

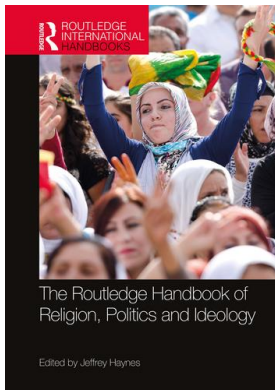
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14

BUDDHIST NATIONALISM

*Saul Tobias***Introduction**

The violence perpetrated by Buddhist ultra-nationalists in countries such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar in recent decades has drawn worldwide condemnation, dispelling the notion that Buddhism, uniquely among world religions, is immune to the lure of political violence (Beech, 2013). While it is important to correct this misconception of Buddhism as pacifist and non-political, it is also true that prominent Buddhists who condone nationalist violence are relatively rare, even in countries where Buddhism has a long history of political entanglements. A glance across the landscape of Buddhist Asia reveals that in contrast to these over-simplifications, Buddhism's relation to nationalism is complex and varied, encompassing a spectrum of ideological thought ranging from democratic nationalism to nationalist authoritarianism.

The term "Buddhist nationalism" itself poses problems. Neither "religion" nor "nation" is a concept with obvious equivalents in pre-modern Asia. Both are borrowed from the West, translated and re-appropriated for use by Asian scholarly and political elites in the modern period (Ashiwa, 2009). From around the 19th century, the European colonization of Asia elevated the concept of the nation as a principal focus of anti-colonial resistance. At the same time, policies of modernization and secularization promoted by both European colonizers and Asian elites highlighted the question of religion's status and relation to the state, a question also posed by Asian scholars of religion as they incorporated Western academic approaches into their studies. The result was a variety of re-imaginings of Buddhism's relation to the nation. Since then, the term "Buddhist nationalism" has been used by a number of politicians, such as Burmese post-independence Prime Minister U Nu or Sri Lanka's present-day Bodu Bala Sena organization to describe their ideological agenda (Kawanami, 2016; Schonthal & Walton, 2016). More broadly, Buddhist nationalism may refer to a range of modern political movements and ideologies that infuse nationalism – the view that "the political and national unit should be congruent" (Gellner, 1983, p. 1) or that political sovereignty and legitimacy reside in an "imagined community" defined by a shared history, culture, or ethnicity (Anderson, 2006) – with Buddhist ideas, values, and identities. Though the focus of this chapter is on Buddhist nationalism in the modern period, rulers in pre-colonial Asia also utilized Buddhism to affirm communal bonds within a populace and to cultivate a sense of shared purpose in the face of external threats, a kind of proto-nationalism (see Smith, 1991). However the term is used, one should keep in

mind that there is nothing inherent to Buddhist teaching or tradition that implies an obvious affinity with nationalism, and much, in fact, that opposes it (Tobias, 2018). Instead, fluid ideas about the meaning of Buddhist community on the one hand, and political community on the other, have coincided, diverged, and recombined over time. The particular form of Buddhist nationalism that emerged depended, in part, on such factors as:

- The traditions and doctrinal resources that advocates of Buddhist nationalism drew on in articulating the relation between Buddhism and the nation, including differences between the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, and the Mahayana Buddhism of Central and East Asia.
- The particular geopolitical interests and ideological orientation of political actors at particular historical moments.
- The political and sociocultural situation of Buddhism in each country.

While these factors interacted in historically and regionally specific ways, we can get a sense of their differing impact by distinguishing three ideal types of Buddhist nationalism: Buddhist civic nationalism, Buddhist patriotism, and Buddhist ultra-nationalism. These ideal types allow us to pick out pertinent features of Buddhist nationalism in the modern period. However, as we shall see, none of these ideal types is in practice mutually exclusive, as one may give rise to another, given the right conditions.

Buddhist civic nationalism

Buddhist civic nationalism denotes an ideological association of Buddhism and the national interest that emerges from an enduring and well-established relation between Buddhism and the state. This kind of relation already existed prior to colonization and the subsequent formation of modern nation-states in the Buddhist kingdoms that spanned South and South-East Asia, in what is today Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Cambodia. Theravada Buddhism, with its strict rules governing the life of the *sangha* (the monastic community) and its canon of sacred Pali texts, dominated religious life in these countries, providing a cultural and moral foundation for the community.

Two early images of Buddhist leadership were influential in these countries. The first is the (originally pre-Buddhist) idea of the *Cakkavatti* (Sanskrit: *Cakravartin*), the universal monarch who fuses divine and temporal power. The second is the idea of the *Dhammaraja* (“Dhamma-King”), a secular ruler who manifests the noblest qualities of the *dhamma* (Sanskrit: *dharma*; the Buddhist teachings) and defends and promotes Buddhism in his realm without impinging on the *sangha*’s claim to ultimate spiritual authority. The historical figure closely associated with this ideal is Asoka (c. 304–232 BCE), the Indian monarch who spent the latter part of his reign propagating Buddhism across much of the subcontinent and who stands as the archetype of Buddhist kingship for monarchs in many Buddhist-majority countries.

In addition to these images of leadership, two other factors were conducive to the alignment of Buddhism and the nation in Buddhist-majority countries. First, Buddhism does not, in principle, associate “being a Buddhist” with membership in a particular ethnic or cultural community (as is the case in Judaism and in modern conceptualizations of *Hindutva*), nor does Buddhism identify the faithful with a unified community conceived in spatial or territorial terms (as the Islamic notion of the *ummah* or community of believers can sometimes imply). However, with no central authority to help maintain transnational relationships among the faithful, *sanghas* came to rely on local political authorities for protection and the right to prom-

ulgate the *dhamma*. Hence, many became quite parochial in outlook, reinforcing a symbiotic relationship between *sangha* and state (Borchert, 2007). Second, despite its otherworldly focus on escaping the cycle of rebirth, Buddhism also emphasizes a life of virtue as a prerequisite for favourable rebirth and ultimate liberation. While the monastic community was meant to provide the optimal environment for such conduct, the wider community and polity could also demarcate the bounds of a “virtuous community.” The idea of the *Buddha-sasana*, or Buddhist dispensation, became influential in Theravada countries as marking not only a cosmological epoch but also a geopolitical expanse in which the *dhamma* could thrive and its moral influence reign. Well before Buddhist-majority countries in South and South-East Asia transitioned from empires and then colonies into modern, constitutional nation-states, this interweaving of Buddhist doctrine with notions of ethnos and territoriality were commonplace in both elite political discourse and popular political self-representation, laying the foundation for Buddhist civic nationalism in the independence period.

Cambodia and Thailand

While Buddhist civic nationalism was sometimes revolutionary, more frequently it had a conservative character, functioning less as a force for change than as a basis of identity, stability, and morality, and in the case of constitutional monarchies, as an important adjunct to the monarch in his or her role as the personification of the nation. This kind of civic nationalism is exemplified in Cambodia and Thailand, where political elites were tasked at the end of the colonial period with constituting these countries as modern nation-states.

In Cambodia, Theravada Buddhism has dominated religious life since the fall of the Angkor Empire (which included Shivaist, Vishnuist, and Mahayana Buddhist elements) in the mid-15th century. During colonial rule (1863–1941), the French used the monasteries to administer their protectorate while establishing educational institutions that promoted the modernization of Cambodian Buddhism. The Buddhist Institute, founded by the French in the 1930s, sought to enhance French control by reducing the influence of Thai Buddhism on the Cambodian *sangha* (Chandler, 1991). Such endeavours helped craft the image of a distinctly Cambodian Buddhist nation.

Following independence, Buddhism played a key role in legitimizing the claims of political leaders. Foremost among these was King Norodom Sihanouk, presented as the “great righteous king” (*dhammika mahareach*) in the 1947 Cambodian Constitution and who referred to himself as “king-monk” (Harris, 2008, p. 144). Sihanouk later abdicated to form a political party with an official ideology of “Buddhist Socialism,” and his premiership during the 1950s and 1960s included a national programme of economic and cultural revival guided by Buddhist principles. Defending against accusations that he was merely aping Burmese Prime Minister U Nu’s Buddhist nationalist programme, Sihanouk asserted a distinctly Cambodian Buddhist identity, insisting his policy emerged from “Buddhist morality and the religious traditions of our national existence rather than doctrines imported from abroad” (quoted in Harris, 2008, p. 148). The right-wing coup that deposed Sihanouk in 1970 continued to use Buddhism to support its ideological agenda. Its leader, Lon Nol, advertised his personal piety and emphasized the contrast between Buddhism and the rising communist threat of the Khmer Rouge.

Following the deaths of an estimated 63 per cent of monks during the Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979), Buddhism was restored under the strict control of the Vietnamese-led liberation forces. With progress to democracy, Buddhism has been elevated to a pillar of the new state and once again deeply integrated into the social fabric of society, with close relations between state and monastic institutions. The constitutional monarchy was re-established in 1993, under the

national motto of “Nation, Religion, King,” and the current monarch, Norodom Sihamoni, has remained, at least in public, above the political fray. As Ian Harris notes, Khmer Buddhism has learned to adapt to “a great variety of political contexts – be they colonial, monarchical, socialist, republican or doctrinaire Marxist.” To this list of political ideologies, one must now add creeping authoritarianism, as the current Cambodian government under Hun Sen is dismantling democracy in the country. It remains to be seen how the *sangha* will respond, given the tension between its established role as a stabilizing institution and the quiet support of many monks for the democratic opposition. Whatever the outcome of the current situation, Harris’s conclusion remains valid:

The visible presence of the *sangha* and its unique significance as the only institution able to operate effectively and with high levels of mass support throughout the whole of the country has ensured that almost all governments have felt the need to cultivate [it], whatever their political philosophy.

(Harris, 2008, p. 230)

The tripartite formula of monarchy–religion–nation is also found in Thailand, and as in Cambodia, Buddhism’s contribution to defining Thai national identity has been ideologically flexible, available to democratic and authoritarian regimes alike. Though never colonized by a European power, modern Thailand faced many of the same challenges as its colonized neighbours. From as early as the 19th century, the monarchy faced pressure to democratize and Westernize, as well as intermittent challenges to its existence by anti-monarchist forces. The country also faced the destabilizing impact of global trade, great power rivalries on its borders, economic depression, and two world wars. In seeking to secure its position while transforming Thailand into a modern state, the monarchy turned to its well-established role as protector and patron of Buddhism. Modern Thai monarchs, invoking the *Cakkavatti* and *Dhammaraja* ideals, looked to the example of notable predecessors such as Rama I (r. 1782–1809), who returned the statue of the Emerald Buddha, considered the national palladium, from Laos to the Royal Palace in Bangkok, and Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), a monk for 27 years before becoming king, who had been active in reforming the *sangha*.

In 1902, King Chulalongkorn’s *Sangha* Act established a national monastic hierarchy administered by the crown. With oversight of a monastic organization that reached deep into the provinces and into village life, the state had at its disposal a valuable tool for instilling in the populace a sense of shared communal responsibility and civic duty, with temples functioning as public schools and monks as instructors (Keyes, 2019). The organization of the national *sangha* remained a principal concern of the state, its structure fluctuating from more democratic to more centralized forms, as Thailand oscillated between periods of democracy and military rule throughout the 20th century (Walton, 2017). Throughout these changes, Buddhism continued to play a stabilizing and unifying role, pervading the discourse and symbols of Thai nationhood as exemplified in the “three-pillars” of the Thai nation – Buddhism, the monarchy, and the nation – and symbolized in the three colours of the national flag, adopted in 1917. King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016) was widely perceived as an ideal Buddhist king, associated with the Buddhist virtues of moderation and self-sacrifice. Today, Thais have become increasingly secular or have turned to Christianity or millennial Buddhist movements such as the *Dhammakaya* sect that are better suited to their needs (Keyes, 2016). Nonetheless, Buddhism as a central pillar of Thai national identity and sensibility is likely to endure, however loosely connected to Buddhism urban Thais become in their daily lives.

Sri Lanka and Burma (Myanmar)

Certain conditions that gave rise to Buddhist civic nationalism in Thailand and Cambodia are also found in Sri Lanka and Burma. These countries have well-established Theravada Buddhist institutions and cultures and a historically close connection between the monastic hierarchy and the monarchy. For example, Sri Lanka has the longest history of Buddhism of any Buddhist country, with a largely unbroken connection between the various ruling dynasties and Theravada Buddhism that lasted from the 3rd century BCE until the 19th century. Sinhalese kings were active patrons of Buddhist institutions, with custodianship of the sacred relic of the Buddha's tooth. Buddhism in Burma was almost as well-established, and Burmese kings, whose empires were among the largest in pre-colonial South and South-East Asia, emulated the ideal of the *Dhammaraja* as defender and patron of the faith. King Mindon (1853–1878) erected Buddha statues and stupas, oversaw the compilation of volumes of Buddhist texts, and after 1865 took direct control of the state's religious council rather than install a monastic to the position of Chief of Religious Affairs. He also summoned the fifth great Buddhist synod of 1871, attended by more than 2500 monks from across Asia, a gathering that had not taken place in 2000 years (Charney, 2006). Hence, long before "nationalism" as a modern ideology emerged in Sri Lanka and Burma, Buddhism's role as the principal ground of national identity had been firmly established.

There are, however, a number of factors distinguishing Sri Lanka and Burma from Thailand and Cambodia, which have shaped Buddhist nationalism in these countries. Most prominently, Burma and Sri Lanka contain sizeable ethnic and religious minorities and an overlap between ethnic and religious identity that is less evident in Cambodia and Thailand. Kings of Sri Lanka and Burma spent considerable time in wars with Hindu and Muslim neighbours. This sense of vulnerability to incursion by religious "others" was exacerbated during the colonial period, which introduced secular administration, job preference for Christians, and encouraged Christian missionary work, all of which weakened the cultural and political hegemony of the Theravada Buddhist establishment (Brac de la Perrière, 2016; Lehr, 2019). In Sri Lanka, Buddhist intellectuals such as Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), the founder of modern Buddhist nationalism in the country, responded by spearheading a Buddhist cultural and intellectual revival. The YMBA, or Young Men's Buddhist Association, was established in 1898 as a lay Buddhist alternative to the YMCA, followed by the establishment of the YMBA of Burma in 1906. Both organizations used Theravada Buddhism as the ideological basis of their efforts to end colonial rule (Lehr, 2019). Alongside lay Buddhist organizations, monastics fought to preserve the *Buddha-sasana* (Buddhist dispensation or realm) as the bedrock of national identity. The role of Burmese monks in this effort was significant enough for D.E. Smith, a noted scholar of South Asian religion and politics, to opine that in "the anti-colonial struggle, the *pongyis* (monks) were the first nationalists" (quoted in Lehr, 2019, p. 167). In these ways, colonialism unwittingly reinforced a conception of the Buddhist community in territorial and even ethno-nationalist terms, as the defence of Buddhism was identified with the defence of a national communal space against intrusion from colonial and other outsiders.

Another factor shaping the trajectory of Buddhist civic nationalism in Sri Lanka and Burma was that independence arrived in 1948 without the restoration of the monarchy. Instead of a Buddhist constitutional monarchy, which enabled some symbolic distance between the civic role of Buddhism and the rough and tumble of party politics, politicians were free to burnish their authority by appropriating Buddhist ritual and symbols and by exploiting the majority Buddhist antipathy towards non-Buddhist communities. In Sri Lanka, intercommunal tolerance in the decade following independence disappeared under the premiership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike,

who elevated the Sinhala language, Buddhist history, and Buddhist institutions, and won the support of the *sangha* for these policies. Independent Burma also faced the challenge of unifying an ethnically diverse country that, while overwhelmingly Buddhist, contained significant religious minorities, including migrant Indians (Muslims and Hindus) in the urban areas, Christians in the border regions, and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. U Thant, the post-independence leader, advocated for religious freedom but also promoted Buddhist nationalism in his efforts to lay the foundation of a democratic nation-state with Buddhism as its unifying, moral foundation (Kawanami, 2016). As a result of pressure from the *sangha*, and despite his initial opposition, he acceded to the declaration of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961, with a constitutional amendment that encoded the state's duties to support the religion and defend it against insult. During the period of military dictatorship between 1962 and 2012, the government drew on the ritual power of Buddhism to shore up its legitimacy and suppressed other religions, even in the face of resistance from pro-democratic forces that included many monks. This resistance was exemplified in the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007, named for the robes of the Burmese Monks who marched in their thousands, carried the Buddhist flag, and chanted Buddhist verses while calling for democratic change. These actions exemplified Buddhist civic nationalism of a democratic kind, figuring the *sangha* as the moral foundation and conscience of the nation and identifying Buddhism with national democratic values. However, in both Sri Lanka and Burma, this kind of democratic nationalism had to compete with a more "hard-edged" Buddhist ethno-nationalism that drew protests from religious minorities, generating serious intra-communal clashes that laid the seeds for insurrection and civil war, and for the Buddhist ultra-nationalism that would emerge in following decades.

Bhutan and Tibet

Whereas Buddhist civic nationalism is often quite conservative, upholding traditional roles for the *sangha* and Buddhist monarchy, two examples from Mahayana Buddhist countries, Bhutan and Tibet, indicate the varying, and arguably more innovative, forms that Buddhist civic nationalism can take. Tibetan and Bhutanese models of Buddhist civic nationalism go beyond reconciling Western nationalism with Buddhist tradition or harnessing the ideological and emotional appeal of Buddhism to a modernist national project. Rather, they complicate the nationalist narrative of independent nation-states by blending claims to national sovereignty with appeals to global discourses of ecological and spiritual interdependence, using Buddhism as a basis of national identity *and* as a resource for re-imagining nationalism in ways that are responsive to global political and cultural trends.

For much of its history, Bhutan was a reclusive kingdom ruled by a dynasty whose revered status was inseparable from its role as protector of the *Vajrayana* (Tantric) form of Mahayana Buddhism. These kings appealed not only to the traditional *Cakravarti* and *Dhammaraja* ideals but also to the Mahayana ideal of the *Bodhisattva*, a realized being of boundless compassion who works for the liberation of all beings (Mathou, 2000). In response to recent challenges, including encroaching globalization and regional conflicts arising from the treatment of its Hindu-Nepali community (Saul, 2000), Bhutan has endeavoured to modernize without sacrificing its political or economic sovereignty. Bhutan established a modern constitutional monarchy and adopted a new constitution in 2008 that carves out a civic role for Buddhism consistent with more progressive, democratic principles. The constitution invokes Mahayana Buddhism in its opening lines – "We, the people of Bhutan, blessed by the Triple Gem [of Buddha, Dharma, and *sangha*] [and] the protection of our guardian deities" – and highlights Buddhism as "the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion

and tolerance.” The constitution also names the king as “the protector of all religions in Bhutan” and declares that it “shall be the responsibility of religious institutions and personalities to promote the spiritual heritage of the country while also ensuring that religion remains separate from politics” (Bhutan Constitution, 2008, article 3:3). Bhutan has also promoted a distinctive development philosophy called Gross National Happiness, a model of civic nationalism that grounds a philosophy of national identity and development in a set of principles emphasizing holistic well-being and the protection of religious, cultural, and ecological resources (Kinga et al., 1999). Though problems of ethnic and religious discrimination have not been fully resolved, Bhutan has been successful in using its Buddhist culture to present itself as a progressive country that welcomes international cooperation, but on its own terms.

While Tibet’s history is quite different from that of Bhutan, the Tibetan independence movement has also crafted a national ideology that uses Buddhism in innovative ways. For much of its history, Tibet’s status as a sovereign state was ambiguous; its security often dependent on the patronage of Mongolian and Chinese potentates to whom powerful lamas of the various Tibetan Vajrayana sects acted as spiritual preceptors (Tuttle, 2005). Tibetan theocracy was formalized in the 17th century when the line of the Dalai Lamas, heads of the Gelug sect, was established as the secular authority over large areas of Tibet. Considered incarnations of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Tibetan: Chenrezig) – the embodiment of compassion and protector of Tibet – the Dalai Lamas had semi-divine status. A period of greater sovereignty, which included the expulsion of the Chinese from the territory in 1912, ended with the communist Chinese takeover in 1949 and the 14th Dalai Lama’s flight into exile a decade later.

Since the 1950s, a Tibetan independence movement has resisted the Chinese occupation both within and outside Tibet. For many Tibetans, whose identity was principally regional rather than national, religion remains “their way of ‘imagining Tibet’” (Kolås, 1996, p. 65). A unified Tibetan national identity, in opposition to Chinese occupation and assimilation in the diaspora, has been forged primarily out of Buddhist identity and culture. Inside Tibet, resistance to Chinese occupation and sinification simmered throughout the decades, with frequent outbursts of pro-independence protests, including the uprisings of 1987 and 2008. Young monks and nuns have been prominent in these protests, and monasteries have served as centres of resistance. Demonstrations often take place around the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa and involve overt or covert signs of loyalty to the Dalai Lama, whose image is banned by the Chinese. These protests are both religious and political; the monks and nuns seem to make little distinction between secular values of human rights and the ethical and spiritual demands of their faith. The self-immolations that have occurred regularly since 2009 are similarly best understood as acts of political protest *and* as religious acts of self-sacrifice conceived as Bodhisattva activity (Gouin, 2014; Soboslai & Gruber, 2018).

Outside of Tibet, the nationalist cause and its underlying ideology have gone through a number of changes. Residing in India, the young Dalai Lama looked to the Gandhian example of *satyagraha* and emphasized Buddhist non-violence as the spiritual heart of the Tibetan independence movement. Furthermore, as a key goal of the Tibetan government in exile is the preservation of Tibetan culture and religion in the face of perceived “cultural genocide” in Tibet, the religious, cultural, and political goals of the exile community have frequently overlapped (Anand, 2000, p. 275). While many nationalist causes have appealed to diaspora and international support, the Tibetan cause is exceptional in the extent to which it operates as a “transnational force,” drawing in Tibetans and non-Tibetans, including many non-Tibetan converts to Tibetan Buddhism (Houston & Wright, 2003). Exile has provided Tibetan monks and teachers a new audience, so converts to Tibetan Buddhism are frequently exposed to the Tibetan independence cause as an indirect result of their religious instruction. This, combined with the global

celebrity of the 14th Dalai Lama who embodies the roles of a political leader, Buddhist teacher, and ecumenical spiritual “guru” all at once, gives Tibetan Buddhist nationalism a more international character than is the case with most other examples of Buddhist nationalism. As a result, the rhetoric of Tibetan nationalism has softened in recent decades, shifting from the depiction of Tibet as a nation-state deprived of its sovereignty to an endangered spiritual and ecological resource, whose preservation is of global concern. This approach, promoted by the Dalai Lama, focuses on Tibet as a future “peace zone,” exemplifying values of demilitarization, interreligious dialogue, and environmental stewardship. This evocation of Buddhism as a moderate philosophy of the “middle way” underpins the Dalai Lama’s retreat from a policy of Tibetan independence to that of autonomy within China. Of course, the fusion of Buddhism and politics in Tibetan nationalism is not without its tensions, embodied most obviously in the figure of the Dalai Lama, who espouses a liberal, democratic, and progressive vision for Tibet but personifies the non-democratic history of Tibetan theocracy. In recent years, the Tibetan government in exile has sought to resolve these contradictions, culminating in the Dalai Lama’s 2011 abdication of all political authority.

Buddhist patriotism

A different type of Buddhist nationalism is evident in places where Buddhism’s relationship to the state has been more tenuous, even though its presence in people’s everyday lives is well-established. In most East Asian countries, including China, Taiwan, and Japan, Mahayana Buddhism remains one religion among several influential competitors, including Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and Christianity. In these countries, shifting dynasties or political regimes often meant changes in Buddhism’s fortunes. The attitude of the *sangha* and lay Buddhist intellectuals to their modernizing nation-states was therefore characterized by the need to reassure political authorities of Buddhism’s loyalty and benefit to society, often in the face of competing claims by these other religious traditions. This need was especially pronounced at historical junctures when political elites were forging new ideologies of the nation that sought to reconcile Western discourses of modernization with essentialist notions of a national spirit or essence. This essence was often associated with religion or culture and not always to Buddhism’s advantage. While ideologies of “Buddhist patriotism” that emerged in these circumstances were as diverse in form as those of Buddhist civic nationalism, they are all explicit in articulating the compatibility of Buddhism with national projects of modernization and moral regeneration and the ways in which Buddhism can serve the goals of the state.

China and Taiwan

Since its arrival in China as early as the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD), Buddhism’s political status has depended on the shifting ideologies of the imperial court. Periods of generous patronage by successive dynasties such as the Tang (618–907 AD) alternated with periods of persecution in which Buddhist activity was severely curtailed. Buddhism’s foreignness was often a factor in this persecution, as well as the perceived unproductiveness of the monastic community and their withdrawal from social life, characteristics at odds with Chinese social norms. From at least the 7th century, the emperors sought to control admission to the *sangha*, requiring the registration of monks and nuns and closely controlling their movements. During the last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1636–1912), Chinese Buddhism declined as the court embraced Confucianism while also patronizing Tibetan Buddhism as a way to exercise control over Mongolia.

With the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1912, nationalists embarked on a process of modernization that emphasized science, secular education, and an overhaul of all imperial institutions. They differentiated religion from superstition and sought to rationalize the influence of religion in government and civil life (Scott, 2011). The resulting “Smashing Superstition” movement, initiated by more radical nationalist party officials, and the “Converting Temples to Schools” movement, threatened the survival of Buddhist institutions (Ashiwa, 2009). However, these developments also offered leading Buddhist reformers, among them Dai Jitao, Yang Wenhui, and the monk Taixu, an opportunity to promote a Buddhist revival along lines that would cement Buddhism’s position in the larger national project of social and cultural development. Drawing on classical sacred texts such as the “Scripture for Humane Kings who wish to Protect their States,” as well as the example of Japanese Buddhism’s successful modernization, these reformers emphasized education, social involvement, and the rationalization of the monastic system, as well as promoting public rituals such “nation-protecting” ceremonies (Scott, 2011). Reforms were spearheaded by new Buddhist organizations, such as the Chinese Buddhist Association, that defended Buddhist interests and acted as liaisons to the nationalist government (Ashiwa, 2009). Buddhist monks began to take a more active role in social and political causes affecting the Chinese nation, including participating in armed resistance to the Japanese (Xue, 2005).

The reorganization of Chinese Buddhism during the Republic laid the blueprint for future relations with the communist government after 1949. As Wellens notes, “Already in the early years of CCP rule, secularization did not mean Buddhism was forced into the private sphere or totally suppressed, but rather, remoulded and utilized by the party-state” (Wellens, 2017, p. 159). Since its suppression during the cultural revolution, Chinese Buddhism has once again experienced a period of growth, perhaps best described as “regulated development” (Gildow, 2020). Buddhist seminaries have been established, though they mandate political instruction, and Buddhist associations have grown, closely regulated by the state. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increases its resistance to “foreign interference,” for which Islam and Christianity are viewed as conduits, it has grown more receptive to Buddhism as an “indigenous” religion. A number of Chinese officials, including President Xi Jinping, have publicly affirmed Chinese Buddhism’s compatibility with Chinese cultural values and traditions and with the CCP’s agenda for a Chinese cultural renaissance. The *sangha* has proved receptive to this role, as evidenced by its support for the government’s ongoing suppression of the Falun Gong sect, in part because it benefits from this relatively privileged status compared with other faiths. Yet, despite such recent “harmonization” of Buddhism with the state, Buddhism’s political position in China remains tenuous. Its current relationship to the state could be described as one of open arms and an iron fist, as heightened scrutiny and increased regulation by the more authoritarian Xi regime attest.

In Taiwan, the nationalist government that fled the communist victory in 1949 elevated Confucianism to a virtual state religion, partly because Confucianism’s emphasis on social unity and respect for authority suited the Kuomintang’s purposes. Taiwanese Buddhists responded by aligning Buddhist organizations with the interests of the state. Buddhist reformers like Cheng Yen (b. 1937), the founder of the Tzu Chi movement, presented submission to family and community as essentially Buddhist values, a view that was consistent with the development of Taiwan under the Kuomintang’s authoritarian leadership (Madsen, 2007, pp. 26–27). The influence of Christian missionary activity offered Taiwanese Buddhists an additional opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty. Buddhist publications in Taiwan in the 1950s published articles extolling “patriotism and political loyalty ... as part of Chinese Buddhist identity, in contrast to Christianity” (Pacey, 2020, p. 60).

Japan

Like Buddhism in China and Taiwan, Japanese Buddhism has a turbulent history in which its political status has been much contested. Japanese Buddhism's association with the state goes back to the 6th century, and the legendary Prince Shotoku, considered the founder of Japanese Buddhism, through his support of Buddhist scholarship and monks. In later centuries, Buddhism flourished under the patronage of the state but also faced repression during the Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1573–1600), when Shinto and neo-Confucianism were favoured. Buddhism's political revival came under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868), which folded Buddhist institutions into the operations of the state. Buddhist temples functioned as central registrars for localities, and with their monopoly on the performance of funeral rites, these temples gained wealth and political influence (Wilkinson, 2016). However, after the Meiji restoration in 1868, Buddhism again faced a backlash. Buddhist temples lost land and power, and monks faced persecution.

The response of Buddhist intellectuals to the modernizing Meiji state was to recast Japanese Buddhism as consistent with the official ideology of state Shinto and integral to the nation's well-being and development. The figure of Prince Shotoku was revived with new biographies and editions of his writings, and his status as an ancestor of the imperial family highlighted as evidence of the natural alliance of Buddhism and the modern imperial regime. Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939), founder of a number of neo-Nichiren Buddhist organizations, expounded a version of Nichiren Buddhism that maintained that the imperial constitution, despite the privileged position it accorded to Shinto, was an “ideal manifestation of Nichiren's religious teaching, in which the unity of the *dharma* and the absolute authority of the Emperor could be fully realized” (cited in Kawanami, 1999, p. 109). Buddhist scholars embraced the task of establishing Buddhist studies as a scientific field that aligned with the state's ideological interest in presenting Japan as a modern nation. The first decades of the 20th century witnessed a surge in Buddhist research and publications, particularly of canonical works and scholarly editions of scriptures (Wilkinson, 2016). Leading figures in Japanese Buddhism such as Shimaji Mokurai (1838–1911), a leader of the Jodo Shinshu sect, and Inoue Enryo (1858–1919), an influential Buddhist scholar at Tokyo University, viewed these developments in Japanese Buddhism as a boon to Japan's national self-assertion. Inoue wrote that

If we continue to nurture [Buddhism] in Japan and disseminate it some day in foreign countries, we will not only add to the honor of our nation but will also infuse the spirit of our land into the hearts and minds of foreigners.

(cited in Wilkinson, 2016, p. 289)

These patriotic efforts to reform Buddhism would secure its ideological position in Japanese national life, though not without dire consequences in the 1930s and 1940s.

Buddhist ultra-nationalism

As can be seen, Buddhist nationalism is not monolithic. It includes various permutations that reflect the interaction between Buddhist doctrine and tradition, historical circumstances, and the specific sociopolitical conditions to which a country's Buddhist institutions must adapt. This is also true of Buddhist ultra-nationalism, the most publicized, but, in fact, most infrequent, type of Buddhist nationalism. Ultra-nationalism can be described as extreme devotion to one's nation, accompanied by violent actions or rhetoric directed at perceived “outsiders.” Buddhist ultra-nationalism adopts these positions while equating the defence of Buddhism with the defence of the national commu-

nity. For this reason, it is inaccurate to describe this ideological position as Buddhist fundamentalism (at most, it is a “syncretic fundamentalism”) given that the view of Buddhist purity it espouses is inseparable from ethnocultural or ethnonational concerns (Almond et al., 2003).

Buddhist ultra-nationalism has emerged out of both Buddhist patriotism and Buddhist civic nationalism, with Japanese Buddhism in the 1930s and 1940s a striking example of the former, and militant Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Burma examples of the latter. By and large, Buddhist countries have avoided this kind of ultra-nationalism, though Thailand witnessed such extreme views in the 1970s, as the threat of communism loomed at home and abroad. A prominent Buddhist monk, Kittivuddho Bhikkhu, expressed the view that communists were less than human and to kill them would not be a sin. More recently, Thai monks in the south of the country have been vocal about the need to defend Buddhism against the region’s Malay Muslim minority, if necessary by force (Keyes, 2016).

Japan

In Japan, Buddhist support for ultra-nationalist militarism grew out of “patriotic” efforts to align Buddhism with the state’s imperialist foreign policy and state Shinto emperor worship. Militant strains in 20th-century Japanese Buddhism were apparent as early as the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905), when leading Buddhists such as Zen master Shaku Soen identified Buddhist values of self-sacrifice for a greater cause with service to the emperor and the state (Victoria, 2006). The association of Zen Buddhism with the ancient warrior code of Bushido was one way in which Buddhism and militarism were aligned, but the wholesale endorsement of Japanese aggression extended to almost every sect of Japanese Buddhism. By the 1930s, leading Buddhist organizations, including the Nichiren-aligned Association for the Practice of Imperial-Way Buddhism (*Kodo Bukkyo Gyodo Kai*) and the pan-Buddhist association *Myowai Kai*, published declarations of support for the state under the rubric of “Imperial-way Buddhism,” which held that complete submission to the emperor was required by Buddhist teaching (Kawanami, 1999). An influential work on the subject, *The Buddhist View of War*, published in 1937 by Hayashiya Tomojiro and Shimage Chikai, stated that “the reason Japanese Buddhism regards the emperor as a Golden Wheel-Turning Sacred King [Cakravartin] is because he is the Tathagata [fully enlightened being] of the secular world” (cited in Victoria, 2006, p. 86). Apologists for Japan’s wars went on to argue that the expansion of Japanese Buddhism through conquest was a form of *Bodhisattva* action, benefitting the Asian countries that would come under Japan’s control. Furukawa Taigo, in *Rapidly Advancing Japan and the New Mahayana Buddhism* (1937), explained that this meant it would be possible for Japan as a divine nation “to transform the world into a pure Buddha Land” (cited in Victoria, 2006, p. 92). Contemporary writings indicate that Buddhist ultra-nationalists of the time asserted not only the superiority of the Japanese nation but also the superiority of Japanese Buddhism, which they held to represent the perfection of Buddhist thought. The *Myowai Kai* association responded to Chinese criticism of their support for Japanese aggression by explaining that “Chinese Buddhists believe that war should absolutely be avoided no matter what the reason. Japanese Buddhists, on the other hand, believe that war conducted for a [good] reason is in accord with the great benevolence and compassion of Buddhism” (quoted in Victoria, 2006, p. 87).

Sri Lanka and Burma

In contrast to Japan’s patriotic ultra-nationalism, Buddhist ultra-nationalism in Sri Lanka and Burma is better conceived as an offshoot of the “hard-edged” Buddhist civic nationalism that is

present in these countries. The combination of democratic nationalism and reformed Buddhism advocated by urban political elites in the first years of independence was unable to contend with this more exclusionary, communalistic vision of Buddhist nationalism that took hold in these countries in response to the perceived threat of religious and ethnic minorities. In recent decades, both Sri Lanka and Burma have experienced the further ethnicization of nationality, with national identity increasingly identified with the majority Buddhist, Sinhala, and Burmese communities (Lehr, 2019). Defenders of this ethnicized Buddhist nationalism have revived traditions that reinforce the connection between ethnos and religion, such as the legend of the 2nd-century BCE Sinhalese King Dutthagamani, whose war against non-Buddhists was sanctioned by Buddhist monks and rituals (Harris, 1999). Such violence against ethnic and religious minorities has been framed as necessary to the survival of Buddhism. In both Sri Lanka and Burma, extremist monks emphasized the territory of the nation as a sacred space, often conceived as a *Buddhadesa* or “Buddha-Land” (Lehr, 2019). Sinhalese ultra-nationalists insist that Buddhism is preserved in its most authentic form in Sri Lanka and that the obligation to defend the Buddhist character of the island against Hindu nationalists or the spread of Islam or Christianity is akin to preserving Buddhism itself. This territoriality is often expressed through monastic opposition to the construction of churches, Hindu temples, or mosques or through the renovation and rehabilitation of Buddhist wats and stupas in disputed territory, even when this exacerbates conflict. In Burma, ultra-nationalism has also included a strain of Buddhist apocalypticism that views current strife as evidence of a dark age. Such movements have proliferated in the countryside, where they combine monarchist revivalism and hopes for the arrival of the future Buddha Maitreya with violent rhetoric towards outsiders (Lehr, 2019).

Although most Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Burma oppose the active involvement of monks in politics, such activity has been a notable feature of Buddhist ultra-nationalism in these countries. In Sri Lanka, monks have stood as candidates for the Sinhala Buddhist supremacist *Jathika Hela Urumaya* party and been elected to parliament, advocating policies that included the violent prosecution of war against the Tamils and restrictions on Muslim and Christian proselytizing (DeVotta & Stone, 2008). In Burma’s volatile border regions, militant monks played an active role in establishing organizations such as the Arakan Liberation Party (founded in 1968) and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (founded in 1994) to oppose insurgencies by Muslim and Christian ethnic minorities (Lehr 2019). These longstanding tensions fuelled the anti-Muslim boycotts and violence that have plagued Burma in recent years, spearheaded by organizations such as the Theravada Doctrine Network (later the Association for the Defence of the Nation, Religion and its Teachings) and the 969 movement that targeted Muslim businesses (Brac de la Perrière, 2016). In recent years, social media has played an important role in disseminating the views of ultra-nationalist monks such as Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara of the *Bodu Bala Sena* organization in Sri Lanka and Ashin Wirathu in Burma. Wirathu has focused his speeches, shared widely on social media, on the perceived threat to Buddhism posed by the “foreign” Muslim Rohingya community in Rakhine state, despite their having lived in Burma for many generations. Furthermore, the failure of prominent democratic Buddhist politicians, such as Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi, to condemn such actions indicates that the distinction between Buddhist democratic civic nationalism and Buddhist ultra-nationalism is not always clear.

Conclusion

While it is tempting to identify Buddhist nationalism with its most extreme and militant manifestations, this overlooks the long history of Buddhism’s interaction with the idea of the “nation” and the diversity of forms that Buddhist nationalism takes. As Buddhism is characterized by an

“interpretive plasticity” (Jackson, 2002), Buddhist thinkers have been able to integrate Buddhist ideas with nationalist ideology in a variety of ways, under different political conditions. Such efforts have been generated by political elites using Buddhism to legitimate programmes and policies and to suppress dissent, as well as by Buddhist religious figures and scholars to secure and enhance Buddhism’s political position. Regardless of whether its principal proponents are religious authorities, scholars, or politicians (it is frequently all three), Buddhist nationalism tends to take hold under the same social and political conditions in which nationalism, in general, has appeal. To suggest that Buddhist nationalism is merely a reflection of these conditions is to unduly minimize the responsibility of its advocates, particularly when such advocacy adds fuel to a smouldering fire, but neither does this particular ideology arise in isolation from wider sociopolitical forces. Nor should we expect Buddhist nationalism to decline. As the meaning of the “nation” continues to evolve under the impact of transnational forces and economic and cultural globalization, and as Buddhism confronts the challenges of changing social and political landscapes across Asia and beyond, new iterations of Buddhist nationalism will undoubtedly emerge in response to transforming conditions.

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