Hinduism to caste, Islam to the caliphate), Buddhism has none.<sup>44</sup> All three religions have been exploited in various nationalist struggles, but perhaps Buddhism's doctrine does not save it from that fate as one might expect, because it does not offer any worldly alternatives to nationalism.

As Peter Mentzel notes, scholars of nationalism have long debated its relationship with religion, and the very definition of "nation" remains contested.<sup>45</sup> Despite modern nationalism originally arising partly as an anti-religious force, and despite the most influential early sociologists (Durkheim and Weber) placing nationalism in a secular, modern context, the modern nation-state has been far from

<sup>36</sup> Weber's traditional ideal types of religion would put Buddhism in the class of mysticism, but this does not encapsulate the complexities of Buddhist thought and practice. Furthermore, in practice, Buddhism can manifest as polytheistic, monotheistic, pantheistic, or not theistic at all.

<sup>37</sup> For example, it does not advocate suicide.

<sup>38</sup> Mahāyāna doctrine especially advocates trying to improve the world and help others along the path to enlightenment.

<sup>39</sup> (Kann 1970).

<sup>40</sup> (Whitaker 1973, p. 188; Harris 2008, p. 166).

<sup>41</sup> (Whitaker 1973, p. 188).

<sup>42</sup> (Kiernan 2019).

<sup>43</sup> (Bartholomeusz 2002, p. 20).

<sup>44</sup> (D. Smith 1965, pp. 82–83).

<sup>45</sup> (Mentzel 2020).



necessarily or primarily secular<sup>46</sup> and its nationalism is often intimately connected with religious belief even when it is not explicitly religious in nature.

Modernity does not secularize society by ridding it of religion, but rather transforms the objects and purposes of religion as ways with which people search for meaning.<sup>47</sup> Some theorists of nationalism conceived of it as a distinct and secular “civic” or “primordial” identification (Geertz 1973) and thought that it would lead to the marginalization or disappearance of religious worldviews (Gellner 1983). However, nationalism and its object, the nation, have turned out to be more contingent and malleable. Instead of nationalism being “engendered by nations” as “enduring collectives”, nationalism operates more as a “practical category”, “as contingent event”, or “as cognitive frame” (Brubaker 1996).<sup>48</sup> Nations emerge out of a complex of elements, including shared myths and religious beliefs (A. Smith 2000), and some have traced nations and nationalism to pre-modern origins (Hastings 1997; Grosby 2005), which would tie them even more closely to their associated religions.<sup>49</sup>

In practice, nationalism can be and certainly has been religiously-based,<sup>50</sup> but conceptions of religious nationalism can vary widely, ranging the spectrum from civic religion to radical religious nationalism. Entanglement between religion and nationalism in modern nation-states can blur the distinctions between civil identity and primordial identity<sup>51</sup> (especially if the civil identity is not itself fully secular in practice), and can lead to conflating these two identities.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4.2. Modern State Capacity

Another factor to consider is that the rigidity of territorial boundaries in a geopolitical landscape dominated by modern states can combine with modern religious nationalism to tie that religious sentiment to territory in a more inflexible manner; it is not an actual return to pre-Axial age “monolatry”, in which each nation and its land has its own distinctive god,<sup>53</sup> but it can be experienced that way and can enhance the mutual influence that religion and polity have on each other.

The modern state’s greater *capacity* to exercise more extensive reach into the lives of its population<sup>54</sup> than traditional or pre-modern polities possessed, as well as its monopoly on the use of legitimate violence within its borders, will lend itself to greater political and cultural separation between people of different states, and it will tend to funnel societal issues through a nationalist lens that may coincide with state boundaries. When religious impetus is further added to a state’s potential reach and parameters (whether the state is a full-fledged theocracy or merely has strong associations between religion and politics, e.g., legislation that favors certain religious doctrine, overlap between religions and political authority/officials, etc.), it can generate a flammable combination. Nationalist sentiment does not inevitably lead to violence, and the violence has never been solely motivated by nationalism;

<sup>46</sup> (cf. Gellner 1983).

<sup>47</sup> (Weber 1978).

<sup>48</sup> Explains (Brubaker 1996): “We should focus on nation as a category of practice, nationhood as an institutionalized cultural and political form, and nationness as a contingent event or happening, and refrain from using the analytically dubious notion of ‘nations’ as substantial, enduring collectivities”. He adds that “a strong theoretical case can be made for an eventful approach to nationness.” (pp. 19–20, 21).

<sup>49</sup> While this article takes “national” identity and “nationalism” to be modern ideological constructs, it also follows A. Smith’s “ethnosymbolism” in the belief that nations arise from existing ethnic foundations (with differing relative emphases on shared language, religion, culture, history, race, etc.). What matters for the purposes of this article, however, is how Burmese Buddhist nationalists tend to view their “nation”: they justify their nationalism by reference to “perennial” or “primordial” origins (along the lines of Hastings 1997; Grosby 2005).

<sup>50</sup> (van der Veer 2015).

<sup>51</sup> cf. Geertz.

<sup>52</sup> While distinct civil identities are most commonly found in secular, democratic states, they are possible in every type of state, including theocracies, if there are citizens who do not share the dominant religion. (In Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example, there are citizens of minority religions who have civil identities such that they can still say they are Iranian or Saudi).

<sup>53</sup> (Jaspers 1953).

<sup>54</sup> While the capability is not always used to its full extent (e.g., in more decentralized liberal democracies, and for principled reasons), modern technology and bureaucracy give every state—even weak ones—a greater capacity to enforce on and intervene in their populations.

but there is an undeniably strong historical correlation between nationalism and the use of violence, as well as between religion and the use of violence.

Religiously-based nationalism in general is no longer a surprise, but the content of Buddhist tenets means that Buddhist nationalism still confounds and Buddhist nationalist violence especially continues to shock. Pure doctrine is often overcome when it meets societal phenomena, however, and organized violence in the Buddha's name in Myanmar is partly accounted for by some particular characteristics of Theravāda Buddhism as practiced there and the history of the phenomenon of religion as lived experience in political society.

## 5. Contemporary Myanmar

Religion can play a key role in “the ritual legitimacy of traditional states”,<sup>55</sup> as modern religion both is shaped by nationalism (as the nation-state is now the primary form of political organization) and shapes national identity (for example as a base for anti-colonial mobilization).<sup>56</sup> Burmese Buddhist nationalism presents both these dual phenomena.

Buddhism has long been an integral force in Burmese society. After Aśoka's son Mahinda, a Buddhist monk, converted Sinhalese king Devanampiya Tissa, it expanded Buddhism's political and social/ethnic reach and solidified its place in Sinhalese national identity. When Theravāda Buddhism was established centuries later (11th century CE) by Anawrahta Minsaw in the kingdom of Burma,<sup>57</sup> it looked to Ceylon's example for its role in society.<sup>58</sup>

Since then, for over a millennium, Theravāda Buddhism has been the dominant religion in Burma, and there have been close ties between political and religious authority through to modern colonization. Over time, Buddhism in Burma abandoned its individualized monastic form in favor of more organized communities, which led to greater political control of the *sangha*, the Buddhist clergy.<sup>59</sup> Kings appointed the head of the *sangha*,<sup>60</sup> many kings were considered Bodhisattvas,<sup>61</sup> and kings' special role in defending and supporting Buddhist faith buttressed and confirmed their own political legitimacy.<sup>62</sup> Kings built monasteries, provided food and other patronage, and appointed and supported the *sangha* and settled its controversies, as well as suppressed internal schisms and heresies.<sup>63</sup> The *sangha*, in turn, was involved in political life, writing the most prominent lawbooks; some monks had governance duties; and the religious orders used their position in society to legitimize the king.<sup>64</sup> Overall, there was an “interdependence” between the king and the *sangha*,<sup>65</sup> although Donald E. Smith deems that the king interfered in religion more than the *sangha* was involved in politics.<sup>66</sup>

### 5.1. Colonial Rule and Buddhist Activism

In the 19th century, Buddhists more broadly, not just in Burma, became more activist, and “anticipat[ed] the much more overtly political Buddhism that emerges in the mid-twentieth century. . . . the line between lay Buddhist activism and the *sangha* was increasingly blurred over the

<sup>55</sup> (van der Veer 2015, p. 11).

<sup>56</sup> (van der Veer 2015, p. 19).

<sup>57</sup> King Anawrahta Minsaw founded the first united Burmese kingdom and empire in 1044 CE (Lewy 1972, p. 19).

<sup>58</sup> (D. Smith 1965, pp. 9, 11).

<sup>59</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 15).

<sup>60</sup> Political domination over religious matters continues to this day, with the government's appointment of monks to Mahana (State Sangha Mahā Nayaka Committee), which was formed in 1980 to regulate the clergy.

<sup>61</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 22).

<sup>62</sup> (Lewy 1972, pp. 20–21; D. Smith 1965, p. 23).

<sup>63</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 27).

<sup>64</sup> (D. Smith 1965, pp. 31–32).

<sup>65</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 37).

<sup>66</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 36).

course of the twentieth century (Seneviratne 1999; Tambiah 1992),” and this represented an “important shift in the public role of Buddhism,” says Harshana Rambukwella.<sup>67</sup>

Even before Burma’s colonial occupation began in 1824, the idea that Buddhism was being “restored” to its rightful place in Burmese society had emerged. For example, Pali, which is Theravāda Buddhism’s liturgical language, appears in and influences much of Burmese language, which only augments the association of Burmese identity with Buddhism.<sup>68</sup> This does not mean that Buddhism is the root cause of Burmese nationalism, but “rather, it provided an essential component in a national self-concept which helped differentiate the Burmese from the foreigner”, says Donald E. Smith.<sup>69</sup>

Argues D. Smith, Burmese nationalism was more than simply anti-British and anti-colonial, as “traditional Burmese nationalism was based, among other things, on a common race, language, and religion.”<sup>70</sup> Historically, non-Buddhists in Burma were considered alien, thus excluding them from Burmese identity, even under colonialism and into the periods of secular nationalism associated with Marxism or with Aung San’s Thakin movement.<sup>71</sup>

During colonial rule, Buddhism remained an integral force in civil society and took on a different form, as politically-oriented monks engaged in strikes, political agitation, and other independence-minded action—both peaceful and violent—from the 1920s onward, and continued alongside the more secular nationalist movement that emerged in the 1930s.<sup>72,73</sup> Anti-colonial parties, which included Buddhist monks, sometimes targeted Muslims and Christians under British colonial rule (which began in 1824, but formally lasted from 1886–1948) as well as the ensuing short-lived parliamentary government (1948–1962), and during the military dictatorship (1962–2012).<sup>74</sup>

Buddhist identity was also co-opted to bolster political legitimacy: for example, the ostensibly socialist military junta that came to power in 1962 via coup tried to ground its socialist platform in both Marxist dialectics and vaguely-Buddhist doctrine,<sup>75</sup> especially with its references to man’s relationship with nature and its three material, animal, and phenomenal worlds.<sup>76</sup> So ethnic conflict with religious overlay is not new to the recently-parliamentary Myanmar.

Post-dictatorial Burmese nationalism further conflates with Buddhist religious identity by justifying violence against non-Buddhists as fighting ethnic insurgency and eliminating illegal immigrants.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, Burmese nationalism emerged both gradually under British colonial rule and in response to an event (democratization), to use Brubaker’s framework, and has long intertwined with Buddhist religion as an identifying marker.

## 5.2. Religious Nationalism Under a Constitutional Republic

In the contemporary period, Theravāda Buddhism continues to provide a significant framework through which Burmese view politics.<sup>78</sup> Today, nearly 90% of Myanmar’s population is Buddhist, almost all of them Theravāda, although Buddhism has only briefly been Burma’s official state religion. In 1961, Burma’s constitution was amended to make Buddhism the official religion and to provide significant financial support to Buddhist institutions, and Prime Minister U Nu passed the State

<sup>67</sup> (Rambukwella 2018, p. 42).

<sup>68</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 83).

<sup>69</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 86).

<sup>70</sup> (D. Smith 1965, pp. 84, 112).

<sup>71</sup> (D. Smith 1965, pp. 113, 115–16).

<sup>72</sup> (Lewy 1972, pp. 25, 28–37, 37–40).

<sup>73</sup> Due to their interest in religious rule, many politically-active monks sided with the Japanese during World War II, to their detriment after the war (Lewy 1972; Hobbs 1947).

<sup>74</sup> (Walton and Hayward 2014, p. 6; Hobbs 1947).

<sup>75</sup> (Walton 2016, p. 30).

<sup>76</sup> (Burma Socialist Programme Party 1963).

<sup>77</sup> (Walton and Hayward 2014, p. 6; Walton 2013; Ibrahim 2016).

<sup>78</sup> (Walton 2016; Schober 2011; Jordt 2007; Houtman 1999; Spiro 1970; Sarkisyanz 1965).

Religion Promotion Act which mandated the teaching of Buddhist scriptures in schools and prisons;<sup>79</sup> but this was largely undone shortly afterward by General Ne Win's military coup.

Myanmar's new constitution (2008)<sup>80</sup> provides for freedom of conscience and the free profession and practice of religion "subject to public order, morality or health or the other provisions of this constitution" (Art. 34), and it "recognizes" that some of its population currently practice Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Animism (Art. 362).

At the same time, Buddhism occupies a "special position" in Myanmar as the religion of the overwhelming majority (Art. 361), and the religious freedom accorded does not extend to religiously-related "economic, financial, political or other secular activities that may be associated with religious practice"<sup>81</sup> and the government may curtail religious freedom in accordance with "public welfare" (Art. 360).

In 1998 and 2007, groups of Buddhist monks mobilized politically against the military government, and they have continued to be active on a variety of issues (e.g., illegal land seizures, environmental protection) since the latest transition to more democratic rule. Unfortunately, this activism has included pogroms against Muslims (and especially the Rohingya)<sup>82</sup> in what is called the "969 movement", driven by a variety of forces but most prominently by the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, commonly abbreviated as MaBaTha (*A-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shauq Ye a-Pwe*, "Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion" or "Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion").<sup>83</sup> Their claims about not just personal safety but also the security of the Buddhist religion and Buddhist community (*sasana*), and therefore the state as a political entity as required for enlightenment,<sup>84</sup> echo historical Burmese conceptions of Buddhism's place in politics and the status of non-Buddhists as discussed above.

Despite nearly 90% of the Burmese population professing adherence to Theravāda Buddhism, the perceived Muslim threat from its 4.3% of the population is often couched in existential terms, as a menace to the very existence of Buddhism. "If a man dies, it is acceptable, but if a race or religion dies, you can never get it back", some Burmese Buddhists will say as they justify their fears that Muslims will ultimately "swallow our country" as they expand beyond the borders of Rakhine state.<sup>85</sup> In this way, Muslim Rohingyas are seen and portrayed as a dual existential threat to both polity and religion.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>79</sup> (Crouch 2015). U Nu deemed it a governmental responsibility to care for the population's present and future existences, which required that Buddhism be made the state religion (D. Smith 1965, pp. 25–26).

<sup>80</sup> (Constitution of the Union of the Republic of Myanmar 2008).

<sup>81</sup> I.e., freedom of conscience under the Myanmar constitution only covers the ability to hold a belief in one's own head, but does not come with freedom of associated actions (e.g., the right to set up a religious charity or welfare association).

<sup>82</sup> Myanmar's 2014 census identified 4.3% of its population as Muslim; up to 2% are Rohingya, whose "non-enumerated" population was controversially only estimated rather than counted by the census. (Republic of the Union of Myanmar—Department of Population, Ministry of Labor, Immigration, and Population 2016; Lynn 2016) Until 2017, the total Rohingya population, which has borne the brunt of the anti-Muslim attacks, was approximated to reach 1.3 million. Since recent government-sanctioned pogroms against the Rohingya began in 2016, however, up to 1.1 million have fled to refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh.

The long-Muslim Rohingya claim that they are indigenous to the area, while the Myanmar government says they illegally migrated during the colonial period from now-Bangladesh, considers them Bengalis, and denies them citizenship and proper documentation, thus rendering them effectively stateless. About 80% of Rohingya lived in the state of Rakhine, on the western coast. (There are other Muslims—including some Indian, Chinese, Malay, and others—as well as most Kaman, who also primarily live in Rakhine but are formally recognized as an ethnic group by the Myanmar government and who hold citizenship.)

<sup>83</sup> While the Association may mean "ethnicity" where it says "race", its context is Myanmar's peculiar classification of races and ethnicities. Myanmar recognizes eight "major national ethnic races" that are grouped primarily by geographic region, with each race comprised of a subset of the 135 recognized "ethnic groups". Along with several others, the Rohingya are not among the recognized ethnic groups.

<sup>84</sup> (Walton and Hayward 2014, pp. 17–23).

<sup>85</sup> (Beech and Nang 2019; Freeman 2017).

<sup>86</sup> Even religions that reject worldly constraints will develop practices for adherents to demonstrate the sincerity of one's convictions (Weber, "Religious Communities", *Economy and Society*), and that necessarily injects social functions, practices, and institutions into those religions. Unfortunately, social reinforcement around bigoted and discriminatory movements often involves engaging in violence as ritualistic proof of commitment, such as is commonly found, for example, in criminal gangs everywhere, such as The Lord's Resistance Army (central Africa), etc.

The communal action (*Gemeinschaftshandeln*) of religion (Weber 1978, p. 399) has its own structures and laws

To date, the Myanmar government rejects the existence of “Rohingya” as an ethnic group and does not mention their name in denying genocide attempts against them. In State Counsellor (prime minister) Aung San Suu Kyi’s address to the International Court of Justice (Hague) on 11 December 2019, she rebuffed charges of genocide, arguing that, at most, any violence might constitute “disproportionate force” but that it was part of “cycles of inter-communal violence going back to the 1940s”.<sup>87</sup> In addition to government-sanctioned pogroms and gender-based violence against the Rohingya, the 2015 Population Control Healthcare Law permits local authorities to enforce a mandatory 36-month “birth spacing” between children that is understood as an attempt by Buddhist nationalists to prevent a “takeover” by Muslims, who have higher birthrates.<sup>88</sup>

As a country, Myanmar has endured harsh oppression by colonial and domestic rulers alike and substantial upheaval in the transitional interstices, including recently. International observers often focus on the religious identities espoused in the conflict between Buddhist and Muslim Burmese, and while it is important to take the agents’ own claims at face value initially, the repeated and persistent violence by Buddhists against minority Muslim Rohingya over the past decade appears to be less about religious competition strictly speaking, and rather seems inseparable from ethno-nationalist motivations. The former should prompt serious attempts at converting others to one’s religion, for example, while the latter would provoke feelings of existential danger that lead more to expulsion, pogroms, and/or genocide, as we are seeing there.

Breaching Buddhist precepts of non-violence in defense of Buddhism has historical, liturgical, and doctrinal precedent, and the need to prevent Burmese Buddhist social and cultural erosion or elimination in the face of modernity and political change<sup>89</sup> can operate in the minds of its proponents somewhat like “supreme emergency” justifications in contemporary just war theory—the idea that one must sometimes violate the principles in order to save them.

Buddhist doctrine adds its own twist to that “supreme emergency” problem, however, because doctrinally, the fate of the *sasana* is to slowly disappear. That does not do much to alleviate worldly anxiety now about *sasana*’s future disappearance,<sup>90</sup> but this is the least of the inconsistencies between doctrine and practice.

One pressing question is why ethno-nationalist Buddhist groups in Myanmar have systematically waged violence against minorities *to such an extent*. A large reason has been the role of clerics in Myanmar in legitimating and encouraging nationalist sentiment, and especially the MaBaTha organization, which appeared to operate not only in conjunction with but also as a front for the military.<sup>91</sup> Some recruits to MaBaTha were, ironically, monks who had been arrested during the 2007 Saffron Revolution,<sup>92</sup> and were paid in money and state patronage to join and promote MaBaTha’s anti-Muslim campaigns.<sup>93</sup>

Here, too, the state is not monolithic: there is an ongoing power struggle between the former dictatorial ruler (the military), which supported MaBaTha, and the new political parties for which it reluctantly (and incompletely) stepped aside. MaBaTha was banned in 2017 after three years,<sup>94</sup> by Aung San Suu Kyi’s administration on the grounds of hate speech, and an arrest warrant was issued for

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(*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) with a logic of their own (Klaus Lichtblau, Hans Kippenberg) and whose rationality does not necessarily reference justice or correctness.

<sup>87</sup> (Simons and Beech 2019; Birnbaum and Mahtani 2019).

<sup>88</sup> (Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015; White 2015; Deutsche Welle 2015).

<sup>89</sup> Modernization can corrode traditional communities and their values, while political change such as globalization, secularization, and economic development may eventually challenge Buddhism’s primacy in Myanmar society. See also, e.g., (Gravers 2015).

<sup>90</sup> (Walton and Hayward 2014, p. 25).

<sup>91</sup> (Ibrahim 2016, p. 70).

<sup>92</sup> From August through October 2007, there were broad, non-violent protests (including by monks, whose colored robes came to represent the movement) against the ruling military junta’s removal of subsidies on the fuel supply it monopolized.

<sup>93</sup> (Ibrahim 2016, p. 70).

<sup>94</sup> MaBaTha reconstituted itself as the Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation, which was similarly outlawed in 2018.



extremist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu for sedition against Suu Kyi. At the same time, the military, MaBaTha, and Suu Kyi's administration seem to find common cause in the denial of Rohingya ethnic identity and their marginalization as illegal immigrants who cannot be Burmese citizens.<sup>95</sup>

To further complicate Myanmar's situation, the people themselves are not unified: there are Buddhist groups on both ends of the spectrum from MaBaTha, such as Buddhists who have assisted and protected Muslim Rohingya, as well as the Arakan Army, comprised of lay Buddhists in Rakhine state fighting against the government and other Buddhists for an autonomous state and who officially welcome those of other races and ethnicities to join their nationalist insurgency.<sup>96</sup>

Here, recall Theravāda Buddhism's *tendency* toward excluding the laity in pursuit of enlightenment. In Myanmar, monastic orders attempt to alleviate Theravāda's lesser attention to the laity and to create a bridge to them by playing a significant role in male education: in Theravāda practice, many if not most males become novice monks for limited periods.<sup>97</sup> The *shinbyu* ceremony, which inducts young males into temporary monkhood, "both exalts the ideal of the monastic life and denies it absolute separation from the life of the laity", says D. Smith.<sup>98</sup> As he describes it, this practice of temporary monkhood does as much to keep the Burmese population attached to Buddhist religion as the other way around, to keep Buddhist elites tied to the population. It is somewhat ironic that this widespread ritual of temporary monkhood meant to alleviate the hierarchical tendencies of Theravāda also broadens and strengthens the Myanmar population's investment in the Buddhist aspects of its identity, which are now being used to violently expunge non-Buddhists from the Burmese nation.

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Buddhism is hardly the only moral philosophy and religion whose practices can deviate violently from its tenets. Religious doctrines can and usually do differ from religion as a lived experience, as every religion has demonstrated many times over. Even similarly ascetic moral philosophies such as Stoicism have seen their adherents struggle terribly with their duties, perhaps most famously Marcus Aurelius.

One reason those internal contradictions get lost is because most religious adherents, having been raised in a particular religious faith, are immersed in their own inconsistencies between doctrine and practice, such that they usually do not notice them or have found practical accommodation with them. When they encounter other religions, however, the gap between doctrine and practice can seem glaring, because the alien religion's precepts are treated as reified doctrine instead of living philosophy and evolving practice.

Buddhism's non-violent and ascetic principles are fundamental to the religion, and their peaceful effect should only be reinforced by its functional polytheism in practice, so it can be especially difficult (for many Buddhists as well) to acknowledge that Buddhism plays a role in Burmese nationalist violence against the Rohingya.

A muscular Buddhism is not unheard of, but attempts at genocide are especially shocking. Some would try to explain this by making "problematic distinctions between 'true' Buddhism and Buddhism corrupted by its contact with politics."<sup>99</sup> Yet, the resources for violence—including in defense of the religion and associated polities—are available in Buddhist canon and history from not long after its birth, so if corruption is to blame, then the thread of that defect is long.

<sup>95</sup> (Ibrahim 2016; Beech and Nang 2019; Radio Free Asia 2017).

<sup>96</sup> (Emont 2019).

<sup>97</sup> Males become temporary novitiates (*sāmaṇera*) in these societies for many reasons, including to accumulate religious/spiritual "merit" for themselves and for others, and there is variation within Southeast Asia on the practice. In Burma/Myanmar, for example, usually boys will novitiate, sometimes for only a few days, and they can temporarily return to monkhood later as married men, whereas in Thailand, older boys or young men will commonly become monks for three-month periods. This practice is far less common in Sri Lanka (Gombrich 1984; Samuels 2013).

<sup>98</sup> (D. Smith 1965, p. 19).

<sup>99</sup> (Rambukwella 2018, p. 42).

This combines with the particulars of Theravāda practice in Myanmar and the role and exploitation of Buddhist identity from ancient Burmese history through colonial and contemporary times to contribute to the ongoing atrocity. The persistence of current anti-Rohingya campaigns show that even non-violent religions and moral philosophies are not immune to and can be overtaken by political influence and nationalist sentiment and the violence they can engender.

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