

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 28, 2021

*If You Meet the Buddha on the Road:
Buddhism, Politics, and Violence*

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A Review of *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence*

Manuel Litalien¹

If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence. By Michael Jerryson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 240 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-068356-6 (hardback), \$115.00.

The title of this book sets the tone for Michael Jerryson's work on Buddhism and violence; the author informs us that the phrase is attributed to the ninth-century Chinese monk Linji Yixuan, who once told his disciples to kill the Buddha if they were to meet him on the road (1). The monograph clearly contributes to the developing field of Buddhism and violence, every chapter giving the reader a chance to explore the complexity of the topic, with rich examples from Sri Lanka to Japan, but with a strong focus on Thailand and to a lesser extent on Myanmar. This adds to Jerryson's previous work on the topic with books such as *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (2011) and *Buddhist Warfare* (2010), the latter coedited with Mark Juergensmeyer.

The book chapters present an original, multidimensional approach to violence, categorizing it as institutional, structural, gendered, psychological, doctrinal, and symbolic. The research seeks to understand

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why people in majority Buddhist environments engage in violent actions, and how they justify their commitment to conflict and violence. One of the strengths of Jerryson's work is how each chapter depicts with clarity the multifaceted aspects of Buddhist violence. The result is a wide constellation of religious variables, the interconnectedness of which may lead to support for harm, war, conflict, and a narrative justifying violence. In embracing such a variety of topics, Jerryson calls for a definition that recognizes the positive and negative aspects of violence (6). The positive aspect may be associated with notions of not doing harm, as it requires self-restraint, which can be equally understood as a violent action against the self. It may also be associated with social activism such as the Saffron Revolution, which resulted in protests and boycotts, or Engaged Buddhism, referring to Buddhists seeking to fight perceived social, political, economic, and environmental injustices. The negative elements of the definition cover physical, emotional, and systemic forms of violence, to which Jerryson also rightly adds the notions of harm and injury.

By addressing what Buddhism is well known for—nonviolence (*ahimsā*), peace, and compassion—the introduction contrasts these tenets with the presence of violence in three distinct areas: Buddhist thought, doctrine, and actions. Jerryson here provides clear guiding questions: how do Buddhists justify wars? If Buddhists are engaged in conflicts, can they be truly Buddhist? Are “Buddhist-influenced” acts of violence not really about Buddhism, but driven by other motives? (2) These questions refer to how Buddhists invoke, support, and justify violence. The blame for violence cannot solely rest on the shoulders of the state and politics, but can also be rooted in Buddhist principles of emptiness and compassion. Religion, here Buddhism, is not distinct from power and politics. Notably, Buddhist principles can justify killing or torturing for a higher cause. Jerryson gives the example of *dhammacakke ghana* (hitting the wheel of the *Dharma*) in Sri Lanka.

Chapter one, “Buddhist Paths to Violence,” is structured around two main themes, namely, *prima facie* logic, according to which non-

violence is an ethical obligation only at first glance, and heuristics, which includes “fetishist disavowal,” our tendency to consciously overlook a particular group or community in our moral system. The idea is that Buddhists resort to *prima facie* logic, heuristics, and fetishist disavowal to harm living beings, a framework that is certainly not exclusive to Buddhists. The political context behind Buddhist violence is clearly illuminated throughout the chapter via Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna (Tantric) scriptures. Here, three exceptions to justify violence are enumerated as “the intention” of the perpetrator, “the nature of the victim,” and “the stature of the killer” (20). Tantric texts are presented as less straightforward than the other two, as the “directives” are more metaphorical. The implication of this distinction is, however, not clear. Indeed, all three Buddhist traditions are provided with doctrinal spaces for violence and logic for killing. The notions of direct and indirect causes of violence are then introduced, covering topics such as euthanasia, abortion, suicide, Buddhist-sanctioned torture, capital punishment, defensive violence, war, suicide attacks, liberation killing, invasion, meat consumption, treatment of the environment, and killing insects, which are all analyzed and connected to Buddhist canons. The chapter is informative and gives various illustrations of different karmic repercussions (22).

Turning to the scriptures, Jerryson writes that they provide ethical “exceptions” to the precept against killing (33). If nonviolence is the *prima facie* obligation, specific contexts may take priority over other obligations; historical examples are found in Japan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, to name a few. The *prima facie* logic applies to the killing not only of humans, but also of animals (43). Violence may also be the result of biased problem-solving heuristics, or, in other words, mental shortcuts that are essentially summarized in the chapter as flawed judgment (44). Mental shortcuts allow for turning a blind eye to the karmic repercussions of injustice, abusive behaviors, violence, and killing. An example would be the common belief that the karmic consequences of eating meat are less important for the consumer than for the person actually killing the animal. This ignores the idea that it is the very consumption of

meat that encourages the meat industry. Hence, convenient exclusions may be broadly accepted in the name of an industry, a trade, or an activity (46). Jerryson here cautiously advances the idea that there is no “universal blind spot.” The suspension of certain rules is an integral part of a form of heuristic that is known as fetishist disavowal (48).

Chapter two, “State Violence and Buddhist Monks,” looks at the different models presented in the scriptures that support state authorities’ and/or monks’ violent actions in support of a (political and religious) system. Jerryson points to the *Aggañña Sūta*, the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanadā Sūta*, and the *Mahāparinibbāna Sūta*, along with the figure of the *cakkavattin* as the model of the universal ruler. Kings and figures of authority are associated with the ideal notion of the bodhisattva, whereby a virtuous political or religious leader can assist lay society toward awakening (52). In such a paradigm, the Buddhist laity holds little moral authority to criticize either the political power in place or the monks without risking punishment or hell (60). The model also facilitates a fusion of the political and religious spheres through these Buddhist ideals of statecraft. Furthermore, detailed in chapter two is the “Aśokan paradigm,” rooted in the Mauryan emperor Aśoka (r. 269-232 B.C.E.), and its relationship with the *saṅgha* as a Buddhist ideal form of social control (54). The question here becomes why ethically Buddhist monks would support autocratic rule or repression; Jerryson points precisely to this ideal form of government as embodied by one important central figure, the historical Buddha. The government, meanwhile, can look to Aśoka and the *cakkavattin* as the universal ruler. In a modern context, Jerryson contrasts Thailand with Myanmar, arguing that the small amount of agency provided to citizens is exemplified by Thailand’s strict *lèse-majesté* law (68), or, in Myanmar, the military recognizing the political force of the *saṅgha*, such as the conservative Buddhist 969 movement and the MaBaTha (Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion), or the Saffron Revolution (2007), when monks took to the streets to protest against the high cost of living and clashed with the military junta (75-77). Overall, the relationship between the modern state and the *saṅgha* is not one of simple complaisance or the

legitimization of the existing regime, but can lead to tensions, violence, and oppression. State-led violence, therefore, can take many forms, such as oppressive legislation, the suppression of political dissent, or state control of and limitations on minority groups (77). Monks as moral authorities participate in the violence by endorsing repressive measures, or by gratifying it in the name of protecting Buddhism.

Overall, the second chapter introduces the reader to a rich set of terminology, such as “*dhammic dictators*,” “*dhammic socialism*,” and “*dhammocracy*,” to name a few. The chapter focuses heavily on Thailand, understood here as a modern *dhammic* autocracy with its strict *lèse-majesté* law. It is carefully contrasted with Myanmar, which Jerryson argues was never a *dhammic* dictatorship (73), as the Burmese exhibited some level of skepticism towards kingship and sovereignty; he points to a collection of folk wisdom, *Lawkaniti*, which portrays the king as one of the five enemies, along with “flood, fire, thieves, and disease” (77). The idea of Buddhist divine rule is analyzed and contrasted with Buddhist monks who support violent laws and regimes (78). Jerryson closes this section with a thought-provoking idea: Buddhist societies with an autocratic form of government may wish to leave behind the *cakkavattin* model, in order to avoid violence and successfully adopt democratic reforms (79). The reader will find the idea of an uninterrupted or disrupted state-*saṅgha* dynamic engaging, with a contrast between monarchical support (Thailand) and condemnation of the political regime (Myanmar)—though this idea is treated only briefly. This brings back the importance of history in understanding current institutional identities (76).

Chapter three, “The Violence of Gender Discrimination,” is a welcome addition to the topic of Buddhism and violence as it adds a different layer of complexity, namely the interaction between physical and structural acts of violence (80). The chapter centers around the prohibition against ordaining women by conservative monks, who cite scriptures and doctrinal limitations to justify their views on the topic. The author shows how the Theravāda *saṅghas*, notably in Myanmar and Cambodia, are male-

only due to religious reasons and political influence (83). The chapter mainly looks at Thailand, even if it also provides short examples of other countries.

The chapter enumerates the challenges concerning the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* listed in the existing literature and briefly analyzes the contrasting hagiographic accounts of *bhikkhunīs* found in the scriptures (*Therīgāthā*). The reader will find that historical contexts that justify the absence of the *bhikkhunī* order in South and Southeast Asia, such as its disappearance in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries in Sri Lanka, and the early fourteenth century in Myanmar, are abundant. This disappearance is at the core of the current difficulty in reestablishing the Buddhist nuns' order. Typically, to ordain *bhikkhunīs*, a dual ordination is required, by both the *bhikkhu* and the *bhikkhunī* orders, following the procedure prescribed by the *Vinaya*, and particularly the *Cullavagga* section of the *Vinayaṭīka*. Jerryson gives the reasons behind the discrimination, such as the eight *garudhammas* (conditions to be respected), which require that women are ordained by an existing male and female order, the claim that “the admission of *bhikkhunīs* will shorten the duration of the *dhamma*” (101), and the idea that “in the contemporary era there is no fertile ground to grow a *bhikkhunī* order” (103). These discriminations have made it challenging for women to pursue higher ordination. In sum, some gender discrimination or gender disparities are based on hermeneutics, historical circumstances, or institutionalized superstition promoting femininity as profane, impure, and harmful (88). They represent strict conditions affecting women's capacity to thrive in societies that have enshrined Buddhism as a key cultural and ontological tenet. For Jerryson, violence toward women is rooted in these systemic gender-based forms of prejudice (108).

The most interesting part of the chapter, in the present reader's view, is its section on the limitation of the two-gender binary and transgender ordination (97-98). The latter is forbidden, bringing to the fore the cisgender normativity in Buddhism. One could wish that the

author had given more space to this reflection on normative masculinity and femininity with some ethnographic studies, in order to demonstrate the impact of the systemic nature of discrimination.

Overall, chapter three is a tour de force, giving a nuanced overview of a complex topic. The chapter also manages to end with a positive note on master narratives and counter-narratives, acknowledging the strong *bhikkhunī* lineage, such as in the Mahāyāna traditions. Jerryson argues that the counter-culture created by these female Buddhist renunciants is significant in the fight against subordination, androcentrism, and misogyny (108). The author here presents the popular temporary ordinations conducted by Bhikkhunī Dhammananda (in Thailand) as one such example (107-109). The reader may wish, however, that the chapter gave further background and updates on the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* movement, as well as the situation of the struggle of nuns in the Vajrayāna tradition, along with the role of foreign-ordained nuns in each of the Buddhist schools—hence the weight of transnational networks such as the Sakya-dhita organization (International Association of Buddhist Women).

Jerryson notes that the next chapters—chapters four, five, and the postscript—were all previously published in part, either as chapters in edited volumes or as journal articles. This could explain why at times the analysis appears unevenly distributed in contrast with the first three chapters. Chapter four, “The Negotiation of Violence,” is innovative but unfortunately the shortest chapter, with only sixteen pages. The cases analyzed revolve around Thailand and the United States, explaining the complex and paradoxical realities of Buddhist military chaplains, and considering the military’s relationship to religion and “Buddhism’s complementary nature to the military” (110-111). Buddhist chaplains can be seen as contradictory in nature, as they embody nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) yet also hold pro-military positions associated with violence (*hiṃsā*). The chapter provides an historical overview of the topic, covering the U.S. military authorization of Buddhist chaplains in 1996 and the commissioning of the first chaplain in 2004. This, according to Jerryson, opened a new chapter

in the development of American Buddhism. The two events are presented as emerging out of the needs of the soldiers (111). Hence the official recognition of the Buddhist chaplaincy is the military's validation of its own diversity and the presence of various systems of belief in its ranks. This phenomenon is still in its infancy in the U.S., but has longer roots in Thailand where, due to the country's demographics, the chaplaincy is strictly reserved to Buddhism (113).

The chapter looks at restrictions in the scriptures on the role of Buddhist monks in matters pertaining to the military, quoting the *pāṭimokkha* rules for monastics. Jerryson summarizes the complexity of the topic by again looking at Thailand: the Thai state has declared that monks and soldiers are two mutually exclusive categories, which hints at the challenge presented by the very existence of the Thai Buddhist chaplains. Officially, Thai Buddhist monks are forbidden from joining the army, unlike in the United States where Buddhist chaplains maintain both military and monk status. However, at the informal level, the country tolerates soldiers being ordained (monastic soldiers), such as in Thailand's southern conflict areas (116). A Thai American Buddhist who becomes a chaplain needs, however, to convert to the Mahāyāna school to perform his duty and adopt the title of "minister," because of the official decree that monks cannot be soldiers (117). Also important to note is that, according to the author, there are currently no women Buddhist chaplains. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex, and he builds his analysis on his understanding of gender discrimination and structural violence elucidated in chapter three (109). Via these relevant examples, the reader can better understand the "context of scriptural interdictions and social pressures" surrounding Thai Buddhist chaplaincy (126).

For Jerryson, the origins of contemporary chaplaincy remain unclear overall, and this provides a challenge for establishing a clear distinction between structural and processual analysis, or how and why chaplaincy was introduced in Thailand, along with the ethical and doctrinal analysis. The author nevertheless provides some clarity on different

hypotheses for the Thai case, such as the interaction with Britain during the reigns of Chulalongkorn and later Vajiravudh. He also hints at the possible influence of the Christian church and the military model, with the etymology of the words used by the Royal Thai Armed Forces (119-120). Strong historical moments are plenty, such as when Thai soldiers were sent to fight in the First World War, accompanied by a chaplain in order to maintain Buddhist rituals and support the mental health of the troops; Jerryson argues that this effort was institutionalized with the creation of the Division of the Buddhist Military Chaplaincy (DBMC). Demands have grown for chaplaincy ever since, but quotas restrict chaplain numbers substantially, creating scarcity and providing them with only a peripheral role (121). The requirements for chaplains are also quite high; for example, the demand for extensive knowledge of Pāli or the mandatory following of the thirteen rules enumerated in the *Handbook of Chaplains* (124-125).

In Thailand, the status of Buddhist chaplains is ambiguous, as they are neither monks nor lay Buddhists, but are expected to provide spiritual guidance. For Jerryson, the dialectical relation between these two dimensions is key to understanding their social role. In 2017, the DBMC reported 170 Buddhist chaplains; their roles are not fixed but evolve, the author writes, according to “the context of scriptural restrictions and social pressure” (126). Despite being short, the chapter provides clarity on a complex topic and provides the next generation of researchers with a solid ground for future study. Readers who would like to read more on the topic can consult Jerryson’s book chapter titled “Pluralistic Permutations: The Thai Buddhist Military Chaplaincy,” published in 2017.

One might wish that the author had looked at Buddhist chaplaincy in prisons. In Canada, there are a few examples, such as the late Ven. Anila Ann McNeil (Sister Ann), who worked as a Buddhist prison chaplain for many years. There is a notable demand from Buddhist practitioners in the Canadian correctional system, including maximum security prisons, which poses the challenge of teaching meditation in volatile

environments in which violence can affect the practice and well-being of all involved. Another example of such an interest can be found through the Applied Buddhist Studies Initiative (ABSI) at the Emmanuel College of Victoria, part of the University of Toronto, which offers educational programs in Buddhist chaplaincy. Notably, the University of British Columbia together with the Tung Lin Kok Yuen Canada Foundation held a workshop on the topic of Buddhist chaplaincy in 2011, which was an opportunity to expand on and compare the topic of Buddhist chaplaincy across borders.

Chapter five, “The Violence of Trauma,” compares the psychological coping strategies of Buddhists and Muslims (127). This chapter, cowritten with Wattana Prohmpetch and David A. Kessler, is intriguing; it engages with the topic of religion and health, namely the application of Buddhists’ and Muslims’ religious practices in the area of mental well-being, with guiding questions such as which of the two religions has a higher rate of resiliency. The chapter’s information rests on the study of a wide range of participants, and reads more like an independent scientific journal article than a book chapter. Nevertheless, it is a welcome addition as it clarifies how Buddhists handle violence, and it contradicts other research on Buddhist coping and meditation strategies carried out in controlled environments (130). The author draws his observations from a year of fieldwork in a conflict zone, working on a project titled “Prayers under Fire: Trauma, Religion and Violence” (129). This study did not focus on experience post-violence, but looked at the reactions of individuals as violence occurred or as participants were confronted with it, comparing Buddhists and Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand (130).

In light of the absence of a comparative framework in the literature, the authors sought to answer the questions of what elements Buddhist meditation provides that other religious coping practices do not (134), and what the difference is between “studying Buddhist meditation in a lab, versus studying the ways in which Buddhists employ meditation *on the ground*” (129, emphasis in original). The reader may appreciate the contribution of the authors as they tackle that challenge and avoid

adopting a reductionist approach. Chapter five, as previous chapters, provides rich references to relevant scientific literature as, in part, this section also examines the topic of Buddhism and neuroscience. The findings confirm previous clinical studies of Islam, such as the Psychological Measure of Islamic Righteousness (PMIR), whereby Islam was central to its practitioners' well-being. Religion was mainly seen as "another primary coping strategy for Buddhist and Muslim participants," as were family and friends (142). The violence and imposition of martial law in three of Thailand's southern provinces have efficiently disrupted social activities for the past decade, but out of 1,452 questionnaires, Islam showed more effectiveness as a coping mechanism compared to Buddhism, mainly due to routinized religious activities that fewer Southern Thai Buddhists adopted (143-147). According to the authors, in Southern Thailand Buddhism rested on a communal identity, in contrast with Islamic practices (147), and essentially, the Malay Muslims' routinized and intrinsic religious practices were less disrupted by violence compared to those of the Buddhists (148). In sum, the lack of habitual religious practices, such as meditation, was presented as a hindrance to Buddhists' ability to manage violence in Southern Thailand (150).

In suggesting alternative considerations of their results, the authors consider the "Hawthorn effect," according to which the participants' behavior may have been influenced by the fact that they knew they were being studied (149). Another possibility is that the results can be explained by the effect that writing as a form of therapy had on the participants, or, in other words, the "role of expressive narrative writing in coping with traumatic events" (149). The chapter wraps up with a cautionary suggestion that "coping strategies are not a 'one-size fits all' solution" and that if routinized Buddhist practices increase, this may lead to higher resiliency rates (151). As a word of caution, Jerryson argues that not all Buddhists meditate, or the frequency with which they do so varies. He continues by cautioning against overgeneralizations and advocates the inclusion of social, historical, and political contexts in comparative studies of religion and health in conflict zones. Additionally, the authors suggest that

the critical comparison of religious resilience may shed light on other religious systems, and they rightly encourage further research on the topic.

Chapter six, “Violence Against Buddha,” looks at how Buddhists handle blasphemy. The chapter suggests that a contemporary way of responding to blasphemy has led to changing laws, business practices, and policies in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand (174). Central guiding questions in the chapter are: how is insulting Buddhist doctrine, relics, or images condemned? Does the response contradict people’s vision of Buddhism? How is blasphemy considered a form of violence? What is considered sacred, and how can the feelings of people affected by religious blasphemy be honored? Finally, is there a karmic repercussion to blasphemy (157)?

Attempting to provide an answer to this list of questions, Jerryson illustrates historical responses to disrespect across various Buddhist schools. The chapter provides a variety of materials on how people interact with Buddha images (153); simply put, violating Buddha images is considered damaging the Buddha himself, according to the doctrine, and injuring Buddhist images is seen as harming Buddhists. The response is usually not violence but negative karmic repercussions. From the viewpoint of the scriptures, little can be found on the topic, but blasphemy can be equated to the coming of Buddhist End Times (the end of one cycle of time and existence, and the beginning of another), and is also seen as one of the worst sins (153). So Buddhist relics do have a life of their own, as insulting them is literally a cosmic and personal violence. As in other chapters of the book, the etymological analysis provided adds an interesting dimension to the inquiry. Jerryson carefully notes that “blasphemy” has no direct translation in the Buddhist system, and one should therefore look at the classical Greek context to understand the usage of the word. In this context, “blasphemy” is less connected to the sacred, but rather is about harming reputation (154).

This chapter is rich in nuances and scriptural references. According to the teachings, here the *Lotus Sūtra*, blasphemy can lead to people

being reborn in different realms, one of which is the lowest level of hell (157). Hence there are personal repercussions for blasphemy, but there is no description of how to police these irreverent acts (158). Hints can be found, though, for instance in the *Brahmajāla Sūta*, which mentions that there is no such thing as blasphemy in Buddhism and that benevolence and compassion should rather be adopted toward people seeking to harm (159). One should not, though, underestimate the importance of relics across all traditions, as they can be seen as an extension of the doctrine and of the Buddha (160). Relics are alive and powerful, and their destruction equates to more than the loss of the material—it incurs immediate karmic retribution (161). For some communities, “the harming of a stupa is the equivalent of spilling the Buddha’s blood” (162). On that account, this chapter sheds light on the impact that the Taliban bombing of the famous Bamiyan statues in 2001 had on Buddhist communities across the world, and on Buddhist responses to incidents of tourists sitting on the top of a Buddha image (163). In some cases, condemnation was followed by physical violence and anti-Muslim riots, such as in Myanmar (164).

As with all the chapters, this section gives a diverse range of examples from across all Buddhist schools. One is the case of the “Dharma Army” of Thailand’s Knowing Buddha Organization (KBO); the organization is well presented by Jerryson, who explains how they seek to fight blasphemy against Buddhism by launching massive campaigns across the world to educate people on the dos and don’ts of protecting Buddha images. The KBO created the Knowing Buddha advocacy group to promote and campaign for a respectful usage of Buddha images (166). Wrongful examples are numerous: Buddha images on toilet seats, tattoos, Buddha images in bars, Buddha Bars, Buddha beer, Buddha skateboards, Buddha carpets, bikinis with Buddha images, etc. The KBO feels harmed by these different practices and commodifications of Buddha images, which they feel are based on ignorance (169). Furthermore, the author points out that current governments in Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka have adopted regulations to protect not only the use of images, but also the rhetoric adopted online about Buddhism; the penalty for violating these measures

can be jail time (171). He argues, essentially, that governments and court systems show an attempt to institutionalize religious norms, and in this context, the KBO's approach is one that seeks to educate. One can even witness online protests staged by other Buddhist community actors (172).

Overall, this chapter provides a good introduction to Buddhist responses to blasphemy toward images, relics, and doctrine. The clash with people's various visions of Buddhism is well presented, and the reader will find it informative. It gives a sense of why certain laws are enacted, or why economic boycotts or social media protests take place in Buddhist communities across the globe (174).

In conclusion, each of the book's six chapters, with their different approaches to the topics of Buddhist violence, could be a book by itself (4). The first four chapters display the ways Buddhists enact violence, and the last two illustrate how Buddhists react as recipients of violence (128). The book ends with a valuable postscript cowritten by Matthew Walton on "Buddhist Authority, Politics, and Violence," which is equally instructive and complements all the other chapters, as it looks beyond the doctrine (orthodoxy) and practices (orthopraxy) to the importance of culture as an authoritative axis, referring to, amongst others, Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu (177-180). Walton makes a plea here to look further into Buddhist cultural authorities in order to comprehend religio-political phenomena (191). Like other literature by Jerryson, this book will satisfy readers across different disciplines and students at different stages in their studies, from the neophyte to graduate students to experts in Buddhist Studies, each chapter laying the ground for future research on Buddhism(s) and violence. Jerryson's work asks relevant questions and provides well-documented and nuanced answers throughout the book.

Works Cited

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