

# INTRODUCTION: BUDDHISM, BLASPHEMY, AND VIOLENCE

Michael Jerryson

Youngstown State University

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**Abstract:** This special issue explores the relationship between Buddhism and blasphemy. The articles chart new territory within the study of religion and violence and Buddhist Studies. The first essay outlines the Indian Buddhist doctrinal and ethical foundations for such an inquiry. The second, third, and fourth essays locate their examination within a particular Buddhist tradition: Burmese Buddhism and the prosecution of anti-blasphemy laws, Thai Buddhism and its jailing of people for insulting photographs, and Mongolian Buddhist concerns over purity and sacrilege in early twentieth-century monastic education.

**Key words:** Buddhism, blasphemy, violence, Tibetan, Indian, Burmese, Thai

This special issue explores the relationship between Buddhism and blasphemy. The articles chart new territory within the study of religion and violence and Buddhist Studies. The first essay outlines the Indian Buddhist doctrinal and ethical foundations for such an inquiry. The second, third, and fourth essays locate their examination within a particular Buddhist tradition: Burmese Buddhism and the prosecution of anti-blasphemy laws, Thai Buddhism and its jailing of people for insulting photographs, and Mongolian Buddhist concerns over purity and sacrilege in early twentieth-century monastic education.

## A BUDDHIST BLASPHEMY?

On June 1, 2016, a Nigerian Christian man was killed after he allegedly made blasphemous remarks about the prophet Muhammad. Local Muslims gathered in Pandogari and burned down a church, looted dozens of shops, and killed three additional people (Farley 2016). In recent years, Western media have made numerous connections between blasphemy and violence, such as

the violence in Pandogari. Several incidents have received global attention, most notably the Muslim violence over the Jyllands-Posten's Muhammad cartoon controversy in 2005 and against the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015.

Often, journalists focus on Muslim reactions to blasphemy. The journalists are not alone. In their 2016 report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expresses specific concern over the Organization of Islamic Countries members' continued support of global anti-blasphemy laws (20). The USCIRF notes that particular governments like Pakistan have many inmates on death row because of violating anti-blasphemy laws. However, religious persecution through anti-blasphemy laws is not an Islamic phenomenon. Political scientist Jonathan Fox argues that religious persecution is not only in the Middle East or practiced by Muslims; rather, it is a *global* problem. In his *Foreign Affairs* article "Equal Opportunity Oppression," Fox draws upon the data sets collected in his *The Religion and State Project* to cite examples of religious persecution in Christian majority countries and others, such as China (2015).

But does blasphemy, or the concept of blasphemy, exist in Buddhism? One method for exploring Buddhist notions of slander and blasphemy is to investigate the terms' presence—or lack thereof—in Buddhist scriptures. As Matthew King explains in his article "Like Giving Milk to Snakes in Revolutionary Mongolia: Reformed Monasticism in the Contrastive Language of Ts. Zhamtsarano and Luwsandamdin," there is no direct equivalent of the word in Tibetan or Mongolian that matches the Abrahamic concept of blasphemy. Such an absence has led some Buddhist scholars to dismiss the subject entirely. For instance, the British Buddhist monk Sangharakshita argues that there is no such thing as blasphemy in Buddhism (1978, 9). Taken at face value, Sangharakshita's caution is important, particularly in light of the common Western misconceptions of non-Western religious traditions like Buddhism. Yet this caution should not dissuade an exercise of critical comparison, especially in light of weak comparisons à la Bruce Lincoln (2012, 121–130). There are similar challenges in the comparative study of religion to locate terms such as "culture," "religion," and "politics" in non-Western languages. While some languages do not have these terms, it is a mistake to argue that phenomena they represent do not exist.

To consider Sangharakshita's premise more closely requires an examination of blasphemy's etymology. In the typical classical Greek usage, *blasphēmia* connotes the broader act of slandering or harming a reputation. While the exact term might not exist in Sanskrit, the concept certainly does. In his article "Debate, Magic, and Massacre: The High Stakes and Ethical Dynamics of Battling Slanders of the *Dharma* in Indian Narrative and

Ethical Theory,” Stephen Jenkins finds a virtual cornucopia of examples in Buddhist scriptures that reference disrespect and harm to Buddhism. Through these examples, Jenkins reveals that Buddhist scriptures greatly revile the slandering of the Buddha and the Buddhist doctrine (Sanskrit: *dharma*; Pāli: *dhamma*).

In addition to analyzing Buddhist scriptures, there is a complementary approach to consider. Alongside the examination of Buddhist scriptures is the examination of the ways *Buddhists* have perceived slander and blasphemy. This approach is especially pertinent in the contemporary context in which religious communities engage in a healthy and rapid global exchange of ideas and beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

One contemporary example that involves an ethnographic approach is Myanmar’s hate speech laws. In June 2015, Htin Lin Oo, a former information officer for the National League for Democracy, was sentenced to two years of hard labor for his public criticism of prominent Buddhist organizations like the MaBaTha (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion).<sup>2</sup> In his article Paul Fuller argues that in order to understand the Buddhist perspective on blasphemy, one must examine the contemporary Burmese anti-blasphemy cases, such as Htin Lin Oo’s, in tandem with scriptural analysis.

In the contemporary age, Buddhists do engage in anti-blasphemy laws and legislation. These range from Burmese imprisonment of bar managers for using images of the Buddha (*The Guardian*, March 17, 2015) to the deportation of a British tourist to Sri Lanka because of a blasphemous tattoo (*BBC*, April 22, 2014), to Buddhist organizations marching in protest of blasphemous uses of the Buddha image (Knowing Buddha Organization, February 21, 2016). Thus, instead of questioning the existence of blasphemy in Buddhism, it is more productive to investigate the nature of Buddhist blasphemy.

### WHERE IS THE VIOLENCE?

There may be Buddhist examples of blasphemy—particularly in the contemporary age—but are these examples of blasphemy violent? In addition to providing important case studies, the articles in this issue address a powerful and pervasive lacuna in the study of religion and violence: religious systems have different definitions for violence.

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<sup>1</sup>Sangharakshita acknowledges Buddhadatta’s translation of the Sanskrit term *ariyupavada* as blasphemy (literally—the insulting of a noble, *ariya* + *upavāda*), and contends that this is modern coinage.

<sup>2</sup>Htin Lin Oo was released on April 17, 2016 along with 82 other prisoners. See Caster 2016.

While there is no accepted definition of violence in the Western context, popular Western parlance often uses the word with a negative connotation and conflates violence with physical acts against other people, such as wars, conflicts, and killings. This pattern does not necessarily relate to non-Western religious traditions. One example of this problem is found in the work on early China. In a discussion of Confucian philosophers and their treatment and definition of peace, Robin D. S. Yates questions the usefulness of Harald Müller's use of "violence." Müller argues, "Peace is a state between specific social and political collectives characterized by the absence of direct violence and in which the possible use of violence by one against another in the discourse between the collectives has no place." However, Yates points out that, unlike the conventional understanding of violence in contemporary academic discourse, the early Chinese saw the absence of violence as "a condition or state with positive characteristics among which the emanation of moral virtue by the ruler and his high officials was especially important" (Yates 2016, 105).

This misapplication of Western notions of violence is found also in the study of the Buddhist system and violence. A common reference point when discussing Buddhist ethics and violence is the concept of *ahimsa*. There has been a tendency to translate *ahimsa* as "non-violence," particular with regard to Buddhist ethics.<sup>3</sup> The principle of *ahimsa* is quite important to the discussion of Buddhist ethics and violence and should remain as such. However, translating *ahimsa* as "non-violence" fails to capture the full contours of the term and its relevance within the Buddhist system. The term *ahimsa* derives from *himsa*, which does not mean violence, but injury or harm.<sup>4</sup> Buddhist Studies scholars such as Stephen Jenkins have critically addressed the mistranslation of *ahimsa* and the confusion this lends to discussions of Buddhism and violence (2010/2011, 311). As such, *ahimsa* means non-harm or non-injury.<sup>5</sup>

There are important distinctions between "harm/injury" and the Western uses of "violence." In his discussion of the relationship between the Buddhist notion of compassion and violence, Jenkins provides a lucid distinction with a doctor who causes pain, but whose intention to help is pure. The doctor is not causing harm or injury to her/his patient, but the physical actions in-and-

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<sup>3</sup>For example, see Queen, Prebish, Keown (2003). While scholars such as Peter Harvey translate *ahimsa* as "non-injury" or "non-harm," their works were fewer and catered to less general audiences (1990, 76).

<sup>4</sup>The absence of the "a," *himsa*, is sometimes translated as "violence." The "a" in *ahimsa* acts in a similar fashion as the 'a' in English, e.g., atypical.

<sup>5</sup>For a close examination into the constructed distinctions between violence and non-violence, see Jerryson and Kitts (2015).

of-itself can be construed in the Western context as violent. Drawing on the work of Henk Bodewitz, Jenkins explains, “[i]t is important to recognize that being harmless may actually require violent action and that restraint from violent action may be harmful” (2010/2011, 311).<sup>6</sup>

The Buddhist treatment of violence parallels some Western views of violence, such as the view on torture. For example, in the recent past, the Sri Lankan government arrested Buddhist monks and made use of *dharmacakke ghahana* (Pāli: hitting the wheel of the *dhamma*, the Buddhist doctrine). The practice requires that the victim contort her/his body into the shape of a wheel (*cakra*), a historical symbol of the Buddhist teachings. Once the victim’s body is in the shape of a wheel, the victim is spun and beaten until s/he passes out or bleeds to death. Ananda Abeysekara reflects: “It is as if the state invented a specific kind of ‘Buddhist’ punishment for a specific kind of ‘Buddhist’ subject” (2002, 230–231).

The *dharmacakke ghahana* is violent in the Buddhist system and it is also violent within the Western context. However, there are other examples that might fit the Western notion of violence, but are not violent in Buddhism. One example, which continues to puzzle Westerners, is self-immolation. Western publications often frame Tibetan self-immolation as a form of violence (including articles in this journal).<sup>7</sup> Conversely, Tibetan Buddhists have argued that this is not an act of violence. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama repeatedly has said that the Tibetans who self-immolate are not violating the rule of *ahiṃsa*. As long as Tibetan Buddhist self-immolators retain a calm state of mind and are not psychologically impaired, they are not harming themselves or others. In short, Tibetan Buddhist self-immolation is not violent.<sup>8</sup>

Placing violence within a Buddhist perspective does not remove its ambiguities. There still remains the difference of perspective of and motive for imposing harm. Does it matter if one does not intend to inflict harm, or is the issue decided by the victim whom experiences harm? Most Buddhists argue that what constitutes violence depends upon the intention behind the act itself, e.g., whether the act was motivated by compassion or not. Indeed, the location of intention in Buddhist ethics is preeminent to all other variables. However, this does not efface the feelings and actions of the victim. As Mark Juergensmeyer notes in his work on religion and terrorism, the ability to

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<sup>6</sup>Henk Bodewitz shows in his work on the roots of *ahiṃsa* that before modern times South Asian commentaries did not regard the kingly duties of torture or capital punishment as *hiṃsa*, as these acts were seen as warranted and beneficial. See Bodewitz (1999, 17).

<sup>7</sup>For example, see Plank (2013).

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of the non-violence of Tibetan Buddhist self-immolations, see Soboslai (2015).

identify terms like terrorism is not in the hands of the perpetrators; it is rather in those who feel the terror (2000, 5). In a similar vein, one could argue that the ability to identify harm or injury is not located in those who perform the alleged acts, but the ones who *experience* harm or injury.

Buddhists have said that they feel harmed when they witness the slandering of their doctrine and the insulting treatment of their images. To many Buddhists, Buddha images are relics. And in Buddhism, relics have a life of their own. They are revered on the same level as the doctrine—or in some cases, even higher. As such, harming relics is harming the sacred and, moreover, is an act of violence.

### THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The first contribution to this issue establishes a foundation of Buddhist ethics for blasphemy and violence. In “Debate, Magic, and Massacre: The High Stakes and Ethical Dynamics of Battling Slanderers of the *Dharma* in Indian Narrative and Ethical Theory,” Stephen Jenkins surveys scriptural sources that equate slandering the Buddhist doctrine with sin and that instruct Buddhists to use force against those who slander Buddhism. Jenkins also underscores the gravity of committing a great sin in Buddhist doctrine, the *upānantaryāni*. One of the five great sins is harming a Buddha, which is correlated with the destruction of a Buddhist relic or shrine.

In the next essay “The Idea of ‘Blasphemy’ in the Pāli Canon and Modern Myanmar,” Paul Fuller addresses both the scriptural evidence of blasphemy and contemporary Burmese legal and political anti-blasphemy cases. Burmese Buddhist monks have expressed outrage over the misuse of Buddha images, such as in bars to sell alcohol. Often, criminal charges follow in the wake of views expressed by the monks. Over the last several years, Myanmar has imprisoned both Burmese and foreigners for blasphemous actions. Fuller argues that these religio-political views and actions are not new, but rather modern versions of stances found in Buddhist scriptures, known collectively as the Pāli Canon.

Shane Strate provides another powerful Buddhist example of anti-blasphemy laws in “The Sukhothai Incident: Buddhist Heritage, Mormon Missionaries, and Religious Desecration in Thailand.” In early July 1972, two Mormons visited Ayutthaya in Thailand and photographed themselves in front of Buddhist statues. In one photo, they dangled their feet—the most unclean part of the body—in front of the Buddha’s face. The photo was leaked to the press and there was a public outcry. At their trial, the judge sentenced them to one year in prison. He explained that if someone insults Buddhism, it is

an attempt to undermine the structure of society. To not punish them would incur sin upon the court itself.

Lastly, Matthew King offers an alternative voice to the discussion in “Giving Milk to Snakes: A Socialist ‘Dharma Minister’ and a ‘Stubborn’ Monk on Rejecting the Dharma in Revolutionary Buryatia and Khalkha.” While King acknowledges that Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhists have concerns over the purity of their religion and religious education, he expresses concerns about using the term blasphemy to describe these sentiments. King argues that blasphemy can direct our analytical attention to the theory of contrastive language and the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Ervin Goffman. Ultimately, he finds monastic concerns over secularizing religious education much closer to the prohibitions against rejecting Allah or revelation than to Jewish and Christian notions of blasphemy.

Collectively, these articles pave the way for further work on the subject of Buddhism, violence, and blasphemy. Scholars who engage in comparative religion and violence have neglected the variegated ways in which religions define violence. Buddhist traditions understand violence as harm or injury, and this provides importance nuances to the subject of blasphemy. Buddhists view Buddha images as relics—and their scriptures treat relics as living embodiments of the sacred. The use of a Buddha image on a toilet seat or in the marketing for a bar to consume liquor *harms* the image. Furthermore, Buddhists are *harmed* by these acts. Blasphemy against Buddhist images is a form of violence.

There is no intent here or by the authors in this issue to argue that Abrahamic instances blasphemy and violence operate in the same manner as they do in Buddhism. Such an exercise follows the course of making a strong comparison. Rather than making a strong comparison, the motives here are to engage in a weak comparison. In his theses on comparisons, Lincoln urges scholars to engage in weak comparisons, ones that “are equally attentive to relations of similarity and those of difference” (2012, 123).

For example, both Muslims and Buddhists respond strongly when their sacred images and doctrine are defamed. In Pandogari, Nigeria, Muslims reacted to the alleged blasphemous remarks about the prophet Muhammad. In Myanmar, Buddhist monks and the government reacted to the defamation of Buddha images and Buddhist monks. However, the Nigerian and Burmese examples display a variation in the magnitude of the responses. The Nigerian government is not Islamic and would not enforce Islamic views of blasphemy; conversely, the Burmese government is Buddhist and has enforced Buddhist views of blasphemy. Thus, in Pandogari, the local Muslims responded by acting outside the law. Four people were killed and properties were destroyed. In Myanmar, the government responded to the Burmese Buddhist monks’

outrage and sentenced people to prison. The comparison holds a similarity with regard to the views on blasphemy and the need to respond, but there are notable differences in who responded and the magnitude of the response.

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