**Guest Editors’ Introduction**

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

**Margo Kitts**¹ and **Mark Juergensmeyer**²

¹. Hawai‘i Pacific University  ². University of California, Santa Barbara

mkitts@hpu.edu / juergens@global.ucsb.edu

The essays in this commemorative issue of *Buddhist Studies Review* explore the theme of Buddhism and violence with an eye towards the seminal work of Michael Jerryson, who has offered rich insights into the subject over many years. Jerryson has earned the reputation—a notoriety in some quarters—for showing the dark side of the Buddhist traditions. Preconceived in the modern West as a pacific, chiefly meditative tradition whose practitioners aim for personal salvation and world peace, Buddhism has been shown by Jerryson in fact to resemble every other religious tradition in that it can support martial ventures and political oppression. Buddhism too has a legacy of bloodshed.

This exploration of Buddhist violence is directly related to Jerryson’s interest in the dynamism of Buddhist authority. Most recently in his critique of Ashin Wirathu, the Burmese Buddhist monk whose advocacy of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar has stirred a boiling pot of anti-Muslim resentments, Jerryson has shown that reverence for Burmese religious authorities transcends respect for traditional Buddhist doctrine and monastic accomplishments. It emanates instead from the phenomenon of religious authority itself and from the cultural institutions that support it. His examinations have resulted in heightened sensitivity to the sociology of religious authority and violence.

Jerryson’s interest in these topics has evolved over the years. As an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, Madison he had majored in Western Philosophy. But fate and the U.S. Peace Corps brought him to a quite different culture, from Madison to Mongolia, where he immediately began to plunge into a study of Buddhist religion and society. What interested him most was the way that the relationships of authority within the monastic institutions change over time. While other Peace Corps volunteers were content with building portable toilets and creating higher crop yield, Jerryson was writing a book that resulted in his first monograph, *The Rise and Fall of the Mongolian Sangha* (Silkworm Books...
Buddhist Violence and Religious Authority

2007). It dealt with the socialist purges of the Buddhist sangha from Mongolia, a purge he has called a genocide.

This study set his sights on the larger issues of Buddhist society in Asia. It led him back to Madison for an M.A. in Asian Studies, and then to his Ph.D. work at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He turned to Thailand to study a different kind of Buddhist tradition, the Theravāda Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia that are full of interesting issues in the relationship between religion and society, and between religion and politics. On a research trip to the region, his interest in the role of the Buddhist sangha took him to the southern Thai border with Malaysia, where Buddhists—including Buddhist monks—were engaged in struggle with the Muslims who thought that the territory was rightfully theirs. In consulting with the U.S. Embassy he was specifically warned not to visit the region, and indeed he experienced close encounters with the conflict. At one point he was urged to flee from the region as quickly as possible since he had been marked as a Buddhist ally by angry Muslims in the area.

Despite the drama of the research trip, Jerryson was able to gather enough material to complete his dissertation research. More than simple research, the material provided ample fodder for his second published monograph, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford 2011). This book was almost immediately hailed as a milestone in the literature on Southeast Asian Buddhism. Though the theme of Buddhism and public life in Southeast Asia had already been broached by such scholars as Harvard’s Stanley Tambiah—Jerryson’s mentor when Tambiah was a visiting professor at Santa Barbara—Jerryson raised the topic to a whole new level. Many supporters of Buddhism, especially in the U.S. and Europe, were incensed to see their lovely pacifist tradition dragged through the mud of violence. But more seasoned Buddhist studies scholars, including many in Buddhist regions who knew the realities of how religion and society interrelate, were grateful for Jerryson’s pioneering work in this sensitive area.

Jerryson was successful in broaching the topic of Buddhist violence in part because he remained respectful of the tradition. Clearly his work was not meant to trash a culture that he had long admired. Rather it was meant to illuminate, to show how diverse the tradition could be and how intricately related it was to local cultures. Though his book was focused on Southeast Asia, he broadened the topic to the role of violence within Buddhism in general in a workshop on the topic that he convened, bringing together scholars who studied various Buddhist cultures, under the auspices of the American Academy of Religion. With the assistance of one of the editors of this issue, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jerryson edited the papers and published them under the title, *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford 2010).

Jerryson has broadened his purview to survey the relationship between religion and violence not just in Buddhism but also in every other tradition. Working with the editors of this issue, he has co-edited the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, and its offshoot volume, *Violence and the World’s Religious Traditions*. A similarly broad scope is represented in his recent edited work, *Religious Violence Today: Faith and Conflict in the Modern World*, which is published in two volumes by ABC-CLIO Press.
(2020). He has edited other volumes, as well, including an Oxford Handbook specifically on Contemporary Buddhism (2016). This volume brought together some of the major scholars working on current issues of religion and society within all branches of the Buddhist tradition. Buddhism is again the theme of a recent book he co-edited with Iselin Frydenlund, *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World*, published in 2020 by Palgrave.

Another recent and solely-authored book is a research monograph, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence* (Oxford 2018). The title plays on the familiar koan, “if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” The idea of this puzzling advice given by Buddhist masters was aimed at weaning Zen Buddhist disciples from clinging to Buddhist doctrine and the figure of the Buddha as an object of worship. But it also signals a theme of violence only slightly beneath the surface of Buddhist teachings. The volume reflects Jerryson’s critical movement away from the traditional Buddhist emphasis on doctrine to the study of lived Buddhism, in all its complexities with regard to violence, race, and gender.

It is Jerryson’s broad and comprehensive understanding of the complexities of religion in society that is the subject of the diverse essays in this issue. The articles are framed by the introductory essay by Stephen Jenkins, which shows the relationship of the essays to one another and places them in the context of the scholarship of the tradition. The first essay, by John Thompson, focuses on the concept of Dharma in Buddhism with reference to the case of Kumārajīva. Thompson agrees with Jerryson that the Buddhist Dharma has been just as marked by cruelty and violence as any institutionalized socio-cultural movement. He examines the life and teachings of a particular figure, the Kuchean monk Kumārajīva (ca. 450–504 CE), probably the most important foreign monk in the history of Chinese Buddhism. An unparalleled translator and exegete, his work propagating the Mahāyāna in China ushered in a more mature understanding of the Dharma. More intriguingly, though, Kumārajīva’s colorful life made him an international Buddhist celebrity which no doubt contributed to his legacy. According to traditional accounts, Kumārajīva was orphaned at a young age, and held prisoner for many years during which he was mistreated and forced to violate his monastic precepts several times. He also served as a military dictator’s “war prophet,” and even inflicted physical harm on his own body. Moreover, he conducted all of his influential work under direct imperial supervision, essentially operating under constant threat of punishment and/or death. Accounts of Kumārajīva’s life have all the trappings of a grand epic and betray the exaggeration typical of hagiography. Perhaps because of these facts, his life story provides ample evidence of the sheer pervasiveness of violence in Buddhist history, rhetoric, and practice. A careful study of the narratives portraying Kumārajīva’s life makes it virtually impossible to take at face value the simplistic claim that Buddhism is “a religion of peace.”

In the next essay Ben Schonthal examines connections between Buddhist law and international law. He does so not from a theoretical or philosophical perspective but from an empirical perspective. In particular, he looks closely at the story of a single Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka whose domestic arguments about Buddhist
law ended up forming the groundwork for a United Nations’ Resolution relating to the status of religious symbols. Drawing on legal archives from Sri Lanka and the UN as well as other monastic legal texts, he illustrates how and why Buddhist monks in the contemporary world can work as agents of international law, even unwittingly. Schonthal also adds a consideration of processes, persons and institutions to a discussion of Buddhism and international law that has, to date, been largely abstract, disembodied and speculative.

In the following essay, Matthew King builds on Jerryson’s ground-breaking work on violence in Buddhist thought and society with reference to Mongolia. His chapter examines thirteenth to twentieth century monastic memorialization of the bodily violence enacted upon Köten Ejen at the center of his “Buddhist conversion of the Mongols.” Köten Ejen (Tib. Lha sras go tan rgyal po, 1206–1251) was Chinggis Khan’s grandson and a military leader involved in Mongol campaigns against the Song Dynasty. The second son of Ögedei Khan and a brother of Gūyük Khan, Köten Ejen ruled over large swaths of China prior to the rise of Khubilai Khan and the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty in 1271. According to later Tibetan and Mongolian memorialization, it was Köten who directed the Tangut military general Doorta to lead Mongol troops into eastern Tibet in 1240. In time, Köten summoned the Central Tibetan Buddhist polymath Sakya Paṇḍita, by then already an old man, to his court at Liangzhou. The elderly Tibetan master is said to have converted Köten to Buddhism, which then opened the great dispensation of the Dharma into Mongol lands, a Dharma that deepened over the course of the Yuan, the Northern Yuan, the Ming, and the Qing periods. This chapter examines the therapeutic practices and metaphors used in Tibetan sources to describe the bodily afflictions that besot Köten and the counter-violence enacted by Sakya Paṇḍita.

Nathan McGovern’s essay on “De-Centering the Normative in the Introduction to Buddhism Class” shifts the book’s subject from textual and field research to pedagogy. In it he presents an alternative method for teaching the Introduction to Buddhism class, inspired in part by Michael Jerryson’s work on Buddhism and violence. The standard way of teaching this class is to divide the semester into two halves. The first half gives a three-fold doctrinal history of Buddhism in India: early Buddhism, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. The second half of the semester then explores the three major regional traditions of Buddhism outside of India: Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Tibet and Mongolia. This model allows little room for non-normative aspects of Buddhism such as violence, and insofar as it does, it implicitly frames those aspects as “aberrations” from “real Buddhism.” In McGovern’s syllabus, he begins by having students read The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching by Thich Nhat Hanh, which teaches them about Buddhist doctrine with a seductively modernist approach. At the mid-point of the semester, he then reveals that Thich Nhat Hanh’s book leaves out a great deal of what is found in actual traditional Buddhist practice, including reincarnation, gods, spirits, miracles, the supernatural, patriarchy, and violence. The class then does a brief theoretical excursus into “Protestant presuppositions” and Orientalism so as to understand how the modernist view of Buddhism came about and why we need to take traditional forms
of Buddhism seriously. In the second half of the semester, the course focuses on regional forms of Buddhism, with a special eye towards practice, including the practice of violence.

Blaze Marpet’s essay picks up a theme from Jerryson’s book, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road*. As Jerryson notes, many people—especially devout Buddhists—object to the characterization of violent acts as “Buddhist violence” by asking “is it really Buddhist?” Behind the question are two assertions – that Buddhism cannot possibly be violent since it adheres to a doctrine of nonviolence, and that in any event, acts of violence associated with Buddhism are ultimately about other things, such as ethnicity, power, or economic control. Marpet expands on two points that Jerryson makes in response—first, that regardless of its creed of nonviolence, Buddhism has indeed been used to support acts of violence. And second, that motivations for violence are almost always mixed. Religion is only one component, though often a vital one. In buttressing Jerryson’s first point, Marpet argues that there are no single agreed upon sets of texts, teachings, or emulatable figures by which one could determine what “true Buddhism” might be or how “a good Buddhist” should behave. In support of Jerryson’s second point, that Buddhist ideas and identity can be linked to the violent motives of race, politics, and economics, Marpet shows how these features are interconnected in specific Buddhist cultures. He cites cases from Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, and agrees with Talal Asad’s observation that the notion of separating religion from politics is a peculiar feature of the West. The phrase “Buddhist violence,” therefore, should not imply that Buddhism causes violence but that on some occasions it is in some way associated with it in what is frequently a complex nexus of motives. Marpet ends with an appreciation of the nonviolent tradition within Buddhism and the recognition that this tradition provides an inherent critique of the violence that is sometimes done in its name.

The final essay by Grisel d’Elena turns to the contemporary situation of religion and violence in Myanmar. It is based on an analysis of interviews with Ashin Wirathu and Buddhist nuns, with an emphasis on Buddhist nationalist discourses of gender and violence against religious and ethnic minorities in the country. It is a project for which Jerryson has served as mentor and an example of engaged research. It argues that Burmese Buddhist nationalists’ marginalization of the Muslim Rohingya ethnic minority is inextricably linked to their attempts to control Buddhist women, and to the victimization of Rohingya people in nationalist systemic Buddhist violence. This essay asserts that the Rohingya’s view should be given agency, and not characterized as immutably foreign and Muslim.

Taken as a whole, these seven essays show the enduring power of the issues and ideas explored by Michael Jerryson in his ground breaking work on religious violence and authority. It is rare to see such wide-ranging scholarly impact by a body of work like Jerryson’s that, though extensive, has been created within a fairly limited span of time. It also shows, however, that these fertile ideas will continue to nourish the field for some time to come. They will provide an enduring legacy for Jerryson’s significant contributions to our understanding of the complex relationships between religion and public life.
About the authors

Margo Kitts is Professor and Coordinator of Religious Studies and East-West Classical Studies at Hawai‘i Pacific University in Honolulu. She is the author or editor of eight books and over 50 articles. She edits the *Journal of Religion and Violence*, the Cambridge series, Elements of Religion and Violence, and is a senior editor for the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion.

Mark Juergensmeyer is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and writes on South Asia and global religion and society. He has co-edited *Buddhist Warfare* with Michael Jerryson and *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* with Jerryson and Margo Kitts. He is the author of *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, along with many other works.