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*Buddhist Violence and Religious Authority: A Tribute to
the Work of Michael Jerryson*

Reviewed by Marte Nilsen

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

marnil@prio.org

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vforte@albright.edu

A Review of *Buddhist Violence and Religious Authority: A Tribute to the Work of Michael Jerryson*

Marte Nilsen¹

Buddhist Violence and Religious Authority: A Tribute to the Work of Michael Jerryson. Edited by Margo Kitts and Mark Juergensmeyer. Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2022, vi + 187 pages, ISBN 978-1-80050-101-0 (hardback), \$75.00, 978-1-80050-102-7 (e-book), \$75.00.

Since the start of Michael Jerryson's academic career in the early 2000s, his engaged scholarship has inspired and motivated experts and students in multiple disciplines, spurring productive theoretical debates and controversies on important philosophical dilemmas. In later years, his illness seemed to be the only thing holding him back; eventually, it overpowered him at far too young an age.

Much of Jerryson's academic focus concerned the difficult relations between religion and violence, and notably the question of Buddhism and violence. From his early work on the Buddhist *saṅgha* in Mongolia, to the role of Buddhism in nationalist politics in the conflict of

¹ Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Email: marnil@prio.org.

Southern Thailand and in ultranationalist movements in Myanmar, his work shed new light on Buddhism in political conflicts and on religious authority in Buddhist majority states.

Jerryson's scholarship has often been interpreted simplistically in light of a perceived paradox of violence in Buddhism—a lingering idea that the presence of violence within the Buddhist tradition is somehow more astonishing than in other religious traditions. However, this alleged Buddhist paradox really only scratches the surface of the debates that Jerryson raised. His research and the academic discourses in which he engaged were much broader, dealing with larger philosophical questions of what religion is, how it should be understood, and how it relates to society.

This anthology, written as a tribute to the work of Michael Jerryson and edited by his long-term collaborators Margo Kitts and Mark Juergensmeyer, reflects these layered aspects of Jerryson's scholarship in an excellent way. At first glance, the book's cover and introductory pages give the impression of delivering yet another discussion on whether Buddhists' igniting violence is at odds with Buddhism or not, a question that over the years has been excessively debated. However, reading the rich and diverse contributions to the book, it becomes clear that the topic has matured to spur new and fruitful analyses concerning the role of Buddhism in society and religion in society.

The first part of the book sets out to discuss the relations between Buddhism and violence. The most interesting aspect of these contributions, however, is the way they analyze what Stephen Jenkins calls "Euro-American Protestant and scientific biases" about Buddhism (15), as well as the interpretations they offer of karmic hierarchies from different Buddhist contexts and across time. Regardless of its philosophical basis, the concept of karma has been used to cement social hierarchies and, ultimately, evaluate people's worth. These hierarchies are often pivotal in the justification of violence in Buddhist societies.

As outlined in the chapter written by Blaze Marpet, “But Is It Buddhist?,” Jerryson’s scholarship has challenged a tendency of reducing religion to its texts and ideas. Religion, as an analytical entity, cannot and should not be distinguished from power or politics. Religion is an integrated part of human culture used to create meaning in all aspects of life, not only the afterlife. In Buddhist terms, Buddhism as a religion is not only about the *Dhamma* and the eternal truth taught by the Buddha; people live in *saṃsāra*, the karmic cycle of our world, and the vast majority of people are not on the immediate path towards enlightenment. As a mass religion, Buddhism therefore relates primarily to the complex realm of *saṃsāra*. This is of course no new revelation; it was discussed by Melford E. Spiro in 1971 in his book *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Buddhism, and religion for that matter, goes beyond individual salvation; it is also a cultural system for society.

The focus on scriptural analyses of Buddhism (and religion in general) is perhaps more prevalent within philosophy than other disciplines, possibly due to the shared disciplinary origins of philosophy and theology and to philosophy’s primary focus on ideas and ideals. However, several subdisciplines of contemporary philosophy have moved towards including an analytical focus on human culture and more practical aspects of life. Religious studies, which originally evolved from theology, quickly moved away from an essentialist approach to religion and developed a clear distinction between the two disciplines by focusing on religion primarily as a cultural phenomenon. In this sense, the book’s concern with essentialization of Buddhism and religion may be better suited to stir public debates, rather than challenge academic discourses. In fact, Jerryson as well as many of the book’s contributors have been active participants in the public debate, supplementing their academic engagement.

The second part of the book raises important theoretical debates about religious authority, in Buddhism as well as in other religions. Julie Ingersoll’s chapter, “Contested Authority: Evangelicalism as a Cultural

System,” explains how evangelical elites in the United States have produced and reproduced narratives and cultural memories of martyrdom and persecution, and how these narratives construct an apocalyptic world divided into “good” and “evil” people. In her analysis, she reminds the reader that, rather than battling over what religion *is*, scholars should focus on what religion *does*, as well as who gets to define what religion should be. Who has the authority and the power in religious terms? And how does this affect politics?

The various chapters in the book deal with questions about religious authority from different religious traditions and from different historical eras. Religious authority and power can be given to people and practices that have not traditionally been seen as representing orthodoxy or orthopraxy, and while world religions are defined as being universal, they are always practiced and understood according to cultural norms. Andrew Atwell, in his chapter “Religion, Authority, Grammar: The Scholarly Legacy of Secular Concepts,” highlights Matthew Walton and Jerryson’s claim that cultural authority is the dominant dimension through which religious authority does its work, and Kelly Denton-Borhaug, in “Jerryson’s ‘Exposure of Buddhism’ and the Christian Religio-Cultural Legacy of Violence in U.S. War-Culture,” references Hans Mol’s conceptualization of religion as the sacralization of own identity from 1976, which again affects the understanding of the (unholy) religious other. In practical terms, as Abby Kulisz notes in “Affect in the Archives: Representations of Violence in Late Ancient Apocalyptic Texts,” this leads to situations where people are in need of defending their own identities and worldviews against other identities and worldviews, and it is often in such situations that violence is justified religiously.

I met Michael Jerryson only a few times, although we had many overlapping research interests. We shared the same engaged curiosity for the restive Patani region of the southern border provinces in Thailand, where we both conducted our doctoral research, Michael a few years prior to me. While many scholars writing about the Patani conflict at the time

focused on security issues and the nature of the insurgency movement, we were both more interested in understanding the cultural dimensions of Buddhist-Muslim relations and the role of the religious aspects of Thai nationalism and the Thai state in maintaining the conflict. Solidarity with the people living in the conflict was always an underlying premise.

Like many others, I have found Michael Jerryson's writing inspiring and stimulating, qualities that this volume clearly illustrates. The book proves that his scholarship will continue through the writing of other scholars. It also indicates that Jerryson's commitment to teaching, mentoring, and nurturing academic relations will live on in the scholarly practices of his colleagues and former students.

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