

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael K. Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer, eds. *Buddhist Warfare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xi + 257 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-539483-2; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-539484-9.

Reviewed by Vladimir Tikhonov (University of Oslo)

Published on H-Buddhism (June, 2010)

Commissioned by Dan Lusthaus



The Myth of “Nonviolent Buddhism” - Demolished Once Again

Given the frequency with which stories of religious violence appear in the news—be it terrorist atrocities perpetrated by fundamentalist groups, or religiously tinged communal strife—the thesis that religion has an intrinsic potential for violence that time and again erupts in bloodshed seems to be self-evident. However, compared to all other global religions, Buddhism tends to be the one least associated with warfare, even while the Sri Lankan state, constitutionally bound to “foster and protect Buddhism,” was conducting a brutally efficient elimination campaign against Tamil insurgency, with the enthusiastic support of its Buddhist community. In fact, “Buddhist warfare” was not unknown to Western observers prior to this—the first works on Japan’s militant monks were published already in the late nineteenth century. The myth of “nonviolent Buddhism” persisted, however, owing much to the pacifist leanings of Western Buddhist converts who tended to “see no evil” in their adopted religion, as well as to the widespread tendency to apply “positive Orientalist” stereotypes to Tibet, often seen as a peaceful Shangri-La of sorts in the apologetic writings of Western supporters of its charismatic Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

The new collection edited by Michael Jerryson (Eckerd College, Florida) and Mark Juergensmeyer (University of California, Santa Barbara) will hopefully contribute significantly to demolishing the “nonviolent Buddhism” myth, at least at the level of academic discussion. It persuasively argues that even though in theory Buddhism highlights the inescapably insalubrious

karmic consequences of any violence, in practice it functions pretty much like any other religion: From its inception, Buddhism was integrated into a complicated web of power relations; it always attempted to accommodate itself with the pre-existent power hierarchies while preserving a degree of internal autonomy; and it inevitably came to acknowledge, willingly or otherwise, that the powers-that-be use violence to achieve their objectives, which often overlap with those of the Buddhist monastic community. In many cases, the passive acknowledgment of the inexorableness of state violence further developed into active collaboration with state war-making or internal pacification—as long as state bloodletting was seen as also serving Buddhist religious interests.

The collection opens with an introduction by Michael Jerryson which provides a masterfully written outline of Buddhism’s ambiguous relations with state violence throughout the course of its history. The gist of its argument is that early Buddhism’s dichotomous view of society gave Buddhists little reason to take risks by actively promoting antiwar views certain to alienate state rulers. While the autonomous communities of full-time Buddhist practitioners (*sangha*) were supposed to eschew violence, the mundane world was seen as inherently chaotic and thus in need of “those who administer torture and maiming” (*Vinaya*)—that is, kings. Never tired of admonishing kings to rule in a benevolent way which would render royal violence unnecessary, Buddha tacitly accepted, however, the reality of dog-eat-dog in-

terstate competition—the quid pro quo being what Jerryson justly defines as “monks’ immunity to state rules” (p. 11). These patterns of Buddhist collaboration with state powers were eventually cemented with the incipience of modern nationalism, as whole nations (Śrī Lanka, Thailand, etc.) were seen now as “Buddhist,” their warfare being inescapably legitimized in religious terms. The *sangha*-state dualism, in other words, developed, in the end, into its own negation.

Jerryson’s introduction is followed by another, much longer outline on the issue of Buddhism’s relation to warfare, Paul Demiéville’s (1894-1979) well-known 1957 text, *Buddhism and War*, translated into English by Michelle Kendall (University of California, Santa Barbara). Originally a postscript to a study on the Japanese “warrior monks” (*sōhei*), Demiéville’s incisive text highlights the issue of violence in the Japanese Mahāyāna tradition and especially emphasizes the theoretical platform which makes even active monastic participation in violence permissible. As Demiéville makes clear, Buddhism tends to reject the existence of any essential existence of things (*svabhāva*) as such, and Mahāyāna philosophy accordingly privileges “mind”/“consciousness,” the questions of the “relative” existence of matter being hotly debated by a variety of theoretical traditions. Thus, in the matter of killing, it is the *intention* and not the act in itself that is focused upon. As some of the most influential Mahāyāna *sūtras* (*Ratnakūta Sūtra*, *Yogācārabhūmi*, etc.) suggest, “killing” is simply a meaningless misconception from an “enlightened” viewpoint (since neither the killer nor the killed have any independent existence) and may be undertaken if intended to prevent a worse misfortune, and done with the best objectives in mind. Demiéville, in effect, points to the dangers inherent in the Buddhist relativizing of the objective world in the situation when Buddhist monks themselves are strongly influenced by conflicting worldly interests. It is a pity, however, that the article’s translator left intact Demiéville’s use of the antiquated system devised by Séraphin Couvreur (1835-1919) for transcribing Chinese (which used to be in vogue primarily in France), instead of re-transcribing Chinese words into Pinyin (which is used by the other contributors to this collection).

The next article, Stephen Jenkins’s (Humboldt State University) research on the Mahāyānist *Ārya-Bodhisattva-gocara-upāyaviśaya-vikurvaṇa-nirdeśa Sūtra* (the title is translated by Jenkins as *The Noble Teachings through Manifestations on the Subject of Skilful Means in the Bodhisattva’s Field of Activity*), contextualizes the teachings of the *sūtra* in question and further buttresses

Demiéville’s argument that the Buddhist emphasis on “good intention” opened the door for a broad spectrum of violence legitimization, including both war and in criminal justice. The *sūtra* Jenkins analyzes justifies both torture if done with the intention to prevent criminality, and war as *ultima ratio regum* if conducted with the intention to protect noncombatants. Unfortunately, however, Jenkins does not elaborate in more detail what sort of influence the Chinese and Tibetan translations of this *sūtra* exerted on Buddhism’s political views and activities in Central and East Asia.

Buddhist justifications for warfare in supposedly “pacifist” Tibet are dealt with in the following article by Derek Maher (East Carolina University). Focusing on the writings of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-82) in which the Gelug-pa (Yellow Hat sect) leader glorifies his mundane patron, Gushri Khan (1582-1655)—the Khoshut Mongol ruler who effectively established the domination of Gelug-pa’s Dalai Lamas over Tibet through a series of wars against competing sects and potentates—Maher shows how the supposedly “Dharma [Buddhist law]-protecting” violence was rationalized as not sinning against explicit Buddhist disciplinary norms. Without ever clearly arguing in favor of violence as such, the Dalai Lama subtly leads his readers to think that once violence is perpetrated by a venerable religious warrior with a clear intention to protect Dharma, then it is justifiable. As the next article, by Oxford University’s Vesna Wallace, argues, a very similar logic was also applied to the cruelest forms of criminal justice utilized by secular rulers in Mongolian society after the conversion to Gelug-pa Buddhism in late sixteenth century. Executions by spine-breaking and slicing into pieces, and tortures by clubbing or crushing hands and feet were all justified as long as they were conducted by “Dharma-protecting” authorities with the “compassionate” intention of purifying society. Violence ended up being justified as long as it was seen as the best way of realizing rulers’ good intentions in what was perceived as an inherently violent world.

While identifying belligerent Gushri Khan as the compassionate bodhisattva Vajrapāni was rarely problematic for supposedly “nonviolent” Tibetan Buddhism, it does prove problematic for many contemporary Western Buddhists, many of whom view their Buddhist faith as an extension of their pacifist convictions. Their voice is represented in the collection by Brian Daizen Victoria (Antioch University), whose article, critically dealing with the appropriation of Zen Buddhism by Japanese militarism forcefully argues that acquiescence to violence completely contradicts the spirit of Buddha’s Dharma.

The argument is fully plausible, since the emphasis on the inauspicious karmic consequences of violent acts, thought, or speech is more than clear, especially in the early Buddhist literature. However, if Victoria is to criticize Japanese Buddhists' wartime collaboration with their state, he—as Bernard Faure (Columbia University) persuasively suggests in his “Afterthoughts” probably would have to ultimately extend his criticism to the historical Buddha and his disciples, since it was exactly their attitude of tacitly acknowledging state violence and accepting sponsorship from ruling-class personages directly or indirectly implicated in all sorts of violence that laid the foundation for what Victoria describes as Buddhism’s “self-prostitution” in the service of the state (p. 128). Taking this historical background into consideration, the pattern of “mutually beneficial” relations between the Buddhist monastic community and the early Maoist state in China, as described in Xue Yu’s (Chinese University of Hong Kong) article on Chinese Buddhists during the 1950-53 Korean War, does not look like a deviation, but rather like a continuation of a time-honored pattern strongly rooted in the *habitus* of the monkhood. The pattern shows regional variations, of course: While donating airplanes to and personally enlisting in the Chinese “volunteer” army “fighting crazy American criminals in Korea” (p. 146) was not seen as problematic for Chinese Mahāyānic monks, the Theravādin Sri Lankan monks, as Daniel Kent (University of Virginia) shows in his contribution, even eschew direct encouragement to kill in their sermons to soldiers (not to mention abstaining from any personal participation in killing), preferring to emphasize instead that the fighting men should kill and die “without unwholesome intentions,” so as not to suffer karmic consequences from their “Dharma-protecting war” against Tamil rebels. But, as Michael Jer-

ryson makes clear in his piece on monks' participation in the Thai state's suppression of a Muslim insurgency in the south, it is a sort of “public secret” in Thai society that some monks become ordained while still on military duty and some monasteries house military garrisons in the insurgency-ridden areas. As long as the Thai state is considered a “Buddhist nation,” this sort of Buddhist response to the threats facing it makes perfectly logical sense, all the doctrinal skepticism towards violence notwithstanding.

All in all, Jerryson, Juergensmeyer and their co-authors have produced an extremely valuable, edifying collection which seriously challenges the images of “peacefulness” that Western Buddhists have tended to project onto the religion of their choice. A reader feels persuaded to conclude, as Faure suggests in his “Afterthoughts,” that a religion which does not question the (inherently violent) hierarchies of power in the mundane world; which promotes interiorized violence in the form of ascetic practices; and which systematically discriminates against women and habitually demonizes outsiders and rivals, should, in fact, be expected to be violent. What remains to be desired—from Jerryson, Juergensmeyer and their collaborators, as well as other specialists working in this field—is a broader and stronger contextualization of Buddhist violence as part and parcel of a more general tendency of practically all religions to be violent. Religions are symbolic systems that organize the universe in such a way as to make themselves central and powerful—and closing the distance between “power” and “violence” is only a question of time, however “compassionate” the axiology of a given religion might originally have been. The present collection shows us very clearly the dangers inherent in privileging one religion—even a most “compassionate”-looking one—in relation to others.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Vladimir Tikhonov. Review of Jerryson, Michael K.; Juergensmeyer, Mark, eds., *Buddhist Warfare*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29747>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.