The Authorization of Religio-political Discourse: Monks and Buddhist Activism in
Contemporary Myanmar and Beyond

Matthew J. Walton (University of Oxford, matthew.walton@sant.ox.ac.uk, 44-01865-612866)
and Michael Jerryson (Youngstown State University, mjerryson@gmail.com, 330-941-3275)

Matthew J. Walton is the Aung San Suu Kyi Senior Research Fellow in Modern Burmese Studies at St Antony's College, University of Oxford. Michael Jerryson is associate professor of Religious Studies at Youngstown State University.

The authors would like to acknowledge constructive feedback on this article from the participants at the Interdisciplinary Seminar on the Study of Religion at the University of Oxford in November 2014 and three anonymous reviewers.

ABSTRACT

Through the example of contemporary Buddhist nationalist groups in Myanmar, this article draws attention to the cultural authorization of religio-political discourse. The symbolic power of a monk's pronouncements is amplified because of the cultural reverence attached to his vocation as a Buddhist monk, even without doctrinal references or ritual practices. A monk's cultural position within Burmese Buddhism particularly strengthens his authority when he frames his preaching and actions as a defense of Buddhism. Without attention to these cultural institutions and the religious authority they confer, the resonance and influence of monks' words cannot be completely understood. Furthermore, without directly responding to the logic of these

authorizing discourses, responses intended to counter the violence emerging from Buddhist nationalism and promote tolerance will be ineffective.

Introduction

The Burmese Buddhist monk U Wirathu sits with legs crossed on an ornately carved wooden throne on a raised platform in front of hundreds of lay Buddhists.¹ He is wrapped in the dark maroon robes of his office and holds an ornamental fan in his lap, a remnant of earlier times when monks hid their faces to give sermons to separate the perfection of the *dhmma*--the Buddha's teachings--from the morally imperfect and almost incidental person conveying it. Just a few minutes ago he had entered the crowd of people as any other monk does before preaching a sermon, passing through their midst preceded by young men carrying Buddhist flags with the insignia of the *sāsana* (a term for the Buddhist religion in its entirety) as the assembled laypeople chanted together, bestowing blessings of good health and freedom from suffering on the revered monk.

Once seated, he reciprocates the blessings by chanting in Pāli (the language of the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures) before leading the assembly in taking refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the *dhmma*, and the *sangha*--the community of monks) and the five precepts: vows to abstain from taking life, taking that which is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. The renewal of these vows is common to most Buddhist rituals in Myanmar, where monks lead participants away from their focus of worldliness and the everyday (*lokiya*) to prepare the reception of the Buddha's teachings, which speak to the otherworldly perception of ultimate truth (*lokuttara*).

With the standard components of the ritual complete, U Wirathu begins his sermon. Some monks are traditional in the content and structure of their sermons, taking a passage from a

sutta (episode from the Buddha's life) and expounding on its meaning. Others adopt a more contemporary approach, illustrating a Buddhist virtue with reference to everyday situations, maybe even making reference to a popular singer or local gossip to keep the listeners engaged. Some monks have a sing-song "call-and-response" style of preaching, where they repeatedly have their listeners repeat a phrase that they want to emphasize. Whatever the style, throughout any sermon, mumbled choruses of "*Hman ba, hpaya*" or "*Tin ba, hpaya*" (the polite way of saying "Yes, reverend monk" in Burmese) form an almost constant backdrop to a monk's words, as devoted followers nod along, listening to and confirming what he says. In this particular case, U Wirathu has chosen a topic that many would consider to be political, almost unthinkable several years ago under Myanmar's former military government, but increasingly common as restrictions on public speech are gradually lifted as part of a program of political reforms. His subject: the dangers of Islam and the need for Burmese Buddhists to conduct themselves in appropriately nationalist ways or risk losing both their religion and their country.

"These days, whatever you do, you need to do it from a nationalist perspective," he begins. "Our existence as a Burmese Buddhist nation has been threatened," he declares a few moments later, still preaching in a calm, almost recitative manner. Eventually, he comes to the subject of Buddhist politicians, asserting that they are not doing enough to defend the religion. "Once these so-called Buddhist politicians like Aung San Suu Kyi control the government our Buddhism is doomed. They will ban the Buddhist ceremonies in any government functions just to please their Muslim supporters in their parties...We need to be aware of what will happen once the Buddhist ceremonies are banned unofficially by the government. It will affect our religion directly and eventually Buddhism will disappear from our day-to-day lives."

U Wirathu goes on to warn about the dangers to Buddhist women, repeating claims that have circulated in Myanmar for decades: “They [Muslims] have a lot of money and no one knows where that money mountain is. They use that money to get our young Buddhist women. They show that money to attract our young women.” But the threat does not end there: “[The money that you spend at a Muslim-owned shop] will be used to get a Buddhist-Burmese woman and she will very soon be coerced or even forced to convert to Islam. And the children born of her will become Bengali Muslims and the ultimate danger to our Buddhist nation as they will eventually destroy our race and our religion. Once they become overly populous they will overwhelm us and take over our country and make it an evil Islamic nation.”

It is easy to frame U Wirathu’s speech as part of a larger cultural mosaic that does not directly pertain to Burmese Buddhism. He does not cite specific scriptures in his sermons on Burmese nationalism and Islam, nor does he perform rituals that sacralize the nation or demonize Islam. However, the power of U Wirathu’s words and their resonance among his listeners are enhanced by a set of factors that often go unexamined in studies of the interaction of religion and politics. This article draws attention to the cultural institutions that authorize religious discourses and practices.

The cultural reverence attached to the vocation of a Buddhist monk amplifies the power of U Wirathu’s pronouncements. He draws on narratives that make reference to Buddhism, but not directly to its doctrine; he appeals to a more nebulous notion of Buddhist cultural and political identity, and an even more specific *Burmese* Buddhist identity. This identity is rooted in a particular historical self-understanding, yet is affected by a set of global narratives about Islam, Buddhism, and Burmese Buddhists’ places in the world. His cultural position within Burmese Buddhism particularly strengthens his authority when he frames his preaching and actions as a

defense of Buddhism. Without attention to these cultural institutions and the religious authority they confer, the influence of U Wirathu's words cannot be completely understood. Furthermore, without directly responding to the logic of these authorizing discourses, responses intended to counter the violence emerging from Buddhist nationalism and promote tolerance will be ineffective.

Cultural Institutions and Religion

There has been critical work by sociologists and anthropologists on the general role of culture in religious traditions. Sociologist Peter Berger (1967, 25) considers religion the human enterprise of meaning making, "by which a sacred cosmos is established." Anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz also account for the ways in which religion affects peoples' worldview beyond doctrinal understandings or ritual practice. Geertz argued, "As we are dealing with meaning, let us begin with a paradigm: viz, that sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style or mood—and their worldview—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (1966, 3). The tandem between ethos and worldview captures the reverence that adherents of a religion have for their religious intermediaries, the ways in which they understand certain places or contexts to be imbued with meaning, and the way that they understand their own place in the world, both cosmologically and politically. But in general treatments of culture and religion there has been very little attention paid to the *authoritative* role of culture beyond the discussion of ethics and ritual.

In related fields, political scientists and some sociologists often have been guilty of either ignoring or essentializing culture, presenting it and its influence as primordial and unchanging

within society² or epiphenomenal.³ Modernization theorists saw religion and its anti-liberal effects on culture as allegiances to be overcome as a society progressed along the teleological path towards a modern, politically secular state.⁴ Political scientists studying religion and politics in Southeast Asia also have often failed to view prominent political actors as themselves embedded within particular religiously-influenced worldviews. They instead assume an instrumentalist perspective that political leaders merely *use* religion to manipulate the masses.⁵

Even when it appears that a leader or a regime is using religion politically, the efficacy of these methods is by no means guaranteed; this leaves open important questions such as what factors determine the resonance or acceptance of a particular religio-political argument or action? For instance, while Burmese Buddhists might have remained skeptical of the intentions of the country's former military leaders who supported extravagant public donation ceremonies over the past few decades, the mere fact that these officers were acting as proper Buddhist authorities ought to (supporting the monkhood and creating opportunities for the laity to donate and make merit), meant that there was also some degree of acceptance of their actions (Jordt 2007, Schober 1997).

One possible reason why the cultural dimension of authority has been under-recognized in scholarship on religion and politics is the unconscious Western bias toward interpreting religion through Christian frames. Among Western academics, early investigations saw doctrine and scriptures as foundational to religion. The conflation of doctrine and scriptures follows with modern interpretations of Judaism and Christianity – and the long-standing practices of hermeneutics – but is not necessarily valid for all religions. In his critique of the presumed parameters of the field, the historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith (2012, 43) charges that Religious Studies is dominated “by Protestant concerns and models.”⁶ These Protestant concerns

and models have precluded Western scholars from properly assessing the role and influence of cultural authority for religious traditions such as Burmese Buddhism.

In her study of “collectivistic religions,” Slavica Jakelic criticizes the assumption that religion is a choice and that the merging of religion and nationalism necessarily indicates a secularization process. In fact, most of the world’s religious population would fit into the category of collectivistic religiosity, that is, being born into a religious practice and identity. The implicit theory of religion that Jakelic identifies as underlying most analyses of religious nationalism incorrectly “understands religion to be about beliefs and rituals (i.e. theology) and not about the kind of belonging that shapes communal boundaries (i.e. identity, culture, or politics)” (Jakelic 2010, 9-10). Yet the fact that these identities are more culturally-based does not make them any less “religious.” And Jakelic’s warning, although present in a study of Christianity in Europe, would appear to be particularly relevant for the study of Buddhism; most Buddhists in the world are born into their religious identities, whereas most Western scholars or practitioners come to the religion as a matter of choice, often failing to recognize the “complex relations of religion to collective identities” (Jakelic 2010, 11).

An explanation that moves beyond individualized accounts of cultural authority relates to structural patterns, particularly communication. In his seminal work *Beyond Culture*, anthropologist Edward Hall places cultures on a communication continuum that ranges from high-context to low-context. On this continuum, Western cultures and their Abrahamic traditions exhibit low-context communication that requires nominal supplements to interpret verbal and written sentiments. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Asian Buddhist societies such as the Thai, Japanese and Chinese reflect high-context cultures, which demand a greater degree of

common, collective understanding, which Hall refers to as the programming of individuals to each other (1989).

The distinction between low-context and high-context cultures is intended to be mostly value neutral; however, problems arise when people assume that communication styles are uniform worldwide, such as Westerners who assess U Wirathu's sermons in the same way as U.S. Christian sermons. Hall writes, "In general, high-context cultures-- those which call for considerable programming of individuals to each other-- have greater mass and are therefore more predictable, if, and only if, one is familiar with the system. On the other hand, to the observer who doesn't know there is another system, a strange high-context culture can be completely mystifying...The force of his own cultural stereotypes will be so strong that it will distort what he sees; he will delude himself that he knows what's going on before his eyes" (Hall 1989, 53). It is due to this confusion that Guo-Ming Chen, Akira Miyahara and Min-Sun Kim (2013, 472) underscore the dangers of imposing Western concepts, theories and methodologies onto Japanese communication research; a similar argument applies to an analysis of U Wirathu's sermons.

Some academics and journalists have linked U Wirathu's work and the nationalist 969 movement to the larger discourse on religious fundamentalism and its dynamic Christian ministers, imams, and rabbis.⁷ While there are shared characteristics between U Wirathu and conservative U.S. Christian ministers like Scott Lively, U Wirathu's sermons are interpreted by his listeners through a very different framework than a Christian sermon in the United States.⁸ Since many Asian Buddhist cultures are characterized by high-context communication, Burmese Buddhists listening to a monastic sermon hear different connections and implications than non-Burmese listeners. Not only that, the dynamics and weight of monastic cultural authority (and the

response of a Burmese Buddhist to a monk in the context of a sermon) are different than in other religious traditions (for example, the way U.S. Christians might respond to pastoral sermons). This criterion alone significantly changes the way in which the laity respond to U Wirathu. Analogous to this discussion on communication patterns, cultures contain different levels of religious authority in and against doctrine and ritual, an aspect of cultural authorization that we explore further below.

Among the few scholars to include cultural authority in their assessment of religious systems is Max Weber. In his larger work on authority, Weber theorizes three different varieties: bureaucratic, legal and charismatic. Among the three, charismatic authority is inextricably part of religion. In his seminal work *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Weber writes, “the term 'charisma' will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader” (Weber 1947, 358-9). In this explanation, the treatment of the cultural pertains to the perception of an individual and the context within which he or she acts. Christopher Adair-Totteff (2005, 191) notes that for Weber, “[c]harisma is extremely personal, it is highly irrational, it is very temporary, and, above all, it is especially unusual.”

This type of charismatic authority is unquestionably present in some religious leaders who have galvanized their communities for social and political purposes. An example in the Burmese case is the famous monk Sitagu Sayadaw, whose schools and social welfare projects are spread throughout the country, and whose entrances at public sermons are more akin to the

arrival of a rock star than a humble Buddhist monk (with crowds of devotees surging into lines of makeshift “security” people, trying to get closer to the SUV that ferries him to the stage). And the allure of an individual charismatic monk has been recognized for some time. Reflecting on his ethnographic study of Burmese Buddhism in the 1960s, the anthropologist Manning Nash wrote, “Anyone wearing the saffron robe obeys this minimal code and is accorded respect and deference as the exemplar of the ideal life. But the personal attributes of monks and their learning give them rank, bring them special gifts, and attract villagers to them for advice” (1963, 285). This idiosyncratic aspect of culture, however, does not act as an equivalent authority to that of doctrine and discipline, as reflected in the areas of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. There is an aspect of cultural authority that exists beyond the personal, irrational, and unusual.

U Wirathu seems to possess little charismatic authority, at least as Weber has described it. His sermons do not whip people into a frenzy due to his personal characteristics or his delivery; instead, he excites his listeners through the resonance of the particular religio-cultural messages he conveys and the context in which they are delivered. Although his quarters at Ma Soe Yein monastery are apparently filled with pictures of him, no one has made claims regarding his learning or his proximity to becoming awakened (enlightenment), let alone the possession of supernatural powers. One even could say that his arguments are rather clunky and not delivered in a particularly inspiring or eloquent way. In this case, Weber’s “charismatic authority” does not appear sufficient to explain U Wirathu’s appeal.

While Weber may have presented a personalized charismatic authority as primary, he also described a routinized form that he called the “charisma of office” (*Amtscharisma*) (Parsons 1968, 194). Sociologist Edward Shils builds upon Weber’s work to identify an institutional charisma independent from a charismatic individual and inherent in the massive organization of

authority. Shils explains, “Institutional charisma permeates, but does not by any means completely saturate the entire corporate structure. It is present in every act of obedience, even though it does not account for the whole act of obedience” (1982 [1972], 131-2). Charles Lindholm describes institutional charisma as that “which can be inherited, or passed along with accession to an office, or invested in an institution. This is the charisma that gives an aura of sacred power to any individual who has the right to wear the bishop’s robes, or sit on the king’s throne, regardless of actual personal characteristics” (1990, 24). These explanations of institutional charisma effectively move away from individual and idiosyncratic occurrences of charisma. Yet they also tend to move away from the locus of culture and place the focus instead on institutions *in toto*. It is the cultural sources and mechanisms of authority-production that we seek to re-insert into discussions of institutional charisma as a way of explaining the power and resonance of preaching and writing by contemporary Burmese monks.

The Native Process of Authorization

In 1897, the Burmese monk Okpo Sayadaw entered the Shwedagon Pagon in Rangoon, the most revered Buddhist area in Burma, with his sandals on. It was his second attempt to provoke reform of Buddhist practices. Okpo Sayadaw cited Buddhist scriptures and the importance of intention over practice, but he failed to convince the populace to revise their stance on Buddhist practices. Alicia Turner writes that instead of doing what he had hoped, Okpo Sayadaw’s actions “instigated a polarizing discourse of defending the Buddha’s *Sāsana* against the threats of heteropraxis” (2014, 122).

This was a clear case in which a monk tried to use his cultural authority and doctrine to change orthopraxy. It was, in fact, a particular collision of cultural authority, orthodoxy, and

orthopraxy during a period of contestation and transformation within Burmese Buddhism. To understand the dynamics of interaction of these three sources of religious authority, we need to understand the ways in which, at different times and in different contexts, different authorizing structures are prioritized. For contemporary Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhism, we argue that the dominant religious authority structure derives from cultural institutions, particularly Buddhist monks and the *sangha* (monkhood) that they represent.

Throughout Southeast Asia, there is a high rate of male ordinations. In Thailand over 70 percent of males ordain at one point in their lives. This extremely high percentage is largely due to the societal allowance of temporary ordination, a similar situation to Myanmar, a country for which there is less reliable ordination data but sufficient anecdotal evidence. By ordaining, even for a short period, a boy or a man undergoes a rite of passage that provides his parents and/or sponsors with merit.⁹ When a Buddhist in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos or Cambodia undergoes the full ordination ceremony, he is immediately perceived as different. This imminent transformation underscores the interdependence between the authoritative components: men become monks *through ritual* yet the cultural authority that they come to possess extends beyond the context of the ritual. This significance is imprinted into monks' daily encounters with other people in their society.

In accordance with high-context cultures, Southeast Asian lay men and women show their respect by bowing to the newly ordained monk. This hierarchy of respect pervades nearly all social standings. The level of respect manifests itself not only in body, but in language; there is a host of specific words employed when talking or referring to a monk. In Myanmar, lay people end most sentences directed towards a monk with *hpaya*, a shortened form of one of the official titles of the Buddha. There also exists a special set of words that are used to refer to

monks' daily activities, such as eating and walking. These serve to further delineate the boundary between the laity and monks, the latter of which carry out many of the same activities, yet presumably in a more rarefied fashion.¹⁰

Linguistic practices separate out monks as qualitatively different than laypeople, positioned higher not only in a social hierarchy, but also in a moral one, having taken vows and removed themselves from the worldly life of the householder. Regardless of an individual monk's degree of adherence to the *vinaya* (rules of monastic conduct), monks as a collective body are held in higher esteem in society. In effect, donning the saffron robes and becoming a monk elevates a man in Southeast Asian Buddhist societies and places him in the highest cultural role for Buddhism. Thus, when a monk makes a comment, the authority behind his words (especially if they are framed as relating in some way to Buddhism) derives from his cultural status. He does not need to cite scripture or perform a ritual to exert his authority.¹¹

His words carry weight with his audience, in no small part because of the reverence attached to his status as a monk. Earlier scholars of Southeast Asian Buddhism have made note of this phenomenon. In discussing Thai Buddhism, Yoneo Ishii (1986) opines that the social importance of Buddhism is situated in the *sangha* because the other two sources of refuge (the Buddha and his *dhamma*) are too abstract. The words of monks are almost always accepted without argument or question by the laity or by more junior monks, at least publicly. Monks are assumed to be better acquainted with the Buddha's teachings and to have spent time contemplating them and their implications for the laity's daily conduct. Melford Spiro (1982 [1971], 351) suggested that in 1950s Burma, "Many people entertain exaggerated notions of the emotional qualities of *religieux*," and while lay people may have a slightly less idealized notion

of the monk today in Myanmar, they rarely consider challenging what a monk says, especially in the context of a sermon.

Certainly monks like U Wirathu possess religious authority, but what are the mechanics that confer power upon Burmese monastic status? Further, why do monks such as U Wirathu enjoy such a high level of authority in a country such as Myanmar? Monastic authority derives in part (both collectively and for individual monks) from the practice or perception of renunciation. Renunciation is a prominent source of power in the Theravāda tradition, whether in the form of presumed holy men (Rozenberg 2010, Brac de La Perrière et al 2014), the protective abilities they can transfer into objects (Tambiah 1984), or the *sangha* as a whole, as a body of renunciates.¹² Even as an urban monk, U Wirathu benefits from a general reverence for the *sangha* and an assumption that he is not only more knowledgeable regarding the *dhamma*, but also more diligent in practicing it. But this idiosyncratic aspect of culture also does not fully explain U Wirathu's influence, as his authority stretches beyond the personal, irrational, and unusual.

One aspect of a monk that is vitally important to the respect that he is granted by Burmese Buddhists is the presumption of his great *pāramī*. *Pāramī* is often translated as “perfections” and refers to particular moral qualities that are essential to develop on the path to enlightenment. The concept is also intimately related to *kamma*, in that certain noble actions can produce the specific type of *kamma* that is *pāramī*. According to Burmese Buddhist beliefs, one would not even encounter the opportunity to become a monk if one did not have sufficient *pāramī* accumulated from good deeds in previous lives (Spiro 1982 [1971], 405). Ingrid Jordt notes that many laypeople would consider their own *pāramī* to be inferior to a monk's, enhancing their respect for him (2007, 17). Lindholm describes this source of charisma as:

“These particular institutions and persons claim, and are believed by the public, to have a connection with the sacred, and to therefore have charisma” (1990, 24). Monks, therefore, deserve to be honored both for the renunciation and superior morality they practice in this life and for the noble works they would have performed in previous lives.

It seems clear that this monastic cultural authority has multiple sources. In order to better understand how it affects the ways in which monks and their words are perceived by the laity, it helps to understand monastic cultural authority as functioning within Theravāda societies as a form of what Bourdieu has referred to as “symbolic capital.” Bourdieu sees power as culturally and symbolically created through societal structures and actions within it. He explains that “symbolic capital is a credit; it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (Bourdieu 1989, 23). Capital begets capital-- whether it is financial or symbolic. Within the religious system, monks and other religious leaders regularly engage in ceremonies and interactions, such as the system of bowing, which legitimate their identities. Stanley Tambiah considers these performances on an indexical value, existentially transferred to and inferred by actors during a performance that confers upon them symbolic capital. He writes: “‘Religion’ is not purely a matter of belief and worship but also has social and political resonances and communitarian associations; ‘language’ is not merely a communicative device but has implications for educational advantage, occupation, cultural identity, literary creation, and historical legitimation of social precedence” (1996, 337).

Religious cultural authority, a natural corollary to power, accrues through self-reflective modes of *habitus* that are associated with a network of social interactions. Monks in Southeast Asia partake in regular practices such as going on alms or delivering sermons that reinscribe their relationship with the laity. In this vein, David Swartz describes symbolic capital as “socially

recognized and approved authority” that is “often associated with the authority of positions” (2013, 103).

This cultural authority is connected to - but distinct from - ritual. In explaining the force of a given action or statement, Bourdieu argues that,

What one might call the *liturgical* conditions, namely, the set of prescriptions which govern the *form* of the public manifestation of authority, like ceremonial etiquette, the code of gestures and officially prescribed rites, are clearly only an *element*, albeit the most visible one, in a system of conditions of which the most important and indispensable are those which produce the disposition towards recognition in the sense of misrecognition and belief, that is, the delegation of authority which confers its authority on authorized discourse (1991, 113).

The formal conditions of the ritual are not sufficient to convey its scope of authority; a monk does not need to participate in a ritual to possess his symbolic capital. Rather, the wider context in which the ritual is performed and received is necessary in order to understand the mandate of authority.

If we consider the vignette at the onset of this essay, many of the elements that conditioned the ways in which Burmese Buddhist listeners were prepared to hear and digest the words of U Wirathu were unrelated to doctrine or ritual. While scriptural learning can no doubt enhance the reputation of a monk, regular scriptural references are by no means required in a monastic sermon. In the sermon cited above, U Wirathu made no references to scriptures. The only comment that comes close is an explanation of the 969 symbol (where 9 is the number of great qualities of the Buddha, 6 of the *dhamma*, and 9 of the *sangha*).

The symbolic power generated by a monk is strengthened by the fact that he speaks not as an individual but as a representative of a respected institution, a clarification that helps to further explain the influence of U Wirathu's sermon (Bourdieu 1991, 115). When he preaches, he does so not (only) as a man, or a Buddhist, or a Burmese person, or even a monk. When a Buddhist monk gives a sermon, he is speaking *in situ*, presumably giving an exposition of the *dhamma* or explaining something in light of the *dhamma*, not merely giving his own opinions. The weight of the entire Buddhist tradition, as maintained over centuries by the *sangha*, both empowers and protects him in this context as Buddhist followers are strongly conditioned and pressured to accept monastic moral authority and the preaching of monks.

The Augmentation of Monastic Authority

Completely understanding U Wirathu's social and political influence and the resonance of the arguments that he and his colleagues make, requires more than simply acknowledging the institutionally-bestowed respect that monks enjoy *qua* monks. In this case, the impact of his words is amplified because their subject matter is not only of vital importance to Buddhists in Myanmar, they also represent what is arguably the core vocational duty of a monk: the defense and perpetuation of Buddhism as an institution. The term *sāsana* refers not only to the Buddhist religion as a whole, but also to its texts and teachings and the lived practice of the religion. Without the existence of the *sāsana*, Buddhist practice (and thus, enlightenment) would be impossible.

The need to defend the *sāsana* (religion) against external enemies is already a compelling reason for any Buddhist, but when preached or urged by a monk, the argument becomes an imperative. Buddhist monks are the keepers of the religion, of its texts and its teachings and as

such, they have historically assumed responsibility for its protection and perpetuation.¹³ Myanmar's recent spate of Buddhist activism began in 2012 with sermons like U Wirathu's, positing Buddhism as endangered and Islam as the threat. A "Buy Buddhist" boycott of Muslim-owned businesses quickly materialized, loosely organized by monks and laypeople associated with the 969 Movement. Within weeks of the movement's emergence, 969 stickers seemed to be everywhere in Yangon, the country's former capital and largest city (Schissler 2014). Media accounts of the phenomenon suggested that this was indicative of widespread bigotry and prejudice among Burmese Buddhists,¹⁴ but conversations with many people displaying stickers revealed both the multiple motivations behind putting up the sticker (Cherry Thein 2013) as well as the intense social pressure to do so, especially when the person making the request was a monk (Walton 2013).

In a way, monks are always doing the work of *sāsana*-building and *sāsana*-protection. Under normal circumstances, their practices of learning, teaching, preaching, meditating, and maintaining the scriptural and ritual traditions all contribute to the maintenance of the religion more generally. However, in moments of crisis (or perceived crisis), the vocational obligation of a monk to act to protect the *sāsana* (as well as the veneration that this role generates) is amplified as this specific type of action is brought to the fore of the list of monastic duties. This is certainly a moment of perceived crisis among many Buddhists in Myanmar, as has been well-documented in studies of the current period of activism (Kyaw San Wai 2013, Walton and Hayward 2014, Schissler, Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi 2015). And, while the laity are expected to play a role in the defense of Buddhism, this is a mantle that monks are not only vocationally obliged to take up, they are also better-equipped to play this role more effectively, for all of the reasons stated

above, related to perceptions of their superiority with regard to things such as merit or knowledge of Buddhism.

Connecting political and social issues to the protection of Buddhism also augments monastic cultural authority in relation to the encouragement or sanctioning of violence. The theologian Charles Kimball considers the invocation that the ends justify the means a common way to persuade religious followers to commit violence. He explains, “People also use the end to justify any means when they wish to protect religious institutions and teaching they feel are at risk. Institutions and central doctrines are necessary components in all enduring religious systems; they are essential to propagate the tradition and nurture each generation of adherents” (2008, 154). This dynamic is certainly present in Myanmar and the underlying imperative is enhanced by monastic endorsement of the threat narrative.

Recognizing the authority of cultural institutions can also help us further understand the resonance of this “defense of the *sāsana*” framing by revealing the dynamics of contestation for symbolic power, the ability to control and “organize the perception of the social world and, under certain conditions...really organize the world itself” (Bourdieu 1989, 22). While there are certainly multiple contestants for symbolic power in Theravāda countries (the ability of a succession of military governments in Myanmar to impose their own dominant frame on the country’s national identity and internal divisions being just one example), in the realm of religion, the symbolic power of monks stands virtually unchallenged. What may otherwise be seen as conflicts over immigration, land, or economic resources, once framed in religious terms by monks, acquire a solidity that is difficult to shake, especially when the conflict is also framed in existential terms.

Even competing political authorities have limited ability to respond to monastic efforts in this area. When, after a monastic conference in January 2014, the monk-led Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha, in its shortened Burmese form) promulgated a set of four laws that it had been developing that would restrict the rights of non-Buddhists, the country's leading political figures felt obliged to not only send the laws through Parliament, but also comment favorably on the laws' intentions (Radio Free Asia 2014). The four laws—regulating religious conversion, inter-faith marriage, population control, and polygamy—were eventually passed by Myanmar's Parliament in stages, between May and August 2015.

Although Buddhists in Myanmar are generally skeptical of overt monastic political engagement, framing these actions as protecting the religion gave the monks space to operate in a realm that has traditionally been seen as their purview and undermined the potential of any opposition. As one monk said after the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, the highest Buddhist authority in the country, banned the political use of the 969 symbol in 2013, “We don't take part in political affairs, steal others' possessions, attack or lie to others. So you cannot say we violate the ethics of a Buddhist monk. We just make our special efforts in order to preserve our race and religion” (May Sitt Paing 2013). Monks affiliated with 969 and MaBaTha have effectively used this interpretive space to not only justify their involvement in affairs that have become more explicitly political, but also to close off avenues for criticism or alternate conceptions of defending Buddhism.

Indeed, any opposition to this renewed Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar has been limited, only beginning to develop since April 2014.¹⁵ This is due in no small part to the presence of monks as vocal leaders of these campaigns. In May 2014, a group of Myanmar civil society organizations released an open letter opposing one of MaBaTha's four laws, which

would restrict inter-religious marriage. They were immediately branded as “traitors” by U Wirathu and forced to defend themselves publicly (Nyein Nyein 2014). Some even received death threats (Yen Snaing 2014). The monks affiliated with 969 and MaBaTha do not generally use scriptural references to demonize Muslims and their defenders; they merely speak about religious and political identities. But as institutional representatives of Buddhism, the religious implications are clear and undeniable. These monks’ words can effectively close off criticism because Buddhists in Myanmar cannot afford to be seen not to support actions that are characterized as being in defense of the religion.

Even within the *sangha*, the monastic role as defender of the faith limits the ability of monks critical of anti-Muslim sentiments to speak out publicly or criticize their fellow monastics. In addition to the general prohibition on causing schisms in the *sangha*, these monks are constrained by the expectation that they will fulfill this role and vulnerable to criticism if they are not seen as doing so. In July 2013, one Burmese monk told an interviewer, “We dare not criticize the extremist monks because they are very strong. So if we make a move, a criticism, we are attacked from every side.” He offered examples of when some monks criticized the 969 Movement and were subsequently accused of not being “true Buddhists” (Hayward and Walton 2013, 7).

The organizational techniques of MaBaTha have drawn on both the ritual and cultural authority of monks to further blur the line between political and religious acts. At the culmination of two weeks of nationwide celebrations of the passage of the last of the religious protection laws in September and October 2015, the group filled Yangon’s national Thuwunna stadium for an event that was equal parts political rally and Buddhist ceremony. One report noted that, “The monks and nuns prayed, chanted and cheered speeches with legions of lay supporters

in a display of the growing political influence of radical Buddhist clergy in the final weeks of a landmark election campaign” (Sherwell 2015). While some monastic participants were more explicit in their political statements, video messages from senior monks made clear the religious imperative and the visual impact of so many monks gathered in a single place reinforced the sanctity of the event’s goals.

It is monastic cultural authority that carries the most weight in matters related to Buddhism in these countries. Monks’ pronouncements on issues like nationalism are taken by many people to have the force of doctrine when these secular interests are painted as inextricably interwoven with the health and propagation of the *sāsana*. In this way, monks can compel political action by framing it as proper, even essential, Buddhist conduct. This has implications for those seeking to respond to the anti-Muslim violence connected to Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Lay activists opposing the religiously discriminatory laws currently being considered in Myanmar have attempted to detach their criticism of the laws from religious matters, with only limited success (Walton, McKay, and Khin Mar Mar Kyi 2015). In this context, cultural institutions trump doctrinal sources in their authority and influence. Effective intervention through a debate of scripture will not have much of an impact; rather, it is likely that only counter-narratives from within the *sangha* (and especially those made by more senior and respected monks) will be effective in re-orienting views regarding the defense of the *sāsana*.

Conclusion

While scholars have regularly noted the importance of the respect paid to Buddhist monks by the laity, the relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond ritual interactions and the doctrinal expertise monks are presumed to possess. The dynamics of cultural authorization of

religious actors in Theravāda Buddhist contexts is related to but also extends beyond the spheres of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. We have used this lens of cultural authorization to explain the resonance and appeal of the messages of monks leading Myanmar's contemporary 969 and MaBaTha movements but we believe it warrants further theoretical exploration, particularly in relation to the authorizing discourses connected to doctrine and ritual. This analysis could also be extended to other Theravāda countries.

The activities of the monk-led *Bodu Bala Sena* and other similar groups in Sri Lanka is the most obvious comparative example, although the different cultural dynamics of lay-monastic interaction might engender other processes of religious authorization.¹⁶ We might also consider the conflict in southern Thailand, where the fact that soldiers and monks live together serves to sanctify the soldiers' activities and behavior (Jerryson 2011). When Buddhist monks speak candidly about how critical the soldiers are to solving the conflict and to protecting the survival of the religion, they do not need scripture to infuse their speech with religious authority. And this authority can be a powerful symbolic tool that does not even require words or actions on the part of monks to be mobilized. When militants there targeted and killed monks, Thai Buddhists perceive these actions as defacing walking emblems of Buddhism and the nation, authorizing violent responses on the part of the state in protection of the religion. In early November 2015, the Thai Buddhist monk Apichart Punnajanto declared on his Facebook page that southern Buddhists should have weapons and should burn down a mosque for every Buddhist monk killed in the conflict (Seiff and Jirenutwat 2016). Before his Facebook page was deactivated, he had posted several memes in support of U Wirathu.

The consideration of religio-cultural authorization in instances like those examined in this article provides a critical additional piece to the religious, cultural and political analyses of

Southeast Asian Buddhist societies by accounting for the ways in which monastic authority is re-inscribed through lay-monastic interactions and by helping to explain both the sources and the political effects of this cultural authority. It may also help to explain the ways in which religion changes with modernity, by identifying an overlooked valence of religious relevance that shifts over time in its importance relative to orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Recognizing this cultural dimension is critical in order to be able to develop effective policy responses to current incarnations of violent Buddhist nationalism that appear to be encouraged or exacerbated by monks. In places such as Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, the religious cultural authority of monks reaches beyond text and ritual and is embedded deeply within society. Understanding the sources and dynamics of this cultural authority will assist both academics and policy makers for Southeast Asia and beyond.

REFERENCE LIST

- Adair-Toteff, Christopher. July 2005. Max Weber's charisma. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 5 (2): 189-204.
- Banton, Michael, ed. 1966 (2013). *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. London: Tavistock Publications
- Becka, Jan. 1991. Buddhist revival in post-independence Burma: a study of interaction of religion and politics (1948-1962). In Vavrouskova 1991.
- Berger, Peter. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- . 1989. Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological Theory* 7 (1): 14-25.
- Brac de La Perrière, B., Rozenberg, G., Turner, A. 2014. *Champions of Buddhism: Weikza cults in contemporary Burma*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Carrithers, Michael. 1983. *The Forest Monk of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Chen, Guo-Ming, Akira Miyahara, and Min-Sun Kim. 2013. East Asian communication skills. In Simonson 2013.

Cherry Thein. 2013. Sayadaw slams '969' campaign. *Myanmar Times*. 22 April. Available online at <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/6458-sayadaw-slams-969-campaign.html> (accessed 4 September 2014).

Falk, Monica Lindberg. 2008. Gender and religious legitimacy in Thailand. In Lundström-Burghoorn 2008.

Fuller, Thomas. 2013. Extremism rises among Myanmar Buddhists. *New York Times*. 20 June. Available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/world/asia/extremism-rises-among-myanmar-buddhists-wary-of-muslim-minority.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> (accessed 4 September 2014).

Geertz, Clifford. 1966 (2013). Religion as a cultural system. In Banton 1966 (2013).

Hall, Edward T. 1989. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hayward, Susan and Matthew J. Walton. 2013. Buddhist narratives of peace and conflict in contemporary Myanmar. Paper presented at Asia Pacific Peace Research Association Conference, 12 November.

Ishii, Yoneo. 1986. *Sangha, state, and society: Thai Buddhism in history*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Jakelc, Slavica. 2010. *Collectivistic Religions: Religion, Choice, and Identity in Late Modernity*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Jerryson, Michael. 2013. Buddhist traditions and violence. In Juergensmeyer, Mark, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson 2013.

---. 2011. *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jordt, Ingrid. 2007. *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Juergensmeyer, Mark, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, eds. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kessler, Clive. 1978. *Islam and Politics in a Malay State: Kelantan 1838-1969*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

Kimball, Charles. 2008. *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*. New York: HarperOne.

Lehrich, Christopher I., ed. 2012. *On Teaching Religion: Essays by Jonathan Z. Smith*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. March 1959. Some social requisites of democracy: economic development and political legitimacy. *American Political Science Review* 53 (1): 69-105.

Lundström-Burghoorn, Wil, ed. 2008. *Gender Politics in Asia: Women Manoeuvring Within Dominant Gender Orders*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.

May Sitt Paing. 2013. "Buddhist Committee's 969 prohibitions prompts meeting of movement's backers." *The Irrawaddy*. 10 September. Available online at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/buddhist-committees-969-prohibitions-prompts-meeting-of-movement-backers.html> (accessed 3 November 2013).

Nyein Nyein. 2014. Nationalist monks call NGOs "traitors" for opposing interfaith marriage bill. *The Irrawaddy*. 12 May. Available online at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/nationalist-monks-call-ngos-traitors-opposing-interfaith-marriage.html> (accessed 2 September 2014).

Parsons, Talcott. 1968 [1949, 1937]. *The Structure of Social Actions, Vol. 2*. New York: The Free Press.

Pitsuwan, Surin. 1985. *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand*. Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University.

Radio Free Asia. 2014. Myanmar Leader Backs Buddhist Monks' Calls to 'Protect' Religion, Race. *Radio Free Asia*. 27 February. Available online at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/laws-02272014174350.html> (accessed 6 September 2014).

Ramakrishna, Kumar. 2013. Religious extremism: the case of Wirathu. *The Nation*. 7 August. Available online at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Religious-extremism-The-case-of-the-monk-Wirathu-30212037.html> (accessed 17 August 2014).

Rostow, W.W. 1960. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rozenberg, Guillaume. 2010. *Renunciation and Power: The Quest for Sainthood in Contemporary Burma*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies.

Schissler, Matthew. 2014. "Sleeping Dogs." *New Mandala*. 20 January. Available online at <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/01/20/sleeping-dogs/> (accessed 9 June 2016).

Schissler, Matthew, Matthew J Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi. 2015. Threat and virtuous defence: Listening to narratives of religious conflict in six Myanmar cities. *Myanmar Media and Society Project*, Working Paper 1:1.

Schober, Juliane. 1997. Buddhist just rule and Burmese national culture: state patronage of the Chinese tooth relic in Myanmar. *History of Religions* 36 (3): 218-243.

Schonthal, Benjamin, and Matthew J Walton. 2016. "The (New) Buddhist Nationalisms?: Symmetries and Specificities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar." *Contemporary Buddhism* 17:1: 1-35.

Seiff, Abby and Rin Jirenuwat. 2016. A Thai Buddhist monk is using social media to preach violence against Muslims. *Newsweek*. 4 April. Available online at <http://www.newsweek.com/2016/04/15/thailand-monk-apichart-social-media-muslim-violence-443698.html> (accessed 15 April 2016).

Sharma, Anuradha and Vishal Arora. 2014. Nirvanaless: Asian Buddhism's growing fundamentalist streak. *Washington Post*. 1 May. Available online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/nirvanaless-asian-buddhisms-growing-fundamentalist-streak/2014/05/01/9af7413c-d161-11e3-a714-be7e7f142085_story.html (accessed 17 August 2014).

Sherwell, Philip. 2015. Burma's radical monks pray for holy intervention in historical election. *The Telegraph*. 4 October.

Shils, Edward. 1982 [1972]. *The Constitution of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Simonson, Peter, ed. 2013. *The Handbook of Communication History*, 46-481. New York: Routledge.

Smith, Jonathan Z. 2012. Here and now: prospects for graduate education. In Leirich 2012.

Spiro, Melford. 1982 [1971]. *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Strand, Cecilia. 2013. The rise and fall of a contentious social policy option – narratives around the Ugandan anti-homosexuality bill in the domestic press. *Journal of African Media Studies* 5 (3): 275-294.

Swartz, David L. 2013. *Symbolic Politics and Intellectuals: The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. 1996. *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.

---. 1984. *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turner, Alicia. 2014. *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Vavrouskova, Stanislava, ed. 1991. *Religion and Society in India and Burma*. Prague: The Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.

Walton, Matthew J. 2013. Myanmar needs a new nationalism. *Asia Times Online*. 20 May. Available online at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-02-200513.html (accessed 2 September 2014).

--- and Susan Hayward. 2014. *Democratization, Communal Violence, and Contesting Buddhist Narratives in Contemporary Myanmar*. East-West Center Policy Studies Series, 71:4.

---, Melyn McKay, and Daw Khin Mar Mar Kyi. 2015. Women and Myanmar's "Religious Protection Laws." *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 13:4.

Weber, Max. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons. New York: The Free Press.

Yen Snaing. 2014. Activists face violent threats after opposing interfaith marriage bill. *The Irrawaddy*. 4 June. Available online at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/activists-face-violent-threats-opposing-interfaith-marriage-bill.html> (accessed 2 September 2014).

¹ The full text and video of the now well-known sermon from February 2013 that is described in this section is available at <http://hlaoo1980.blogspot.ca/2013/03/boycott-muslim-businesses-nationalist.html> (accessed 10 July 2014).

² Pitsuwan 1985.

³ Kessler 1978.

⁴ See, for example, Lipset 1959 and Rostow 1960.

⁵ See, for example, Becka 1991.

⁶ This is not to say that there were not early scholars of religion who went beyond textual analyses. There are notable examples of scholars such as Cornelis Petrus Tiele, W. Robertson Smith, and E. B. Tylor. However, these scholars did not inform the trajectory of Buddhist Studies, nor affect the way in which scholars of religion saw the locus of religious authority.

⁷ For example, see Ramakrishna 2013 and Sharma and Arora 2014.

⁸ The U.S. pastor Scott Lively has lobbied against non-heterosexual identity and has called upon governments like the U.S. to criminalize homosexuality. For a brief background on the global impact of his sermons, see Strand 2013.

⁹ In the case of Thai Buddhists, it is believed that ordination can provide a man's parents with enough merit to go to heaven (Jerryson 2011, 4). Although Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, the Buddhist cosmology does include multiple celestial realms into which beings can be re-born due to their stores of merit; however, the beings in these realms are still ultimately subject to eventual rebirth.

¹⁰ In fact, the Burmese word for monk is *hpoungyi*, meaning one with great power or merit.

¹¹ This distinction may shed further light on the gravity of the debate on allowing women to ordain in Thailand. See Falk 2008.

¹² In his seminal work on forest monks of Sri Lanka, Michael Carrithers locates the authority of forest monks in the pan-South Asian veneration of renunciation. This veneration is reconfigured within the Buddhist framework, so that when monks renounce, they do so in order "to put an end to *dukkha* in its Buddhist significance." Carrithers finds that the more the monk strays from the world of urbanity, the more he is seen to have embraced "a fate noble, heroic and full of fruitful struggle" (1983, 14).

¹³ For more on the “defense of the *sāsana*” justification see Walton and Hayward 2014. This also connects to a wider discussion of exceptions to the rule for Buddhist violence. See Jerryson 2013.

¹⁴ See, for example, Fuller 2013.

¹⁵ See, for example the *Pan Zagar* movement that has promoted “flower speech” and spoken out against spreading rumors or defamation of other religions online. Irrawaddy 2014.

¹⁶ See Schonthal and Walton 2016 for a comparative examination of the differences between the religio-political spheres in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.