

The narratives of ethnocentric Buddhist identity

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ABSTRACT

This article describes several narratives in Southeast Asian Buddhism. I use the term 'ethnocentric Buddhism' to describe these. Collectively, they contribute to the formulation of Buddhist identity, particularly in modern Myanmar. They are based upon a localized form of Buddhism which is often at odds with more universalistic understandings of Buddhism. These new and emerging Buddhist identities are often protectionist in their outlook. They also embrace forms of action which are sometimes in considerable tension with more passive forms of Buddhist behavior. The national and ethnic concerns they represent evoke a rhetoric of intolerance and discrimination which are often violent in their expression. The description of these narratives has the aim of understanding Buddhist ideas and practices that contribute to the emergence of a chauvinistic and nationalistic Buddhist identity.

KEYWORDS

Buddhism, identity, ethnocentric, Myanmar

Introduction

In this article I will describe a set of Buddhist narratives emerging in Southeast Asian Buddhism.¹ These narratives sometimes lead to a radical form of Buddhism which is often at odds with some accepted ideas of Buddhist history and society. They are also fundamental in the emergence of Buddhist identity in Southeast Asia. They challenge notions of what it means to be 'Buddhist'. These new identities do not have their foundations in a rational and universal version of the Buddha's teachings. Their origins are much more local and specific. They form part of the encounter between Buddhism, ethnicity and nationalism.

Questions of Buddhist Identity

The narratives I am concerned with in this article shape Buddhist identity and are often used politically and put into the service of particular groups. These groups have both religious and political agendas, which often overlap. They evolve from key ideas related to cultural, national and ethnic concerns. Pivotal is the idea that the teachings of the Buddha are under threat and need to be protected.

How are we as scholars to describe Buddhist identity? This question is fundamental in our understanding of the recent Buddhist history of Southeast Asian society. In an important sense Buddhist identity can be described as a set of sacred allegiances. These are usually described in terms of going for refuge (*saranattayam*) to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.² Going for refuge could be considered as a signifier of Buddhist identity. It is a mark of dedication, a way of committing oneself to the Buddhist path. It is an acceptance of the reality of dukkha and to the idea that the Buddha's teachings are the way to alleviate it. It is, in effect, an adherence to the principles of the Buddhist religion, the *sāsana*.

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2017 British Association of the Study of Religion conference at the University of Chester, UK. I thank those present for some stimulating comments and ideas.

² The basic formula is found in the *Khuddakapāṭha*: 'I go to the Buddha for refuge. I go to the Dhamma for refuge. I go to the Sangha for refuge. A second time I go to the Buddha for refuge. A second time I go to the Dhamma for refuge. A second time I go to the Sangha for refuge. A third time I go to the Buddha for refuge. A third time I go to the Dhamma for refuge. A third time I go to the Sangha for refuge (*buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*. Khp I, 01). *Gethin*, 1999, 107-8 suggest that *going for refuge* loosely defines an individual as a Buddhist. As an historical way of describing Buddhist identity and affiliation the taking of refuge is a useful identifying formula. When occurring in the Pāli Canon the request in the presence of the Buddha to take refuge is often found in the following form: 'I go for refuge to the Lord Gotama, the Dhamma and the Sangha. May the Reverend Gotama accept me as a lay-follower who has taken refuge from this day forth for as long as life shall last!' D I 234. Episodes in which followers, including Devas, are accepted as flowers of the Buddha are found at D I 85, D I 110, D I 116, D I 116, D I 145-6, D I 252, D II 42, D II 100-101, D II 120, D II 133; D II 152; D II 212.

Buddhist identity in modern Myanmar

In Myanmar Buddhist groups are reacting in radical ways to questions of identity and a new religious discourse is emerging. The most prominent reaction has been from a movement under the broad heading of the 'Organization to Protect Race and Religion' (*amyo barthar thathanar*), often known by the Burmese acronym MaBaTha (Walton and Hayward, 2014, 14). This group is fronted by the prominent Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, famous for his association with the earlier nationalistic 969 movement.³ The 'Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion' grew out of various groups such as the 'The Patriotic Burmese Monks Union'⁴ and from an earlier nationwide organisation within Myanmar known as the '969 movement'. The latter group campaigned around Myanmar in recent years encouraging Burmese citizens to only frequent Buddhist owned businesses and to purchase goods displaying the symbol of the '969 movement', signifying that the premises were owned by 'Buddhists'. This symbol is the Buddhist or *sāsana* flag, with the Burmese numbers '969' superimposed on it. It is a very common sight around modern Myanmar.⁵

Highlighting *the main objectives of the MaBaTha and the 969 movements*, Ashin Wirathu stated in a sermon in February 2014:

If you buy a good from a Muslim shop, your money just doesn't stop there [that] money will eventually be used against you to destroy your race and religion. That money will be used to get a Buddhist-Burmese woman, and she will very soon be coerced or even forced to convert to Islam. [Once Muslims] become overly populous, they will overwhelm us and take over our country and make it an evil Islamic nation.⁶

Groups like the MaBaTha and the 969 movement are part of a phenomenon in which Theravāda Buddhism is used as an ideological vehicle. As Thomas Borchert has observed, Theravāda Buddhism is often used 'to deepen ethnic distinctions in society and to give advantages to a particular ethnic or national

³ Ashin Wirathu is a Mandalay based monk based at Ma Soe Yein monastery. He was imprisoned for a number of years for preaching sermons that were considered to incite violence. In recent years he has become prominent as the unofficial spokesman for MaBaTha. See Walton and Hayward 2014, 13.

⁴ *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 14 February 2014.

⁵ The Burmese digits of the numbers 969 are intended to symbolise the virtues of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha (the nine special attributes of the Buddha, the six special attributes of the Sangha and the nine special attributes of the Sangha). They are linked to ideas of identity.

⁶ Alex Bookbinder, 2014. See also Walton and Hayward, 2014, 14. On 15th January 2014 the monks forming the core of these Buddhist nationalist movements issued a nine-point statement which concluded that they would 'strive for the emergence of the nationality safeguarding law to protect vulnerable Myanmar people.' *Eleven Myanmar Media*, 17 January 2014. This marks the beginning of MaBaTha as an individual movement distinct from the 969 movement. (Walton and Hayward, 2014, 14) and suggests that it wished to instigate laws with the aim of protecting Buddhism within Myanmar and that they perceived nation, race and religion to be under threat, primarily from Islam.

group' (Borchert, 2014, 600). This in turn has led to occurrences of conflicts based upon the conflation of ethnic and religious identities (Borchert, 2014, 601). The recent phenomenon of Theravāda ideology being politicised could be viewed as an aberration from a more familiar form of Buddhist practice.⁷ However, recent events in Buddhist Asia might suggest that Theravāda Buddhism can foster a strong sense of Buddhist identity.⁸

Ashin Wirathu, MaBaTha and the 969 movement offer a distinctive form of Buddhism emerging in Southeast Asia. This is one in which racial and national identity (or a mixture of these) is central.⁹ All of these related movements offer a rhetoric of intolerance, discrimination and often an overt form of Islamophobia.¹⁰ The departure of these movements from a more international Theravāda outlook is due to a focus upon ethnic, racial and related forms of local and specific identities.

An analysis of Buddhism in modern Myanmar might reveal otherwise hidden agendas in the history of Buddhism. This is not the Buddhism of the Pāli Canon, or of the popular imagination. It is a Buddhism in which other ideas take prominence. It is a Buddhism in which the preservation and defence of the *sāsana* (the Buddha's teachings, the Buddhist 'religion') is more important than the ascetic ideal of escaping from the cycle of rebirths.

This radical form does not conform to the Buddhism of the Western imagination. However, as David I. Steinberg (2014) has suggested:

The Western schoolbook approach which views textual Buddhism as pacifistic, meditative and non-violent misses the dynamic of Buddhism in Myanmar as a socio-political force. It is as naïve as interpreting the history of Western Europe on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount.¹¹

If we put aside our romantic idea of Buddhism, how surprised should we be by these Buddhist narratives? For example, Buddhism has often, if not always,

⁷ The more familiar idea would hold that Buddhism is not concerned with politics and society. An example of this would be that given by Ian Charles Harris who has outlined a 6-fold typology of Buddhism and Politics. His fourth explanation of the relationship between Buddhism and politics suggests that Buddhism is completely withdrawn from society. See Kawanami, 2016, 6-7.

⁸ This form of identity would be at odds with a more international Theravāda Buddhist identity based upon the Pāli Canon together with a shared and interacting monastic lineage. This international understanding of Theravāda Buddhist history would be one in which ethnic, racial and national identity is unimportant. See Borchert, 2014, 603.

⁹ For a good overview of the agendas of the 969 movement and MaBaTha see Schonthal and Walton, 2016, 84-89.

¹⁰ Thomas Linehan has stated the following about Islamophobia in modern Britain and many of his points could also be applied to parts of Buddhist Asia: '[R]eligious Islamophobia in contemporary Britain, as with earlier religious antisemitism, is fuelled by ethnocentric conspiratorial attitudes whereby Muslim religious rites and practices, the dress that indicates Muslim religious affiliation, and all other signifiers of Muslim and Islamic religious difference, are seen to represent a danger to Britain's traditionally cohesive national identity based on a long-standing Christian heritage.' (Linehan, 2012, 380).

¹¹ See also Keyes, 2016, 1.

been allied to rulers, kings and emperors. There is little historical evidence for the world renouncing ascetic tradition having ever existed except for in an elite and small, though notionally important, group.¹² There is even less evidence for an egalitarian, liberal, multi-cultural and 'secular' Buddhist society. In Buddhist countries, the Sangha has very real power, and modern Myanmar might offer us an insight into how Buddhist culture functioned in the past. I am not suggesting the extremism of MaBaTha type movements might have ever been the norm, but narratives of ethnic and religious identity surely have existed.¹³ The question I turn to now is how we are to understand the rhetoric of these groups.

Ethnocentric Buddhism

Ethnocentric Buddhism is a term that can be used to describe the particular phenomenon I have been considering in the history of Buddhism. There are other terms that could be used to describe this form of Buddhism. Hiroko Kawanami has proposed the idea of 'Buddhist communalism', and has described the historical origination of the idea in modern Myanmar.¹⁴ The term 'chauvinistic Buddhism'¹⁵ also embraces many of its ideas and practices.

Thomas Borchert suggests that there is a tendency in studies of Buddhism to bracket out notions of ethnicity and more broadly culture as 'epiphenomenal' (Borchert, 2014, 594). At the heart of this tendency is the idea that Buddhism does not categorise people into different groups. This is often a reasonable philosophical and doctrinal conclusion, but it is a rather naive reading of Buddhism in general. As Borchert notes, the discussion of race, ethnicity and Buddhism is similar to the discussion of Buddhism and violence. In both discussions, when Buddhism is violent, or supports racial or ethnic divisions, then this is considered to be a deviation from 'authentic Buddhism' (Borchert, 2014, 594-5).

Ethnicity

Richard Jenkins has summarised Max Weber's influential description of ethnic groups in the following way: 'An ethnic group is based (...) on the *belief* shared by its members that, however distantly, they are of common descent'.¹⁶ As Jenkins goes on to note, Weber's arguments suggest that political activity brings people together, as an ethnic group. People belong to particular ethnic groups because they act together, therefore, 'the pursuit of

¹² Fogelin, 2015.

¹³ In Myanmar these movements have also led to a debate on the role of the Buddhist monk and politics. As Tomas Larsson has considered (Larsson, 2015, 46) although the 2008 constitution of modern Myanmar prohibits political activity by monastics, there is still the question of whether the Buddhist monk should be 'a member of the species *homo politicus*'. While in Southeast Asia the answer to this question appears to be negative with the conclusion that the Buddhist monk should have no political voice, movements like MaBaTha are challenging this assumption.

¹⁴ See Kawanami, 2016, 31-55.

¹⁵ See King, 2009, 3.

¹⁶ Jenkins, 1997, 9-10. See Max Weber *Economy and Society*.

collective interests (...) encourage ethnic identification'.¹⁷ A more detailed working definition is given by Baranove and Yelvington (2003, 225):

Ethnicity may be best conceived of as a set of ideas concerning a group's real or imagined cultural links with an ancestral past. It suggests identification with a certain group based on cultural and historical traditions, including language and religion, and provides basic insights into the nature and origins of a group of people as well as explanations for their modern beliefs, behaviours and accomplishments. Inherent in the concepts the notion that members of a distinct ethnic group share some set of common characteristics that sets them apart from the broader society.

The term 'ethnocentric Buddhism' applies these definitions and points to the ideological and political narrative in which Buddhist identity is intrinsically linked to national and ethnic identity.¹⁸ In this use, there are shared cultural and ethnic characteristics which distinguish Buddhists from non-Buddhists. In the case of Myanmar, this notion of identity can be used in a number of ways. Most notably, in the recent history of Burmese Buddhism, it can be used to gain political leverage for groups such MaBaTha.

The term ethnocentric Buddhism signals the combination of features of Buddhist and national identities producing distinct ethno-Buddhist identities. For example, in Thailand there is the idea of 'nation, religion, monarch' (*chat-sāsana-phramahakasat*)¹⁹ and in Myanmar 'nation, language and religion' (*amyo-barthar-tharthanar*).²⁰ In both of these examples the idea of adherence and allegiance to Buddhism (the *sāsana*. B: *tharthanar*) is linked to other factors in the formation of identity. These new and emerging Theravāda Buddhist narratives in Myanmar promote forms of Buddhist nationalism which

¹⁷ Ibid, P. 10. See also Hutchinson and Smith, 1996, 35.

¹⁸ In this respect Richard Rorty is worth quoting: 'To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and others. The first group—one's *ethnos*—comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. In this sense, everyone is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate, no matter how much realist rhetoric about objectivity he produces in his study.' See Rorty, 1989, 44. For a summary of the history of the term 'ethnocentric' see Bizumic, 2014.

¹⁹ See Liow, 2016, 108.

²⁰ As In 'MaBaTha', *amyo-barthar-tharthanar*. See Sein and Farrelly, 2016, 19-20. It's full name in Burmese is *amyo barthar thathanar saun shauk ye a-pwe*. See Walton and Hayward, 2014, 14. Elsewhere Walton compares the dialogue about ethnicity in Myanmar and the notion of Burman-ness and suggests that it can be seen as a similar category to 'whiteness', denoting privilege, particularly that of Burmans: 'The initial challenge in seeking to explain ethnic dominance in Myanmar in terms of Whiteness is in equating race and ethnicity. While the dominant criterion of comparison and categorisation in the West has been race (and in America, the black/ white racial distinction), in Southeast Asia individuals and groups more frequently identify themselves in other ways. Ethnic categories are prominent markers of identity in Southeast Asia, although ethnicity itself is a more recent construct and reflects a contemporary solidification of historically malleable identity markers.' Walton, 2012, 3. See also Cheah, 2017, 653.

are a challenge to the prevailing notions of Buddhism in the West, which I referred to above.²¹

The defence of one's religion is linked to these other themes of national and ethnic identity – to defend one is to defend the other. This phenomenon is clearly seen in some of the rhetoric I outlined earlier in relation to Ashin Wirathu and the MaBaTha movement. Fundamental questions in relation to these discourses are ideas of belonging and identity.²² The formation of modern Burmese Buddhist identity is complex. Juliane Schober quotes a 1914 speech by U May Ong, who was then the Rector of Rangoon University and professed that that the Burman possess 'race, language, Buddhism and erudition' and that 'We Burmese are Buddhists'.²³ According to Schober this early expression of Burmese identity has shaped discourses in the formation of Buddhist nationalism. It is a key factor in the idea that race, ethnicity and Buddhist identity are primary factors in what it means to be Burmese.²⁴

There are a number of possible factors and ideas that could shape the formation of an ethnocentric type of Buddhism in a given country. Not all of these narratives are available in each cultural context. Some are available across Buddhist Asia, some confined to a particular area. I will outline eight narrative themes:

1. The narrative of the 'True Dhamma/Dharma' (*saddharma/saddhamma*).
2. The narrative of the disappearance of the Dharma/Dhamma.
3. The narrative that the teachings can be corrupted and are subject to decline.
4. The narrative of a collective Buddhist identity.
5. The narrative that Buddhism is under threat and needs to be protected.
6. The narrative of the threat of conversion.
7. The narrative of 'blasphemy'.
8. The narrative that Buddhism is linked to ethnicity.

The description of each narrative will vary greatly in their treatment. There is simply more that can and needs to be explained about some of them than there is for others. For example, I offer ample textual analysis when considering the idea that the Buddha's teachings can be corrupted and are subject to decline, while there is little analysis of the idea that in ethnocentric Buddhism there is an emphasis on the threat of conversion from Buddhism. However, each narrative is important in the description of ethnocentric Buddhism.

²¹ See Schober, 2017, 159. One of the many things that Schober highlight in her article is the use of what she terms 'digital technologies' in the formation of different 'realities' and forms of identity. Social media thus plays a significant role in the formation of Buddhist nationalism and more specifically ideas of belonging.

²² Schober, 2017, 160.

²³ Schober, 2017, 163. See also Gravers, 2013, 48.

²⁴ Schober, 2017, 163-4. An argument could also be made for following the principles of the *Mangala-sutta* (Sn, 2.4) as constituting the ethical foundations of being Burmese. See Hayward, 2015, 31.

To be clear, these are possible themes that might contribute to a form of Buddhism that commits violence, and, more importantly for this article, discriminates against other ethnic and religious groups. I am not claiming that all, or, indeed, any of these factors are present in a given situation. My suggestion is that these narratives are available in Buddhist culture and that they might contribute more violent and form of Buddhism. They are narratives and themes that might contribute to an understanding of militant forms of Buddhism in Asia. Just as there are a number of factors that contribute to more pacifist and tolerant Buddhist movements, such as the teachings on compassion and loving-kindness, the doctrine of not-self which lessens selfish activity, etc., so these narratives might lead to a more aggressive form of Buddhism. Just as greed, hatred and delusion are understood to be defilements, so the defence and preservation of the Dhamma might contribute towards to a more sectarian and chauvinistic type of Buddhism, and indeed a more militant Buddhist identity.

The narrative of the ‘true Dhamma/Dharma’ (*saddharma/saddhamma*)

The idea of the ‘True Dhamma/Dharma’ (*saddharma/saddhamma*) has been a theme throughout Buddhist history. In its developed form the idea is that there is a complete and perfect version of the teachings of the Buddha preserved in one particular place. For example, in Sri Lanka after the migration of Buddhism to the island that particular transmission of the Pāli Canon would be considered to preserve the essential word of the Buddha. Later, national identity would be built around this idea.

Essentially, a particular text is considered to contain the essential teachings of the Buddha (or ‘a Buddha’ in schools that developed into Mahāyāna Buddhism). The *Saddharmapundarika Sūtra* (the so called ‘Lotus Sutra’) is the best known example of this phenomenon in East Asia, but there are many others (See Nattier, 1991, 66 ff; Williams, 2009, 149-171). The Abhidhamma could be said to serve a similar purpose in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism. In Myanmar, the MaBaTha group have taken to settling disputes using Vinaya rules and assumptions.²⁵ In a sense one could argue that the Vinaya itself, as the text that upholds good conduct, is the signifier of the ‘true Dhamma’, being preserved within Myanmar.²⁶ Together with these texts Buddhist symbols, the tooth relic or the stylised footprint of the Buddha, for example, are employed to create the notion of a direct lineage to the Buddha (See Strong, 2004).

The narrative of the disappearance of the Dharma/Dhamma

The second key theme of ethnocentric Buddhism is the notion of the disappearance of the Dharma/Dhamma. In its developed form this is the idea of *sāsana-antaradhāna*, the disappearance or decline of the teachings of the Buddha (see Nattier, 1991, 122). The teachings of the Buddha will last a finite

²⁵ For a detailed historical overview of some aspects of this practice in modern Myanmar see Ashin and Crosby, 2017, 199-261.

²⁶ See also the notion of the ‘counterfeit doctrine’ (*saddhamma-paṭirūpa*). Nattier, 1991, 124.

period of time. This is described as being from five hundred years to ten thousand years in some East Asian traditions (see Nattier, 1991, 28-9).

A classic source in the Pāli Canon is the founding of the order of nuns, the Bhikkhuni Sangha. In this famous episode two themes are considered together. First, the longevity of the Dhamma, in this case five hundred years. Second, the reason for the demise of the Dhamma, in this passage the cause is the admission of women into the Sangha:

If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, the spiritual life would have been of long duration; the good Dhamma would have stood firm even for a thousand years. However, Ānanda, because women have gone forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, now the spiritual life will not be of long duration; the good Dhamma will last only five hundred years.²⁷

A possible implication of such ideas is the urgency for a given people to preserve and defend the teachings of the Buddha with its imminent demise long ago predicted by the Buddha himself. A strong emphasis in the arguments of the MaBaTha movement suggests that the Buddha's Dhamma is at precarious point in its history and that its decline must be stopped. Although these arguments are not necessarily explicit this narrative would fit into the rhetoric of MaBaTha.²⁸

²⁷ *sace ānanda, nālabhissamātugāmo tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajjaṃ, ciraṭṭhitikaṃ ānanda, brahmacariyaṃ abhavissa, vassasahassameva saddhammo patiṭṭhaheyya, yato ca kho ānanda, mātugāmo tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajito, nadāni ānanda, brahmacariyaṃ ciraṭṭhitikaṃ bhavissati, pañcevadāni ānanda, vassasatāni saddhammo ṭhassati.* A IV 278.

²⁸ Between 19th to 21st June 2015, MaBaTha held their annual conference at Insein's Ywarma Monastery on the outskirts of Yangon. A 12 point statement was released (*Myanmar Times*, 23 June, 2015). Another 10 point document was also circulated at the conference but was not released. I was given these by a journalist who was present. The documents were in Burmese. The 12 point statement which was made public begins by stating the wish by MaBaTha to protect the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon as it is 'the national treasure of the entire Myanmar race'. The next three point urge the government of Myanmar to reject 'Bengali boat people', prohibit 'illegal immigrants' (by checking identity cards), and to build a 'strong border barrier', clearly in the region adjacent to Bangladesh to 'protect our country'. When electing members of parliament voters are urged to 'elect a trustworthy candidate for our nation, race and religion'. Point 7 argues the following: 'We urge that vicious and blasphemous attacks on Venerable monks, President U Thein Sein, and leader of the NLD party Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, using improper literature and images which affect our national culture and the image of Buddhist culture must be completely stopped.' The document goes on to urge that the four race and religion protection bills must be passed to protect Buddhist women, and that Muslims in Myanmar must show 'love and loyalty' to Myanmar. The 10 point 'notice of instruction', was not released. It proposes the development of Dhamma schools and monthly MaBaTha meetings throughout the country. It goes on to say that trouble caused by other religions should be reported to the central MaBaTha organisation so as to protect Buddhism from the dangers of 'foreigners of different religions', while urging an 'eye for an eye system' to protect Buddhism. Then there follows: 'In order that our

The narrative that the teachings can be corrupted and are subject to decline²⁹

The third related theme of ethnocentric Buddhism is the idea that the teachings themselves can be corrupted and are subject to decline.³⁰ This idea is written into the Buddhist narrative DNA (See Nattier, 1991, 119 ff).

Nattier (1991, 120) suggests seven categories which summarise the reason for this decline.

1. the admission of women into the monastic community; 2. lack of respect toward various elements of the Buddhist tradition; 3. Lack of diligence in meditation practice; 4. carelessness in the transmission of the teachings; 5. the emergence of divisions in the Sangha; 6. the emergence of a false or “counterfeit” Dharma; and 7. excessive association with secular society.

I have considered Nattier’s second category ‘lack of respect toward various elements of the Buddhist tradition’ in my article ‘The idea of ‘blasphemy’ in the Pāli Canon and modern Myanmar’ (Fuller, 2016),³¹ where I discuss similar passages to those considered by Nattier. I include ‘blasphemy’ as a separate category later in the present article. It is worth noting that Buddhism shows in its description of the decline of the Dhamma a focus upon orthopraxy and not orthodoxy. The teachings of the Buddha do not disappear due to a lack of belief, or the prevalence of mistaken beliefs, but because of bad and misguided behaviour (see Jerryson, 2016, 270).

The causes of this corruption are often internal, caused by members of the Buddhist community – for example, from the admission of women into the Sangha, or from undisciplined monastics. The decline might also be due to monks becoming too involved in secular society. This idea is pivotal to my discussion so will be considered in some detail.

In the *Anguttara Nikāya* a passage occurs discussing the causes for the decline and disappearance of the ‘good Dhamma’ (*saddhamma sammosa antaradhāna*). Two causes are given, ‘badly set down words and phrases and badly interpreted meaning’ (*dunnikkhittaṅca padabyañjanaṃ, attho ca dunnīto*, A I 58). The passage continues: ‘When the words and phrases are

national culture does not become extinct we must seriously request the government for a ban on Muslim pupils wearing Burqa in government schools, and the killing of innocent animals on Eid days of the Muslims.’

²⁹ I realise that this section is much longer than the other narratives that I’m describing. However, the benefits of including this material are important for an understanding of the issues being discussed.

³⁰ ‘Bhikkhus, there are these five things that lead to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma.’ (*pañcime bhikkhave dhammā saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattanti*, A III 177). ‘samosa’: bewilderment, confusion.

³¹ I will consider the *Kimbila-sutta* (A III 247) in which this passage occurs below.

badly set down, the meaning is badly interpreted' (*dunnikkhittassa [...] padabyañjanassa atthopi dunnayo hoti*, A I 59). The continuation of the Dhamma is dependent upon the opposite, namely, 'well-set down words and phrases and well-interpreted meaning' (*sunikkhittañca padabyañjanaṃ, attho ca sunīto*, A I 59). The preservation of the Dhamma is clearly dependent, in these passages, on the preservation of the textual tradition and its correct interpretation.

Three *Suttas* (A III 176-180), give a sustained description of the reasons for the decline of the Dhamma. These are the *Paṭhama saddhammasammosa-sutta* (A III 176-177), the *Dutiya saddhammasammosa-sutta* (A III 177-178) and the *Tatiya saddhammasammosa-sutta* (A III 178-180).

In the *Paṭhama saddhammasammosa-sutta* it is stated that there are five things (*dhammas*) that 'lead to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma' (*saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattanti*). Bhikkhus who do not 'respectively listen (*suṇanti*) to the Dhamma' or do not 'respectfully learn (*pariyāpuṇanti*) the Dhamma', do not 'respectfully retain (*dhārenti*) the Dhamma in their mind', or do not 'respectfully examine the meaning of the teachings they have retained in their mind', or do not 'respectfully understand the meaning and the Dhamma and then practice in accordance with the Dhamma'.³² It is these five things (*dhammā*), which the *Sutta* states lead to the 'decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma'.³³

The *Dutiya saddhammasammosa-sutta* elaborates an alternative or complementary list of five causes for the disappearance of the Dhamma. First, it is because 'Bhikkhus do not learn the Dhamma' (*dhammaṃ na pariyāpuṇanti*), or the 'discourses, mixed prose and verse, expositions, verses, inspired utterances, quotations, birth stories, amazing accounts, and questions-and answers'.³⁴ Second, 'Bhikkhus do not teach the Dhamma to others in detail as they have heard it and learned it'.³⁵ Third, 'Bhikkhus do not make others repeat the Dhamma in detail as they have heard it and learned it'.³⁶ Fourth, 'Bhikkhus do not recite the Dhamma in detail as they have heard

³² *idha bhikkhave bhikkhu na sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ suṇanti. na sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇanti. na sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ dhārenti. na sakkaccaṃ dhatānaṃ dhammānaṃ atthaṃ upparikkhanti. na sakkaccaṃ atthamaññāya dhammamaññāya dhammānudhammaṃ paṭipajjanti. A III 176.*

³³ *ime kho bhikkhave, pañca dhammā saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattanti. A III 176. The preservation of the Dhamma is based upon the opposite, to respectfully listen to, learn, retain the Dhamma in the mind, and to examine and understand its meaning (*idha bhikkhave bhikkhu sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ suṇanti. sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇanti. sakkaccaṃ dhammaṃ dhārenti. sakkaccaṃ dhatānaṃ dhammānaṃ atthaṃ upaparikkhanti. sakkaccaṃ atthamaññāya dhammamaññāya dhammānudhammaṃ paṭipajjanti. A III 176*)*

³⁴ *suttaṃ geyyaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ gāthaṃ udānaṃ itivuttakaṃ jātaṃ abbhutadhammaṃ vedallaṃ, A III 177.*

³⁵ *bhikkhu yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ na vitthārena paresaṃ desenti, A III 177.*

³⁶ *bhikkhu yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ na vitthārena paresaṃ vācenti, A III 177.*

it and learned it.’³⁷ Fifth, ‘Bhikkhus do not ponder, examine, and mentally inspect the Dhamma as they have heard it and learned it.’³⁸ The opposite of these leads to ‘the continuation, non-decline, and non-disappearance of the good Dhamma.’³⁹

The *Tatiya saddhammasammosa-sutta* (A III 178-180), gives a final list of five. These are the longest and most complex account and I give them here in full:

Bhikkhus, there are these five things that lead to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma. What five?

1. “Here, the bhikkhus learn discourses that have been badly acquired, with badly set down words and phrases. When the words and phrases are badly set down, the meaning is badly interpreted. This is the first thing that leads to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma.”
2. “Again, the bhikkhus are difficult to correct and possess qualities that make them difficult to correct. They are impatient and do not accept instruction respectfully. This is the second thing that leads to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma.”
3. “Again, those bhikkhus who are learned, heirs to the heritage, experts on the Dhamma, experts on the discipline, experts on the outlines, do not respectfully teach the discourses to others. When they have passed away, the discourses are cut off at the root, left without anyone to preserve them. This is the third thing that leads to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma.”
4. “Again, the elder bhikkhus are luxurious and lax, leaders in backsliding, discarding the duty of solitude; they do not arouse energy for the attainment of the as-yet-unattained, for the achievement of the as-yet-unachieved, for the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. [Those in] the next generation follow their example. They, too, become luxurious and lax, leaders in backsliding, discarding the duty of solitude; they, too, do not arouse energy for the attainment of the as-yet-unattained, for the achievement of the as-yet-unachieved, for the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the fourth thing that leads to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma.”
5. “Again, there is a schism in the Sangha, and when there is a schism in the Sangha there are mutual insults, mutual reviling, mutual disparagement, and mutual rejection. Then those without confidence do not gain confidence, while some of those with confidence change

³⁷ *bhikkhu yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ na vitthārena sajjhāyaṃ karonti*, A III 177.

³⁸ *bhikkhu yathāsutaṃ yathāpariyattaṃ dhammaṃ na cetasā anuvitakkenti, anuvicārenti, manasānupekkhanti*, A III 177.

³⁹ *dhammā saddhammassa ṭhitiyā asammosāya anantaradhānāya saṃvattanti*, A III 177. For the list of five see A III 178.

their minds. This is the fifth thing that leads to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma.”

These are the five things that lead to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma. A III 178-9.⁴⁰

The opposite of these leads to the ‘continuation, non-decline, and non-disappearance of the good Dhamma (A III 179-80). The *Sugatavinaya-sutta* (A II 147-149) contains a description of four things that lead to the disappearance of the Dhamma. These are identical to the first four in the *Tatiya saddhammasammosa-sutta*. Preceding the four there is an emphasis on ‘the fortunate one’ (*sugato*) and his discipline (*sugatavinayo*), and how these are for ‘the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans’.⁴¹

The *Kimbila-sutta* (A III 247), gives a slightly different perspective.⁴² In the text it is stated that the Venerable Kimbila asked the Buddha:

What is the cause and reason why, Bhante, the good Dhamma does not continue long after a Tathāgata (an epithet of the Buddha) has attained final nibbāna?⁴³

⁴⁰ *pañcime bhikkhave, dhammā saddhammassa antaradhānāya saṃvattanti. katame pañca: (1) idha bhikkhave bhikkhu duggahitaṃ suttantaṃ pariyāpuṇanti duntikkhittehi padabyañjanehi. dunnikkhittassa bhikkhave padabyañjanassa atthopi dunnayo hoti. ayaṃ bhikkhave, paṭhama dhammo saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattati. (2) puna ca paraṃ bhikkhave, bhikkhu dubbacā honti dovaccasakaraṇehi dhammehi samannāgatā, akkhamā appadakkhiṇaggāhino anusāsaniṃ. ayaṃ bhikkhave, dutiyo dhammo saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattati. (3) puna ca paraṃ bhikkhave, ye te bhikkhū bahussutā āgatāgamā dhammadharā vinayadharā mātikādhārā, te na sakkaccaṃ suttantaṃ paraṃ vācenti. tesaṃ accayena chinnaṃūlako suttanto hoti appaṭṭisaṇaṇo. ayaṃ bhikkhave, tatiyo dhammo saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattati. (4) puna ca paraṃ bhikkhave, therā bhikkhu bāhulikā honti sāthalikā okkamane pubbaṅgamā paviveke nikkhittadhurā. na viriyaṃ ārabhanti appattassa pattiyā anadhigatassa adhigamāya asacchikatassa sacchikiriyāya. tesaṃ pacchimā janatā diṭṭhānugatiṃ āpajjati. sāpi hoti bāhulikā sāthalikā okkamane pubbaṅgamā paviveke nikkhittadhurā. na viriyaṃ ārabhati appattassa pattiyā anadhigatassa adhigamāya asacchikatassa sacchikiriyāya. ayaṃ bhikkhave, catuttho dhammo saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattati. (5) puna ca paraṃ bhikkhave, saṅgho bhinno hoti. saṅghe kho pana bhikkhave. bhinne aññamaññaṃ akkosā ca honti, aññamaññaṃ paribhāsā ca honti, aññamaññaṃ parikkhepā ca honti, aññamaññaṃ pariccajanā ca honti. tattha appattassa ceva nappasīdanti, passannānaṃ ca ekaccānaṃ aññathattaṃ hoti. ayaṃ bhikkhave pañcama dhammo saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattati. ime kho bhikkhave, pañca dhammā saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya saṃvattanti. A III 178-9.*

⁴¹ *bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ, A II 147.*

⁴² I have already mentioned this passage above in relation to blasphemy. See Fuller, 2016, 165-6.

⁴³ *Ko nu kho bhante hetu ko paccayo, yena tathāgate parinibbute saddhammo na ciratṭhitiko hotīti, A III 147.*

There is a difference in language to the set formulas I have discussed above. In those passages the reasons are given ‘that lead to the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma’.⁴⁴ Here there is a direct question as to the ‘cause and reason’ (*hetu ko paccayo*) that the ‘good Dhamma’ (*saddhamma*) does not survive after the passing of the Buddha into final nibbāna. The answer to the question is that monks and nuns, male and female lay followers:

- (1) dwell without reverence and deference toward the Teacher. (2) They dwell without reverence and deference toward the Dhamma. (3) They dwell without reverence and deference toward the Sangha. (4) They dwell without reverence and deference toward the training. (5) They dwell without reverence and deference toward each other. This is the cause and reason why the good Dhamma does not continue long after a Tathāgata has attained final nibbāna.⁴⁵

It is then a lack of reverence (*agāravā*) which results in the demise of the Dhamma. Another explanation that the Dhamma does not survive⁴⁶ is found in the *Ṭhiti-sutta* (S V 172). This time the reason given is that it is because the four establishments of mindfulness are not developed and cultivated that the true Dhamma does not endure long after a Tathāgata has attained final Nibbāna. Alternatively, it is because the four establishments of mindfulness are developed and cultivated that the true Dhamma endures long after a Tathāgata has attained final Nibbāna.⁴⁷

These are the most prominent passages describing the reasons for the decline of the teachings of the Buddha. The ‘disappearance’ (*antaradhāna*) is due to various factors causing the ‘corruption’ (*sammosa*) of the ‘True Dhamma’ (*saddhamma*).⁴⁸ The passages show that this theme was common in the Pāli Canon. They give detailed warnings of what might precipitate the disappearance of Buddhism. They also express a religious anxiety about the delicate nature of the teachings and an acknowledgement of the impermanence of the Dhamma. Finally, they express an urgency to follow the Buddha’s path, which is finite and available at this auspicious point in time before its decline. All of these themes make them important narratives for modern Asian Buddhist groups.

⁴⁴ *saddhammassa antaradhānāya saṃvattanti*. For example A III 178.

⁴⁵ *satthari agāravā viharanti appatissā. dhamme agāravā viharanti appatissā, saṅghe agāravā viharanti. appatissā, sikkhāya agāravā viharanti appatissā, aññamaññaṃ agāravā viharanti appatissā. ayaṃ kho kimbila, hetu ayaṃ paccayo, yena tathāgate parinibbute saddhammo na ciraṭṭhitiko hotīti*, A III 178.

⁴⁶ *hetu ko paccayo yena tathāgate parinibbute saddhammo na ciraṭṭhitiko hoti*, S V 172.

⁴⁷ *catunnaṃ kho āvuso, satipaṭṭhānānaṃ abhāvitattā abahulīkatattā tathāgate parinibbute saddhammo na ciraṭṭhitiko hoti. catukkaṅca āvuso satipaṭṭhānānaṃ bhāvitattā bahulīkatattā tathāgate parinibbute saddhammo ciraṭṭhitiko hoti*, S V 172. The four foundations of mindfulness are then explained. See also the *Parihāna-sutta* (S V 173, which is the next Sutta), and the *Brāhmaṇa-sutta* (S V 174, the next but one), which have very little variation.

⁴⁸ See Nattier, 1991, 122.

The narrative of a collective Buddhist identity

The fourth narrative of ethnocentric Buddhism is the idea of a collective Buddhist identity. I mentioned above the idea that Buddhist identity sometimes coalesces around key themes in Buddhist Asia. The most prominent examples are in Thailand where 'nation, religion, monarch' (*chat-sāsana-phramahakasat*) and in Myanmar 'nation, language and religion' (*amyo-barthar-tharthanar*) express key cultural and religious allegiances. Notions of Buddhist identity are then linked to other cultural and national identities.

Alicia Turner (2014, 7-9) suggests that a key factor in the formulation of Buddhist identity is the idea of 'communal belonging'.⁴⁹ This is derived from descriptions of the ethical actions of the Buddha, from the Jātakas (descriptions of the previous lives of the Buddha) and in the Vaṃsa texts of Sri Lanka. Turner suggest that they:

[E]ncouraged listeners to appreciate how the benefits and possibilities of the Buddha's *sāsana* they enjoyed were the result of the sacrifices and devotion of previous generations. The text worked to inculcate a sense of gratitude to those who came before that constructed Buddhists as collective heirs of the past to promote the *sāsana* and created an obligation to continue the effort for future generations. (Turner, 2014, 8)

Turner acknowledges that she is influenced by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.⁵⁰ Anderson, as is well known, describes the nation as an imagined political community. An important aspect of this imagined community is an 'image of communion' in the minds of each member, even though most of them will not know or meet the other members of the nation (Turner, 2014, 8).

One of Anderson's points about these imagined communities is that they are sovereign, and therefore independent. In a similar way in the rhetoric of ethnocentric Buddhism, interference from other nations and communities is often condemned. It is the community of Buddhists which is primary. As Anderson (2006, 7) argues about imagined communities:

It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible [...] for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.'

One could then suggest that in the formulation of Buddhist identity, there is an imagined identity, a construction, an amalgamation of traditional narratives and modern ones in the formulation of Buddhist identity. The term *sāsana* identity readily describes this phenomenon (Anderson, 2006, 141).

⁴⁹ Turner cites Berkwitz, 2013, 579-604.

⁵⁰ Anderson, 2006.

The narrative that Buddhism is under threat and needs to be protected

The fifth narrative of ethnocentric Buddhism is that Buddhism is under threat and needs to be protected. In such a religious environment the suggestion that the teachings of the Buddha can be corrupted by ‘outsiders’ (my third narrative) is instrumental in the need to defend the Dhamma (Nattier, 1991, 119ff). Iselin Frydenlund has used the term ‘Buddhist protectionist ideology’ to describe this phenomenon (Frydenlund 2017, 3).⁵¹ The threat in much of modern Buddhist Asia is perceived to be from Islam. In turn, monastics like Ashin Wirathu are held to be defenders of Buddhism. These self-proclaimed defenders of Buddhism can use arguments to justify why they can act in aggressive ways to defend Buddhist institutions.

The protection of Buddhism often finds expression in relation to the defence and protection of Buddhist women. In a recent article Gerard McCarthy and Jacqueline Menager have described how, over a number of decades, Buddhist Myanmar has had a ‘discourse focused on the need to protect and promote the reproduction – literally and metaphorically – of Myanmar as a Buddhist nation’ (McCarthy, Gerard, and Menager, 2017, 396). Their article highlights the often gendered narrative in which Muslim men are seen as a threat to Buddhist women. Gravers suggests that in modern Myanmar there is a mixing of narratives. First, the traditional ones focussed upon the decline of the Buddha’s teaching. Second, those modern ‘globalized imaginary’ of Islam being a threat to the survival of Buddhism (Gravers, 2015, 1-2).⁵²

Another way of reading the discourse of protection in modern Myanmar is by interpreting it as an extension of traditional Buddhist ideas of the Buddha and his teachings protecting and offering safety to a Buddhist.⁵³ Towards the beginning of this article I pointed out that a key signifier of Buddhist identity is the taking of refuge, in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. In many respects doing so offers protection from danger. In a similar way MaBaTha and other nationalist Buddhist groups offer a rhetoric of protection and defence. The threat in the modern context is often understood to be non-Buddhist religious groups. This feeds into an often volatile Buddhist nationalism. The slogans of modern Burmese Buddhist nationalism are occasionally based upon the idea that being both Burmese and Buddhist averts danger. It could be argued that this serves a similar purpose to taking refuge and the chanting of Buddhist texts in traditional Buddhist culture.

In a sense, modern Burmese Buddhist nationalist groups, and the patriotic feelings they promote, are serving a similar function to *paritta* texts in traditional Buddhist cultures (see Appleton, 2014, 579-80). Key texts are used

⁵¹ In commenting upon religious discourse in modern Myanmar and the interplay of MaBaTha rhetoric and ideas of human rights she comments: ‘A close analysis of Buddhist protectionist ideology and MaBaTha material shows that the language of anxiety, deracination and protection is far more prevalent than religious freedom advocacy.’ Frydenlund 2017, 3.

⁵² See also Schissler, Walton and Phyu Phyu Thi, 2017, 376-395; Cheesman, 2017, 335-352; Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung, 2017, 353-375.

⁵³ A related argument is made in Kent, 2015, 188-223.

in Buddhist culture, and, when chanted, avert danger. They protect the Buddhist reciting them, they safeguard against negative events occurring. These *paritta* or protective texts (usually collections of them) are widely used in Buddhist culture. In a similar way, key slogans of Burmese nationalism, when chanted, prevent national dangers.

As part of this discourse mention must also be made of senior and respected members of the Buddhist Sangha involving themselves in matters of Buddhist identity and opposition to minority groups. I refer to the sermon given by Sitagu Sayadaw in October 2017.⁵⁴ Sitagu Sayadaw is one of the most respected religious leaders in Myanmar. He is very well known for his teachings and for his philanthropic work. He has considerable influence in Myanmar. In this sermon, given to army officers at the Bayintnaung garrison and military training school in Kayin State, Sitagu Sayadaw used the famous 25th Chapter of the Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*. In the episode recounted in the *Mahāvamsa*, Dutthagamani, having waged a long and bloody war in which millions were killed, suffers from extreme unease and remorse. Through their supernatural powers, a group of eight Arahants become aware of this remorse and travel to see Dutthagamani. They travel through the air from the Island of Piyangudipa to comfort him. However, Dutthagamani tells the Arahants:

How shall there be any comfort for me, O venerable sirs, since by me was caused the slaughter of a great host numbering millions?

He is then famously advised:

From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts. Unbelievers [they have “wrong-views”, *micchādittthi*] and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from thy heart, O ruler of men!⁵⁵

He considers that he has performed very destructive ‘unwholesome actions’ (Burmese: *arkhutho*. Pāli: *akusala-kamma*). The comforting words of the Arahants explain why these actions do not have the consequences that we might expect. The Arahants’ analysis is based upon the idea that the ‘deeds’, the ‘actions’ (*kamma*), the killing of millions of ‘human beings’ (*manussa*) have no negative consequences because of the status of those killed. The Arahants, through their ‘higher knowledge’ (*abhiññā*) make a judgement on the ontological and spiritual nature of those defeated in the battle. Dutthagamani’s victims are ‘unbelievers’ in Wilhelm Geiger’s translation. More

⁵⁴ Fuller, 2017.

⁵⁵ *saggamaggantarāyo ca natthi te tena kammunā / diyaḍḍhamanujā ve'ttha ghātītā manujādhīpa // saraṇesu tthito eko, pañcasīle pi cāparo / micchādittthi ca dussilā sesā pasusamā matā // jotayissasi ceva tvaṃ bahudhā buddhasāsanaṃ/manovilekhaṃ tasmā tvaṃ vinodaya narissara*, Mhv xxv. 109-111.

correctly, they have ‘wrong-views’ (*micchā-ditṭhi*). They are ‘men of evil life’ (*dussilā*), they do not practice ethical conduct. They are, in the logic of the *Mahāvamsa* not ‘human beings’ but ‘like beasts’ (*pasusamā*).⁵⁶

How, then, does the *Mahāvamsa* describe a ‘human being’? A full human is one who has taken refuge: in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Secondly, to be human in the context of the Arahants’ explanation is to have practiced the ‘five precepts’ (*pañcasīla*). These are the five ethical practices of a layperson: to refrain from killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct, or intoxicants that cause confusion. Therefore, those who do not practice the five precepts are ‘half of a person’ in the advice of the Arahants.

In the sermon Sitagu Sayadaw clearly intends to suggest that the killing of those who are not Buddhist is justified on the grounds that they are less than human. This argument is given in the context of the killing and persecution of Muslim Rohingyas. Episodes like these suggest a very patriotic Buddhist identity, one in which non-Buddhists are considered less than human. The protection of Buddhism, of the *sāsana*, is key in the recent Burmese discourse about the relationship of Buddhism and national identity. The protection of Buddhism is both a rallying call of Burmese Buddhist nationalists, and a key element in what it means to be Burmese.

The narrative of the threat of conversion

The defence of Buddhism leads to the idea that Buddhism is under threat through Buddhists being coerced to convert to other religions. This is the sixth narrative of ethnocentric Buddhism. The threat of conversion is often part of the rhetoric used by militant Buddhist movements in modern Myanmar. When I met Ashin Wirathu in Mandalay in June 2015, he handed me a pamphlet with a story, an anecdote, about the conversion (B. *batha-ku-pyaung-chin*) and abuse of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man.

In late 2015 four laws were passed in Myanmar. The four laws are: ‘the Population Control Law No. 28/2015, the Conversion Law No. 48/2015, the Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law No. 50/2015, and the Monogamy Law No. 54/2015’. It is the second of these, ‘the conversion law’ that is of interest in the description of ethnocentric Buddhism.⁵⁷ Iselin Frydenlund suggests that the ‘conversion laws’ are a reaction to the Islamic practice of requiring conversion to Islam by Buddhists in Islamic cultures.⁵⁸ These laws

⁵⁶ I would suggest that the primary intention of the Dutthagamani passage is not to justify the killing of living beings who are not Buddhist. The point of the passage, however much we might disagree with its logic, is the idea that actions performed with the idea of protecting and defending Buddhism, or ‘bringing glory to the doctrine of the Buddha’ overrides more accepted ethical norms, such as the precept of not killing living beings. Protecting the Dhamma circumvents the usual operation of karma. All actions have consequences, but the effects of these actions can be lessened if the motivation for them is a noble one.

⁵⁷ See McCarthy and Menager, 2017, 397. For an original discussion of this topic see Frydenlund, 2017.

⁵⁸ Frydenlund, 2017, 7. For draft details of the laws see http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/2015-Religious_Conversion_Bill_2nd_Public_Draft-

gained public support, partly through propaganda spread by members of MaBaTha. The formulation of these laws has been part of MaBaTha's campaign for many years.⁵⁹ As Susan Hayward and Matthew Walton explain:

The Religious Conversion Law requires those wishing to convert to complete a government application and be subjected to an interview with at least five members of an oversight committee to demonstrate that they were not coerced into conversion. The law also criminalizes coercive conversion of other people. (Hayward and Walton, 2016, 71)

The importance of this narrative is that they express a fear within ethnocentric Buddhist movements of other religious groups. There is a hesitation within these modern Buddhist societies to fully accept the existence of other religions, without distancing and distrusting them. They need to be controlled, tamed, and moderated. The idea of a multicultural religiously plural society is treated with suspicion by many of these Buddhist groups. This narrative is part of the protectionist tendency apparent in ethnocentric Buddhism.

The narrative of 'blasphemy'

The seventh narrative of ethnocentric Buddhism is an idea similar to blasphemy in other religious traditions.⁶⁰ Blasphemy, and the idea that images of the Buddha and other sacred Buddhist objects need to be protected. It is often ethnocentric Buddhist groups who protect the sanctity of Buddhism.

Although the idea of blasphemy is not usually associated with Buddhism there are passages in the Pāli Canon which anticipate some episodes in the recent history of Asian Buddhism. These Canonical texts suggest that there were terms used in them that alluded to ideas comparable to the notion of 'blasphemy' as understood in Judeo-Christian thinking. These terms focus upon how Buddhists might be offended by images and texts being used in a way which detracts from and offends their sacredness. There are a set of terms that express the idea that showing disrespect towards Buddhism is a type of offence. For example, in the *Kathāvatthu* (a canonical Buddhist text which has some authority in Theravāda Buddhism) it is described how the person 'accomplished in view' (*diṭṭhisampanna puggala*):

May [not] defile (*ohadeyya*) Buddha shrines, desecrate them (*omutteti*: Lit urinate on them), spit on them (*niṭṭhubhi*), behave disrespectfully in the presence of them (*apabyamāta*).⁶¹

There are clear examples in passages such as these of a sensitivity to not show disrespect towards, for example, 'Buddha shrines' (*Buddhathūpa*), and

en.pdf. See also McCarthy and Menager, 2017. This article details the long history (originating in the colonial era) of legislation regulating the marriage of Buddhist women to non-Buddhist men. See also Walton, McKay and Daw Khin Mar Kyi, 2015.

⁵⁹ See Frydenlund, 2017, 6.

⁶⁰ I've explored this narrative elsewhere. See Fuller, 2016.

⁶¹ *buddhathūpe ohadeyya omuttteyya niṭṭhubheyya, buddhathūpe apabyāmato kareyyā ti*, Kvu 472.

these sentiments go back to an early point in Buddhist history. Buddhists in modern Asia have also shown considerable alarm concerning certain types of disrespectful behaviour.

As an example, in 2014 a New Zealand citizen, Philip Blackwood, caused outrage among a group of hardline Buddhist monks in Myanmar by using an image of the Buddha wearing headphones and being portrayed as a DJ in a trance like state. This image was used as part of a promotion for a bar in Yangon, the former capital of Myanmar. Two Burmese citizens, Tun Thurein and Htut Ko Ko Lwin were also charged. They were charged under articles 295 and 295(a) of the Myanmar Penal Code:

295. Injuring or defiling place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class.

295 (a). Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.⁶²

Monks from the MaBaTha movement campaigned to have the individuals arrested. The three were given prison sentences of over two years.

The actions of these ethnocentric Buddhists is often seen by observers as distinctly 'un-Buddhist'. However, if we more fully grasp the spirit of Buddhist identity, such actions might be better understood.

The narrative that Buddhism is linked to ethnicity

In ethnocentric Buddhism Buddhist identity is associated with ethnicity. A particular ethnic group is under threat and needs to preserve the teachings of the Buddha. Other ethnic groups, unless they come under the control of the dominant Buddhist group, are a danger. In certain contexts, to be 'Buddhist' is to be part of a distinct ethnic group. This in turn gives rise to a natural sense of Buddhist nationalism. What is essential to the tradition is emphasized and Buddhist fundamentalism comes to the fore in which the 'other' is polarized as a threat to the future of Buddhism.

I follow Borchert in his observation that to reduce Theravāda Buddhism to the local level while discounting its trans-national and universal tendencies is a mistake (Borchert, 2014, 617-8). There is, however, a tension between universal versions of Buddhism, with the Pāli Canon at its core, and local and ethnic versions of Buddhist identity. Borchert suggests that the state plays a role in emphasising different expressions of Theravāda Buddhism (Borchert, 2014, 617-8). My point is that there are nuances within different Theravāda Buddhist cultures and at certain points culture and society gives rise to a form of Buddhism which stresses local and ethnic concerns. The emphasis in this article is on the particularities of Buddhism, rather than Buddhism as a monolithic and uniform entity. The local concerns of Buddhism are

⁶² See Fuller, 2016, 171-2 for details.

occasionally violent, personal and chauvinistic. They have little to do with the core ethical values of a more universal Buddhist message.

Buddhism as practiced in Asia is often a potent, apotropaic entity (Blackburn, 2010, 200). The Theravāda monastic controls this power. The monastics have their symbolic roles as the direct link between the lay person and the overcoming of *dukkha*. Buddhists have often expressed an aspiration to one day be reborn when one can go from home to homelessness and renounce society. And this will only be possible if the monastics of the present preserve the Dhamma for that future rebirth. If the monastic sides with a particular ethnic group, like in Myanmar, then the survival of the *sāsana* is dependent upon promoting Burmese Buddhist identity.

Conclusion

We have a number of factors which, when seen together, contribute towards a particular phenomenon in Buddhist culture. It is this that I am suggesting is occurring in modern Myanmar, and that I have termed ethnocentric Buddhism. These factors are those that could contribute to particular attitudes. All need not be present or directly present in a given situation, and, clearly by my presentation of them, more can be said about some narratives than about others. In Myanmar, the defence of the Dhamma, blasphemy and a new Buddhist identity are prevalent attitudes. Other factors might be latent or absent. Of course, other factors that I have not considered might be prevalent, or new narratives could be emerging or will do so in the future. This article is an attempt to understand why Buddhists are involved in the persecution of non-Buddhist ethnic and religious groups.

The narratives that I describe might contribute to the emergence of attitudes which appear to contradict the more compassionate teachings of Buddhism. There is a temptation to assume that these modern movements are not genuinely Buddhist in nature. However, I have suggested that there are ideas and concepts within traditional forms of Buddhism that can be used to justify less accommodating reactions to other religions to shape a radical form of Buddhist identity.

Ashin Wirathu is part of a movement in Southeast Asian Buddhism which questions some of the basic ideas about what it means to be 'Buddhist' in Southeast Asia. Together with the MaBaTha and 969 movements, these narratives suggest ways that Buddhism might shape religious identity. By using the term 'ethnocentric Buddhism' I hope to suggest historical and doctrinal themes and narratives within Buddhism that might help to explain this phenomenon. Buddhism would, we might expect, react calmly, and with kindness and compassion to the presence of other religions and ethnic groups. This seems to lie at the heart of the teachings of the Buddha. However, I have suggested that there are mechanisms in place in Buddhist texts, doctrines and culture that would, at the very least, allow for other ways of forming Buddhist identity.

Abbreviations

A	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Khp	<i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>
M	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Mhv	<i>Mahāvamsa</i>
S	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>

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