

Review: Why Buddhists Are Violent

Monday 23 July 2018, by [JUERGENSMEYER Mark](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2018).

Without being a hatchet job, Michael Jerryson's latest book makes it clear that, like all religious traditions, Buddhism wears many faces.

What is there about Buddhism that leads so naturally to violence? This is a question that I posed to a group of startled policy professionals in Washington DC at a seminar where the topic was Muslim violence. The question for the session was to explain what about Islam seemed to lead naturally to acts of bloodshed.

But how about Buddhism, I asked. If they could explain to me what there was about Buddhism that could lead angry followers of the [969 Movement in Myanmar](#) and the [Bodu Bala Sena](#) in Sri Lanka to attack and kill innocent Muslims — even setting fire to their homes and burning them alive — then maybe I could explain the violence related to Islam, and for that matter Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Sikhism. Violence related to religion, it seems, is an equal opportunity employer. No religious tradition is free from its awful touch.

In an arresting and well researched book, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence*, Michael Jerryson has taken up my question about Buddhism. What he has found is that Buddhists texts, legends and tradition have justified and promoted particular acts of violence, usually legitimised as defending the faith. In that sense it is no different than any other religious tradition.

This is a startling conclusion in large part because of our superficial assumptions about the Buddhist tradition. We have been persuaded that the dictum of nonviolence is absolute and universal throughout Buddhist societies.

Because we assume that Buddhism is by nature nonviolent, the famous saying that provides the title of Jerryson's book is mean to be startling: "If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him." This comment, attributed to the ninth-century Chinese Buddhist monk Linji Yixuan, is meant to be ironic. Why would an apostle of nonviolence be killed, and why would a faithful follower want to kill him?

The answer that is usually given is a metaphorical one. You must destroy the notion of a physical Buddha outside oneself in order to seek enlightenment, and instead look to the Buddha within.

It is a comforting response and a way of domesticating the disturbing image of violence associated with the central figure of a major faith. Yet it is no different than the Christian insistence of displaying prominently on church altars or even as jewellery to be worn around the neck an execution device – a cross, often with the dying Jesus still nailed to it, oozing life. Similarly, pious Hindus will see bloody images of Shiva's destruction to be restorative, and Sikhs who portray images of battle and severed heads in martyrdom will understand this to be testimonies to faith. Religious traditions portray violence as a way of conquering it.

Yet the violent images persist. They present a counterpoint to the insistence of the leaders of every religious tradition that their mission is ultimately only about peace. And sometimes they can be

associated with real acts of violence.

Recently I was in the town of Mandalay in Myanmar where I was able to interview Ashin Wirathu, the fiery Buddhist monk who has incited riots against Muslims, and who was portrayed on the [cover](#) of *Time* magazine with the caption “the Buddhist face of terror.” At first he was all smiles.

“Do I look like a terrorist,” he asked me, chuckling at what he knew would be the answer.

“Yes,” I wanted to say, “you look like all of the other terrorists I’ve interviewed, totally banal.”

But I didn’t say that, since I wanted to hear his take on the situation. “Why,” I wanted to know, “were his Buddhist followers so violence?”

“We Buddhists believe in nonviolence,” he said carefully, as if speaking to a small child. And then he launched into a lengthy discourse on the nonviolence of Buddhist teachings.

Again I asked him my question, and again he repeated his insistence on the nonviolence of the Buddhist tradition.

“But sometimes Buddhism has to be defended,” I suggested.

“Yes,” he agreed.

Finding an opening I plunged on. “Defended from whom,” I asked?

“From its enemies – those Muslims,” he shouted, his voice rising. This began a lengthy rant about the threat of Muslim culture and people to the religious and ethnic purity of Burmese Buddhism.

“Look at the map of the world,” he said, explaining that “there is a great expanse of Christianity and Islam, but only a tiny speak of Burmese Buddhism.” And then he added darkly, “and it is threatened with being forever dashed away.”

He spoke of Burmese Buddhism as if it were a separate religion, though it is as much an ethnicity as it is a religious tradition. In Wirathu’s mind, he was protecting both a community of people as well as the purity of Buddhist teachings, and he and his fire-brand followers saw themselves engaged in a fight to the death.

In Jerryson’s book about Buddhist violence he discusses Wirathu and the role that the figure of a monk plays in legitimising public roles and actions. He notes that Wirathu does not try to justify his prejudice against Muslims through scripture or tradition, other than the implication carried in the name of the movement, 969, that he is defending the nine qualities of the Buddha himself, the six principles of *Dhamma*, and the nine special attributes of the *Sangha*.

But, as Jerryson points out, the very presence of a monk taking such a position gives it credibility. What Jerryson describes as “monastic cultural authority” carries as much or more weight than scripture in most Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist societies. As Jerryson puts it, “cultural authority trumps orthodoxy” (Jerryson, p. 185).

Not all forms of Buddhist violence involve attacks on Muslim shops and homes, setting fire to the buildings, and burning people alive. Nor is the tragic plight of the Rohingya, the displaced persons of northwestern Myanmar, the only instance of victims of a rampant Buddhist cultural violence.

Jerryson also explores forms of Buddhist violence – the violence employed by Buddhists against

other Buddhists, for instance. He examines the way that Buddhist religious precepts have been used to marginalise and control women. And he also looks at the role of state-sanctioned violence where Buddhist precepts are used to justify punishment, violent control, and warfare.

His approach is respectful to the tradition, and his book is not a hatchet job. Jerryson is not blaming Buddhism for the violence committed in its name, any more than one might blame Christianity for the murderous assault of Andres Breivik on a youth camp in Norway, or Hinduism for the riots against Muslims in Ahmedabad. He is simply pointing out what is increasingly becoming obvious to everyone, that Buddhism is no different from any other religion in the way that some of its adherents justify their violence in its name.

Perhaps nowhere has Buddhism been more closely aligned with militant state policy than in Thailand. In [an earlier book of Jerryson's](#), the cover photo portrayed a young Buddhist monk, standing on the open area of a Buddhist monastery, defending it with what appears to be a loaded revolver that he is holding in his hand.

When this picture was portrayed in a review of the book that appeared in the London *Times Literary Supplement*, the outcry was deafening. "How could this be?" asked angry readers of the *TLS*, "since as everyone knows Buddhism is the religion of nonviolence?"

Though everyone may think that they know this, because of Jerryson's work, including this most recent addition to his impressive *oeuvre* on Buddhist-related violence, we also know that the truth is more complicated than our popular assumptions. Like all religious traditions, Buddhism wears many faces.

Mark Juergensmeyer

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