

## BUDDHISM, VIOLENCE AND THE STATE IN BURMA (MYANMAR) AND SRI LANKA

By Juliane Schober

Much of recent public and academic discourse on the intersections of religion with conflict in general, and communal violence in particular, has been limited by generalizations about particular religions and a presumably universal conception of the secular. Such discussions often entail implicit presumptions about propensities, an essence or even authenticity of particular religious traditions and their practical or doctrinal stance towards violence. By illuminating the place of violence in Buddhism, I hope to dispel the notion that religions embracing a doctrine of non-violence are necessarily immune to it. Similarly, religious justifications for violence do not necessarily translate into actuality. My intention is instead to point to the ways in which religious discourse, an universal anthropological phenomenon, tends to intersect with other sources of conflict to augment a potential for violence.

A second misconception informing many discussions concerns the often unstated preconception that a western understanding of the secular and its relation to religion are universally shared. Instead, I treat the notion of secular power as an ethnographic concept that is not universally shared, but rather embedded within particular histories of western enlightenment and colonialism. Modern interpretations of the secular, and of secular state power, derived from a particular history of European post-enlightenment thought and were shaped by Christian cultures and modern political ideologies in the west. And western colonialism has been instrumental to circulating interpretations of the secular across cultures in many parts of the globe. Interpretations of secular power in Asian cultures, however, often incorporate different understandings concerning the division of human and divine powers. The failure to underscore the ethnographic and religious valorizations of the secular, particularly the secular power of the modern state, has been limiting discussions on the religio-political histories and colonial legacies in South and Southeast Asia.

By contrast, I presuppose in this essay that religious meaning and the interpretation of symbols in social practice draws on cultural memory and can be employed to authorize violence through religious means. Specifically, I argue that religious discourse plays a special role in ameliorating or exacerbating cultural perceptions about social economic and political conditions that are prone to violent conflict. Religion plays a special role in communal violence precisely because it furnishes an ultimate language and symbols that essentialize, otherize, and render in absolute moral terms potential conflicts embedded in social and cultural contexts. In other words, in the absence of such religious discourse, such potential conflicts are occur within relative social contexts. Through the process of moral abstraction, religious discourse can be invoked to empower, engender or disrupt violence by creating auras of absolute values and righteousness.

In the west, popular opinion tends to identify 'authentic' Buddhism with nonviolence and many presume that Buddhism rejects all forms of violence.<sup>1</sup> From a doctrinal perspective, Buddhism espouses an ethic of nonviolence, as do other religions. Buddhist Precepts (*sīla*) prohibit killing and Buddhist texts speak in detail about the moral consequences, in this and future lives, of killing another sentient being, human or otherwise.<sup>2</sup> One's *karma*, the ethical force that determines the quality of this and future lives, will manifest the results of causing violence which, inevitably, creates suffering for the perpetrator in this and future lives. Even the future Buddha is believed to have endured suffering as a consequence of violent action in previous lives.

Buddhist doctrine explains that the Path to Moral Perfection (*nirvāṇa*) extends over rebirths in

countless lives. Its mastery speaks primarily to mental and spiritual accomplishments of the individual. Although pivotal in fostering the social and material conditions for enlightenment, Buddhist communities generally do not unite across national boundaries for a common goal or to combat a religious >other.= In contrast to other world religions, Buddhism does not uphold a belief in religious redemption through warfare like the Crusades. Nor does it have a doctrine or history to mobilize religious communities to act violently against unbelievers. And, finally, Buddhists generally do not identify with a global, transnational or universal brotherhood in order to legitimate local practices. Instead, the Buddha=s sacred biography and the cult of this relics justifies ritual veneration at sacred centers throughout the Buddhist world that are seen as centers of extraordinary power. That power is understood to embody simultaneously political and religious dimensions that reflect on the status of local Buddhist leaders and define a political and ritual hegemony within their communities.<sup>3</sup>

Seen from the vantage point of history, however, violence has been and continues to be present in Buddhist societies as Buddhists have been both targets and agents of communal violence. And finally, communal rioting and killings have been justified by Buddhist and ethnic motives in a number of Asian societies. One is reminded of the Chinese occupation of Tibet that initiated the exodus of Tibetan monks in 1959. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, then the religious and political leader of Tibet, led his community into exile to Dharamsala in northern India where the Tibetan government in exile now officially resides. In the course of the cultural revolution that raged through Tibet, countless Buddhist monks have been killed and the monasteries, and libraries as the repositories of centuries of Buddhist learning were destroyed.<sup>4</sup> Cambodia suffered similar mass violence against Buddhists, their traditions and institutions during the Pol Pot regime. In Sri Lanka, violent riots have been promulgated by Buddhist monks and lay people in defense of their vision of a Buddhist nationalism. At the same time, Sri Lankan Buddhists have been the target of violence unleashed against them by ethnic and religious >others,= the Tamil Tigers<sup>5</sup>. In 1973, the Thai monk Kitthiwuttho stated that killing communists did not cause negative *karma* and the Buddhist Precepts were tantamount to national law.<sup>6</sup> In Burma, Theravada Buddhism has just as frequently become a site for resisting the power of state. To help project how these dynamics may play out in future conflicts, we need to examine closely the political roles Buddhist monks, institutions and symbols have played in various historical trajectories and social contexts. The examples adduced here point to the likely continuation of the significant roles Buddhist elements assume in contexts that precipitate violent conflict.

While cautioning against generalizing about the contemporary intersections of religion and violence, this essay examines such recent conjunctures of Buddhism, violence and the state in Burma and, by comparison, in Sri Lanka. In particular, I hope to illustrate the complexities of public discourse about ultimate meanings of life and death in the modern history of Buddhism, violence and the state in Burma. I examine the ways in which the present regime continues to function within a colonial legacy, namely to organize the population for the purposes of extracting resources. In the absence of national constitution since 1988 that would otherwise empower the official acts of a secular modern state in Burma, the regime has employed Buddhist authority and institutions to legitimate its politics. The primary focus of this essay is therefore on recent Burmese national politics and the popular uprising of 1988 in which the sangha facilitated a popular revolt against the state; the anti-Muslim Riots of 1997, and since then, that have been instigated by the regime to exploit anti-Muslim sentiments among Buddhists; and lastly, the ambush of Aung San Suu Kyi=s caravan of cars traveling near Dipeyin, Sagaing Division, where, through deceptive use of Buddhist authority, agents of the state massacred many of her supporters. Although other incidents can be adduced, my choice is to discuss these examples in order to indicate a discursive trajectory in which Buddhist symbols and authority

can facilitate violence.

A brief consideration of militant Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka documents that a significant number monks facilitated, advocated and perpetrated violence and enumerates some salient differences in the political roles Buddhist monks have played in perpetuating violent conflict. The conclusions underscore that religion can serve as a catalyst to preempt or promote violent conflict. In other words, our focus is perhaps less well served by examining closely any single religious tradition and its justifications for violence. As scholars, we may unwittingly empower a culture of religious violence by decontextualizing its public discourse from the social conditions that render the unfathomable plausible and meaningful in everyday life. Rather, our intention must be to construct an explanation that draws on a broader investigation into the kinds of social and cultural conditions that foster a religious discourse advocating violence and chart their developments when religion becomes a marked variable and assumes a pivotal role in communal violence.

### **The Sangha and the State in Modern Theravada Buddhism**

To give some insight into the culture of politics that characterizes Theravada Buddhism in traditional and many contemporary contexts, a few general remarks are appropriate concerning the legitimation of politics Buddhist monks and institutions have often provided. In traditional culture, one's social, political and economic status was indicative of past ethical action (*karma*). Buddhist kings (*dharmaraja*) and lay people who aspired to political power or desired to attain a better rebirth participated in a ritual hegemony in which materials support given to monks and religious causes was exchanged for spiritual returns in this and future lives.<sup>7</sup> While both monks and monasteries continue to be revered and receive significant donations, they also harbor a powerful potential to mobilize people and resources. This kind of ritual hierarchy is expressed in a variety of Burmese cultural contexts. In his discussion of traditional Buddhist societies in Southeast Asia, Tambiah describes this exchange of material support for religious merit and social status as a total social fact, an all encompassing cultural system, in which a cosmological world view encompasses politics, power, economics, history and culture.

Contrary to popular perceptions in the west, the sangha is an institution structured by multiple principles of hierarchy. A culture of hierarchy pervades interactions with and among monks as junior monks are expected to obey and respect senior ones. Most basic is the seniority monks acquire through years spent living a monastic life. In most branches of the tradition, full ordination requires that the monks be at least 20 years of age and his seniority increases with each year of service. The relative seniority of a monk since ordination also determines whether he greets another monk by bowing to him or whether he will receive such homage, although the relative position of two individuals to one another may be less marked. Monastic rank within a monastery further differentiates status among monks, with the abbot receiving unqualified respect from monks residing in his compound. Ordination lineages in the Theravada tradition may also differentiate themselves from other lineages by stressing stricter adherence to the monastic code of conduct (*vinaya*). Respective claims to strict purity in monastic practice also introduce an element of contesting relative hierarchy among monastic communities. Modern reforms of the sangha introduced by the state have sought to institute administrative centralization that links local chapters to regional committees and national leadership. While traditional practice espouses strict adherence to hierarchy within the sangha, such interpretations necessarily also recognize, but may not condone, ways to contest it. Hence, it would be misleading to view the sangha as an monolithic institution since historically, it comprises diverse communities (*gana*) that distinguish themselves through local teachings, practices, language and ethnic identity.

The traditional legitimation of political power through Buddhist institutions has been challenged, but not abandoned by modern practices of the state that were largely introduced through the advent of British colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through the British colonization of Burma modern concepts of secular power and structural venues to achieve secular governance were introduced into a political culture that until then did not separate secular power from the cosmological world views that encompassed all power. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism has been identified with Burmese national identity. >To be Burmese is to be Buddhist= is a slogan first coined by the early nationalist movement, the Young Mens= Buddhist Association founded in 1906 when the country was a British colony. Since then, this statement about national identity has been invoked in various contexts and has taken on diverse interpretations. Because of its history of mapping national identity onto a universal religious identity, Burmese Buddhism, its practices and institutions have drawn on a deep emotional reservoir and extensive social memory by which Burmese may interpret events of the present through experiences of a past, including riots and mass violence against the powers of the state.<sup>8</sup>

The Buddhist sangha is the only cultural institution surviving the collapse of the traditional kingdom after the third and final Anglo-Burmese war in 1885. Buddhism has long been a rallying point for resistance against the colonial state and its successors since independence in 1948.<sup>9</sup> The sangha, or Buddhist monkhood, has played a critical role mediating such sentiments. As other-worldly ascetics detached from worldly gains, monks have traditionally enjoyed a position of authority permitting the sangha to speak `truth= to power. Monks have agitated against colonial rule in 1886 and again in the 1920s and 1930s. The sangha has also been a steadfast critic of Burmese governments from the democratic administration of U Nu, to Ne Win=s Socialist Program Party and its successor regimes under the State Law and Order Council and, most recently, the State Peace and Development Council.

With the exception of the British colonial administration, every Burmese government since independence in 1948 has catered to the sangha for popular support, religious blessing and political legitimation. By the same token, these government also had to contend with the power of the sangha to mobilize people. Governments have used Buddhist ritual to legitimate political power in times of constitutional crisis or in the absence of a national constitution altogether. Governments have used Buddhist authority or `Buddhification= to rally nationalist sentiments among the general population, to foster an ideological Buddhist nationalism, to integrate primarily Christian and animist hills tribes ethnic minorities into the administration of the nation-state, and to force non-Buddhists to convert to Buddhism.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Buddhist nationalist sentiments have been invoked to deflect public attention away from other crises, including agricultural shortages, banking failures and impending anti-government demonstrations.

The modern state imposed centralizing and standardizing reforms on the Buddhist sangha a several historical junctures. In order to revitalize Buddhist learning and invigorate monastic organization, U Nu convened the Fifth Buddhist Council in 1954-6. U Nu initially gained the support of Buddhist monks and thus enhanced his own charisma and the state=s legitimation, but the demise of his government in 1962 was triggered by his inability to resist monastic pressure to establish Buddhism as a state religion. During the 1990s, the SLORC regime sponsored a great many lavish Buddhist rituals to legitimate its power in the absence of a national constitution and other means of legitimating the power of the state.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the state has used the authority of Buddhism to instigate and sanctioned mass violence perpetrated against >enemies of the Burmese nation= and religious and ethnic >others.= It is important to note the country=s ethnic composition in this regard. Although the Burmese sangha is predominantly Burman, yet it also recruits significant membership among ethnic minorities, including the Mon, Karen, Arakanese and Shan. Almost all

ethnic Burmans, who make up about 65-80% of the population, are Buddhist. This brings the total Buddhist population in Burma close to ninety percent.<sup>12</sup> During the twentieth century, military power, religion, ethnicity and national identity have been influential forces in mobilizing communal violence in this country. Yet, none of these factors emerged as a single determinant in the occurrence or outcome of violent encounters and political alliances, however fragile and temporary, routinely cut across these distinctions.

### **Buddhist Monks as Facilitators and Victims in the 1988 Uprising**

The anti-government uprising in 1988 constitutes a tragic watershed in the recent history of a country whose citizens believed themselves to be on the verge of political reforms, only to plunge into the shackles of a military regime that rules by force and exploitation. Political and economic reforms which Hefner (2000) notes as critical to fostering civil society and democracy in Indonesia were not implemented with sufficient cohesion to build a post-colonial state to serve the Burmese nation. The bloody path from that moment of hope in 1988 to the subsequent decades of fear was paved with the bodies of thousands. Those deaths and subsequent purges in education, government, and in the monasteries affected the personal lives of every Burmese family. The absence of a national constitution, the lack of effective political reforms, deeply seated resentment towards the military regime and wide spread social suffering collectively determined the parameters for Burmese politics since 1988.

In the months prior to the uprisings in March and August of 1988, a failing economy, student unrests at Rangoon Technical Institute and Rangoon University, signs of an imminent resignation of the Burmese Dictator Ne Win, the promise of a multi-party system and similar far reaching reforms as well as shortages of basic food staples, including rice and cooking oil, reverberated through Burmese society. Sparked by a seemingly minor student encounter with police in a Rangoon coffee shop, the demonstrations spread rapidly to the Rangoon Technical Institute and to Rangoon University and were quenched each time by brutal police force. As the demonstrations turned into riots. Scores of students were killed by police and military, deaths for which the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) refused to hold its security forces accountable. More and more segments of Burmese society took to the streets of Rangoon, Mandalay and soon cities throughout the country to demand government reform and accountability. In early August 1988, large segments of the Burmese work force, including professionals, civil servants, customs officials, nurses, doctors and even soldiers from certain military units went on strike to join mass protests and demanded radical political change. Perhaps inspired by the Philippine experience of >people power,= there was a prevailing sense in Burma and abroad that real political and economic reforms and a change of government were imminent. The army responded quickly and put a bloody end to the uprising. As thousands of demonstrators were killed by police and military, many, especially students and monks who feared reprisals and mass arrests fled upcountry and eventually crossed the border into Thailand.<sup>13</sup>

Amidst the chaos of the uprising, the Burmese sangha emerged spontaneously to provide an organizational structure to the popular uprising. Monasteries became sanctuaries, particularly at night when military police arrested student agitators at their homes. Monks organized demonstrations, relayed information through an internal monastic network, and even stepped up to administer some judicial and civil infrastructures in those town and areas considered >liberated= by the democratic uprising. The yellow robes of the Buddha offered anonymity to those fleeing from government persecution and the monastic network became a conduit for safe travel to the border and into exile. Along with numerous other exile and refugee organizations, the All Burma Monks Union was formed to speak for the sangha from the relative safety of the Thai border.<sup>14</sup> Burma=s monks once again had become a political force, acting as facilitators of wide-spread

anti-government mobilization.<sup>15</sup>

The military's actions against the sangha were swift and severe. Monks soon became victims of the state's reprisals against "enemies of the state" who agitated in the uprising. Senior monks were held accountable for the involvement of younger ones in the riots.<sup>16</sup> Many were forcibly disrobed, demonstrating the military's flagrant disrespect for traditional monastic authority.<sup>17</sup> Hundreds of monks were detained and many remained in prison for years to come. Some died in prison due to torture, illness or lack of medical care.<sup>18</sup> The government subjected monasteries to group reprisals and retaliated with curfews and other restrictions on monastic participation in public life. It imposed rigid and comprehensive reforms on all religious organizations in Burma, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Christian alike, that brought nearly every aspect of monastic administration, education, and the personal lives of individual monks under close government scrutiny. Most significantly, religious reforms since 1988 have brought the Buddhist sangha under the authority of the modern state. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has been strengthened in many ways and has been given the charge to implement the preservation and propagation of Buddhism in Burma.<sup>19</sup> In sum, in response to popular demands for political reform, the state appropriated the religious authority and institutions of Buddhism, exerting unprecedented control over religion in public life.

Against this background of increasing restrictions on monastic life, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the regime that eventually succeeded Ne Win and his disbanded BSPP government, sought to transform a national community into a ritual community devoted to the veneration of sacred relics of the Buddha, thus minimizing the agency of the sangha. Participation in this Buddhist ritual community also implied participation in a national economic and political network few could afford to ignore. In this manner, the state used Buddhist sacred objects and ritual to enforce a totalizing hold on power.<sup>20</sup> At great expense to the citizens who donated money and labor for lavish religious construction and rituals, SLORC largely succeeded in reinforcing its hegemonic power through its use of religious sources of authority. By the early 1990s, the state had coopted the senior sangha and the majority of the Buddhist population into acquiescent participation.<sup>21</sup> These programs to silence and police Buddhist and other forms of dissent drove popular protest underground, creating a generalized distrust and fear in private and public spheres of Burmese life in which rumors abound, filter public events, and produce counter-narratives at amazing speed.<sup>22</sup>

### **Causes and Catalysts of the Anti-Muslim Persecution in 1997**

Rumors and multiple narratives abound about the causes and cataclysmic events that precipitated the Anti-Muslim riots in 1997 and engendered explosive violence amidst this other-wise tightly policed nation.<sup>23</sup> Buddhist and civil groups as well as foreign news media report that the regime sparked the riots in order to deflect public attention away from impending sites of crisis. Just a few weeks before, farmers had staged demonstrations to protest forced government buy-outs of their harvest. Rumors of food shortages ensued. For several months leading up to the spring of 1997, monks from major Mandalay monasteries had secretly organized an impending human rights strike, demanding the release of 16 monks whom SLORC had previously imprisoned.

In March 1997 and in incidents since then as recently as November 2003, Burmese Muslims became targets of violent rampages by Buddhist monks.<sup>24</sup> Anti-Muslim rioting flared up over a local conflict that is said to have occurred in Mandalay. From there, anti-Muslim riots spread to all major cities in Burma within just a few days. The extent of violence inflicted upon Muslim communities is difficult to ascertain. One measure, however, is the large number of Muslim refugees the riots engendered, especially among Rohingas who fled their native Arakan in Lower Burma mostly to Bangladesh. The attacks caused an unknown number of deaths,

the burning of Muslim homes and shops and the desecration of sacred sites and objects, including the destruction of mosques, scattering the Qu=ran in the street and driving pigs through consecrated grounds.

Accounts about these raids do not add up to a coherent master narrative, but fall into separate categories, such as a version given by government media, accounts by Buddhist monastic organizations, and a third version based on foreign press reports and first-hand descriptions by Burmese Muslims, Buddhists monks and other eyewitnesses. Each kind of narrative attributes the underlying causes and immediate catalysts for these mob attacks on Burmese Muslim communities to entirely different contexts.<sup>25</sup>

According to official state media and newspapers, Buddhist-Muslim rioting broke out in Mandalay on March 17, 1997 over an alleged rape of a Buddhist girl by a Muslim man and quickly turned into a rampage in which Buddhist monks are said to have retaliated by attacking and set fire to Muslim neighborhoods. Intersecting with this narrative were other rumors that alleged the theft of an hitherto unknown, large ruby embedded in the sacred *Mahamuni* Buddha image. The theft was reported to have left a large hole in the icon that forms the central attraction of a major pilgrimage site in contemporary Burma.<sup>26</sup> Popular opinion blamed pagoda trustees appointed by the SLORC regime and damage to the sacred image was generally understood as weakening the political power of the government. These rumors inevitably agitated popular Burmese Buddhist sentiments evoking a complex cultural history concerning identity, power, belonging, place, and agency. This situation by itself might have been sufficiently incendiary for some Burmese Buddhists to participate in an outbreak of violent frustration and the preceding rumors now focused the target of their frustration on the Muslim community.<sup>27</sup>

Different observers affirmed SLORC=s role in instigating the riots. Some stated that the monastic attackers whose identity was mostly hidden by robes draped over their heads were in actuality mere imposter and agitators sent by the regime=s grassroots organization, the Unity, Solidarity and development Association (USDA).<sup>28</sup> Muslims throughout the country often received warnings from local officials of impending mob attacks,<sup>29</sup> indicating that the riots were not spontaneous, but planned in advance.<sup>30</sup> The strategy also concentrated the loss of property and buildings and likely reduced the loss of lives. In response to the rioting that spread within days throughout Burma, SLORC imposed martial law, closed all universities, and instituted curfews on monasteries in Mandalay and in other cities. Soldiers surrounded many of the larger monasteries, especially in Mandalay and Rangoon. At the same time, state television aired lengthy and frequent broadcasts depicting the regime=s leading generals venerating senior Buddhist monks and making extravagant donations to them.

Organizations like the democratic National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) called for restraint among all religious groups. In a statement on March 18, 1997, the All Burma Young Monks= Union (ABYMU), an exile group founded in the aftermath of 1988 explained that monks in Mandalay had planned human rights demonstrations to protest the government=s refusal to reveal the fate of 16 monks who had been previously arrested.<sup>31</sup> Their demands also included easing government restrictions on the sangha. Other senior monks urged calm among the general population, explicitly distancing themselves and the sangha as an institution from violence committed against Muslims. Concurrently, they affirmed their allegiance with Muslim suffering in a common struggle against SLORC=s injustice.

It appears from these reports that SLORC instigated the initial attacks against Muslims in Mandalay to contain anti-government activities among Buddhist monks in Mandalay and the threat of renewed demonstrations public knowledge of their activities would likely bring about. Over the past decades, there have been repeated allegations of such diversionary tactics that create unrest the military **can** contain, while

detracting public attention away from impending crises that were seen as the greater threat to the state's stability. At the same time, it is also clear that Buddhist monks participated in later stages of the anti-Muslim mass rioting. Aung Zaw writes in the Nation (March 28, 1997): A young monk in Rangoon did not deny that they were involved. >Yes! We do have a plan to protest against this brutal regime. Our target is SLORC.=@ The rationale anti-government monks adduced to justify attacks against Muslims as actually an attack on SLORC appears convoluted. Such justifications were borne out of the democratic resentment of support SLORC's bid to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) received at that time from Malaysia's Mahathir. In addition, Indonesia's former president Soeharto had recently visited Ne Win in Rangoon. The public support from Muslim nations for SLORC was popularly seen as undercutting the movement for democracy in Burma. In the same piece, Aung Zaw reports that A... about 50 monks at Bargaya Road in Rangoon followed by soldiers and riot police went to another mosque, chanting: `We don't want Muslims= and throwing stones at the mosque. The authorities did not intervene. @

The narratives illustrate how violence can be instigated against a religious and ethnic `other= as a means to preempt public outcry against the state and, at the same time, place further controls upon the likely facilitators of resistance directed against the state, i.e. the Buddhist sangha. These accounts show how facilitators of violence spread rumors and exploit complex cultural and religious sentiments to accomplish objectives that emerge from entirely different political configurations. They also speak to a Buddhist collusion with political forces to target Muslims<sup>32</sup> and, lastly, they relate how religious identities had become, at one and the same time, targets and victims of violent recrimination.

### **The Dipeyin Ambush and Massacre**

The ambush and massacre of NLD supporters in a wooded area near Depayin began in the evening of May 30, 2003, a day now known as Black Friday in the democratic movement. The events surrounding this incident are primarily political and not religious in character. They indicate heightened political tensions between Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and the ruling regime, that, by that time, had been renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).<sup>33</sup> It is, however, the use of Buddhist authority in constructing the ambush that qualifies it for inclusion in this discussion.<sup>34</sup>

Traveling in the evening of May 30, 2003, the NDL caravan of some two dozen cars and motorcycles was redirected by a military road block, to a minor road that turned out to be blocked by fallen trees.<sup>35</sup> As they made their way through a wooded area near the village of Dipeyin, the caravan was greeted by a large crowd of villagers. A Buddhist monk approached Aung San Suu Kyi's car and invited her to speak to the crowd. Suu Kyi declined due to the late hour, but the monk persisted until her aid, Htun Zaw Zaw, got out of the car to dissuade the monk. Once the caravan stopped, USDA members merged from the near-by woods to attack NLD supporters. Hundred of police, men dressed as monks, armed soldiers and prisoners from Mandalay Prison suddenly dismounted large trucks, armed with bamboo spears, guns, iron pipes and rocks and joined in the attack.<sup>36</sup> In the massacre, more than one hundred supporters of the NLD were brutally slaughtered. Suu Kyi's car escaped to Dipeyin where she was taken into `pre-emptive= custody.<sup>37</sup> Within the following days, dozens of Members of Parliament were arrested or disappeared. Since May 2003, Suu Kyi has remained under house arrest and the regime justifies this action by referring to a 1975 provision that permits the preemptive arrest for up to five years of persons suspected of committing acts endangering the security of the state. The crack-down on the NLD had resumed once again. The attack was planned and carried by the USDA and the police, under the command of the northwest regional military commander, Brig-Gen. Soe Naing who acted in alliance with centrally placed generals in the Rangoon government.<sup>38</sup> The official response

initially pointed toward a popular dislike of Suu Kyi and of the NLD, an account that is widely considered to lack credibility. Signaling perhaps the most egregious manipulation and abuse of Buddhist authority, the monk=s role in stopping the NLD caravan speaks to the tremendous respect individual Buddhist monks as well as the institution of the sangha as whole occupy in contemporary Burmese culture and politics.

### **Buddhism and Violence in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka=s Buddhist engagement with the modern state has dealt with issues similar to those in the national history of Burma. Both states have experienced protracted civil wars with ethnic minorities. In both countries, just and effective policies to integrate ethnic minorities remain a challenge to the power of the state. While both Burma and Sri Lanka share strong identifications of Buddhism with nationality, their historical trajectories differ in important respects. In Sri Lanka, monks have been able to occupy significant political positions in public life, gaining the right to vote in elections and run for political office. In this regard, the Sinhalese sangha negotiated for themselves to a far greater degree a modern re-definition of traditional Buddhist ascetic roles. These traditional monastic ideals remain normative in Burmese national culture, where monks may not vote and are encouraged by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, on grounds of rules governing monastic conduct (*vinaya*), to remain aloof from worldly and political affairs.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism underwent revitalization and reforms in Sri Lanka that were in large measure the result of efforts by Angitara Dharmapala, the Sri Lankan protégé of Henry Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, prominent founders of the Theosophical Society. This revitalization was modeled largely after Christian organizations and a Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka became a rallying point against British colonial power. Upon independence, monks claimed the right to vote in elections and hold political office.<sup>39</sup> These facts strengthened their role in the public life and politics of the new nation.

For Sri Lankan nationalists, Buddhism is commensurate with a Sri Lankan identity whose history they believed reached back to the mythic origins of the island recounted in the sacred *Mahavamsa* Chronicles. Sinhalese Monks continued to be activists in the ethnic and political struggles of the early 1980s.<sup>40</sup> Their actions, indeed, their self-proclaimed sacred duty, was to preserve that religio-national legacy for future generations. Monks saw themselves as not merely advisors, but as moral guardians of the Sri Lankan nation and defenders of the Dharma, both threatened by ethnic and religious others. It was their responsibility to pave the way for politicians to safeguard a Sri Lanka where Buddhism would prosper. During the blood civil wars in the 1980s between Tamil separatists and Sinhala Buddhists, monks were instrumental in organizing and mobilizing people to defend the Sinhala identity.<sup>41</sup> Statements like *There is no Buddhist sangha where there is no Sinhala race*<sup>42</sup> were part of their battle cry to ensure a continuing Sinhalese hegemony. Walpola Rahula, the internationally respected monk and scholar of Buddhism, proclaimed that *The sangha is ready to lay down their lives* over proposed legislation to solve the ethnic conflict.<sup>43</sup> In their view, Buddhist teachings not only justified the prosecution of the war. Rather, war was to be prosecuted to preserve Sri Lanka=s Buddhism in the future.<sup>44</sup> Monks strongly criticized the government of Jayewardene for what they considered his failure to safeguard the country in times of national crisis by inviting Indian military intervention. Sri Lankan political discourse labeled Tamil Tigers as *terrorists*, while monks who were closely allied with the JVP were righteous defenders of Sinhala identity and Buddhist nationalism. Monastic militance even led to the murder of Sri Lanka=s Prime Minister, Ranasingha Premadasa, in 1993.

This brief excursion into the political and at times violent roles of Sinhalese Buddhist monks does not do justice to the multi-layered histories in the struggle for that country=s independence and eventual nationhood. But it can give us a glimpse of the inflammatory discourse in which the Sinhalese sangha

conducted and facilitated its political activism in the public sphere. While monks in Burma may use incendiary language, they are less likely to do so in public spheres that lie beyond monastic contexts. By contrast, Sinhalese monks defined for themselves a modern identity that openly claims monastic engagement with the political world. In Sri Lanka, monks are political actors in the public sphere and they see the exercise of that public function as their primary religious obligation.

In his book, *Buddhism Betrayed*, the eminent anthropologist and scholar of Theravada Buddhism, Stanley Tambiah, himself a Sri Lankan Tamil, criticized the political conduct of Sinhalese monks and questioned, on the basis of Buddhist doctrine, the political activism of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. His book received much public condemnation by Buddhist parties in this conflict and by some academics. It is presently blacklisted in Sri Lanka. While Tambiah's argument is compelling on ethical grounds and adduces sound textual evidence, his work and the critiques of his detractors nonetheless invites us to examine carefully implicit and explicit definitions of an 'authentic' Buddhism. Whose Buddhism is labeled as authentic? And what contextual factors may have helped shape the public discourse about Buddhist legitimacy or ethics at that particular moment of Sri Lankan national history? Abeyesekera rightly cautions us against the view that Ahimsa is the antithesis of a supposedly authentic Buddhism that specifically teaches nonviolence (2002:202). Authenticity is not defined by religious text and academic interpretation, but by the creed of communities that espouse such religious practice and beliefs.

### **Anatomies of Religion and Conflict**

The causes of religiously justified collective violence are likely to be as varied and predictable as any sources of conflict: economic deprivation, social inequity, political exploitation, and so forth. In other words, in the absence of such universal causes of conflict, religious discourse is not likely to spark communal violence. At the same time, even religions that teach nonviolence are not immune to forces that create violent conflict with religious inflections.

How then can we analyze the intersection of conflict and religion? I caution against hastily identifying one with the other. Conflict, even violent conflict, and religion are universal features of society with distinct, though at times intersecting, histories. Not all violent conflict is necessarily religious. And while religions generally seek to instill moral norms in communities, many of them, at one time or another, have been invoked to incite or justify communal violence. Multiple considerations, including questions of identity, religion, power, access to resources, come into consideration. The labels we attach to identify and define categories are themselves products of a discourse that is embedded in wider social contexts. Attributions identifying some religious communities as avowing violence or as practicing nonviolence do not characterize essential qualities of any religious tradition or its communities, but instead refer to specific social and historical conjunctures embedded in multiple trajectories. Although religion provides individuals and communities with a universalizing discourse of ultimate meaning, scholars as well as peace activists must be careful to retain the specificity of the social, economic and political contexts in which such otherizing statements inciting religious violence are made.

Religion, as a phenomenon, however, has the capacity to inflame potential sites of conflict or to amplify preexisting ones by ascribing to them transcending or ultimate significance. Religious discourse links provocative incidents with concepts, symbols and events that intensify and legitimate conflict in absolute terms. Incidents are taken out of context and stripped of relativizing particulars to lend greater relevance to such accounts and an endow them with an aura of religious or cultural 'truth'. Religious discourse can accomplish this precisely because it engages believers in multiple realities at the same time, be they social,

political, psychological or sacred. It decontextualizes causes of conflict and lends them authoritative truths, thus precluding successfully negotiating context-based resolutions. Difference expressed between social groups is no longer one of degree, but an absolute difference that cannot be bridged. The rift is explained in terms of essentializing qualities that belong to self-evident religious truths. In that way, the inflammatory religious discourse becomes focused on absolutes, on >Truth=, >justice=, and >victory.=

Religious discourse taps into sentiments associated with cultural symbols and social memory that together powerfully evoke the past. Such speeches may idealize traditions of the past or and promise reestablish them in the future. The possibilities of the present are interjected with the memories of the past and the promise of salvation or redemption. It brings to bear upon actors realities that transcend the present where social norms constitute a measure for action.<sup>45</sup> The language of warring parties employs idioms and evokes cultural and religious metaphors that resonate at multiple levels. Speeches to incite and mobilize often claim and appropriate religious authority in order to encourage, entitle or mobilize perpetrators of violence into action. To minds already agitated with emotions, these are powerful motivators to do the impossible, to prevail against all odds, to fight a holy war. That kind of discourse is totalizing, hegemonic, `other-izing= and de-humanizing.<sup>46</sup> It refers to absolute truths and ultimate realities in constructing the enemy and explicating the justification for violence.

Who are the participants in the religious discourse that justifies violent conflict? In his examination of communal violence in South Asia, Paul Brass identifies three types of participants within a given group. Perpetrating actual violence and performing within the mob are recruits who often have minimal education and whose existence is already marginal. They are readily exploited as foot soldiers and have few options to deal effectively with social and economic sources of conflict. In contexts of no opportunity, relatively little money can be an excellent wage for a few hours= labor. The acceptance of that kind of employment also speaks to a measure of desperation and powerless alienation from cultural realities that can foster peaceful living.

Strategically placed within organizations controlled by the state or within monastic networks of the sangha are mid-level agitators, or `fire tenders,= as Brass refers to them. They facilitate conflict, fan incendiary rumors and make logistical plans. As leaders of rioting mobs, they have the power to start or call off communal violence. Most violent conflict requires the organization of networks ready to move crowds to action quickly.<sup>47</sup> Brass places ideologues and intellectuals at the pinnacle of organizations likely to incite religiously motivated violence. They construct the discourse that motivates street mobs to act. And they can justify mobilizing violent action in the absolute terms of religious `truths.=

The role of religion in violent conflict is not singular, nor is it unique. But it is effective. Religiously inflected conflict offers powerful motivation precisely because it interfaces with other culturally mediated messages and yet seeks to stake universal claims. The most effective disruption of violence may well be to persuade the ranks of ideologues of their self-interests in alternate strategies while, simultaneously, creating alternate economic and cultural opportunities for those making a living at the mercy of exploitation.

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## Endnotes

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1. *The Story of Buddhism*, by Donald Lopez (2001) offers a useful introduction of this religion in its many, diverse forms. Concerning modern Theravada Buddhism and politics in South and Southeast Asia, readers will also want to consult Donald Swearer's *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*.
2. Primary canonical texts in the Theravada tradition offer abundant evidence for a doctrinal position against violence. Justifications encouraging or condoning communal violence are found primarily in commentaries, local chronicles or semi-canonical texts detailing the rules of good governance and law. At the same time, the Theravada canonical literature recognizes the predicament of kingship for the performance of its duties necessarily entail conducting wars or inflicting violent punishment on culprits, i.e. acts that bring negative karma to the king's future rebirths. For a discussion of a Buddhist theory of just war, the reader is referred to Tessa Bartholomeusz's *In Defense of Dharma*, 2002.
3. For detailed discussions of these complex religious and political processes, the reader is referred to the following essays I authored, namely Mapping the Sacred in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia in *Sacred Places and Modern Landscapes: Sacred Geography and Social-Religious Transformations in South and Southeast Asia*, Ronald Bull (ed.), Program for Southeast Asian Studies Monograph Series, Arizona State University, 2004:1-29; Trajectories in Buddhist Sacred Biography in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, Hawaii University Press, 1997: 1-15; and Venerating the Buddha's Remains in Burma: From Solitary Practice to the Cultural Hegemony of Communities, in *The Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 6, Northern Illinois University, 2001: 111-139.
4. For an insightful analysis as to why westerners tend to romanticize feudal Tibetan Buddhism and the geo-political roots of the empathy in US-China relations during the Cold War, see Donald Lopez, 1993.
5. For a history of ethnically and religiously motivated communal violence in South Asia and theoretical insights into the nature of communal violence, see Stanley Tambiah's excellent book, entitled *Leveling Crowds* (1996).
6. Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 1995:95.
7. See his essay on the Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia, in *Culture, Thought and Social Action* (1985).
8. For a history of Buddhism and Politics in Burma, including its role in Burmese resistance against the colonial state, see, among many other sources, Smith (1965), Sarkisyanz (1965) and Mendelson (1975).
9. The argument that the independent state in Burma represents a continuation of the colonial state has been convincing made by anthropologists, historians, and political scientists. Mary Callahan argues in her recent book, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (2003), that the current state's rationale is identical to that of the colonial state, i.e. to organize the population to facilitate the extraction of resources. The reader is also referred to Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia* (1999).
10. For instance, the Associated Free Press, on Nov. 11, 199\_, reported that according to the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), hundred of Christian Nagas had been forced to convert to Buddhism by the ruling military junta and religious bodies. Those resisting experienced displacement and persecution or were kept as bonded labourers by the junta and Buddhist monks. Other forced conversions occurred in other tribal areas.
11. See my essay (1997) on state rituals and the Chinese Tooth Relic.
12. Statistics on Burma's ethnic and religious composition vary. Matthews (2001) reports that ethnic Burmans, nearly all of them Buddhist, make up 65% of the country's population of 50 million people. The combined Buddhist population comprises an 80-90% majority, with 4% Christians, 4% Muslim, and about 2% Hindu. Other accounts place the Muslim population closer to 8%. The above break-down also does not account for a percentage of tribal, animist groups. According to the Buddhist Relief, approximately the sangha in Burma today comprises about 400,000 monks.
13. Estimates on the death toll of the 1988 uprising range from 3,000 to 10,000. The Buddhist Relief Report (1997: 7)

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states that 600 monks were among the dead.

14. The parameters of this paper do not permit this discussion to focus on other secular resistance organizations, including the Burmese Government in exile, the National League for democracy (NLD) and a great many others in and outside of Burma. I simply want to mention them here to underscore that the focus of this paper does not intend to convey a monolithic presence of Buddhism in the anti-government struggle, though, clearly it is a major force contesting the hegemonic powers of the regime. Moreover, as the tensions extended into decades, some monks have successfully circumvented the policing structures of the state through selective collaboration with their efforts and by accepting >taxation=, especially on the foreign donations they receive.

15. Although the role of the sangha in organizing the anti-government demonstrations in 1988 and giving logistical support to its victims is well known and significant in any study of modern Burmese Buddhism, scholarly analyses of these and subsequent political action in the sangha has not been possible to date. However, first-hand accounts of the monastic role in these events are found in news media reports, in Bertil Lintner=s *Outrage* and in reports by the Buddhist Relief Mission. The regime refers to >the tragic disturbances of August 1988' as the work of communists, especially the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) and other >enemies of the state,= including >foreign imperialists= and their agents with whom are in >collusion.= This entirely mythic attack is a diversionary strategy to detract the actual crises that reappears frequently in the regime=s rhetoric. While it may give insight into the ways in which the junta thinks, it has no factual value. See, for instance, Dr. Maung Maung=s *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*, Yale Southeast Asia Monograph, 1999 where the role of the sangha is not mentioned.

16. The Buddhist Relief Mission Report mentions by name and monastic affiliation several dozen monks that had been detained.

17. While Buddhist kings (*dharmmaraja*) were expected to convene and promote monastic reforms, Buddhist law (*vinaya*) stipulates that monastic ordination removes an individual from civil jurisdiction. Upon becoming a member of the sangha, Theravada monks assume new names and social identities. They also give up all property and are no longer subject to civil authority.

18. Among the monks arrested were prominent leaders, some of them recipients of exalted titles they had received from the government.

19. In an open letter commemorating the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of these riots, the All Burma Young Monks= Union made the following statement: ASince 1988, the Buddhist monks of Burma have been imprisoned, forcibly disrobed, used as porters in military operations, sent to labour camps, prohibited from freely practicing their religion, and forced to move out of the monasteries in which they reside by the leaders of present military regime. For these cruel acts, there are now some monks who have already passed away in prison. Among the detained monks were many prominent and senior monks, including a well-known Tipitakadhara monk. These leading monks are well respected by lay devotees for their efforts in Dharmma and Vinaya. The regime has a long history of oppressing revered Buddhist figures.@ (Asian Tribune Co.,Ltd., 08.8.2003  
Burmese Young Monks Reminiscing September 08, 1988 demonstration)

20. For a more detailed description of the ways in which SLORC used Buddhist symbolism and ritual to legitimate its power, see Schober (1997). While its focus on religious aspects in popular dissent against the state, I do not imply that SLORC=s ability to project a Buddhist identity would be successful without its use of military and other sources of control. Clearly, this was not the case. See also Matthews (1998).

21. Silence, therefore, became one form of resistance, retreat into Buddhist meditation was another. Meditation as a means to promote democracy in Burma is the main theme of Gustaaf Houtman=s book (1999) .

22. Among several significant events, I am omitting from this discussion a monastic purge in October 1990 in Mandalay, in which 350 monasteries were raided and 3,000 monks were at least temporarily arrested and accused of offenses like possessing anti-Slorc and pro-NLD literature. Among the arrested were high ranking monks in the Monks= Union (sangha sammagi), according to the Buddhist Relief Mission report (1997:2). The Union=s leader, Ven. U Yewata who was arrested himself called on monks to refuse acceptance of alms from members of the military and their families on a major religious holiday. This traditional sanction that invalidates the status of Buddhist lay donors is seldom invoked. In

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the following weeks, the boycott spread throughout the country. Amnesty International reported a prolonged arrest of 75 monks in Oct. and Nov. 1990. The Southeast Asian Information Network (SAIN) reported the death of four senior monks in custody (Ven. U Sandwara, Union Secretary, Weyanbonthai Monastery; Ven. U Vimala, Masoeyin Monastery, Ven. U Weyawdana, Hti Lin Monastery, and Ven. U Oketama, Vice-president of the monks= Union (Sangha Sammgi). All resided in Mandalay. SAIN further reported death sentences pronounced in cases against the Ven. U Kawiya, a well-known preacher at the famous Mahamuni Monastery in Mandalay (who had also given daily anti-government at Mahamuni in 1988) and other monks.

23. To explore the role of rumors and conflicting narratives about events that lead up to and occurred during riots, see Paul Brass (1997) and Vena Das (1998).

24. Anti-Muslim riots have been reported as recently as November 2003. These recent riots are also fueled by long-standing anti-Muslim sentiments in Burma.

25. A detailed and multi-faceted Report on the Situation For Muslims in Burma was published by *Images Asia* in two parts in March 1997. It provides first-hand accounts by Muslim victims, statements of Muslim and Buddhist organizations reacting to the atrocities, as well as appeals to Muslims nations in Southeast Asia and elsewhere to intercede on behalf of Muslims to bring about regional stability. And lastly, the report gives the names of 16 Buddhist monks who died in prison.

26. For a discussion of the sacred, colossal image of the Buddha known as the Mahamuni and its mytho-history in Burmese Buddhist culture and history, see my essay >In the Presence of the Buddha: Ritual Veneration of the Burmese Mahamuni Image,= 1997. Although myths abound about the origins of this image, a large ruby had not been mentioned in conjunction with it prior to these riots. Hence, its sudden >theft= was, at least, confounding.

27. In later reports, SLORC attributed the theft to the NLD whom it perpetually painted as the state=s enemy no.1. The NDL, however, swiftly denied any involvement and denounced the anti-Muslim rampage.

28. The Unity, Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) is the regime=s mass organization with local cells throughout the country. Observers noted that on occasion undergarments for purchase in government-run stores would become visible in the course of the struggle, implying the agitators were not monks as the clothing of actual monks does not contain such items.

29. The Nation, a Bangkok-based newspaper, reports on March 28, 1997: ALt. Gen. Myo Nyunt, Burma=s religious minister went to meet local Muslim leaders and reportedly said:="Let them [monks] destroy it - don=t resist them, the army will compensate you for everything.=@

30. Often, warnings of impending attacks would come from local government officials or army officers urging Muslims not to retaliate or fight back, but to endure the Buddhists= rampage. This allowed many Muslim families to flee to safety, abandoning their homes and mosques to destructive fires set by rampaging crowds. .

31. The ABYMU statement is published by Burma Net News, March 20, 1997. The All Burma Young Monks= Union (ABYMU) is a major constituent of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB). This statement also contains expressions of allegiance with the NLD, workers, students and all ethnic >nationalities.=

32. Anti-Muslim violence has colonial roots in Burma. Anti-Muslim riots have periodically erupted since the late 1930s when the majority of Rangoon=s population was of Indian origin and more than one million Indians lived in the Irrawaddy Delta region, making a living as land owners and money lenders.

33. The brief background to the political context is needed. Although the SPDC had been under international pressure to negotiate with the NLD, Senior General Than Shwe, Chairman of the SPDC, who staunchly resisted such negotiations, consolidated his power within the inner circles of the SPDC in April 2003 and again in the fall of 2004. Aung San Suu Gyi, Secretary General and charismatic leader of the NLD had been released from house arrest for nearly a year. Despite repeated interference with her travels in Burma and public speeches, Suu Kyi speaks out publicly about her concern over the lack of progress made in UN negotiations. On May 6, she left Rangoon for a tour to re-energize the membership in the NLD youth groups and the events of the massacre led to her eventual re-arrest and detention since that time.

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34. For a discussion of religious and political aspects of Aung San Suu Kyi=s charisma and her role in formulating Socially Engaged Buddhism in Burma, see Schober 2005.

35. My summary is based on a compilation of news reports and diplomatic statements by the Alternative Asean Network on Burma, dated June 24, 2003, no 03/004.

36. US Embassy personnel visited the site days later and concluded in an official statement that the attack had been planned.

37. Reported, the windows of her car were broken and she incurred injury to her shoulder and face. Recruiting people to participate in the attack began six days prior to it. Payment for the transport and dumping of bodies in remote places amounted close to 40 US dollars.

38. Gen. Soe Naing was promoted to the no. two position within the government during the fall of 2004, following another political reshuffle. In December 2004, he addressed an international Buddhist summit in Rangoon.

39. See Rahula 1974 and Seneveratne, 1999.

40. See Tambiah 1992 and Abeysekara 2002.

41. In Sri Lanka, about 75% of the population is Buddhist. Tamils constitute a minority that is mostly Muslim, but includes also a significant (18%) number of Hindus.

42. Abeysekara, 2002:211.

43. Abeysekara 2002:211.

44. Bartholomeusz, In Defense of Dharma: Just War Ideology, 2002.

45. In particular, the reader is referred to Tambiah=s productive discussion of ritual in the mobilization of violent crowds (1996) .

46. See Bruce Lincoln=s insightful book, `Holy Terror= (2003) where he analyses discourse and structural configurations in society to explain the causes of religious conflict.

47. I suspect that most group acts of religious violence are planned events. Their frequent description as spontaneous uprising likely belongs to the rhetoric of religious violence rather than its factual reality.