



Buddhist Warfare

MICHAEL K. JERRYSON and MARK JUERGENSMEYER, eds.

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In the opening lines of the introduction to this collection of eight essays (some written originally for a panel at an American Academy of Religion meeting) and the insightful concluding “after-thoughts” of Bernard Faure that add a cogent finishing touch, Michael Jerryson (p.3) offers that

[v]iolence is found in all religious traditions, and Buddhism is no exception. This may surprise those who think of Buddhism as a religion based solely on peace. Indeed, one of the principal reasons for producing this book was to address such a misconception.

While this is the clearly stated motivation for putting the book together, a myriad of other compelling issues also arise in the chapters that follow that make this publication, in general, a compelling read.

The eight essays that precede Faure’s summary reflections are methodologically diverse. Five essays are historical, the first consisting of a translation of Paul Demieville’s wide-ranging “Le bouddhisme et la guerre” (originally published in 1957 as an appendix to Gaston Renondeau’s history of medieval Japanese warrior-monks), which focuses primarily on instances of Chinese monastic participation in warfare that, as Demieville underlines, contradict doctrinal teachings against violence. Meticulously researched, the essay reads like a concordance of misguided monastic military play. In the other four historical studies: Derek Maher analyzes, with a salute to Foucault, the fifth Dalai Lama’s discourse in framing the necessity for religious violence in a seventeenth century text entitled *Song of the Queen of Spring*; Vesna Wallace extrapolates vividly from Mongolian sources, especially the *White History* and various legal texts, about extremely harsh and ostensibly cruel, but legalized forms of violence that constituted the types of punishments instituted by Buddhist khans beginning in the sixteenth century that apparently continued up to the early twentieth; Brian Victoria writes passionately from an insider’s engaged perspective (Soto Zen) in articulating a scathing critique, from an avowedly ethically Buddhist and apologetic perspective, of the “soldier-Zen” phenomena found in Japan just before and during the Second World War; and

Xue Yu provides a general historical resume of how Chinese Buddhists, in a bind to preserve for themselves a place in the early years of Mao's China, acted patriotically and practically (primarily by raising funds to donate a "Buddhist airplane") in support of the nascent communist government's effort to bolster their North Korean comrades against the "American aggression" of the early 1950s. In addition to these historical accounts, two of the other essays in the volume are ethnographically based and focused on contemporary contexts. The first is Daniel Kent's sensitive and well-researched essay on how Sinhala Theravada monks have attempted to temper, through stressing the benefits of wholesome intention (*cetana*) or "heart" (*hita*), the inevitable karmic concerns of Sri Lankan army recruits who commit, or are about to commit, violence within the context of battle. The second ethnographic essay is Jerryson's own account of the militarization of the *sangha* (the emergence of clandestine "soldier-monks") and sacred space (the stationing of soldiers and weapons within monastic *wats*) in southern Thailand amidst local Muslim majorities in a depressing and deteriorating socio-political context. Finally, Stephen Jenkins has examined the seemingly convoluted proposition of "compassionate violence" in a little known Indian Mahayana text. I confess that I had difficulty penetrating the terse and opaque writing style of this essay, and thereby had difficulty in understanding the specific contours of his arguments and allusions.

Like many collections of essays, this one is a bit uneven in the quality of its contributions (as I have just signaled above), and apart from the general theme of how Buddhists have engaged in warfare historically, or legitimated violence theoretically, lacks a consistently crisp and sustained focus. Yet, the book certainly succeeds as a whole in raising very important questions for discussion, some of which are expertly framed in Bernard Faure's lucid and provocative "afterthoughts." Faure points out, for instance, that another fruitful line of inquiry would be not just the documentation or representations of violence perpetrated by Buddhists, but rather the *causes* that have led Buddhists to act violently in the first place. He suggests:

[W]e need to know more about the causes—structural, sociopolitical, psychological—of violence before we pass judgment on Buddhist representations of violence.

When confronted with the complex relationships between Buddhism and violence, a more fundamental question arises: is violence contextual, parasitic, or intrinsic to Buddhism? (p. 219)

Faure goes on to note how several instances of violence represented in the essays of this book are, indeed, contextual and comments on how Buddhists have "gone beyond the call of duty, confusing the Buddhist dharma with the reasons of the State and with patriotism" (p. 220) while also rightly noting conversely that "[a]lthough the dharma often has had to bow to reasons of State, in some instances, it has also provided an ideology for counterforces, inspiring peasant revolts in the name of a millenarianism centering on the coming of the future Buddha, Maitreya" (p. 221). While these are instances in which Buddhists have acted violently because of political contexts, Faure presses his point, in conclusion, by raising again the possibility that Buddhist culture, particularly in its

ritual, mythic and symbolic forms of expression, is often laden with a semiotic of violence seen especially within various processes of demonization and subjugation, particularly in Tantric guises (pp.222–223). Finally, in addressing contemporary Buddhist culpability in acts of political violence, he wistfully adds: “now more than ever, the religious sphere is unable to exist outside of the political sphere. In Asia at least, Buddhism has become ancillary to nationalism” (p.223).

In reading this provocative set of essays, especially Faure’s, three additional lines of inquiry that might have been included in this book occurred to me. The first is one occasioned by omission. That is, including tracts on Buddhism and violence in Burma, Cambodia and Laos would have been especially pertinent, given the wrenching and ghastly instances of political violence that have occurred within those nominally Buddhist societies and cultures in recent decades. Second, by shifting the focus a bit, one might also entertain the related question of how Buddhists have not just perpetrated and legitimated violence, but how have they responded to it and coped with it? Kent’s essay on monks and soldiers is headed in this direction, but the trajectory is largely left unexamined in the rest of the essays. It would seem that that violence is an especially acute form of *dukkha* and, as such, Buddhists are potentially well equipped to respond ethically or compassionately, as well ritually, to assuage its deleterious impacts on the human condition. Finally, and perhaps more fundamental to the Jerryson’s stated rationale, a third line is an analysis of how Buddhism gained its reputation for being such a peaceful religion in the first place. Political historians of Asia and historians of religions are fully aware that Buddhists have been a part of the history of war and violence throughout South, Southeast and East Asian cultures and societies. It is also the case that Westerners, rather than Asians, are far more likely to hold the view that Buddhism is a religion exclusively related to peace. An essay that attempts to trace the rise and promulgation of Buddhism’s peaceful profile in the West would have nicely complemented, or set the table, for many of the other essays in the volume.

By taking the initiative to publish this collection of essays, Jerryson and Juergensmeyer have stimulated important dimensions of a discussion that is sure to garner much more attention from scholars of a variety of disciplinary perspectives in the future, as well as from thoughtful adherents of the Buddha’s dharma. It is a welcomed and timely addition.

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