



“Monks Protesting in Burma” by Robert Coles
Wikimedia Commons <http://bit.ly/2eCW0ow>

Note on this Case Study:

No religion is inherently violent or peaceful. However, religions are powerful forces. They can inspire horrific violence. They can also inspire nearly unfathomable acts of love and peacebuilding. The Buddhists described here span a wide range of values regarding the intersection of their religion and violence. Some are the perpetrators of violence, some are working to end violence and promote peace, many more are bystanders, who may build up cultural violence, cultural peace, or even both.

As always, when thinking about religion and conflict, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Conflict in Myanmar

The vast majority of the citizens of Myanmar, a nation in southeast Asia, are Theravada Buddhists. Nearly 90% of the country is Buddhist, and most are members of the majority ethnic community known as Burmans.¹ Ethnic minorities—such as the Chin, Kachin, Karin, and Rohingya—include significant populations of Christians and Muslims. Throughout the 20th century, British colonial policy regularly pitted these groups against each other, creating a violent legacy that continues to this day.²

Today, Myanmar is the center of one of the largest refugee crises in the world. Members of the majority Buddhist Burmese population have forcibly displaced many of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group mainly centered in the southwest of the country. Over the last decade, hundreds of Muslims have been murdered, mosques have been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee their homes.³ By 2013, in neighboring Bangladesh alone around 300,000 Rohingya refugees lived in camps along the border.⁴ The violence has been coordinated and serious, and the UN Human Rights Office has stated that Myanmar is likely guilty of “crimes against humanity” or even “ethnic cleansing.”⁵

This violence has often been supported by factions within the Buddhist monastic community in Myanmar. Buddhist sermons regularly include Islamophobic messages such as unsubstantiated rumors of Muslim violence against Buddhists or Muslim plots to take

over the country and destroy Buddhism.⁶ Thousands of monks have participated in anti-Muslim demonstrations, increasing interreligious tensions in the region. These elements of the Buddhist community have justified their actions using Buddhist theology, claiming that violence is acceptable if it is done in defense of their religion.⁷ Others claim that their statements against Muslims never explicitly call for violence—even if it causes it—and thus any

¹ Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar,” (2014): 4-5.

² Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 81.

³ Walton and Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives...” 7-8.

⁴ Syeda Naushin Parnini, Mohammad Redzuan Othman and Amer Saifude Ghazali, “The Rohingya Refugee Crisis and Myanmar-Bangladesh Relations,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22 (2013): 137.

⁵ “Myanmar army killed, raped in Rohingya ethnic cleansing: UN,” *Businessline*, February 3, 2017, accessed March 19, 2017.

⁶ Walton and Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives...” 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22, 25.

violence that occurs is not their responsibility. They believe in a Theravadan Buddhist doctrine that states that only their intention affects their karma. In other words, they believe that they have only done wrong if the result of their action is what they explicitly intended. Thus, despite clear evidence that Islamophobic monastic rhetoric has increased violence, by denying that violence was their intention, many of these monks claim their karmic conscience is clear.⁸ Regardless, there is no doubt that much of the Buddhist religious leadership of Myanmar has promoted violence against Muslims in the region. One Buddhist nationalist monk, U Wirathu, was even described on the cover of *Time Magazine* as “The Face of Buddhist Terror” in 2013.

These Buddhist monastics, and supportive lay people, have also organized to advocate for economic and legal oppression of Muslims. The 969 Movement, a complex Buddhist nationalist movement, has promoted a “Buy Buddhist” campaign, encouraging citizens to buy goods only from other Buddhists, to target the economic well-being of religious minorities—especially Muslims. Stores are marked with the 969 symbol to verify the owner is Buddhist. Monks have also mobilized to support the passage of anti-Muslim laws in the nation’s legislature. For example, one law promoted by monks in 2013 declared that Buddhist women could not marry a man of another faith without official permission from local authorities.⁹

However, while Buddhist nationalists have clearly stoked violence and legitimized Islamophobic actions, there are many Buddhists who have tried to promote peace with their Muslim neighbors. There have been numerous sermons from such leaders promoting coexistence, decrying the restrictions on interfaith marriages, and building interfaith understanding. Some monasteries have organized humanitarian aid for Muslims who have been displaced by the violence.¹⁰ A few Buddhist monastics have even taken prominent roles in quelling the violence, trying to calm crowds on the ground during riots, or even sheltering their Muslim neighbors. One monk, U Withuta, housed over 800 Muslims in his monastery during anti-Muslim riots, telling the mob that approached that they would have to kill him to reach those he protected inside. He later said to a reporter: “I was only doing it in accordance with Buddha’s teachings. You must help all beings who are in need, who are in trouble.”¹¹

The ethnic and religious violence in Myanmar is incredibly complex; the traumas of colonialism, poverty, the recent transition from a military government to a more democratic state, and the global war on terror all play major roles in shaping the conflict. However, the role of Buddhism in this conflict is clearly no less complex. While many monks in Myanmar seem to support and even advocate for violence against their Muslim neighbors, there are others who are constantly working to end the violence. Both believe their actions to be deeply inspired by Buddhism, and both use theology to justify their claims.



“Novice monks in Myanmar” by Daniel Julie, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2eBsjk6>

⁸ Walton and Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives...” 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9, 32.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Interview with Aung San Suu Kyi—the State Counselor of Burma, Nobel Peace Prize Winner, and a Theravada Buddhist—where she responds to accusations of ethnic cleansing against Muslims in Myanmar: <http://bit.ly/2sfZyDo>

Secondary Sources:

- Al Jazeera English video on the exclusion of Muslims from Myanmar’s government (2015): <http://bit.ly/2rSStYY>
- CNN coverage of the violence in 2013: <http://bit.ly/2mNtGQb>
- CNN article and video on recent bouts of violence (2017): <http://cnn.it/2mS54qv>
- PBS NewsHour video on Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (2017): <http://bit.ly/2wrYRtH>
- BBC video on the alleged crimes against humanity in Myanmar (2017): <http://bit.ly/2qJaOnv>
- Vox video on the history of violence against Rohingya (2017): <http://bit.ly/2hxaB4Q>
- The Guardian video interviewing Buddhist monks who disagree about the causes and solution to the violence (2017): <http://bit.ly/2ExCl7j>
- BBC interviews with anti-Muslim Buddhist monks (2017): <http://bit.ly/2of7LEn>
- BBC video on the arrest of Reuters journalists reporting on the violence (2018): <http://bit.ly/2Hn1i2S>

Discussion Questions

- In what ways can Buddhism said to be internally diverse in light of the conflict in Myanmar?
- Identify an example of structural violence in the case study. What cultural violence makes this structural violence seem acceptable?
- How has the cultural context of Burmese Buddhism impacted the ways in which Buddhism is practiced in the region?
- It is common to hear people say that certain religions are “religions of violence” or “religions of peace.” What might you say to someone who made such a claim? How does the situation in Myanmar make simplistic statements like these problematic?
- How does gender play a role in the conflict in Myanmar?



Rohingya refugees in Rakhine State, Myanmar. From “Myanmar/Burma: Little hope for Rohingya IDPs” by Mathias Eick, Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2dUfX90>