Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand*

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standing of why Islam has so often been characterized as a “special case” in the context of the study of religion.

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“Early one evening, while smoking his hand-rolled cigarette . . . one military monk, whom I refer to as Phra Eks, proudly opened up his saffron robes to reveal a Smith & Wesson tucked beneath the folds around his waist. Although he keeps his M-16 hidden in his sleeping quarters, at night he generally carries the handgun in case of trouble” (121). So begins one of several jarring anecdotes recounted in Michael K. Jerryson’s recent monograph on religion, violence, and the state in southern Thailand. Grounded in ethnographic and historical research, the book offers a window onto the ongoing conflict between ethnically Malay Muslims and both Thai and Chinese Buddhists living in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. As Jerryson notes, a crucial aspect of the conflict is the exceptional status of the ethnically Malay Muslims, as a southern majority within a country that is otherwise largely Buddhist. Drawing on the work of S. Tambiah, M. Askew, D. McCargo, and others, Jerryson argues that, despite the increased visibility and escalation of violence over the past decade, the roots of the current conflict can be traced back several centuries to the machinations of colonial politics (early twentieth century) and, before that, to relations between precolonial Siam and the Islamic kingdom of Patani (sixteenth century).

Focusing largely on the contemporary scene, Jerryson’s book sets out to answer two questions and to unsettle two sets of prejudices. The questions are stated clearly from the outset, namely: How is the violence affecting the lives of Thai Buddhist monks? And how are the monks themselves affecting the violence? As for unsettling prejudice, Jerryson wishes to question our habit of uncritically associating Buddhism with peace, and Islam with violence. The book is arguably successful on each of these four counts.

Opening his introductory chapter with a call to arms issued in 1911 by the Sixth Monarch of Siam (3), Jerryson makes a strong case for acknowledging historical ties between Buddhism, politics and violence. Turning his attention to the present day, he notes that the local Thai press tends to replicate the habituated biases of transnational media in casting “the conflict as an Islamic conflict without the necessary corollary—that it is also a Buddhist conflict” (5). In other words, when it comes to protracted internecine violence, it takes two to tango. And the author’s detailed accounts of militarized monks, fortified monasteries, and gun-toting abbots makes his point abundantly clear. By the end of the third of his five substantive chapters, Jerryson has presented the evidence to support tentative answers to his opening questions regarding the relationship between escalating violence and the lives of monks.

In the chapter’s conclusion he explains, “When monks live in an oppressive, stressful, and traumatic environment, they may exhibit combative and violent tendencies” (113). He goes on to suggest in answer to his second question that, through their daily comportment, the monks are also contributing to the escalation of violence—albeit often unwittingly. “Practices such as collecting morning alms with a military escort and politically charged sermons accentuate the divide between Muslims and Buddhists and fuel a primary cause for the violence—Otherness” (113).

Here one wonders how closely we should be reading the language of causality (“a primary cause for the violence”). Jerryson’s emphasis on identity relies heavily on the
work of Mark Juergensmeyer and Bruce Lincoln to propose his own threefold “equation for Buddhist violence” (76ff.). The latter is a cautiously predictive model premised on the presence of a set of preconditions that include “a space of conflict, a politicized Buddhist representation, and the defacement of the representation” (65). Jerryson accounts for the escalation of violence in southern Thailand with reference to this model, suggesting that it was the absence of one or other of these three elements that explains why a series of other sample cases, in different parts of the world, did not lead to such escalation. As with such predictive models more generally, the underlying presuppositions are arguably the stuff of sociological faith.

This raises the broader question of “theory.” If the book seems to fulfill its fourfold aim (as described above), certain aspects of the critical apparatus appear inconsistent, and at times misinformed. For instance, A. Gramsci did not “coin” the terms “hegemony” and “subaltern” (41); J. Baudrillard’s simulacrum is not simply a representation that is more powerful than its referent (201 n. 11); T. Ling’s use of the term “Buddhisms” is an ill fit for those representations the purpose of which is precisely to make an authoritative claim regarding the true nature of the Buddha’s teaching (see, e.g., 116); and, unfortunately, this list of inaccuracies might be extended. There are also, however, more fundamental problems of consistency. The reader is presented with a trenchant critique of the Thai press in chapter 2, in which Jerryson neatly demonstrates the press’s reliance on the historical periodization of the monarchy’s “master narrative.” Yet, at the same time, the endnotes would suggest that he has relied on these very publications for a substantial part of his information regarding crucial incidents of violence. On the one hand, history is contingent (on which he cites Gramsci and M. Foucault), as he argues well with respect to schoolbooks and the state curriculum; on the other, history is both determinate and its mass mediated representation transparent—as implicit in the idea that the newspaper presents a “first draft of history” (my phrase, not Jerryson’s). Can a similar thing be said of his simultaneous fealty to post-structuralist sensibilities on culture and power (Foucault, J. Butler), and his commonsense retention of an ahistorical theory of religion (C. Geertz, C. Long)? The careful reader might conclude that “theory” has been strapped on for largely aesthetic reasons. There are also quite a few typos, not to mention frequent stylistic infelicities that might have been caught with more careful editing of this timely study of such an important topic.

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Victor Turner’s ritual theory has been extremely influential in anthropology and religious studies, in particular his notion of the “ritual process” and the state of “liminality” with its specific quality of “communitas” or undifferentiated unity. Turner’s widow Edith, a formidable anthropologist in her own right, has brought together in her new short book many instances of communitas across many genres of culture in an inspirational and light volume aimed, presumably, at a popular audience.

Until recently social scientists have ignored happiness or joy as a legitimate academic subject. Edith Turner wants seriously to correct this neglect and to demonstrate the applicability of her husband’s concept of communitas to many aspects of social life, not merely religion. Thus her book “describes scenes where the light dawns for all kinds of groups, times, and places, where people stumble on ‘the best time they’ve ever had’ —the time of communitas, unexpected and extraordinary” (xii). Since, she claims, communitas “can only be conveyed properly in stories” (1), the book