

FAULTLINES

The K.P.S. Gill Journal of Conflict & Resolution

Volume 25

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Volume 25

edited by

AJAI SAHNI



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&

THE INSTITUTE FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT



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FAULTLINES: THE K.P.S. GILL JOURNAL OF CONFLICT & RESOLUTION

Edited by Ajai Sahni

FAULTLINES - THE SERIES

FAULTLINES focuses on various sources and aspects of existing and emerging conflict in the Indian subcontinent. Terrorism and low-intensity wars, communal, caste and other sectarian strife, political violence, organised crime, policing, the criminal justice system and human rights constitute the central focus of the Journal.

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Foreword

In every age, we have been reminded of the inherent and extreme contradictions of war. The stresses of armed conflict appear to bring out the best and the worst in mankind, at once provoking unimaginable barbarities as well as a creative genius that has spurred human knowledge, science and technology into the realms of greatness; destroying the very foundations of morality and social order, even as they inspire fundamental transformations in values and establish new worlds of hope; stirring in the human mind unequalled rapacity and inconceivable self-sacrifice, moral collapse and spiritual exaltation.

And when war coalesces with religion – as it invariably does throughout history – such contradictions are infinitely compounded. All the great Faiths emphasise restraint, abnegation and an inflexible morality above all concerns of profit, victory and even survival. Yet all institutionalized Faiths have allied themselves to stark power and pelf, and some of the greatest atrocities of history – wars of aggression, rapine, genocide, slavery, some of the vilest and most oppressive forms of discrimination and oppression – each has been, at some time, validated by high religious authority. A vast chasm has been created by ambition and avarice, between the principles and the practice of religion.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, for instance, the very foundation of Christianity, preaches a radical pacifism. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ declares, “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” And yet, it is in the name of Christ that the crusades were

launched and sustained over nearly four centuries. And where Christ declared, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone”, the Catholic church inflicted the torments of the great Inquisition.

The Hindus speak of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, ‘the world is one family’, but constructed the gross inequities of a vicious caste system.

Islam, the Faithful remind us repeatedly, is a religion of peace. And yet, today, violence and discord afflict almost every Muslim majority state, and strife flows from these to impact much of the world.

How could Buddhism be an exception? Despite occasionally startling examples of commitment to the core tenet of *Ahimsa* or non-violence against all living beings – perhaps embodied in the life of the present (14th) Dalai Lama, Lhamo Thondup – Buddhist communities and states have not been averse to war and violence.

And what brings violence to an end? India’s Northeast has been a locus of chronic ethnic violence virtually since the moment of the birth of the nation. A proliferation of insurgencies have since afflicted much of the region but appear, now, to have substantially burnt themselves out. While kinetic measures have been integral to the state’s counter-insurgency responses in the Northeast, a wide variety of non-kinetic strategies have also been deployed. Prominent among these have been a diverse range of peace initiatives, some of which have successfully ended specific insurgencies, others that have limited or ended certain patterns of violent action, and still others that have produced enduring, albeit uncertain and fragile cessations of hostilities, and a restoration of democratic processes and governance.

Separately, the state and its agencies may itself be the source and cause of insurgent and terrorist violence, even as the shadowy core of its power centre – the deep state – actively undermines and ‘manages’ democratic processes. This has certainly been the case in Pakistan, where the military-madrassa-mullah nexus has come to dominate the national imagination and democratic processes,

though election after election has demonstrated the absence of democratic support to this corrosive power cabal. Pakistan's history is a cautionary tale for others in the region and across the world on how identity politics and militarism are an incendiary mix, and not a force that can help cement nationhood.

But identity politics and a new legitimization of authoritarian and communal politics is now a growing reality in India, and will provide fertile ground for hostile states to exploit in new patterns of disruption. The wars of the future are 'hybrid', exploiting a range of instrumentalities well below the threshold of open war, to inflict harm on the target state. India is already victim to corrosive proxy wars and patterns of long-term subversion, and the scope for injury is vastly augmented by the revolutionary technological transformations of the past years, by globalization and the integration of the communications and information technology spectrum, and a progressive erosion of the distinctions between the military and non-military spheres. All measures suggest that India's leaderships are yet to imagine the sheer magnitude of this challenge, and a policy response remains well beyond the reach or aspirations of the powers that be.

The *madrasa* has long been a favourite whipping boy in the discourse on radicalization, extremism and terrorism, on the one hand, while conservative Muslims insist that the institution provides much-needed educational and welfare services, particularly in societies where state systems fail to fulfil basic obligations. Such a failure is acute with regard to the female population in Pakistan, where state and public institutions have systematically reinforced the disempowerment of women, and where female education receives particularly low priority within and dismal wider educational scenario. Empirical assessments of the role and efficacy of *madrasas* are rare, and an evaluation of the efficacy (or otherwise) of *madrasas* in promoting female empowerment in Pakistan is of particular significance.

Ajai Sahni

This volume explores these diverse themes in a continuing effort to bring into critical focus elements of the complex dynamic that produces, sustains, confronts and, on occasion, neutralizes divergent patterns of conflict.

Ajai Sahni

October 28, 2019

Buddha Goes to War

Ramananda Sengupta*

One of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism is *ahimsa*, or non-violence. Yet the history of Buddhism is replete with violence, committed not just by followers defending their country or faith, but also for personal and political gains. While many Tibetan Buddhists violently (and in vain) opposed the Chinese after the People's Liberation Army (PLA) "liberated" their country in 1950, Chinese and Japanese Buddhists have often supported and justified extreme acts of violence down the ages, including during World War II. And recently, there's been a rising spate of violence by Buddhists, including monks in Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka, who believe that their religion is under threat. So what explains this massive gap between perception and reality?

The Buddha was a wealthy Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama who lived around the 6th century BC. But struck by the fact that life appeared to be an endless cycle of sorrow, suffering and death, he became an ascetic in search of the meaning of existence. After years of wandering around in search of an answer, he achieved Nirvana (enlightenment)

* The author is a Foreign and Strategic Affairs analyst.

after meditating for 49 days under a Bodhi tree, and became the Buddha, or the enlightened or awakened one.

His teachings soon spread across India into China and Asia and eventually around the world. Today there are an estimated 380 million practitioners of his faith, which essentially preaches deep contemplation and compassion for all living things.

But the faith mutated along the way, and today the three main denominations of Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, each with several sub-sects. The Tibetan sect falls under Vajrayana, while the numerous Mahayana sects include Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren, Soka Gokai, and the Falun Gong, which rattled the Communist regime in China. Theravada, practiced in South and Southeast Asia in countries like Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, lays stress on the monastic aspect of the religion, although monks have joined political dispensations in places like Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Mahayana, which means ‘large vehicle’, is practiced in North, East and Southeast Asia in countries like China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan, and stresses on *Bodhicitta* or the awakened heart.

The Vajrayana or diamond (indestructible) vehicle comes from the syncretism between Buddhism and the Hindu Tantric Yoga, and it has many complicated practices and systems of Bodhisattvas, Buddhas and Deities. Tibet, Nepal and Japan are some countries where Vajrayana is practiced.

The faith also morphed “to include a pantheon of deities in addition to Gautama Buddha. Those include numerous *bodhisattvas*, the term for sage-like individuals who work for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. In Theravada Buddhism, practiced mainly in Southeast Asia, Gautama Buddha is only the most recent of 28 Buddhas described in

holy texts. And then there are *avatars*, humans believed to be incarnations of deities.”¹

While some Buddhist texts do sanction taking human lives in exceptional cases to protect the *sangha* or defend the innocent, most (*but not all*) Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists today reject even these justifications.²

“IF YOU MEET THE BUDDHA ON THE ROAD, KILL HIM”

That was the intriguing title of a book by American psychotherapist and author Sheldon Kopp, first printed in 1972.³ Subtitled “the pilgrimage of psychotherapy patients,” the book comprises a number of short stories which dwell on the ‘pilgrimage’ aspect of psychotherapy, and expounds on Kopp’s belief that it’s the journey of life that matters, not the destination. But apart from obliquely hinting that one needed to believe in oneself and not blindly follow a Buddha, or anyone else who claimed to have all the answers, the book doesn’t quite explain why the Buddha, a symbol of non-violence, or *ahimsa*, needs to be killed.

Kopp’s title may have been startling, but it was not original. He was echoing Línjì Yìxuán, a Buddhist monk who founded the Linji school of Zen Buddhism in late 9th century China. According to Linji, “Followers of the Way [of Zen], if you want to get the kind of understanding that accords with the Dharma, never be misled by others. Whether you’re facing inward or facing outward, whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you

1 Dave Roos, “That Fat, Jolly Fella Isn’t Buddha”, August 24, 2018, <https://people.howstuffworks.com/that-fat-jolly-fella-isnt-buddha.htm>.

2 Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, “Buddhism on Peace and Violence”, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/buddhism-on-peace-and-violence>.

3 Sheldon Kopp, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*, Bantam Books, New York, 1972.

meet a *buddha*, kill the *buddha*. If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch. If you meet an *arhat*, (someone who has, or is about to achieve Enlightenment,) kill the *arhat*. If you meet your parents, kill your parents. If you meet your kinfolk, kill your kinfolk. Then for the first time you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go...”⁴

Of course, Linji was not literally promoting mass murder, parricide or the killing of whoever one came across in their lives, but stressing, perhaps a bit dramatically, that true salvation lay in understanding that anything, even the Buddha, was an attachment that one needed to get rid of in order to achieve true salvation.

However, the words “kill” and “Buddha” in the same sentence are difficult to reconcile for most people for whom Buddhism tops the list of all the ‘peaceful’, ‘non-violent’ religions in the world.

“The impression of Buddhist pacifism is so strong that it has suggested to historians that it was a significant factor in the downfall of Buddhism in India,”⁵ argues Stephen Jenkins, Professor of Religion at Humboldt State University, whose research is focused on Buddhist ethics, “Buddhist kings would seem to be implicated in a hopeless moral conflict. No Kṛṣṇa seems to rescue the Buddhist Arjuna from the disempowering moral conflict that arises between a warrior’s duty and the values of *ahimsā* (nonviolence).”⁶

4 Burton Watson, (trans.), *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-chi lu*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999.

5 Stephen Jenkins, “Making Merit through Warfare and Torture According to the Ārya-Bodhisattva-gocara-upāyaviśaya-vikurvaṇa-nirdeśa Sūtra”, 2009, https://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Making_Merit_Through_Warfare_and_Torture.pdf.

6 Ibid.

Perhaps nothing embodies this non-violent image more than the forever smiling Lhamo Thondup, or Tenzin Gyatso, better known as the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of the Tibetan Buddhists.

This is the same Dalai Lama who blessed Indian Army Colonel Sonam Wangchuk a day before he led his unit of Ladakh Scouts to take on Pakistani intruders in Kargil in late May 1999. Three days later, battling extreme weather and geographical conditions, Wangchuk's 40-man unit attacked and killed or evicted some 135 Pakistani soldiers who had occupied Chorbit La, a strategic pass 5,141m (16,866 ft) high in the Himalayas.

Colonel Wangchuk was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, India's second highest military decoration, for his bravery. Recalling that the meeting with the Dalai Lama before the mission was mooted by a senior JCO, Wangchuk recalled in an interview that his faith helped him tremendously: "We were given *prasad* and sacred threads by him (the *Dalai Lama*). When you are alone on the battle front far from loved ones it is only divine presence that encourages you to go ahead and do your best."⁷

So here we have a Buddhist warrior who has no trouble reconciling his faith with his job, or as he describes it, his duty, despite it entailing violence and killing. He's not the only one.

THE SECRET WAR IN SHANGRI LA, OR THE SHADOW CIRCUS

In 1998, the BBC released a documentary titled *The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet*,⁸ which shattered the popular

7 "Kargil: How Sonam Wangchuk and 40 men defeated 135 Pakistani troops", *Rediff*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.rediff.com/news/special/kargil-how-sonam-wangchuk-defeated-135-pakistanis/20190726.htm>.

8 Tensing Sonam, "*The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet*", June 30, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_5LOPYzddY.

impression that the non-violent Tibetans allowed the People's Liberation Army to stroll into Lhasa in 1951 after half-hearted, token resistance.

Produced by Tenzing Sonam, (whose father Lhamo Tsering was a resistance leader) and his wife Ritu Sarin, the film uses rare footage to vividly recount how a few thousand Tibetans took on the mighty PLA for almost two decades. Outgunned and outnumbered, they fought a violent and bloody guerrilla battle on the roof of the world. And their unlikely, and in the end, unreliable ally for much of the time was the American Central Intelligence Agency.

The 50-minute documentary cites retired CIA veterans and surviving Tibetan fighters to shed light on how Washington funded and trained the resistance until it suddenly decided that wooing Communist China made better sense.

According to intelligence documents declassified by the US State Department in August 1998, the CIA budgeted almost USD1.7 million a year through most of the 1960s for the Tibetan resistance. Code named ST Circus, the top-secret operation included covert training at a site in the remote Colorado mountains (where Tenzing's father went for training) and later in Mustang, Nepal. It also involved supplies for reconnaissance teams in Tibet and an annual subsidy of USD180,000 for the Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet after an unsuccessful uprising and took refuge in India in 1959. And the 'Tibetan cause' was promoted through "Tibet Houses" set up in New York and Geneva.⁹

According to one memo among the declassified US documents, "The purpose of the program... is to keep

⁹ Jim Mann, "CIA Gave Aid to Tibetan Exiles in '60s, Files Show", *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-sep-15-mn-22993-story.html>.

the political concept of an autonomous Tibet alive within Tibet and among foreign nations, principally India, and to build a capability for resistance against possible political developments inside Communist China,”¹⁰ then under the iron rule of Chairman Mao Zedong.

Warren W. Smith Jr., a research historian at Radio Free Asia and author of several books on China’s control policies in Tibet, asserts that Indian intelligence officials also set up a secret Tibetan unit within the Indian Army, though declassified US documents indicate that Tibetan leaders occasionally complained to Washington about India’s half-hearted support.¹¹

In *Shadow Circus*, Acho, an operative who was part of the CIA sponsored outfit conducting raids into Tibet from Mustang, vividly recounts one of the more “successful” raids, where 40 Tibetan horsemen ambushed a Chinese military convoy on the Xinjiang-Lhasa highway in 1961:¹² “The driver was shot in the eye, his brains splattered behind him and the truck came to a stop. The engine was still running. Then all of us fired at it. There was one woman, a very high-ranking officer, with a blue sack full of documents.”¹³ These documents later proved to be treasure trove for US intelligence operatives desperate for information on Mao’s China. But the graphic rendering of the violence speaks for itself.

In his 1990 autobiography *Freedom in Exile*, the Dalai Lama admits that two of his four elder brothers (Thubten J. Norbu, who passed away in the US in September 2008, and Gyalo Thondup, 91, who runs an ancient noodle making

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Patrick French, “A Secret War in Shangri-La”, *The Daily Telegraph*, November 14, 1998, https://info-buddhism.com/CIA_in_Tibet-A_Secret_War_in_Shangri-La.html.

13 Ibid.

factory in the Indian hill town of Kalimpong), made contact with the CIA during a trip to India in 1956.¹⁴

According to the Dalai Lama, the CIA's decision to help was "not because they cared about Tibetan independence, but as part of their worldwide efforts to destabilize all Communist governments... Naturally, my brothers judged it wise to keep this information from me. They knew what my reaction would have been."¹⁵

China, however, insists that the Dalai Lama knew of the operations right from the start, and accuses him of being a "splittist" agent of foreign forces seeking to violently separate Tibet from China.

Lamenting the CIA decision to train and equip Tibetan guerrillas who conducted raids into Tibet from Mustang, the Dalai Lama argues that this "only resulted in more suffering for the people of Tibet. Worse, these activities gave the Chinese government the opportunity to blame the efforts of those seeking to regain Tibetan independence on the activities of foreign powers – whereas, of course, it was an entirely Tibetan initiative."¹⁶

Notice, however, that he does not say that those seeking to regain Tibetan independence should do so without violence.

Richard Nixon, who was elected President of the United States in November 1968, decided to open up to China. But one of Beijing's pre-conditions for any formal talks was that all help to Tibetans had to stop. In 1971, a year before Nixon and Chairman

14 Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile*, Harper Collins Publishing, San Francisco, 1991.

15 Jim Mann, "CIA Gave Aid to Tibetan Exiles in 60s, Files Show", *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1998, <http://latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-sep-15-mh-22993-story.html>.

16 Ibid.

Mao Zedong held their historic meeting in Beijing, the CIA abruptly wound up its Tibetan operations. And in 1974, Nepal bowed to Chinese pressure and sent its army to close the camps in Mustang. When the Dalai Lama heard that the few remaining rebels there were refusing to surrender, he sent a taped message urging them to do so. Unable to handle the conflict between the instructions of their spiritual head and the need to defend their faith, many of the US trained rebels jumped into a raging river and drowned. One senior officer slit his throat after handing over his weapons, while another was ambushed and shot by the Nepalese army. Tenzing argues, “These were men who had been fighting the Chinese since the mid-Fifties, people who had grown up with guns and knives, being asked to surrender their weapons ... It was the end of everything for them.”¹⁷

The two instances mentioned above – Colonel Wangchuk and the Tibetan resistance – show that when it comes to defending their nation, Buddhists have no qualms about resorting to violence or going to war. The same logic applies when it comes to defending their faith.

The cover of *Buddhist Warfare*¹⁸, a series of essays edited by Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, has a disquieting photograph of a youngster in maroon Buddhist robes and shaved head standing on the bank of the mighty Irrawady – brandishing a revolver. The essays not only document violence down the ages by Buddhists of all hues – and there are many – but also expose the deep symbiotic relationship between the Buddhist clergy and several states which co-opt religion to justify violence for political ends. This link between Buddhism and aggressive political and military action are clearly visible

17 Patrick French, op. cit.

18 Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (eds.), *Buddhist Warfare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010.

in the large number of people who died in the wars between Burma and Thailand, and in Cambodia.

And then of course there is the extreme brutality of Japanese soldiers during their conquest of China, particularly in Nanking in December 1937:

The Japanese invaders took full control of the city on December 13. In seven short weeks, they engaged in “an orgy of cruelty seldom if ever matched in world history.” They brutally murdered, raped, and tortured as many as 350,000 Chinese civilians. In this bloodbath, more people died than at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. For months, the city was filled with piles of rotting corpses. Nearly 80,000 women were raped and mutilated, many gang-raped. Soldiers disembowelled women. Fathers were forced to rape their daughters, sons their mothers. All manner of inhuman torture was practiced without remorse. Children and the elderly were not spared. Thousands of young men were beheaded, burned alive, or used for bayonet practice.¹⁹

In his introduction to *Buddhist Warfare*, Jerryson says that while “The motivations for this volume are many, but chief among them is the goal of disrupting the social imaginary that holds Buddhist traditions to be exclusively pacifistic and exotic.”²⁰ He then goes on to note:

The Indian *Kālacakratāntra* describes an eschatological war in which the army of the bodhisattva king of Shambhala conquers and annihilates Muslim forces and re-establishes Buddhism.²¹

19 Josh Baran, “Sword of Compassion?”, *Tricycle*, 1998, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/sword-compassion/>.

20 Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, op. cit, p.3.

21 Schmithausen, Lambert, “Aspects of the Buddhist Attitude towards War,” in E.M. Houben and K.R. Van Kooij (eds.), *Violence Denied: Violence*,

And in Japan, Zen became a mechanism of the state and a motive to fight – to convert the heathens. Japanese Buddhist military objectives in the early 1900s were to kill unbelievers and to convert their state to Buddhism. In accordance with *Mahāyāna* principles, people who were not enlightened would be reborn; therefore, there was no true destruction of life. Once the state became Buddhist, unbelievers would be reborn in a Buddhist country. Brian Victoria writes that, in this context of Buddhist war, murder becomes a form of *upāya* (skillful means), since sentient beings are ultimately saved. When Buddhist states have attempted to preserve Buddhist principles and values, popular forms of Buddhist nationalism and fundamentalism have been simultaneously elicited.²²

In his subsequent essay, Jerryson brings out the link between violence and the role of monks as a political symbol in Buddhist countries, and suggests that attacks – real or perceived – on monks could be one of sparks, triggering violent acts of Buddhist retaliation.

Any “view of an authentic early Buddhism” that rejected violence “flies in the face of reality” since “Buddhism has always been closely associated with rulers” and was “an instrument of power,” asserts Bernard Faure, Kao Professor of Japanese Religion at Columbia University, in another essay.²³

The role of Chinese Buddhists who enthusiastically endorsed and supported the Korean War effort to ingratiate

Non-Violence and the Rationalization of Violence in South Asian Cultural History, Brill, Leiden, 1999, p. 58.

22 Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, op. cit. p. 9.

23 Faure, Bernard, “Concluding Remarks: Afterthoughts”, in Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (eds.), *Buddhist Warfare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, pp. 216-217.

themselves with the Communist state is brought out by Xue Yu, author of *Buddhism, War and Nationalism*. In this case, “patriotism served almost as a new religion.”²⁴

Among the other essayists in *Buddhist Warfare*, Brian Daizen (Andre) Victoria, professor of Japanese studies at Antioch University and the director of the Antioch Education Abroad Buddhist Studies in Japan, is the only one who asserts that the “soldier-Zen” in Imperial Japan “so grievously violated Buddhism’s fundamental tenets that the school was no longer an authentic expression of the Buddhadharma”.²⁵ According to him, the clear alignment of Buddhists with state interests was so clearly evident in Imperial Japan, and proved that the “*sangha* has become corrupt and degenerate,” adopting a “slavish subservience” and “becoming the *de facto* pimp and prostitute of the state.”²⁶

In his 1999 dissertation, *Zen and Japanese Militarism: A Critical Inquiry into the Roots of “Imperial Way-Zen*, Victoria dwells on “the way in which institutional Buddhism became ever more tightly interwoven with, and supportive of, the government’s ongoing expansionist policies on the Asian continent, especially in Korea and northern China,” and “the increasing role played by leaders of both the Rinzai and Soto Zen sects within institutional Buddhism in justifying the identification of Buddhist doctrine and practice with a martial spirit and warfare.”²⁷ Further, “What becomes clear is

24 Xue Yu, *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle Against Japanese Aggression 1931-1945*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 151.

25 Victoria, Brian Andre, “A Buddhological Critique of ‘Soldier Zen’ in Wartime Japan”, in Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (eds.), *Buddhist Warfare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, p. 106.

26 Ibid, p. 128.

27 Brian Andre Victoria, “Zen And Japanese Militarism: A Critical Inquiry Into The Roots Of “Imperial Way-Zen”, Temple University Graduate

the manner in which these ostensibly religious efforts were in reality merely one aspect of the Japanese government's attempt to win the allegiance and acquiescence to its rule of its colonial subjects..."²⁸

The irony of images of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddhist embodiment of compassion, adorning Japanese Kamikaze aircraft during World War II, or the Pure Land Buddhist monks arguing that the war was necessary to preserve 'true' Buddhism, is hard to miss.

More than 4,000 kilometres southeast of Japan lies Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist nation in the news today for its brutal suppression of Rohingya Muslims. Earlier known as Burma, Myanmar is the northernmost country of Southeast Asia. Flanked by China in the north, Laos and Thailand in the east and southeast, Bangladesh and India in the west and northwest and the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal to the south and southwest, it is the 26th most populous country in the world, and the 40th largest country by area, with a 2019 estimated population of 54.34 million.

Almost 90 per cent of this population practices Theravada Buddhism, which adheres closely to the oldest Buddhist texts and stresses on a rigorous observance of the monastic code. Christians comprise 6.2 per cent of the population, Muslims 4.3 per cent, Animists 0.8 per cent and Hindus 0.5 per cent. The Muslims are primarily concentrated in the Rakhine state on the Bay of Bengal, with the port city of Sittwe as its capital.

Buddhism has been the state religion of Burma beginning with the Kingdom of Bagan in the 11th century, and the Faith has been used to consolidate the national identity since then.

Board, December 1, 1995, pp. 13-14, <https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/Victoria-Zen-Militarism.pdf>.

28 Ibid.

Subsequently, most Burmese kings and rulers supported the Buddhist *Sangha* – or the monastic order – which in turn gave the ruling dispensation some legitimacy. While encouraging nationalism, the *Sangha*, which had immense moral authority, also ensured that the country was run according to ‘Buddhist’ principles.

In the mid-16th century, King Bayinnaung waged relentless wars to acquire huge chunks of territory, and probably under pressure from the *Sangha*, imposed restrictions on Muslims. When he died in 1581, his kingdom included large chunks of Laos and Thailand, then known as Siam. Things started falling apart soon after his death, and the kingdom started eroding politically and physically.

Muslim sailors and traders from the Arab world as well as from neighbouring India started settling in Rakhine (then known as Arakan) around the 9th century. But many local Buddhists felt threatened by the newcomers and their alien culture, and there were several clashes between the two. In 1785, Burmese Buddhists from the south attacked and annexed Arakan, killing most Muslim Rohingya men and driving the others into neighbouring Bengal, then under British rule.

After the first Anglo Burmese War (1824-1826), the British seized Arakan and encouraged Muslim farmers from Bengal, including Rohingyas, to settle there, again fuelling local resentment.

After two more wars, in 1853 and in 1886, the British captured Burma and started bringing in more Hindus and Muslims from India to fill government jobs. The Buddhist monks – who thus lost their exalted position in the state as well as a large chunk of their revenue – were at the forefront of the protests against colonial rule as well as the influx of Indians, and many took part in violent protests in 1930 and 1938.

The riots in 1938 had another trigger, “A book published by an Indian Muslim author, reprinted with an attachment containing ‘highly disparaging references to Buddhism’.”²⁹ It is unclear whether religious or political provocateurs added this attachment, but it further inflamed communal and religious tensions. Demonstrators including monks demanded that the author be punished; if not, they threatened to treat Muslims as “enemy number one” and take action to “bring about the extermination of Muslims and the extinction of their religion and language.”³⁰ At this stage, “Some monasteries became armed sanctuaries and storage space for loot, contrary to monastic rules. More than 4,000 people were arrested, including monks accused of violence, arson and murder.”³¹ A colonial British inquiry into the 1938 riots noted, “One of the major sources of anxiety in the minds of a great number of Burmese was the question of the marriage of their womenfolk with foreigners in general and with Indians in particular.”³²

Further, Randy Rosenthal, an editor and writing instructor at Harvard University who specialises in Buddhist studies and literature, asserts,

An important contributing factor to the current crisis in Rakhine occurred during WWII. Under Japanese occupation, Buddhists in Rakhine (then called Arakan) were recruited to fight as proxies for the Japanese... Local Muslims, in contrast, were armed

29 “Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar”, ICG Report No. 290/Asia, September 5, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar>.

30 Ibid.

31 Mikael Gravers, “Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka”, *Contemporary Buddhism*, Volume 16, Number 1, 2015, pp. 1-27.

32 Burma Riot Inquiry Committee, *Interim Report*, Rangoon, Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, Burma, 1939.

and mobilized by the British as independent militias who performed guerrilla-attacks on Japanese forces. This meant that Buddhists and Muslims were fighting against each other, which resulted in the groups becoming geographically separated and “ghettoized,” with Muslims fleeing north to avoid the anti-Muslim violence of the Japanese offensives, and Buddhists fleeing south to avoid the anti-Buddhist violence of the guerrilla counter-offensives. After the war, waves of government violence against Rohingya occurred in 1954, 1962 (during the military takeover), 1977-78 (when the military forced the Rohingya to carry Foreign Registration Cards, and over 200,000 were driven into Bangladesh), 1992, 2001 (in response to the Taliban’s destruction of Buddhist statues in Bamiyan), and 2003.³³

The fact that the Rohingya Muslims lobbied for a separate Rakhine state towards the end of World War II, as well as after the British left in 1948, did not help matters. Describing them as ‘stateless Bangladeshis’, all the subsequent dispensations have refused to recognise them as Burmese citizens.

The military, which ruled Myanmar in some form or the other from 1962 to 2011, constantly fuelled the notion of the country and its religion being in danger from “outsiders.”³⁴

33 Randy Rosenthal, “What’s the connection between Buddhism and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar?”, November 13, 2018, <https://www.lionsroar.com/what-does-buddhism-have-to-do-with-the-ethnic-cleansing-in-myanmar/>.

34 Interestingly, one of the finest accounts of the Muslims in Myanmar was written by Moshe Yegar, an Israeli diplomat who served in Rangoon in the early 1960s. His MA thesis, titled “The Muslims of Burma: A Study of Minority Group,” published in 1972 is probably one of the best works on the subject.

The transition to democracy in 2011 didn't change much. Today, while Myanmar has no official religion, powerful elements in the new government support blatantly anti-Muslim Buddhist outfits with immense grass-roots support, such as the 969 movement and the Amyo Barthar Thathanar (Organisation to Protect Race and Religion), better known by the Burmese acronym Ma Ba Tha.

Popular and powerful monks like Ashin Wirathu, the spiritual leader of the 969 movement and head of the Ma Ba Tha, and his followers feed and promote the narrative that Muslims (or Chittagong Bengalis) from Bangladesh had sneaked in not just to dilute and erode the local Buddhist culture and population, but are part of a crusade to turn Myanmar into a Muslim nation. Describing mosques as enemy bases, these two outfits have publicly urged Buddhists to boycott Muslim shops and shun interfaith marriages.

“Some Buddhist leaders have justified violence against non-Buddhists,” an article in the *South China Morning Post* notes,

Sitagu Sayadaw is one of the most respected religious leaders in Myanmar, known for his teachings and for his philanthropic work. In a recent sermon, he clearly intended to suggest that the killing of those who are not Buddhist is justified on the grounds that those who do not follow Buddhist precepts and do not take refuge in the Buddha, his teachings and the monastic community, are less than human. Violence is justified if those persecuted are not Buddhists.³⁵

35 Paul Fuller, “Blood sutra: whatever happened to Buddhism, religion of peace and compassion?”, *This Week in Asia*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2152083/blood-sutra-whatever-happened-buddhism-religion-peace-and>.

The current Rohingya crisis was sparked by the gang rape and murder of a young Rakhine woman in May 2012 by three Muslims, which spiralled into massive clashes between Muslims and Buddhists, often abetted by local security forces, which used reports that the Muslims were *jihadis* planning terrorist strikes in the country as an excuse. The anti-Muslim violence spread beyond the Rakhine state and Rohingya to Meiktila in central Myanmar, where a mosque was burnt down and over a 100 killed.

Ashin Wirathu, a seemingly unassuming monk of the Masoeyein Monastery, who was featured on the cover of *Time magazine* as “the Face of Buddhist Terror” in July 2013, insists that his movement is a peaceful one. But in his talks, he often stresses that Buddhism, which once extended all the way from Afghanistan in the West to Japan in the East, faces an existential threat from a rising Islam. He cites the razing of the Buddhist library in Nalanda/Bihar at the end of the 12th century, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001, and points out that Indonesia, once a Hindu and Buddhist nation, has since ‘fallen’ to Islam, while the Philippines is grappling with violent jihadists. Myanmar, he asserts, is next. “I am only warning people about Muslims. Consider it like if you had a dog that would bark at strangers coming to your house – it is to warn you. I am like that dog. I bark,”³⁶ he asserts. What his followers do after he barks, he says, is not his problem.

This key fault-line between Buddhism and Islam is also visible in Thailand, and further west in the tiny island of Sri

36 Marella Oppenheim, “Ashin Wirathu – ‘It only takes one terrorist’: the Buddhist monk who reviles Myanmar’s Muslims”, *The Guardian*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/globaldevelopment/2017/may/12/only-takes-one-terrorist-buddhist-monk-reviles-myanmar-muslims-rohingya-refugees-ashin-wirathu>.

Lanka, both countries where militant Buddhist outfits have forged linkages with the Ma Ba Tha and 969 movement of Myanmar. The growing Islamophobia worldwide after the 9/11 attacks and the rise of Muslim terror outfits like the Islamic State (formerly Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham, ISIS; also, *Daesh*) wanting to turn the world into an Islamic caliphate, have further fuelled the ranks of Buddhists believing that they face a major threat. Social media is vigorously used to promote and build on these fears.

SOLDIERS IN SAFFRON

In January 2019, General Apirat Kongsompong, the Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army, announced that he planned to have some of his soldiers ordained into the monkhood and assigned to posts in temples.³⁷

This unusual announcement came days after a group of armed men stormed Wat Rattananuparb, a Buddhist temple in Sungai Padi District of the southernmost Thai province of Narathiwat, killing the abbot and three other monks, on January 18, 2019. While no one claimed responsibility, Muslim separatists increasingly active in the region were suspected to be behind the incident.

Narathiwat is one of Thailand's three southernmost provinces (the others being Yala and Pattani) which have Muslim majorities in the Buddhist-dominated country. The three provinces and a small part of neighbouring Songkhla were part of a Malay sultanate annexed by Thailand in 1909, and tensions have simmered ever since. On the same day that the Narathiwat temple was stormed, a roadside bombing

37 Narong Nuansakul, "Army plans to have soldiers ordained, posted to temples in troubled South: Army chief", *The Nation Thailand*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.nationthailand.com/breakingnews/30362720>.

wounded five soldiers and a shootout between paramilitary rangers and Muslim rebels left one of the gunmen dead. Days earlier, a local Imam was shot dead, while four civil defense volunteers were killed in a drive-by shooting on January 10, in the neighbouring Pattani province.³⁸

The violence in the south has been described as one of the deadliest low-intensity conflicts on the planet, with more than 7,000 people killed and over 11,000 injured since 2004.

According to the Thai Foreign Ministry, there are approximately 7.5 million Thai Muslims in the Kingdom or about 12 per cent of the total 62.5 million Thai population. While the majority of them are Sunnis, there are a few Shias and followers of Wahhabi sects too.

The social characteristics of the area are those of Malay Muslims, who form the majority of the people in the society and live in harmony with ethnic Thai and Chinese minorities. At present, there are about 1.4 million Thai Muslims in the three provinces, which accounts for 18 per cent of the Thai Muslim population...³⁹

The ministry however insists that the problems in the three southern provinces are in general similar to those existing in other remote provinces of other regions in Thailand. They include poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, low education, as well as discrimination

38 "Thailand: Suspected Muslim rebels storm temple, kill monks", *Taiwan News*, January 19, 2019, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3621056>.

39 "Muslims in Thailand", Royal Thai Embassy, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017, <http://www.thaiembassy.org/riyadh/en/organize/29025-Muslim-in-Thailand.html>.

from corrupt and misbehaving officers. However, due to the specific social and cultural conditions of the South, these problems have been used as a pretext for creating divisions and attempting to separate the three southern provinces from the rest of Thailand by claiming the history of semi-autonomous Pattani over 100 years ago.⁴⁰

The stark differences in culture, language and customs in the southern provinces have often led to friction, even though the government insists that these are more due to economic and cultural reasons rather than religious. It argues that though several separatist movements have tried to exploit these ethnic, religious and linguistic faultlines, they have been unsuccessful because their violent activities have undermined public safety and security.⁴¹

In late October 2015, Apichart Punnaajanto, the monk who headed Bangkok's Wat Benchamabophit Dusitwanaram, popularly known as the Marble Temple, urged his followers on *Facebook* to burn one mosque to the ground for every Buddhist monk killed in the Deep South.

Though the offensive post was quickly pulled down by the government, Phra (a prefix loosely translated as 'Venerable') Apichart Punnaajanto, then 30, remained unrepentant. The death of a single monk should be considered a religious attack, he said in interview to *Newsweek*. "I was stressed before, when monks got killed and injured," he added. "Now it's past that point—no stress, just revenge. This is why I said those things about burning the mosques: because I want revenge." Punnaajanto's idol, according to the *Newsweek* report, "is

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

Myanmar's firebrand monk U Wirathu, whose anti-Muslim rhetoric helped stoke deadly riots in 2012 and 2013.”⁴²

Punnajanto declares, “What I want to do is to make Buddhists who are still sleeping and think things are beautiful, I want to make them aware of what’s going on. Muslims aren’t trying to invade just the three [southern] provinces; they are trying to occupy the whole country.”⁴³

Bangkok-based security analyst at IHS-Jane’s, Anthony Davis, observes, “There is a growing strain of anti-Muslim sentiment within the Buddhist *sangha* [monastic community] in Thailand...This thing isn’t some nasty little insect hidden away under a rock, it’s becoming mainstream.”⁴⁴

Several rounds of talks between the government and the rebels, including the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) have failed a Patani separatist movement in northern Malaysia and Southern Thailand, and the violence continues.

An AFP report on July 25, 2019, a day after Muslims rebels armed with grenades attacked a military outpost in Pattani and killed four soldiers before escaping with several machine guns, noted, “Insurgents operating in small, secretive village-level cells carry out near-daily bomb attacks and shootings in Thailand’s south – including the murder of Buddhist civilians and Muslims perceived to be collaborating with the state.”⁴⁵

42 Abby Seiff and Rin Jirenuwat, “A Thai Monk Is Using Social Media to Preach Violence Against Muslims”, *Newsweek*, April 4, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/04/15/thailand-monk-apichart-social-media-muslim-violence-443698.html>.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 “4 killed as Thai rebels hit military base”, *The Straits Times*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/4-killed-as-thai-rebels-hit-military-base>.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE: SRI LANKA'S OTHER WAR

The resignation of all nine Muslim Parliamentarians and two provincial governors in Sri Lanka after the coordinated bombings of Churches and hotels on Easter Sunday (April 21, 2019), exposed the deepening fault lines between the majority Sinhala Buddhists and the small Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Over 250 people were killed and hundreds injured in the attacks, claimed by *Daesh* (Islamic State).

The resignations came after Athuraliye Rathana, a powerful hardline Buddhist monk, lawmaker and adviser to President Maithripala Sirisena, went on a hunger strike demanding the removal of the two governors and a minister he accused of having links with the suicide bombers. The other eight Muslim ministers resigned in solidarity.

The links between the Buddhist clergy and politicians in Sri Lanka is overt, with many monks not just supporting, but joining nationalist political parties.

In March 2018, communal riots broke out in the eastern town of Ampara and subsequently spread to nearby Kandy. This followed a video purportedly showing a Muslim restaurant owner from the town admitting that the food he served Sinhalese was mixed with “sterilisation pills,” which went viral on social media,⁴⁶ and the death of a Sinhalese truck driver who was assaulted by four Muslim men.⁴⁷

46 Janet Guyon, “In Sri Lanka, Facebook is like the ministry of truth”, *Quartz.com*. April 22, 2018 <https://qz.com/1259010/how-facebook-rumors-led-to-real-life-violence-in-sri-lanka/>.

47 “Sri Lanka declares state of emergency after Buddhist-Muslim clash”, *Reuters*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-clashes/sri-lanka-declares-state-of-emergency-after-buddhist-muslim-clash-idUSKCN1GI0WG>.

Angry Sinhalese mobs attacked Muslim establishments and mosques, and the latter responded in kind. At least two people were killed and scores hurt, and government declared an emergency to stem further violence.⁴⁸ There were disturbing reports however that the local administration and the police had overtly sided with the Sinhalese.⁴⁹

Therevada Buddhists, who comprise almost 75 per cent of the population, monopolise the country and treated minorities (Hindus 12.6 per cent, Muslims 9.7 per cent and Christians 7.6 per cent) condescendingly even during the British Colonial rule. After independence in 1948, the government's attempts to impose Buddhism by incorporating it into the constitution and enforcing the use of Sinhala as the official language angered the minorities, and sparked a violent movement for a separate homeland for Tamils, who live principally in the north and east of the island. The ensuing civil war, which began in the early 1980s, saw the Sinhalese, including monks, using Buddhist religious texts to justify attacks on Tamils. Just like India's predominantly Buddhist Ladakh Scouts, the mostly Buddhist Sri Lankan Army found solace – and perhaps justification for their violence – in their religion. The war finally ended in 2009, after a massive military offensive and the killing of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) chief Velupillai Prabhakaran.

But, as the recent accusations which led to the resignation of all Muslim ministers clearly show, the Buddhist hardliners were quick to shift their target.

48 “Sri Lanka violence: Nationwide state of emergency lifted”, *BBC*, March 18, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43446239>.

49 Tom Allard and Shihar Aneez, “Police, politicians accused of joining Sri Lanka’s anti-Muslim riots”, *Reuters*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-clashes-insight/police-politicians-accused-of-joining-sri-lankas-anti-muslim-riots-idUSKBN1H102Q>.

Apart from the hardline Jathika Hela Urumaya founded by Athuraliye Rathana, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, also known as Buddhist Power Force) is another outfit which has been in the forefront of the anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka. In 2013, the outfit, said to have links with the Ma Ba Tha and 969 movement of Myanmar, ran a virulent campaign demanding the boycott of stores selling *halal*-certified meat, alleging that Muslims were illegally slaughtering young calves. It also claimed that the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, which certifies *halal* products, was plotting to bring about Sharia law in Sri Lanka.

Other Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalist organisations such as the Sinhala Ravaya (The Roar of the Sinhalese and the Ravana Balaya (Ravana's Force), have also got a shot in the arm with the Easter Sunday massacre, and the now familiar narrative about the "Muslim problem" has grown stronger.

THE GODS OF WAR

No paper on Buddhist violence would be complete without referring to the self-immolation by hundreds of Tibetan monks and nuns in Tibet and China, and some in India and Nepal.⁵⁰

While insisting that he does not encourage such violence against the self, the Dalai Lama has praised the courage of these protesters. After initially blaming the "cultural genocide" unleashed by the Chinese for these acts, he later said he wanted to remain neutral on the issue.

In Vietnam, Mahayana Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức burned himself to death at a busy Saigon road intersection on June 11, 1963, to protest against persecution by the South Vietnamese regime. He was followed by five other monks.

50 "Self-Immolation Fact Sheet", International Campaign for Tibet, <https://savetibet.org/tibetan-self-immolations/>.

Today, the communist regime in Vietnam allows Buddhists to practice but watches them warily to ensure that radicals from neighbouring nations do not vitiate the atmosphere.

Even though none of the main religions of the world promote violence at a philosophical level, Faith has often been used to justify war and violence down the ages.

A ‘War Audit’ commissioned for the BBC programme *What the World Thinks of God* noted, in 2004,

All advocate peace as the norm and see genuine spirituality as involving a disavowal of violence. It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions or when a political opposition is trying to take power that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.⁵¹

A section of the *War Audit*, devoted to the situation in the first years of the 21st century, “looks at the most recent examples of serious religion related violence: inter-communal violence in Gujarat in India and Al Qaida’s war on the USA and its allies,” and examines “the three different fundamentalisms on show in these cases: Hindu, Muslim and Christian.”⁵²

A subsequent section,

...asks whether it is possible to identify a list of states that are most likely to go to war by invoking the name of God. It notes the difference in the disposition to war in the name of God between these states and secular or atheistic states, such as China. A genuinely secular (atheistic) state may be less inclined to go to war than a state in which religion is very prominent, as long as the

51 Greg Austin, et. al. “God And War: An Audit & An Exploration”, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war_audit_pdf/pdf/war_audit.pdf.

52 Ibid.

secular state is one which is not pursuing a millenarian or totalitarian ideology (such as Communism or Nazism) and as long as the state is one in which pluralism and tolerance of diversity are the norm.⁵³

Buddhism, is referred to only in a footnote in the *War Audit*, but it is an interesting one:

Buddhism does not support war or any type of violence; none of the Buddhist scriptures advocate the use of violence as a means to resolve conflict or as a way of life. One of Buddha's sermons powerfully illustrates Buddhism's commitment to non-violence: 'Even if thieves carve you limb from limb with a double-handed saw, if you make your mind hostile you are not following my teaching.' 'Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love.'⁵⁴

Non-violence, it adds, is at the heart of Buddhism. Indeed, the first of five precepts of Buddhism states: 'I shall undertake to observe the precept to abstain from harming living beings'.⁵⁵

Neuroscientist, philosopher, and author Sam Harris has no such illusions. In "Killing the Buddha"⁵⁶ he argues that Buddhism's philosophy, insight and practices would benefit more people if they were not presented as a religion.

The Chinese Buddhist monk Línjì Yìxuán's exhortation to "Kill the Buddha" should be taken seriously, he says. "...as students of the Buddha, we should dispense with Buddhism."⁵⁷

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Sam Harris, "Killing the Buddha", *Shambhala Sun*, March 19, 2006, <https://samharris.org/killing-the-buddha/>.

57 Ibid.

Buddhism is not spared in his long listing of recent religious violence, although he cites only the instance of Sri Lanka.

Incompatible religious doctrines have balkanized our world into separate moral communities, and these divisions have become a continuous source of bloodshed. Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it has been at any time in the past... The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews vs. Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians vs. Catholic Croatians; Orthodox Serbians vs. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants vs. Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims vs. Hindus), Sudan (Muslims vs. Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims vs. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists vs. Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims vs. Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite vs. Sunni Muslims), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians vs. Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis vs. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. These are places where religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in recent decades.”⁵⁸

In his underground bestseller titled *Skinny Legs and All*, author Tom Robbins has another take on religion.

Religion is nothing but institutionalised mysticism. The catch is, mysticism does not lend itself to institutionalisation. The moment we attempt to organise mysticism, we destroy its essence. Religion, then, is mysticism in which the mystical has been killed. Or, at least diminished... not only is religion divisive and oppressive, it is also a denial of all that is divine in people; it is a suffocation of the soul... religion is a

58 Ibid.

paramount contributor to human misery. It is not merely the opium of the masses, it is the cyanide.⁵⁹

On a lighter note, perhaps it is time to clear another misconception. Almost everyone is familiar with the Laughing Buddha, whose large belly and sack are believed to represent abundance and good luck. Listed among the seven Japanese Gods of luck and good fortune, his figurines adorn mantelpieces and cash registers around the world.

In reality, the image has nothing to do with the original Buddha, but is one of his many avatars, reportedly a 10th-century Chinese monk named Budai, a gregarious, pot-bellied monk who wandered from village to village carrying a large sack over his shoulder. (Budai means “cloth sack” in Chinese.) He was beloved by children and the poor, to whom he would give rice and sweets from his sack. On his deathbed, Budai penned a poem in which he revealed himself as the avatar of Maitreya, a deity also known as the “Future Buddha.” Crucially, perhaps, the world should pay more attention to his catch-phrase: “Let Go”.⁶⁰

Semantics aside, religion is a peculiarly human trait. And most humans, particularly when they feel threatened individually or collectively, or when they believe it would either bring or deprive them of wealth or power, are prone to violence. Buddhists, like the followers of any other religion, are humans first.

59 Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, Bantam Books, New York, 1990.

60 Dave Roos, op. cit.

