

Buddhism and the State in Burma: English-language discourses from 1823 to 1962.

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Abstract

This thesis examines three English-language discourses on the relationship between Buddhism and the state in Burma: its core focus is a postcolonial narrative produced largely by Burmese lay Buddhists writing in English, a narrative that I examine with reference to two other Anglophone discourses – a nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial European narrative and a mid-twentieth-century narrative produced by academic historians and other scholars, most of them non-Burmese. The thesis contributes to recent scholarly efforts reappraising the narrative of Buddhist primordialism or changelessness in Burmese state-society relations that has dominated English-language scholarship on Burma in the twentieth century. I also highlight the significance of English as a language for discussing Buddhism in Burma, paying particular attention to the colonial and early postcolonial periods, when English was a language of education and statecraft.

The thesis begins by examining the emergence of twentieth-century English-language scholarly discourse on the relationship between Buddhism and the state in precolonial Burma. I suggest that three core concepts have guided the modern academic understanding of this relationship: the concept of the state as a religious entity, the concept of the state as a harmonious mirror of the greater Buddhist cosmos and the concept of the sangha as the state's most influential constituency beside the monarch. I trace the emergence of these core concepts by examining three influential texts by three well-known scholars produced at three different periods in the twentieth century. I use this academic discourse about the relationship between Buddhism and the state in precolonial Burma as a point of reference and contrast for the other two strands of English-language writing that this thesis examines – colonial-era discourse and the postcolonial discourse which inherits and challenges colonial ideologies.

The thesis then considers an earlier stratum of English-language commentary on Burmese religion and society produced by precolonial and colonial observers between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These writers contrasted a 'pure' idealised Buddhism with a 'corrupt' and 'degenerate' Burma, setting up a dichotomy between a simple and 'correct' textual template and a degenerate local reality. I assert that there is a continuum of English-language discourse about Buddhism in Burma: while the British deployed this narrative as a justification for colonialism, it was coopted by later postcolonial authors who placed a 'pure' Buddhism at the centre of Burmese political life, subverting the characterisation of Burma as backward.

The core of the thesis is an analysis of how postcolonial lay Burmese authors, writing about Buddhism in English in the years from 1948 to 1962, imagined Buddhism as a modern philosophy in an effort to lend religious legitimacy to the postcolonial state. This discourse linked Buddhism to three key ideologies that epitomised modernity: science, socialism and democracy. The similarities of Buddhist doctrine to scientific theories and to Marxist materialism and democratic individualism were emphasised in an effort to imagine Buddhism as a rational and modern philosophy. Colonial discourses were both inherited and refuted in an attempt to articulate a Burmese Buddhist modernity.

This is to certify that -

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work;
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;
- (iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Jordan Carlyle Winfield

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Table of Contents

	Acknowledgments	5
	Note on Terminology	8
	Glossary	9
	Introduction	11
Chapter 1:	Twentieth-century English-language scholarship on Buddhism and the State in Precolonial Burma	28
	Introduction: The Scholarly Consensus on Buddhism and the State in Premodern Burma	29
	The Dharma State: Discourse on Buddhism and Kingship	32
	The Cosmic State: Discourse on Cosmological Conceptions of Authority	44
	The Sangha State: Discourse on the Role of Monks	49
Chapter 2:	English-language discourse on Buddhism and the State from Colonial and Precolonial European Observers	58
	Introduction: Glorious Past, Debased Present	59
	The Alabaster Image: Idealised Dogma versus Corrupt Practice	63
	Invisible Dharma State versus Visible Tyranny	75
	Passive Sangha versus Activist Sangha	83
Chapter 3:	English-language discourse on Buddhism and Science in early Postcolonial Burma	91
	Introduction: A Modern Buddhism	92
	The Origins and Uses of Buddhist Modernism	101
	Buddhism and Science: Points of Similarity	109
	Buddhism and Science: Complementary Philosophies	121

Chapter 4:	English-language discourse on Buddhism and the State in early Postcolonial Burma	129
	Introduction: A Modern Buddhist State	130
	Earthly State: The Rejection of the Magical	132
	Buddhism and Socialism	144
	Buddhism and Democracy	155
Chapter 5:	Transformation, Comparison and Analysis	168
	Introduction: The Dharma State versus the Science State	169
	Building Ivory Towers: The Cosmic State versus the Earthly State	183
	Modern State, Modern World: U Thant and Buddhist Internationalism	192
	The State Religion: The Sangha State versus the Democratic State	199
	Conclusion	211
	Bibliography	216

Note on Terminology

The term I generally use in this thesis to describe the Buddhism that was imagined by lay Burmese authors in the period ranging 1948 - 1962 is 'Buddhist modernism.' I considered a variety of labels - including 'Protestant Buddhism' - for this cluster of ideas, but settled on Buddhist modernism as the term that best encompassed the characteristics of the ideology and the ambitions of the formulators of this discourse. 'Buddhist modernism' has been used by other writers. Donald Lopez, for example, uses it in his work *Buddhism and Science: A Guide to the Perplexed*. In that book, the term is understood as a general one applying to various interpretations of the idea, both European and Asian:

In the last half of [the nineteenth] century, a movement that has retrospectively been dubbed "Buddhist modernism" began. One of the several family resemblances of its various manifestations was the emergence of Asian elites who adopted the European representation of Buddhism, at least the more romantic aspects of it, and then put it to use in defending the dharma against both colonialism and missionary Christianity.¹

In this thesis, however, the term is used *only* to describe the postcolonial Burmese ideology and not the earlier European variant. Because postcolonial discourse is my core focus, I use the term Buddhist modernism to refer to the concepts of postcolonial writers as a way of maintaining conceptual clarity.

I have chosen to use the term 'Burma' rather than 'Myanmar' to describe the country and its people. The official romanisation of the name was changed by the ruling junta in 1989 and was considered by many at the time to be illegitimate; the historian David Steinberg noted in his book *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (published in 2001) that 'one person's use of the term "Burma" or "Myanmar" indicated political preferences and indicts one in the eyes of another.'² Since the end of the military dictatorship and the transition to civilian government, however, the issue has become less contentious. Mary Callahan informs us that 'Myanmar' and similar revisions dating from 1989 are now widely used within the country itself and that 'some minority leaders prefer Myanmar, as less associated with the Burmans (now renamed "Bamars.")' These points notwithstanding, I have

¹ Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.)

² See David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), xxvi; Mary Callahan, "Myanmar's Perpetual Junta," *New Left Review* 60, (2009), 28f.

decided to use the term ‘Burma’ in my thesis for the sole reason that the materials that I draw upon - dating from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century - refer to the country exclusively by that name.

Where Sanskrit Buddhist terms (such as ‘dharma’) are well established in English, I use these in preference to Burmese or Pali equivalents.

Glossary

Abhidhamma: the third ‘basket’ of the *Tripitaka*, dealing with metaphysics

anattā: ‘no-self,’ the doctrine of no permanent self or soul

anicca: impermanence

arahant: a Buddhist saint

Ari: a semi-mythical Buddhist sect, notoriously heterodox

awza: influence or power, a characteristic of authority

balinatsa: spirit-propitiation ceremony

bhikku: monk

bodhisat: one who is bound for nirvana, a future Buddha

cakkavattin: ‘wheel-turner,’ a universal monarch³

Chattha Sangayana: the Sixth Buddhist Synod

dasa rajadhamma: ten virtues of a good king

dayaka: donor, supporter

dhammaraja: king of the dharma

dosa: hatred, one of the roots of evil

dukkha: suffering

gaungbaung: a headscarf

hpoun: glory, worthiness, a characteristic of authority

Jambudvipa: ‘Island of the Jambul Trees,’ the earthly plane

kala: foreigner, alien

khanti: patience, a kingly virtue

lobha: greed, one of the roots of evil

loki pañña: ‘this-worldly knowledge,’ mundane, technical knowledge

³ Note that *chakravartin*, the Sanskrit equivalent of the Pali term *cakkavattin*, is used frequently in this thesis when quoting from the works of other scholars. The two terms have essentially the same meaning.

lokka nibbana: earthly nirvana

lokuttara pañña: spiritual or higher knowledge

mahadan wun: ecclesiastical censor

māna: pride

metta: loving-kindness

miccha-ditthi: wrong beliefs

min-laung: ‘embryo king,’ a pretender or kingly aspirant

moha: ignorance, one of the roots of evil

nats: animist spirits.

opapatika: a miraculous form of birth associated with gods and ghosts

pancha sila: the ‘Five Precepts,’ the code of conduct for Buddhist laypeople

pariccaga: generosity, a kingly virtue

paticca samuppada: the doctrine of dependent arising, the chain of causation

pongyi: a monk

sama-ditthi: correct beliefs

samsara: the cycle of death and rebirth

sangha sameggi aphwes: monk unions

sasana: the Buddhist religion

sasana dayaka: supporter of the religion, a kingly title

sayadaw: ‘royal teacher,’ a senior monk

sukkha: joy

thakin: ‘Master,’ a title used by Europeans in the colonial period, later used by Burmese nationalists

thathanabaing: ‘keeper of the religion,’ primate or head of the sangha

tilakkhana: the three ‘marks’ or characteristics of existence, being *anicca*, *anattā* and *dukkha*

Tripitaka: the ‘Three Baskets,’ the Buddhist scriptures

u padisesa nibbana: an aspect of nirvana

Vinaya: the code of conduct for monks

vipassana: ‘insight,’ also a form of meditation that emphasises lay practice

wun: official

Introduction

In the course of English-language writing on Burma, the central role of Buddhism in its society and history has always been given special emphasis. No English-language observer, commentator, scholar or journalist has failed to notice and remark upon this connection. In the early twentieth century, Major C. M. Enriquez, a colonial official and author who wrote a number of romantically titled works on Burma, noted in the first of these, *A Burmese Enchantment*, published in 1916, that:

Buddhism is the central feature of Burma. Its influence is visible everywhere. Its monuments cover the land. Its essence broods unseen over everything. It hallows the repose of deserted shrines. It is the support of the people. It impregnates their ideas, guides their actions, supplies their motives, pervades their atmosphere.¹

Similarly, another British author - the sinologist Edward Harper Parker - writing a decade or so earlier in 1893, noted this connection and rooted it in the distant past, providing a translation from 'the chapter on "Southern Barbarians" in the T'ang history' wherein he observed that the fourth century inhabitants of the country, known to us as the 'Pyu':

are devotees of Buddhism. They have a hundred monasteries, with bricks of vitreous ware, embellished with gold and silver vermillion, gay colours, and red kino. ... The people cut their hair at seven years of age and enter a monastery. If at the age of twenty they have not grasped the doctrine, they become lay people again. For clothes they use a cotton sarong, holding that, as silk cloth involves the taking of life, it ought not to be worn.²

Importantly, Parker follows up this excerpt with a deliberate comparison with Burma as he saw it in the nineteenth century:

It will be at once evident that a great deal of this descriptive account exactly corresponds with the Burma of our time: the golden couch, the elephants, the dislike of taking animal life, devotion to Buddhism, numerous temples, temporary embracing by all youths of the monastic discipline...point unmistakably to well known Burmese characteristics of to-day.³

¹ C.M. Enriquez, *A Burmese Enchantment* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1916), 67.

² Edward Harper Parker, *Burma: with Special Reference to Her Relations with China* (Rangoon: Rangoon Gazette Press, 1893), 12.

³ Ibid.

Parker's statements allude to another line of discourse that frequently accompanied the emphasis on the centrality of Buddhism to Burma in the colonial-era English-language narrative; namely, that Burmese Buddhism was ancient and unchanging. According to this interpretation, there was an unbroken continuity throughout Burmese history up into the colonial present, wherein the influences and idiosyncrasies of Burmese Buddhism remained constant and uniform.

These quotes from Enriquez and Parker reflect two core ideas which, this thesis argues, have shaped English-language discourse on Burma between the colonial-era and the present. The first is that Buddhism is 'the central feature of Burma,' most particularly in terms of its importance in political legitimacy and in notions of authority. The second is that Buddhism and its influence in the modern era 'exactly' and 'unmistakably' correspond to Burma in the distant past and throughout Burmese history. Because these two ideas have exerted a great influence on English-language discourse about Burma - both that produced by non-Burmese and that produced by Burmese people writing in English - it is worth examining them closely and studying how they developed.

Since the late nineteenth century, English-language writing on Burma has evolved in constant dialogue with Burmese-language discourse. Of course, Burmese language remains the key medium through which Burmese people discuss their society and their religion. Nonetheless, I suggest that there is much to be gained from treating English-language discourse about Buddhism's place in Burmese society and politics as an historical phenomenon worthy of study in its own right, irrespective of how it does or does not correspond with what is written and said in Burmese. The group that is the core focus of this thesis, the Anglophone Burmese lay Buddhists who wrote in the years that intervened between Burma's independence and the establishment of military rule in 1962 were people whose experience of Buddhism was shaped by English-language education and whose terms of reference, when they wrote in English at least, were powerfully affected by Anglophone world-views and discourses. Through this study, I argue that it is possible to trace how and why colonial-era Anglophone discourse was transformed and adapted in the postcolonial period and how it affects English-language writing even in the present, especially when the evolution of this discourse is examined in relation to the transition from the Konbaung monarchy (1752-1885) to colonial rule (1885 - 1948) and from colonial rule to an independent state. The relationship between English and the ideas about Buddhism and the state in Burma that are charted in this thesis can be characterised as symbiotic: exploring the continuities and changes in Anglophone discourse about Burmese Buddhism is one of the scholarly contributions of this thesis.

Recent English-language writing on Burma, including journalism, furnishes many examples of the ongoing influence of these core ideas on the central place of Buddhism in Burmese political and social life and of the continuity between past and present in the discourse about Burmese Buddhism. For instance, the coverage in the English-language press concerning the period from August to October 2007, when Burma leapt briefly into the news when many hundreds of Buddhist monks - *pongyis*⁴ - took to the streets in protest against the military government of the time. In response to this incident, now known as the 'Saffron Revolution,' analysts attested to the great significance of monastic participation given the devout Buddhist nature of the Burmese population. 'In an overwhelmingly Buddhist Southeast Asian nation,' stated one editorial, 'this was a withering rebuke.'⁵ Commentators were similarly keen to illuminate the importance of Buddhism and Buddhist concerns in the contemporary political scene; one wrote in the Melbourne *Age* newspaper that the *pongyi* protests represented a strong challenge to the ruling military junta because of the fact that the dictatorship 'draws political legitimacy from "sponsoring" Buddhism in Burma.'⁶

Perhaps most authoritatively, the Burma specialist David I. Steinberg contributed an op-ed to the *Asia Times*, in which he claimed that there were 'traditional Buddhist views of the proper attributes of kingship or administration' that the regime was failing to satisfy. He went on:

The essential element of legitimacy in Myanmar has been Buddhism. As someone once wrote, "To be Burman is to be Buddhist," and virtually all of the Myanmar population (some two-thirds of the national population) are Buddhist. Buddhism looms large in the political equation. Buddhism is a matter of profound belief and an administrative necessity for virtually all higher levels of government, for under the military (but not the previous civilian government) one must be Buddhist and Burman to rule. ... There has been a calculated policy of associating the military leadership and rule with Buddhism.⁷

⁴ *Pongyi*, which means 'great glory' is not the only term by which Buddhist monks in Burma are known, but I have settled on its use because, as Melford Spiro wrote, 'it is... the term most frequently used by both laymen and monks.' See Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 311f.

⁵ "Burma Stirs: will the rest of the world stand by?" *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2007.

⁶ Mary O'Kane, "Our shameful silence on Burmese terror," *The Age*, September 25, 2007.

⁷ David Steinberg, "Myanmar and the loss of legitimacy," *The Asia Times*, October 10, 2007.

Steinberg observed that military leaders since the coup of 1962 as well as the preceding civilian government courted Buddhist legitimacy in similar ways, particularly pagoda construction.⁸ Thus, Steinberg and others subscribed to the notion that there is a continuum of Buddhist criteria for legitimacy about which Burmese political actors have tended to orbit and align themselves, deriving from the precolonial kingdom. Indeed, one journalist wrote at the time that the Saffron Revolution was essentially the most recent chapter of

a much larger tussle in Burma over the use and practice of Buddhism, which became visible to the world during the past week. This boils down to the issue of which political ideology is a more fitting reflection of Burma's Theravada Buddhism, military dictatorship or democracy. While the answer should be obvious, the military has done all it can to tilt the balance its way.⁹

According to this interpretation, political systems change but Buddhism remains static; the Burmese state is the inheritor of the precolonial Buddhist kings. This idea is likewise found in a variety of twentieth-century scholarly works on Burma, which assert that Buddhism has had either a legitimating or adversarial effect in relation to authority depending on how it aligned itself to precolonial norms. Well-known English-language studies from the 1960s and 1970s that set out the close relationship between Buddhism and the state include Donald Smith *Religion and Politics in Burma* and Trevor Ling's *Buddhism, Imperialism and War* - which compares Buddhism in Burma and Thailand.¹⁰ E. Michael Mendelson's work *Sangha and State in Burma* gives equal time to the phenomenon of monastic sectarianism and the relationship between the monkhood and the state.¹¹ There were many works on similar themes produced throughout the 1980s and 1990s.¹²

⁸ Steinberg's comments here are tailored for a general audience, nonetheless this is an argument that he has advanced in his scholarly work. See for example: Steinberg, *Burma: the State of Myanmar*, 42-5.

⁹ "Buddhism in Burma," Philip Delves Broughton, *Wall Street Journal Online*, last modified October 4, 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB119144623100748099>.

¹⁰ Donald Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Trevor Ling, *Buddhism, Imperialism and War* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1979).

¹¹ E. Micheal Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

¹² Studies specific to the anti-colonial movement include *From Sangha to Laity* and *Burmese Nationalist Movements*; both by U Maung Maung and between them cover the period from 1900-1950; also there are numerous articles by such authors as Bruce Matthews and Michael Aung-Thwin. See U Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma: 1920-1940* (Colombia: Mo. South Asia Books, 1980); U Maung Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements: 1940 – 1948* (Edinburgh: Kiscadale Publications, 1989); Bruce Matthews, "The Legacy of Tradition and Authority: Buddhism and the Nation in Myanmar," in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Pinter, 1999), 26-53; Michael Aung-Thwin, "The British 'Pacification' of Burma: Order Without Meaning," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16, 2 (1985): 245-61.

In addition to this emphasis on Buddhism as the wellspring of political legitimacy in Burma, a point of interest about this scholarship, as well as what is found in more general histories is their tacit or explicit assumption that the Buddhist religion in Burma possesses an immutability; that it has undergone little or no change between the time of the Burmese kings in the precolonial period and the modern era. That is, despite the advent of modern technologies, as well as (albeit limited) participation in a global community as a colony of Britain and as an independent nation, Burmese Buddhist practices and attitudes, particularly those pertaining to government and authority, are held to be more or less the same as in the precolonial era. Such arguments suggest that if we consider a sprinkling of rulers and political aspirants from the last one hundred and fifty years, for example, we can see that they have been perceived as enjoying political legitimacy through the cultivation of the symbols and priorities of traditional Buddhist kingship. Such narratives would see Thibaw Min (1859 - 1916), the last king of Burma, as having stubbornly resisted Western influence and aggression through promotion of his religion. Similarly, the rebel and agitator Saya San (1876 - 1931), is portrayed as having sought the trappings of kingship when he led a resistance to the non-Buddhist British coloniser in 1930-31.¹³ In the same vein, in postcolonial Burma, U Nu (1907 - 1995), the first prime minister of independent Burma, with his pagoda construction and pro-Buddhist legislation, is seen as explicitly reviving precolonial ‘norms’ as a response to postcolonial uncertainty - more than sixty years after the kingship was abolished.¹⁴ Lastly, the unnatural longevity of the military dictatorship of Ne Win (1911 - 2002) and his successors, who governed from 1962 to 2011, is held to have been due to the cynical manipulation of religious patronage and to invoking the aura of Buddhist kings.¹⁵ The key notion here is continuity: the idea and practice of righteous authority in Burma – the defence of Buddhism, the construction of pagodas, the possession of regalia, supporting the sangha and the propitiation of spirits, among others – are understood to have scarcely changed since the time of King Thibaw, with no significant disruption. This view informed the journalistic and popular academic comments on the Saffron Revolution cited above; indeed, in a book published comparatively recently, Steinberg used the word

¹³ John F. Cady, *The History of Modern Burma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1958), 309-11; Robert L. Solomon, “Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion,” *Modern Asian Studies* 3, 3 (1969), 220; Solomon called Saya San’s rebellion, ‘the last gasp of authentic traditional resistance in Burma.’

¹⁴ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (London: Hurst, 2009), 292; Hugh Tinker, *The Union Of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 166-76.

¹⁵ Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, 45; Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999), 161-4.

‘primordial’ twice and ‘atavism’ once in describing the relationship between Buddhism and politics in Burma in the twenty-first century.¹⁶

We can contrast this with scholarship on other Buddhist countries that displays a sharper sense of discontinuity; contemporaneous studies of other Theravada nations have illustrated differing responses to modern ideologies and institutions in terms of religious legitimacy. In the Thai case for instance, Patrick Jory wrote about how Buddhist scriptures were reinterpreted during the reign of Chulalongkorn to strengthen and legitimate a more bureaucratic and centralised monarchy at the expense of provincial elites.¹⁷ Similarly, attention has been paid to the changing role of Buddhist kingship and legitimacy in Cambodia; Buddhist literati under French colonialism and after have been shown to emphasise the textual foundations of Buddhism as rational and congruous with science, while King Sihanouk blended socialism, Buddhism and the monarchy in a 1965 pamphlet titled ‘Our Socialist Buddhism.’¹⁸ But perhaps the best known example is the scholarship around the development of ‘Protestant Buddhism’ in colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka, particularly Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere’s influential study *Buddhism Transformed*.¹⁹ Therein, they described the invention in Sri Lanka of a new Buddhist orthodoxy that emphasised scripture over tradition, substance over form, meditation over ritual and the importance of the laity as opposed to the sangha. In all these cases, these modifications were made in response to ‘progressive’ Western concepts of science and governance and in the case of Sri Lanka, to bolster Sinhalese nationalism and counter the Western claims of being both civilised and civilising. More recent studies that cement this impression include Anne Blackburn’s *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*, published in 2010, in which she coins the term ‘sea-change model’ when critiquing the notion of a changeless Buddhism ‘ruptured’ by colonialism; Blackburn questions this model, suggesting that Sri Lankan Buddhism was characterised by change and plurality.²⁰ Further examples dealing with Cambodia include Ian Harris’s *Cambodian*

¹⁶ David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 149-50.

¹⁷ Patrick Jory, “Thai and Western Buddhist Scholarship in the Age of Colonialism: King Chulalongkorn Redefines the Jatakas,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, 3 (2002): 891-918.

¹⁸ Peter Gyallay-Pap, “Reconstructing the Cambodian Polity: Buddhism, Kingship and the Quest for Legitimacy,” in *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Routledge, 2007), 71-103.

¹⁹ Richard Gombrich, Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

²⁰ Anne Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Buddhism: History and Practice and Ann Ruth Hansen's *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930*, and with Thailand, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* by Justin McDaniel.²¹ Thus, there has been a sustained effort in studies of Thailand, Cambodia and Sri Lanka to demonstrate that Theravada Buddhism has been adapted or invented anew to suit a changing political climate. In contrast, Burmese Buddhism has until recently been portrayed primarily as displaying a religious and cultural inertia that extends across the periods of colonial, parliamentary, socialist and military rule.²²

Despite the enduring power of these narratives of an unchanging Buddhist Burma, which, as we have seen, could be detected in the writings of Burma experts as recently as 2007, a pattern of scholarship has emerged in the last few years that attempts to redress this trend in the academic understanding of Buddhism in Burma. An early and seminal example of this is Mary Callahan's *Making Enemies: War and State-building in Burma*, published in 2003. Callahan seeks to explain the durability of the successive military dictatorships in Burma without recourse to peculiar notions of royal or religious legitimacy:

If [elements of Burmese culture] are held to explain the unusually coercion-intensive history of postwar Burmese politics, the state must have started fresh with a tabula rasa after the British departed in 1948. Only under that condition could the colonial structuring of state-society relations be said to be fully replaced by uncorrupted, "truly Burmese" – and thus, truly pathological – forms of social and political relations.²³

In this fashion, Callahan sets forward a key idea: that the usefulness of traditional concepts like the doctrine of karma or the notion that Ne Win enjoyed the kingly attributes of *awza* ('awe-inspiring power') or *hpoun* ('charismatic power') depended, essentially, on a denial of Burma's history since the fall of the kingdom. Similarly, the anthropologist Ingrid Jordt warned that to perceive the social forces underpinning Burma's military dictatorships as 'a black box of tradition' represents not only

²¹ Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005); Ann Ruth Hansen, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practising Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011).

²² There have been a handful of exceptions to this narrative of continuity religious inertia, mostly published in the 1960s; they include Emanuel Sarkisyanz's *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), Manning Nash's *Golden Road to Modernity: Village Life in Contemporary Burma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) and Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society*. These authors were among the last to carry out academic fieldwork in Burma before the country retreated into isolation after the military coup of 1962.

²³ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Cornell University Press: London, 2003), 6.

a failure to ‘improve our understanding of what continues to animate and generate the political landscape’ but also an unhelpful narrative of that tradition as an obstacle to progress.²⁴ ‘To wit,’ Jordt writes, ‘one often hears in association with these studies the call for an education to democracy, an education to modernity or even a “revolution of the spirit.”’²⁵ In such a reading, the association of Burma’s military dictatorships with an antiquated ‘tradition’ asserted or explained its backwardness and failure to progress to a ‘modern’ democracy in a timely fashion. In contrast to this view, Jordt’s own study *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, published in 2003, argued that the way many Burmese people understand and relate to authority has evolved over time due to their changing conceptualisation of Buddhism and its practice through participation in lay meditation, also known as the *vipassana* movement.

There are a number of other studies that I would assert belong to this trend towards the reconceptualisation of state-society relations and the legitimacy of government in Burma. The religious scholar Julianne Schober, for example, in articles like “Buddhist Visions of Modernity and Moral Authority in Burma,” “Buddhist Just Rule and Burmese National Culture,” and most recently in a book published in 2011, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*, has charted the ways that competing groups in Burmese society have attempted to organise and interpret Buddhism to make it a more effective tool for legitimisation, calling the image of a static or inviolate tradition into question.²⁶ Similarly, in a chapter in an edited volume called “The Chicken and the Scorpion,” Keiko Tosa posits that rumours about the royalist and astrological obsessions of Burmese military dictators - far from representing proof of the enduring legitimating power of such notions - in fact represent a counter-narrative on the part of the Burmese public intended to subvert the regime’s efforts to cultivate Buddhist legitimacy.²⁷ In Tosa’s thesis, regime efforts to cultivate pious Buddhist legitimacy - like pagoda construction - are deliberately cast as insincere and selfish by a skeptical Burmese public. Most

²⁴ Ingrid Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 6.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Julianne Schober, “Buddhist Visions of Moral Authority in Burma,” in *Burma at the Turn of the 21st Century*, ed. Monique Skidmore (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 113-32; Julianne Schober, “Buddhist Just Rule and Burmese National Culture: State Patronage of the Chinese Tooth Relic in Myanma,” *History of Religions* 36, 3 (1997), 218-43; Julianne Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011).

²⁷ Keiko Tosa, “The Chicken and the Scorpion: Rumour, Counternarratives, and the Political Uses of Buddhism,” in *Burma at the Turn of the 21st Century*, 154-73. Tosa reminds us that the astrological inspirations that observers have confidently assigned to unusual decisions or events during the military period (like the demonetisations of the eighties or the relocation of the capital in 2006) cannot in fact be proven to be so.

recently, Matthew Walton in his study *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* has surveyed Burmese political culture, asserting that Buddhist concepts lie at the root of most modern Burmese political thinking. The book is deliberately positioned as engaging critically with the idea of a static Buddhist tradition disrupted by colonialism; his work charts the way in which a core set of Buddhist concepts was subject to different interpretations and applications at different times in Burma's modern history.²⁸

Other scholars have turned this analytical lens towards the less recent past, examining periods or events where the role of an ageless Buddhism was considered settled. Michael Charney, for example, in his book *Powerful Learning*, suggested that at the time of the last Konbaung kings when the British were encroaching upon their sovereignty, Burmese literati made efforts to study and integrate new Western knowledge rather than retreating from it into religious orthodoxy.²⁹ Alicia Turner, in her work *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* surveyed the creative reinterpretation of Buddhism during the colonial period and positioned phenomena like laicisation or the refusal of monks to teach Western curricula as inspired responses to a concept of religious decline that drew on Burma's own history of reform.³⁰ Erik Braun has likewise written about this period in *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*, charting the life and work of the monk usually credited with the popularisation of *vipassana*. Braun places the Ledi Sayadaw squarely within the narrative of Buddhism as mutable as opposed to static; Ledi was an innovator who cleverly used Burmese intellectual traditions, print-capitalism and lay practice in his quest to arrest the decline of Buddhism.³¹ Similarly, in his study, *The Return of the Galon King*, Maitrii Aung-Thwin challenged the accepted narrative of the Saya San rebellion as a traditional attempt to restore Buddhist kingship, arguing that this understanding was a colonial construct, rooted in contemporary assumptions about Burmese superstitiousness and their inability to progress or change.³² (It is a point of interest that the fact that this narrative of Saya San as a restorationist has continued to be

²⁸ Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁹ Michael Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty 1752 – 1885* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

³⁰ Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

³¹ Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

³² Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King: History, Law and Rebellion in Colonial Burma* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010).

accepted up to the present reflects as pervasive inability of commentators to consider the changing or changeable nature of Buddhism and Burmese culture.) Additionally, the analyses of D. Christian Lammerts in his article "Narratives of Buddhist Legislation: Textual Authority and Legal Heterodoxy in Seventeenth through Nineteenth-Century Burma" and his edited collection *Buddhist Dynamics in Premodern and Early Modern Southeast Asia* emphasise the concept of Buddhist plurality in Burmese history and offer serious challenges to the notion of an immutable religious past.³³

This thesis seeks to position itself within this growing field of scholarship that questions the still widespread image of Burmese Buddhist 'primordialism' through a reevaluation of the epistemological, political and religious history of Burma. Specifically, I aim to contribute to an understanding of the complexity of Buddhism and state-society relations in Burma by examining how English-language discourses on Buddhism and the state in Burma took shape in the colonial era and in the transition to independence. Furthermore, the thesis makes an original contribution to the study of the new orthodoxy that can be referred to as 'Buddhist modernism' in the postcolonial period. A number of the works cited above have explored this concept with reference to the premodern or colonial period, yet creative reinterpretation of Buddhism in the early postcolonial period has received less attention (although it is discussed to some extent in Matthew Walton's recent book.) I argue that in the postcolonial setting, discourse about how Buddhism and the state interacted was articulated in fundamentally different terms from those in which they had been represented in the premodern era. This was as much about imagining a new and modern religious orthodoxy as it was about shaping new conceptions of state-society relations after colonialism. Both were indebted to certain discourses that had been in circulation in the colonial era and before, not only in Burma but in other parts of the English-speaking colonial world. This postcolonial discourse about Buddhism, politics and modernity coexisted with the emergence of modern scholarly discourse in English about the premodern Burmese state. I seek to map out some of the contours of that academic discourse as a reference point for postcolonial attempts to formulate a modern Buddhism and a modern Buddhist state.

³³ D. Christian Lammerts, "Narratives of Buddhist Legislation: Textual Authority and Legal Heterodoxy in Seventeenth through Nineteenth-Century Burma," in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, 1 (2013), 118-144; D. Christian Lammerts, ed., *Buddhist Dynamics in Premodern and Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015).

My analysis focuses on how these English-language discourses were constructed, not on whether or not they accorded with an extra-discursive ‘reality’. I also pay close attention to how the discontinuities in Burmese history since the nineteenth century affected these discourses. Of the three discourses concerning the relationship between Buddhism and the state in Burma that my thesis considers, two - those produced by colonial commentators and by postcolonial elites - are largely or partly forgotten, while one - the scholarly narrative produced by mid-twentieth century Anglophone academics - is still referred to extensively by present-day academic writers on Burma. Two of these discourses - the colonial era narrative and the twentieth century academic account - are narratives produced by non-Burmese ‘outsiders’, while one of them - postcolonial lay Buddhist discourse - is the work of mostly Burmese ‘insiders.’ The existence of these three discourses – which are distinct from each other, but have some degree of mutual awareness and reciprocal influence – reflects the complex role of the English language in modern Burma.

The displacement of the traditional Burmese state by colonial rule involved the establishment of English as a language through which Burmese experience was narrated and discussed. The changed relationship between state and Buddhism that colonisation brought about – non-Buddhists controlled the Burmese state for the first time since Burmese monarchs adopted Buddhism in the eleventh century – was accompanied by the establishment of a new language for discussing Burmese realities, including its religious realities. Initially a language of the colonisers, English had, by the 1920s and 1930s become a language in which a Burmese elite had been educated and which they used to experience and narrate the world, including their religious faith. English is thus an important medium through which Burmese Buddhism has been experienced in modern times. I argue that a study which focuses on the characteristics of Anglophone discourses can shed important light on how the relationship between Buddhism and the state has been conceptualised by different modern constituencies who wrote in English. This includes Anglophone academic writers from the mid twentieth century, colonial commentators from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, most importantly, postcolonial English-educated Burmese lay Buddhists.

With this in mind, that the abolition of the Burmese monarchy in 1886 represents a key point around which the English language coalesced as a medium for discussing, imagining and analysing Buddhism and the state in Burma. European observers who wrote about Burma before and during the colonial period looked to the end of Buddhist kingship as desirable and inevitable and described it in critical terms. After the destruction of the monarchy, a generation of English-educated Burmese

arose, with their own ideas about the proper form of a Burmese state and Buddhism's role within it. It was this group, as much as any other, who determined the character of the postcolonial state. However, the importance of English as a language of public discourse declined after the military overthrew the government and instituted an isolationist one-party state and the Burmese language arguably became the main linguistic medium through which ideas about Buddhism and the state were articulated. It is for this reason that my own survey of English-language discourse on Buddhism and the state concludes in 1962.

The core discourse on which my thesis focuses – the ‘forgotten’ works by Burmese ‘insider’ authors writing about Buddhism and the state that dates from the early postcolonial period – was the direct product of colonial-era English-language education. From 1948 to 1962 there was an effort by various English educated authors in Burma, including some Europeans, to imagine Buddhism as a modern and rational religion that was compatible with three key ideologies: science, socialism and democracy. As I will outline in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, this essentially fundamentalist narrative repudiated contemporary Burmese Buddhist orthopraxis, preferring to emphasise an ancient and pure textual core to which these Buddhist modernists were the true heirs. Through the medium of English-language newspapers, journals, speeches and other publications, Anglophone Buddhist politicians, officials and literati attempted to inculcate a progressive, rationalist Buddhist legitimacy for the state and its programs while at the same time asserting the superiority of Burma's religious tradition over others through its congruity with the most modern of ideologies. This narrative has received very little scholarly attention; as suggested above, a narrative of the ‘revival’ of precolonial Buddhist activity is usually applied to this period.

My analysis contrasts this postcolonial discourse with an earlier narrative. This is another largely ‘forgotten’ English-language discourse and one produced by ‘outsiders.’ It is the critical account of Burmese Buddhism produced by European – primarily British – observers during the early colonial period of the mid-to-late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The British, too, imagined an ancient Buddhism that was rational and scientific; yet they contrasted it to what they believed to be a degenerate and backward Burmese present – a description that conveniently sanctioned their own presence in Burma as a civilising influence. The elements that characterise this discourse; the imagined, rational Buddhism, the degraded present and their implications for legitimacy have parallels in the later, Burmese narrative of the postcolonial period and may well have been one of its antecedents and sources, suggesting that there is a continuum of English-language discourse

discussing, inventing and describing Buddhism within Burma that ran between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

The third discourse that my thesis examines – the ‘outsider’ Anglophone discourse that is still cited by academic writers in the present – is the scholarly narrative about the role of Buddhism and the precolonial state that emerged in the twentieth century. I would argue that this scholarly narrative has dominated the modern English-language academic understanding of Burmese Buddhism and the state, particularly in terms of claims about how Buddhist ideas have influenced the Burmese people across a century of historical change. The thesis will consider the development of this scholarly discourse over three decades between the 1920s and the 1950s (with some reference to earlier and later writers), examining key scholars and publications as well as the sources that they relied upon. Rather than simply presenting this influential narrative as depicting the reality of premodern Burma, we can, by examining its origins, appreciate some of its limitations and demonstrate further the complexity of the lineage of English-language discourse in the understanding of Burmese Buddhism and state-society relations.

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter One, ‘Twentieth-century English-language scholarship on Buddhism and the State in Precolonial Burma,’ sets the stage, considering the origins of what I call the twentieth century consensus in English-language academic discourse about the relationship between Buddhism and the state, a consensus that in broad terms still shapes the way in which historians and other scholars imagine the traditional Burmese Buddhist monarchy. This academic consensus grew out of the work of several key scholarly authors and emerged over some decades in the late colonial period and early postcolonial period. The chapter highlights three specific aspects of the scholarly account of the relationship between Buddhism and the state in traditional Burma that I have discerned in the discourse; namely, kingly rule as holy, the state as a mirror of the heavens and the role of religious functionaries. I have referred to these three aspects as the ‘dharma’ state, the ‘cosmic’ state and the ‘sangha’ state and my analysis associates each with a specific scholar, published work and decade in the historiography of the Anglophone scholarly narrative. In terms of the idea of the ‘dharma’ state, I argue that the scholar G.E. Harvey, writing in the 1920s was a key figure in the emergence of the notion that the Burmese kings were primarily religious figures and that they and the state were defined by their role as protectors and defenders of Buddhism; this view is reproduced and

confirmed in later, more general scholarship. Similarly, the emergence of the notion of the ‘cosmic’ state is associated with an influential essay by the archeologist Robert Heine-Geldern, published in 1942. He originated the idea, now commonly found in scholarship on premodern Southeast Asia, that the state was obliged to visibly mirror the broader cosmos in form, thereby guaranteeing prosperity for the people and legitimacy for the king. Finally, this chapter analyses the concept of the ‘sangha’ state and the work of the historian D.G.E. Hall, who articulated the broadly-shared view of the role of monks as perhaps the most important participants in the premodern Burmese polity, exercising their influence both socially and politically. I believe that setting out these three core categories helps to frame discussion in the subsequent chapters. Modern scholars are likely to read the other discourses examined in the thesis - the colonial and postcolonial discourses - with reference to these categories and tend to see themselves as being in the position of either inheriting this scholarly discourse or being in dialogue with it; by setting out its assumptions and examining its development, we can be more reflexive in our reading of the colonial-era discourse and the post-colonial Buddhist modernist discourses.

Chapter Two, ‘English-language discourse on Buddhism and the state from Colonial and Precolonial European observers,’ establishes that in nineteenth century English-language discourse, Buddhism was defined as an essentially rational and pure philosophy found in ancient texts but missing from contemporary Asia. This approach characterised early European observations of Burmese Buddhism as well. I establish how this ‘idealised dogma’ was contrasted with what the British saw as a Burmese ‘corrupted practice,’ wherein the Burmese Buddhists had fallen from the imagined purity of a textual Buddhism, presenting no obstacle to their colonisation as a primitive people. The supposed Burmese predilection for spirit-worship and astrology was given special emphasis by colonial observers. I consider how the belief that the king’s religious responsibilities were not in harmony with the British understanding of the scriptures - which championed an image of a ‘proper’ Buddhist society that denied a religious role to any group besides the sangha - led the British to deny the existence of traditional royal responsibilities for religion. The Burmese kings were therefore seen as tyrants who enjoyed no special legitimacy and deserved no special treatment; they could be safely deposed and replaced with a modern, British administration. The Burmese would still have their monks, the ‘only’ sacred group in Burma - who, the British felt, were bound to remain apart from society. In the European imagination, there was an appealingly logical and stark contrast between the ‘temporal’ laity and the ‘sacred’ sangha that denied *pongyis* an active role of any kind in Burmese public life. Monks who acted in any fashion that was considered to have

contravened this understanding were dismissed as ‘bad’ and held up as further examples of Burmese irreligiousness. This had the effect of invalidating any opposition or dissent from this extremely influential group. The chapter thus demonstrates that the colonial era English-language discourse on the proper role of Buddhism and the state in Burma was dominated by Manichaeic dichotomies between a simple and ‘correct’ template and a degenerate local reality. There exist significant continuities between this discourse and the postcolonial English-language one outlined in the subsequent chapters.

Chapters Three and Four represent the core of the thesis. Chapter Three, ‘English-language discourse on Buddhism and Science in early Postcolonial Burma,’ argues that in the postcolonial period an Anglophone Burmese discourse emerged that posited a new rational Buddhism that was consistent with science and other forms of modern knowledge. This Buddhist modernism was envisioned by its proponents, mostly the British educated Burmese elite, as creating a religious legitimacy for a modern postcolonial state. As such, it represented an inversion of the colonial era English-language discourse with which it shared many similarities; its goal was to demonstrate an inherent Burmese suitability for modern life, whereas colonial observers had intended to prove the opposite. Imagining Buddhism as a modern and rational religion subverted the colonial narrative of Burmese backwardness, offering a means to match and participate in ‘Western’ notions of progress without losing national distinctiveness. These Anglophone Burmese Buddhists confronted a perennial problem for postcolonial societies - the gulf between the modernising nationalist elite and the cultural orientation of the bulk of the population. Their efforts to reconcile these old and new conceptions rested on similarities between Buddhist doctrine and certain novel scientific theories, most particularly evolution. It also involved an insistence on Buddhism’s essential nature as an empirical and investigative philosophy or system of thought.

Chapter Four, ‘English-language discourse on Buddhism and the State in Postcolonial Burma,’ demonstrates some of the consequences of this new understanding, especially in the political sphere - certain ideologies and institutions were championed as suitable for Burma, while others were rejected. For example, there appeared in the discourse a rejection of any activity that was considered to be *unscientific* or *irrational*, and a strong desire to prevent these activities from affecting the operation of the state. As it had for the British before them, this involved a horror of anything that smacked of spirit-worship or astrology, and particularly any such activity on the part of the government. Newspapers from the period printed many complaints about pagoda

construction and the propitiation of *nats* (spirits) by the government and particularly U Nu. A further theme presented in this chapter involves the alignment of Buddhism with the ‘modern’ ideology of socialism, chosen by the postcolonial Burmese elites as the means of Burma’s economic development. Common cause was made in speeches by figures such as Nu (who despite his reputation as a ‘traditionalist,’ was, I suggest, an active participant in this ‘Buddhist modernist’ movement) between Buddhist materialism and Marxist materialism. As with science, parallels were drawn between certain Buddhist stories and sutras and the goals of socialism. The purpose of this association was not simply to garner Buddhist legitimacy for the state’s socialist objectives, but also to localise and capture the Marxist narrative from international Soviet-style communism, the adherents of which were competing for control of the Burmese state. Finally, this chapter deals with the association between Buddhism and democracy. Burma had inherited a system of parliamentary democracy from the British and it was required that this system, like that of socialism, be disentangled from international associations, particularly those connected with the former colonisers themselves. Efforts were made to localise democracy through a shared emphasis on the individual that Buddhist modernists found in both Buddhism and democracy and that this association was borne out at events like the Sixth Great Buddhist Synod, where the citizen-laity was held to have replaced the king (and, perhaps, the sangha) as the defender of Buddhism.

The fifth and final chapter, ‘Transformation, Comparison and Analysis,’ considers some of the consequences of these competing discourses, particularly in relation to the postcolonial Burmese state and its attempts to inculcate a modern Buddhist legitimacy. The postcolonial state needed to differentiate itself both from the old ‘dharma’ state and from the materially-oriented colonial state. Buddhist modernism was one solution and the state’s purpose was conceived as ‘guaranteeing prosperity.’ This new criteria for legitimacy rejected the kind of showy, ‘spiritualistic’ activity - like pagoda construction - that was seen to have been undertaken by the precolonial state and the postcolonial ‘revival’ outlined in the twentieth-century academic discourse. Instead, the state banked on material programs that would supposedly achieve visible outcomes. These outcomes often failed to materialise, meaning that the state was forced to fall back on religious display. Next, the chapter focuses on the attempts of the modernists to assert their creed as a genuinely international religion, a viable philosophy for the entire modern world. It does this through considering the example of U Thant, the Secretary-General of the United Nations who was one of the best representations of the power of this idea. He championed it in his speeches and in his writing. He was an embodiment, essentially, of the modern Buddhist ‘international layperson,’ an

expression of modernist Buddhist ideologies and attitudes. The last section of the chapter deals with the furore surrounding the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion in 1960. The modernist emphasis on rationalism and democracy meant that there was distrust and opposition in the English-language press to this policy. The state religion issue also highlighted the modernist distrust of the privilege and influence of the sangha, specifically when that influence was expressed politically. The modernists tarred *pongyi* activism with the same brush that they had used for astrology and spirit-worship; in the sacred/temporal dichotomy that the modernists subscribed to, the sangha were not permitted an active political role. The *pongyi* campaign campaigning for Buddhism to be made the state religion and against later constitutional amendments was seen as a challenge to the new emphasis on the sovereign laity. Discussion of this issue concludes the thesis.

Chapter One

Twentieth-century English-language scholarship on Buddhism and the State in
Precolonial Burma

Introduction: The Scholarly Consensus on Buddhism and the State in Premodern Burma

A recent and authoritative English-language history of Burma discusses the nineteenth century encounter between the traditional Burmese Buddhist monarchy and the power of Imperial Britain in the following terms:

Myanmar was...Jambudvipa, where *chakravartins* ('world conquerors') were born and where the future Buddha Maitreya would descend. But the growth of British India over the next 100 years and a weakened monarchy in Myanmar by the beginning of the nineteenth century would change both these long-held perceptions and the realities on which they were based. So when secular, capitalist, industrialised Britain - the real 'world conqueror' at the time - clashed with religious agrarian and 'medieval' Myanmar, the outcome was predictable.¹

This quote illustrates what might be called the scholarly consensus view of the nature of the precolonial Burmese state. Although the authors, Michael and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, emphasise the contrast between the colonial and precolonial order, their account of the essential characteristics of a traditional Buddhist state in Burma is consistent with a depiction shared by almost all scholars writing on the subject in English since Burmese history became an academic discipline after World War II. In broad terms, this view sees that state - and to some extent all Southeast Buddhist polities in the premodern era – as being based on an indivisible link between Buddhism and monarchy, to such an extent that it is almost impossible to imagine Buddhism and monarchy apart from each other in the centuries before the establishment of European colonial power. Some recent scholarship, such as that of Michael Charney, has pointed out that much of the modern understanding of Burmese Buddhist political history projects the image of the relationship between Buddhism in the state constructed by Konbaung-era historians on the eve of colonisation back into the distant past.² However, it can be argued that most English-language academic writing on the subject still presents the basic structure of the relationship between Buddhism and monarchy in Burma as having undergone no significant change from earliest times.

¹ Michael and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditions and Transformations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 174. See also Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580-1760* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

² Michael Charney, "A Reinvestigation of Konbaung-era Burman Historiography on the Beginnings of the Relationship Between Arakan and Ava (Upper Burma)," *Journal of Asian History* 34, 1 (2000), 53-68.

This chapter will contend that the image presented in the Aung-Thwin quote above of a traditional Burma defined as ‘religious, agrarian and medieval,’ and founded on the religious obligation of the monarch to defend the Buddhist faith is the product of a set of views of traditional Burmese Buddhist monarchy that took shape as formal academic scholarship on Burmese history in English (and on traditional Southeast Asian history more broadly) emerged in the period between the 1910s and the 1950s. The period in which this paradigm emerged extends from the later decades of British colonial rule in Southeast Asia and the early period of national independence. This scholarly discourse was not explicitly aligned with supporting colonial rule (even though some of those involved with it were themselves colonial officials) and it was not overtly aligned with the project of postcolonial nation building. As a general rule, present-day historians of Burma writing in English do not seek to repudiate this scholarly discourse (although they may seek to challenge some of its details) and the authors associated with its formation are seen as the founders of genuine academic scholarship on Burmese history. The cohort of Anglophone scholars discussed in this chapter were the first historians of Burma who were not traditional scholars working in either Pali (the language of the scriptures) or in Burmese and who also were not affiliated with the colonial attempt to displace the traditional state. They wrote at a time when Burmese Buddhist monarchy had passed into history and when a postcolonial Burmese state was either a dream of nationalists or a work in progress. I would argue that present-day scholarship on traditional Burmese history continues to use the frameworks developed in this late-colonial academic discourse because the people who produced it appeared committed to a disinterested and scholarly appraisal of the precolonial state, in contrast to the majority of their late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antecedents, who sought to catalogue its errors.

The purpose of the present chapter is to set out some of the key features of this scholarly image of the traditional Burmese Buddhist state and to show in broad outline how this image came into existence. I must emphasise that my intention is not to try to overturn this image or to show that it is false. Rather, I attempt to set out what I regard as some of the central concepts of this image and to trace their origins and evolution by examining a number of what I consider to be key texts. The three key components of this image of the traditional Burmese Buddhist state (and to an extent, the general idea of premodern Theravada Buddhist monarchy) that I identify are the idea of a dharma state, the idea of a cosmic state and the idea of a sangha state. The term ‘dharma state’ refers to the sacred nature of kingship; ‘cosmic state’ refers to the state’s alignment with the greater Buddhist universe and ‘sangha state’ refers to its partnership with religious functionaries. These three

concepts are of my own delineation, though they are not inherently controversial and are in general accordance with existing ways of defining premodern Theravada Buddhist states.

In my discussion of these three ways of conceptualising the precolonial Burmese state, I focus on a particular text and a particular author that are, in my view, key to the articulation of one of these three core concepts. This choice of texts is my own and does not derive from previous work on the historiography of academic scholarship on Burma. In point of fact, there is precious little historiography on specifically English-language histories of Burma, the only real examples being an article by Emanuel Sarkisyanz published in 1966, ‘On the Changing Anglo-Saxon Image of Burma’ and a book by Michael Aung-Thwin, *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma: Paradigms, Primary Sources, and Prejudices*.³ The former is a survey of authors, the latter an investigation of Burmese primary texts and certain events; neither pays much attention to how the relationship between Buddhism and kingship was conceptualised. Finally, I should reiterate here that my focus is solely on English-language discourse and while the writers and texts under consideration were in many cases engaged in dialogue with Burmese language scholarship and scholars of their era, I seek here to set out the concepts and lines of influence in the English-language work, focusing in almost all cases on writers who were not Burmese.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: the first section deals with the emergence of the idea of the ‘dharma state’ – the notion that the function of premodern Buddhist kingdoms was essentially to protect and defend the dharma and that the state was conceived and understood as a mechanism for perpetuating Buddhism and furthermore that the legitimacy of kings was bound up with how closely they associated themselves with religion and religious standards of behaviour. The key text that I focus on in the articulation of this concept is the historian G.E. Harvey’s *History of Burma*, which was first published in 1925. The second section discusses the concept of the ‘cosmic state,’ or the idea that in premodern Buddhist kingdoms, the forms of authority and of the state itself were obliged to replicate the structures of the broader Buddhist cosmos; that is, in order to guarantee prosperity for the Burmese kingdom and legitimacy for the king, the palaces, provinces and courtly relationships needs must all conform to a certain cosmological pattern. The text on which this

³ Emanuel Sarkisyanz, “On the Changing Anglo-Saxon Image of Burma,” *Asia Studies* 4, 2 (1966), 226-35; Michael Aung-Thwin, *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma: Paradigms, Primary Sources, and Prejudices* (Athens: Ohio University Centre for International Studies, 1998). Sarkisyanz locates the beginnings of what he calls ‘useful, influential and mostly scholarly writing’ in the late nineteenth century with the publication of Arthur Phayre’s *History of Burma*, otherwise it is a straightforward, critical survey on mostly British material on Burma and Burmese history.

section focuses is a widely-cited article by the archeologist Robert von Heine-Geldern, ‘Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia,’ published in 1942. (Almost all English-language scholarship on traditional Southeast Asian Buddhist monarchy produced between its publication and the present deploys ideas that were first given an explicit articulation in Heine-Geldern’s article.) The final section concerns itself with the ‘sangha state.’ – a concept that revolves around the significant role that the Buddhist monkhood played both politically and socially in the premodern Burmese state. A central element in the concept of the sangha state, I suggest, is the idea that monks were a check on the authority of the Buddhist kings and the ultimate arbiters of their legitimacy. Although the origins of this sangha state concept are perhaps more diffuse than the other two discussed in this chapter, I take the historian D.G.E. Hall’s work, *Burma*, published in 1950, as the focal point for my discussion. While I do not seek to argue that the concepts of dharma state, cosmic state and sangha state emerged in a sequential order, the movement from the work of Harvey in 1925, to that of Heine-Geldern in 1942 and then to that of Hall in 1950 traces a line between the time when British colonial power was firmly established, to the time of its displacement in World War II through to the early years of independent Burma. These historical contexts are not explicitly discussed by any of the writers in question, but they are relevant to the emergence of modern scholarly discourse on precolonial Burma in the sense that it is against this historical background that Burmese history as an academic subject takes shape. I should also note that in this chapter I draw on the work of scholars who were not primarily academic specialists in the history of either Burma or premodern Southeast Asia to show how ideas that have helped to build up the concepts of the dharma state, cosmic state and sangha state were disseminated and constructed in wider reflections on the relationship between Buddhism and politics in the decades after Harvey, Heine-Geldern and Hall’s works appeared.

The Dharma State: Discourse on Buddhism and Kingship

The dharma state, as already mentioned, is the concept whereby Buddhism is seen as the very *raison d’être* of the kingdom and the single most important factor in its legitimacy. In this understanding, state and kingship existed primarily to maintain and protect the religion. One place in which we can see the emergence of this notion of the ‘dharma state’ is in the historian G.E. Harvey’s *History of Burma*, published in 1925. Harvey was born in Britain and joined the Indian Civil Service as a young man and arrived in Burma in 1912 at the age of twenty-five. He became proficient in Burmese and served in the country until 1932, and thereafter was lecturer in Burmese history at

Oxford from 1936 to 1942. We can see Harvey as a transitional figure whose career began in the colonial era and who lived into the period of independence. His relationship to colonialism was complex: the Burmese historian U Htin Aung depicts Harvey as an apologist for British imperialism who became progressively more liberal in the postwar period, while Alyssa Phillips has recently offered a reading of his *History of Burma* that situates it firmly within the structures of colonial discourse.⁴ It can be argued that even though Harvey was part of the colonial establishment, his *History of Burma* marks the point when the “modern” academic narrative of Burmese history becomes possible, and it is with Harvey, rather than any earlier writer, that modern English-language academic history of traditional Burma begins. Harvey’s text appeared almost fifty years after the fall of the Burmese kingdom; it was written at a time when British rule was firmly established. The dharma state was a thing of the past and there was no prospect at that time for its restoration, making it an object for historical inquiry rather than a living political reality.

Harvey’s text sets out a periodisation of Burmese history that has been enormously influential. I would argue that the key idea that underpins Harvey’s narrative is that of a state whose core attribute was its commitment to Theravada Buddhism: Burma as ‘dharma state.’ Below, I outline how the image of the dharma state was developed in Harvey’s work and then consolidated and reinforced in scholarly discourse about Buddhism in Burma and Buddhist kingship generally in sources ranging from the 1930s to the 1970s. In creating this narrative of traditional Burmese history, Harvey reworked and displaced the Burmese chronicle tradition. Indeed, one of the framing contexts for the production of Harvey’s *History of Burma* was the 1923 publication of Gordon Luce and Pe Maung Tin’s translation of a portion of the Glass Palace Chronicle or *Hmannan Yazawin*.⁵ The *Hmannan Yazawin* is a formal dynastic chronicle compiled under King Bodawpaya of the Konbaung dynasty between 1829 and 1832. Harvey’s text can be seen as founded on the chronicle tradition; his account of Burmese history relies heavily on that tradition while also changing it in significant ways.

In Harvey’s narrative, the founding and defining moment of the relationship between kingship and Theravada Buddhism in Burma was the fabled meeting between Anawratha and Shin Arahan.

⁴ Maung Htin Aung, “Three Unpublished Papers by Harvey,” *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 58, 1 (1975), 1-52; Alyssa Phillips, “Romance and Tragedy in Burmese History: a Reading of G.E. Harvey’s *The History of Burma*,” *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, 1 (2005), 1-26.

⁵ Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce, trans., *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

Anawratha was a king of the Pagan dynasty (849-1297) and the first to rule over an area commensurate with modern Burma, while Shin Araham was a monk from a different, more southern kingdom called Thaton. Harvey's account of their meeting reads as follows:

Shin Araham, son of a Thaton Brahman, came to Pagan in 1056. He was a Talaing (Mon) monk of the Theravada school of southern Buddhism, who burned to evangelise the heathen land of Upper Burma. He dwelt in a solitary hermitage in a glade near Pagan, until one day a woodman, wondering what this strange being in a yellow robe might be, led him away to court. Anawrahta saw him and realised that here was one whose purity and restrained power were in utter contrast with the leering vacuity of the corpulent Aris (the Pagan priesthood.) He told him to be seated, and to all men's wonder, Shin Araham seated himself on the throne. Anawrahta asked "Master, of what race art thou? Whence comest thou? Whose doctrine dost thou follow?" Shin Araham told him and Anawrahta entreated saying "My lord, teach me somewhat, yea, though it be a little, of the law preached by the Lord, the Master." Before long, the apostle's first step was accomplished: he had won authority to his side.⁶

Harvey's narrative implies that a dharma state was created at this moment of meeting between these two figures and that Anawrahta's kingship and the Pagan era more broadly set the tone for all subsequent Burmese dynasties in terms of the indivisible alliance between the state and Buddhism. What is noticeable in the above quotation is how Harvey reworks the Konbaung-era account of events that occurred almost a millennium before and representing the Burmese Buddhist chroniclers' account of the event as historical fact: even though he treats other portions of the chronicle as myth, the encounter between Shin Araham and Anawrahta is recounted almost exactly as it is in the chronicle. Harvey seems to accept without question that this early nineteenth-century account accurately related events in the eleventh century. Arguably, this reflects a significant underlying assumption of the dharma state narrative, namely that the relationship between the monarchy and Buddhism and the characteristics thereof became solidly established in the Pagan period and remained unchanged and constant until modern times. In Harvey's narrative, commitment to the preservation of the dharma is one of the definitive features of Buddhist monarchy. This emphasis on the centrality of religion to public life is clearly shown in the following quote in which Harvey describes the pagoda-covered ruins of Pagan:

⁶ G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Frank Cass, 1925), 25-6. For a critical reexamination of the encounter between Anawratha and Shin Araham see Michael Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Rāmañña: The Legend That Was Lower Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 136-9.

Those who doubt the reality of the populous city given up to the spiritual, should read the numberless inscriptions of the period, richly human and intensively devout; contemplate the sixteen square miles at Pagan, all dedicated to religion; contrast each separate brick from the depths of a great pile with the rubble of the Norman pillars; reflect that each temple was built not in generations but in months; remember how short was the period when Pagan was inhabited...add to all of this our natural preconception of the conditions necessary to the production of the great religious art; and then say whether those campaigns for a tooth, those heart searchings over the loss of a white elephant, at which we smile, are not rather possessed of a significance as deep to men of the age as the quest of the Holy Grail had for Arthurian knights.⁷

The ruins of this “city given up to the spiritual” give evidence of a state “dedicated to religion” animated by the same spirit that inspired the religious culture of medieval England. Elsewhere, Harvey suggests that a different political spirit underlies the cathedrals of medieval Europe and the religious architecture of Pagan:

The Gothic cathedrals are the work of the seething democracy of the mediaeval cities. The temples of Pagan symbolise the might of a great despotism, and they were built by the forced labour of villagers torn in thousands from their husbandry. Yet though they grumbled the people [of Pagan] would not have had it otherwise. The dynasty appealed to their imagination, and the age they lived in was an age of religious enthusiasm.

If Europe’s great religious art was the product of European freedoms, the art of Burma was the product of state that, though unfree, was dedicated to religious pursuits first and foremost. The kings may have been cruel despots, but they were valued by the people nonetheless for their contributions to Buddhism. What the ruins of Pagan show, Harvey suggests, is a populace which supports its rulers because of deep religious commitments. Harvey made this calculus explicit when he wrote that the role of Burmese Buddhist kings ‘was aesthetic and religious rather than political.’ Consider the following excerpt in his typically florid prose:

If the men whose day-dreams became incarnate in the temples of Pagan were also swarthy tyrants whose peevish frown spelt death, whose harems were filled with slave-women, that is only to say they were as other kings of their time. But whatever they were, the legacy of their fleeting sway has enriched posterity forever. It was they who made the sun-scorched wilderness, the solitary plain of Myingyan, to blossom forth into the architectural magnificence of Pagan. If they produced no nation-builder like Simon de Montfort, no lawgiver like Edward I., they

⁷ Ibid., 70.

unified Burma for more than two centuries, and that in itself was an achievement. *But their role was aesthetic and religious rather than political.* To them the world owes in great measure the preservation of Theravada Buddhism, one of the purest faiths mankind has ever known. Brahmanism had strangled it in the land of its birth; in Ceylon its existence was threatened again and again; east of Burma it was not yet free of priestly corruptions, but the kings of Burma never wavered, and at Pagan the stricken faith found a city of refuge. Vainglorious tyrants build themselves lasting sepulchres, but none of these men have a tomb. Then as now hut jostled temple and housed even the great; the two were not antithetic but correlative: these men's magnificence went to glorify their religion, not to deck the tent wherein they camped during this transitory life.⁸

Harvey suggests that the despotism of Burmese monarchs was simply a product of their being 'kings of their times.' More distinctive is that they 'never wavered' in their defence of the Buddhist faith; they were not 'vainglorious tyrants' and thus did not build tombs to commemorate themselves – instead 'these men's magnificence went to glorify their religion.' The power of the dharma state, according to Harvey, was that it was greater than the men that ruled it. It saved Buddhism for the world as a pure faith.

We can see how the image of the relationship between Buddhism and traditional monarchy that Harvey articulated had established itself by looking at J.S. Furnivall's 1948 account of the arrival of Buddhism in Burma.⁹ Furnivall condenses Harvey's narrative, affirming Buddhism's permanence as a coherent and constant influence on the Burmese from the earliest era to the time when Furnivall was writing. Furnivall was another key figure in the establishment of the discourse on Buddhism and the state in Burma, all the more influential because his work was not confined to the academic study of Burma's past. A scholar of Southeast Asia and Burma and, like Harvey, a member of the Indian Civil Service, Furnivall lived and worked in Burma for many years. He was a founder of the Burma Research Society, the creation of which marked the beginning of serious English-language scholarship about Burma specifically.¹⁰ Furnivall remained in Burma even after it had achieved independence and it was at this time that he published his most well-known work, *Colonial Policy and Practice*. In this seminal study, Furnivall presents the evolution of Buddhism in Burma in the following concise terms:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 12.

¹⁰ Dr Maung Maung, "A Boundless Faith in Burma," in *Dr Maung Maung: Gentleman, Scholar, Patriot* ed. Robert H. Taylor (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 282-7.

During the first millennium of the Christian era, though at long intervals, merchants from India established trading posts and settlements ... They brought with them their religion...some were Hindus, and some Mahayanist or Hinayanist Buddhists. In Burma, Hinayanism seems always to have predominated and was the religion that finally prevailed. Early Chinese sources portray among the Pyus (the earliest recorded inhabitants of Burma) a social life that in its leading features was still characteristic of Burma during the nineteenth century. ... It is Buddhism that has moulded Burmese social life and thought, and to the present day the ordinary Burman regards the term Burman and Buddhist as practically inseparable. The whole political and social life of Burma, from the palace to the village, centred round the Buddhist religion and the monastic order.¹¹

Here, Furnivall attests that the premodern Burmese state was inconceivable without Buddhism and that Burmese identity was synonymous with Buddhism: traditional Burma as dharma state. Furnivall's text was produced when colonialism was on its deathbed and I suggest that it represents the transformation of the concept of the dharma state into an academic object separated from any strong connection with colonial rule.

Further development of this academic consensus can be seen in the first Anglophone narrative of Burmese history to appear after the Second World War, published by D.G.E. Hall in 1950. (Hall's career and background will be discussed later in this chapter.) If Furnivall's narrative represents the dissemination of the dharma state model in general discourse, Hall's text shows it establishing itself in more specialised academic narrative. Hall's style is more moderate than that of Harvey, arguably helping to establish the neutrality and factuality – and hence the academic authority – of his account of the Burmese past. Hall's presentation of the 1057 conquest of the kingdom of Thaton, which traditionally was understood as a consequence of the meeting of Anawrahta and Shin Arahman, sets out what is arguably an elaboration of the basic features of the dharma state narrative, describing the foundation of the relationship between Buddhism and monarchy in the Pagan period:

The conquest of Thaton in 1057 was a decisive event in Burmese history. It brought the Burman into direct contact with the Indian civilizing influences in the south and opened the way for intercourse with Buddhist centres overseas, especially Ceylon. The possession of the Pali scriptures ... introduced him to the Buddhist ethic, which, as monasteries and teachers

¹¹ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 12.

multiplied throughout the land, began to exert its moral force, to restrain his more barbarous impulses, and to liberate him from the worst of his animistic practices.¹²

The consensus that Harvey and his successors articulate about the foundation of a Burmese dharma state in the eleventh century can be summarised as follows: even as Anawrahta benefited from the association of his throne with Buddhism, he placed upon his descendants the responsibilities that the Theravada doctrine required of a righteous king; while Buddhism supported the king, the king was in turn compelled to support Buddhism – how both he and the state itself were seen as having no greater task than the defence of the faith.

The basic image of the dharma state is reinforced and elaborated in the mid-twentieth century by academic work in other contexts, a wider theorisation of the Buddhist state in Southeast Asia that emerged more or less in the same era as Harvey, Hall and Furnivall's writing on Burma and in dialogue with them. A founding text in the more theoretical and anthropological tradition is the 1942 article by Robert Heine-Geldern: 'Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia,' which will be discussed in detail in the section of this chapter concerned with the idea of the cosmic state. In terms of the dharma state paradigm, however, one of Heine-Geldern's key contributions was the setting out in an academic context the idea of the Buddhist monarch as *cakkavartin*, a universal monarch. In defining this notion, Heine-Geldern drew on ideas found in Buddhist canonical literature, as well as general points about Southeast Asia with specific Burmese examples, quotes from Burmese sources and his own conclusions:

The whole idea and outward form of kingship in Southeast Asia, and specially in the Buddhist kingdoms of Farther India, was of course based on the conception of the Chakravartin, the Universal Monarch. Now it is known that a Chakravartin is the worldly alternative to a Bodhisatva, a future Buddha. Under these circumstances the theory of rebirth and of karma was bound to induce monarchs with a very high idea of their religious merits to consider themselves as Bodhisatvas. Thus, Oung Zaya, the founder of the last dynasty of Burma, took as king the name Alaungpaya which designated him as an Embryo Buddha. His son, king Bodawpaya (1782-1819) claimed outright to be the Bodhisatva Maitreya. However, his claim was rejected by the clergy and he dropped it.¹³

¹² D.G.E. Hall, *Burma* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), 12.

¹³ Robert Heine-Geldern, "Conceptions of the State and Kingship in Southeast Asia," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 2, 1 (1942), 26.

Heine-Geldern presents the structures of Southeast Asian Buddhist monarchy as being essentially the same across time and space: like Harvey he sees the Burmese Buddhist monarchy of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries as essentially following patterns that were established much earlier – he also sees these patterns as being shared with non-Burmese Southeast Asian Buddhist monarchies, monarchies in which the ruler was constructed as a *cakkavattin* or ‘wheel-turning king’. In the above quote, the core feature of the idea of the *cakkavattin* that Heine-Geldern is emphasising is the constraint on his power that results from his obligation to protect the dharma. The fact that the clergy could force Bodawpaya to drop his claim to be the next Buddha (arrived two thousand years ahead of schedule) is illustrative of the consensus that this status of ‘temporal Buddha’ placed critical responsibilities on the ruler. The *cakkavattin* owed his position to the dharma, he was obliged to act in accordance with it and, importantly, to preserve it.

As English-language academic discourse about traditional Buddhist monarchy became more elaborated in the twentieth century we can see the steady emergence of a narrative of the relationship between the king and Buddhism that reinforces the ideas set forth by Heine-Geldern in 1942. Balkrishna Gokhale’s 1969 article ‘The Early Buddhist View of the State’ - which summarises the Pali sources on the ideal Buddhist polity - offers the following description of the quasi-divine *cakkavattin*:

The ideal king is described as a “holy” person, a person in whom resides some mystic power. The *Cakkavatti* (Universal Monarch) has almost all the characteristics of a Bodhisattva like the marks of great men (*mahāpurisalakkhanāni*), and on death his funeral is conducted in the same fashion as that of a Buddha. As in the case of a Buddha there cannot be more than one *Cakkavatti* in a world-system at a time. ... To all appearances, therefore, kingship is endowed with mystical power or a charisma which makes obedience on the part of subjects to the ruler a quasi-religious duty.¹⁴

In Gokhale’s account, obedience to a Buddhist king was deference to the established patterns of authority as ordained by dharma, the Buddhist law of the universe; though not a god, the *cakkavattin* was an exalted being, sharing many characteristics with the Buddha himself, imbuing his royal authority with a degree of veneration and myth.

¹⁴ Balkrishna G. Gokhale, “Early Buddhist Kingship,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 26, 1 (1966): 19.

Where the image of the dharma state that is constructed by Heine-Geldern and Harvey draws primarily on traditional Southeast Asian historiography and on premodern accounts Southeast Asian states by non-Southeast Asian observers (including Chinese and European travellers), Gokhale's narrative is based on Pali language texts (a tendency which has been continued in subsequent scholarship on Theravada Buddhist ideas of kingship.) The *locus classicus* of ideas on the role of the *cakkavatin* is the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda* sutra, which outlines the responsibilities of a wheel-turning king.¹⁵ It tells the tale of Dalhanemi, a world-conqueror whose right to rule was symbolised by his possession of the Wheel-jewel, which hung in the sky overhead. After the passage of many years, Dalhanemi decided to become an ascetic, handing over the reigns of kingship to his eldest son. Seven days later, the Wheel-jewel vanished. The new king sought out his father, who told him not to despair. 'The celestial Wheel-jewel is not your ancestral heritage!' he admonished him. 'Come now! ... You (have to) behave like a noble Wheel-turning king!'¹⁶

'How does such a king behave?' the new king asked. 'Depend on the dharma,' his father replied:

honour and respect it, praise it, revere and venerate it, have Dhamma as your flag, Dhamma as your banner, govern by Dhamma, and arrange rightful shelter, protection and defence for your [all your subjects, as well as animals] ... Let no wrongdoing take place in your territory. ... Avoid what is bad; you should take up what is good and do that. That is the noble turning of a Wheel-turning king.¹⁷

Entwined with the notion of the 'universal monarch,' therefore, is the idea, as Gokhale puts it, of the Buddhist king as a moral being, the maintainer of the law: a *dhammiko dhammaraja*, or king of righteousness. Gokhale outlines the concept as follows:

It is in the concept of *dhamma* that the Buddhist ideas on kingship find their ultimate conclusion. The *Cakkavatti* is *dhammiko dhammarājā*. He is devoted to the *dhamma*, honours it, is deferential towards it, worships it, makes it his banner and treats it as his overlord. ... *Dhamma* is declared to be the ruler of rulers, the highest in the world. ... In this line of reasoning, then, the state is never an end in itself but rather a means to an end. ... For [the Buddhists], the state was not merely a punitive instrument but primarily an agency for the moral

¹⁵ Which translates as 'Discourse (containing) a lion's roar on the Wheel-turning King.' Cited in Steven Collis, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 602.

¹⁶ Ibid., 602. Literally 'turn in the noble turning of a Wheel-turning king.'

¹⁷ Ibid.

transformation of man. [The king's] functions were not restricted to to the establishment of orderly social, economic and political relationships among his subjects but extended to bring about a moral transformation in the nature of his subjects. This he was to achieve through setting the highest personal example by living life of contemplation, purity and moral endeavour.¹⁸

From this summary of the Buddhist responsibilities of the king and the state as set forth in the scriptures can be seen several key elements. The state existed to safeguard Buddhism and provide a suitable environment for its citizens to lead moral Buddhist lives. The king's main duties, too were understood through this paradigm; the king was required to live as a paragon of Buddhist virtue. By summarising the ideal of the *cakkavattin* in this way, Gokhale's furnishes English-language academic scholarship on traditional Theravada Buddhist monarchy with a firm scriptural basis.

The scholarship on the king as *cakkavattin* coexisted with that on the *dhammaraja* – King of the Law – a title that was, in the Burmese case at least, perhaps more important than that of *cakkavattin*. The idea of the *dhammaraja* as it has been enunciated in English-language scholarship is well summarised by the historian Josef Silverstein in a 1998 article, which also demonstrates how the dharma state narrative that emerged in the mid-twentieth century has survived largely without change into recent times. Silverstein asserts that the premodern Burmese state 'was so intimately connected with Buddhism [that] it was inconceivable for anyone to consider the survival of the faith and the kingdom without a king to protect both.' Similarly, the state itself was 'an instrument of this higher and universal morality for the transformation of man from being a merely political creature into a wholly moral being,' so they can know the Law and find nirvana.¹⁹ The *dhammaraja* had to be virtuous, pious and just; in practice, the Burmese laity were likely to be oblivious to the king's virtues and wary of his faults – except when it came to religion. He *had* to be a Buddhist, and he *had* to protect Buddhism. The discourse contends that it was inconceivable that it could be any other way.

Silverstein's account of the centrality of the figure of the *dhammaraja* to Buddhist political life has a well-established pedigree; it can be found in numerous twentieth-century studies that discussed the relationship between Buddhism and politics, not simply in the Theravada Buddhist cultural

¹⁸ Gokhale, "Early Buddhist Kingship," 20.

¹⁹ Josef Silverstein, "The Evolution and Salience of Burma's National Political Culture," in *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington DC: Brookings Institute Press, 1998), 14, 22.

sphere, but in premodern Buddhist Asia as a whole. An article titled ‘Buddhism and Asian Politics,’ published in 1962 by the Japanese American theologian Joseph Kitagawa highlights the status of the Indian emperor Aśoka as the conceptual origin of the ideal Buddhist king, pious and a champion and purifier of the faith. Kitagawa writes:

It was his (Asoka’s) pious hope to spread the *Dharma* as the guiding principle and the bond of unity within his empire and the sphere of his influence, and also as the means to enlighten people who lived in distant lands. In short, he was a Buddhist counterpart of the sage-king, and his vision of what Buddhism ought to be greatly inspired later Buddhist historians and theorists. In fact, we may go so far as to say that Asoka’s policy provided the only tangible norm for the relation of Buddhism to the socio-political order that was acceptable to many Buddhists until recent years.²⁰

Kitagawa, by citing the Aśokan example, was affirming the consensus that Buddhism was both a unifier of society and definer of society in premodern Buddhist kingdoms like Burma. Note the broader historical context in which Kitagawa’s text appeared: writing in the year that Ne Win established a new Burmese Buddhist polity, Kitagawa implicitly raises the problem of how to imagine a non-Aśokan form of Buddhist state, and significantly (from a Burmese point of view) how to create unity in a diverse state that has no *dharmmaraja*.

Indeed, one aspect of the Aśokan paradigm that is important to the image of the Burmese dharma state is the idea that the traditional Burmese monarchy possessed the capacity to unify the state across ethnic lines. Kitagawa’s comment that for Aśoka spreading the dharma served as the ‘guiding principle and the bond of unity within his empire and the sphere of his influence, and also as the means to enlighten people who lived in distant lands’ – with the implications that kings who attempted to emulate Aśoka as *dharmmaraja* or *cakkavattin* would be able to unite both those within their direct authority and those in neighbouring polities – resonates with claims by Furnivall that Buddhism had been critical to generating a premodern sense of nationhood in Burma. He wrote (in part quoting Harvey) that the Buddhist religion, among other factors, meant that the Burmese possessed an unusually coherent and uniform set of attitudes towards identity and government:

The whole country, marked out by nature as a distinct political unit, and with a common religion and a uniform social culture, had a far more national character than one could find anywhere in

²⁰ Joseph M. Kitagawa, “Buddhism and Asian Politics,” *Asian Survey* 2, 5 (1962): 2.

India. 'The Burmans, in fact, correspond far more closely to the ordinary conception of a nation than the Indians.' They had 'developed what may fairly be called a nation State, and possess a national consciousness;' the Mons and even many Karens preferred to be considered Burmese.²¹

Arguably, those historians of Burma who have followed in the wake of Harvey, Hall and Furnivall and whose work has been informed by the broader theorising of the traditional Buddhist monarchy that we see in the work of writers like Heine-Geldern, Gokhale and Kitagawa, have generally subscribed to the view that the Burmese monarch's defence of Buddhism was not only the fundamental source of the loyalty of Burmese people to their rulers but was also the most important bond between the leading ethnic groups of Burma in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and was the basis of the apparently genuine popular allegiance paid by them to the king.

To conclude, from this section we can make some broad observations about the way scholars writing from the late colonial era into the 1960s and 1970s conceptualised the way that premodern Burmese people regarded their state and its relation to the Buddhist dharma. First of all, the state itself was seen as an instrument of the dharma, existing only to maintain the religion - it could hardly have been otherwise, since both the Burmese notion of nationality and the perceived function of the Burmese king were so closely tied to Buddhism: adherence to it, in the case of the former, and the maintenance and defence of it, in the case of the latter. The next section will consider a further aspect of the connection between religion and state, the idea of authority as spectacle, wherein the state and king are obliged to visibly reflect the greater Buddhist universe. Harvey, whom this section has portrayed as one of the key formulators of the notion of the dharma state, also helped to define this concept: the state as *tableau vivant*. The institution of monarchy, he writes:

lingered in the imagination of the people, who felt that far away from their poor little huts, above the dullness of their lives, rose the Golden Palace, enshrining their king amid magnificence such as they had never dreamed of save in a fairy tale. Men live largely by sentiment, and that sentiment was satisfied to the full in the mystery and splendour of the kingship.²²

²¹ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 14-15. The Karen are an ethnic minority living in southeastern Burma. The source by Harvey that Furnivall is quoting here are the volumes on Burma in the *Cambridge History of India*, 1925.

²² Harvey, *History of Burma*, 200.

The Cosmic State: Discourse on Cosmological Conceptions of Authority

The references to splendour, mystery and fairy tales in the quote from Harvey in the previous section point to another key aspect of the academic discourse about the traditional Burmese monarchy - the idea of the state being part of a wider cosmo-magic order. A key text in theorising the relationship between the Burmese state and traditional cosmological thinking was Robert von Heine-Geldern's classic article 'Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia.' This text – which has already been mentioned above – is the first genuinely systematic articulation of what I would call the 'cosmic state' vision of the traditional Southeast Asian Buddhist monarchy. Heine-Geldern writes as follows:

According to this belief humanity is constantly under the influence of forces emanating from the directions of the compass and from stars and planets. These forces may produce welfare and prosperity or work havoc, according to whether or not individuals and social groups, above all the state, succeed in bringing their lives and activities in harmony with the universe. Individuals may attain such harmony by following the indications offered by astrology, the lore of lucky and unlucky days and many other minor rules. Harmony between the empire and the universe is achieved by organising the former as an image of the latter, as a universe on a smaller scale.²³

For the human world to thrive, it needs to mirror the cosmos in its hierarchy and its harmony. Not only would this 'produce welfare and prosperity,' but, as Heine-Geldern asserts, structuring the coronation, the capital and the kingdom in accordance with the greater universe proved useful in providing support for the authority of the ruler. The spiritual superiority of the king is the analogue of the supremacy of heaven. Nonetheless, the king himself must be careful to ensure that this parallelism remains intact – should it become upset, the consequences could be dire. When the state and the cosmos are seen as inseparable, it augurs badly for the religion – and the world – if that link is broken. Heine-Geldern defines this phenomenon as the 'astrological or cosmo-magic principle,' and he contended that it was an important religious and philosophical conception that underpinned the state in Burma. According to this principle, the people and their kings needs must align their behaviour and lives in line with cosmological and astrological understandings. In the following section I will show how Heine-Geldern sets out the idea of the state as both imagined and deliberately structured to ensure harmony with the unknown forces of the universe.

²³ Heine-Geldern, "Conceptions of State and Kingship," 1.

Born in Austria in 1885, Heine-Geldern was an archaeologist, ethnologist and foundational scholar of Southeast Asian studies in Europe and America. He had more than a passing acquaintance with Burma, having travelled there in 1910 to research his doctoral dissertation, *The Mountain Tribes of Northeastern Burma*.²⁴ ‘Conceptions of State and Kingship’ is ostensibly about the entirety of Southeast Asia, and ‘Farther India,’ as he puts it, yet the article’s principal focus is precolonial Burma; most of his examples of ‘Hinayana Buddhist kingship’ are Burmese. Despite this, he names only two sources, the section of the Glass Palace Chronicle that had been translated into English in 1923, and James George Scott’s *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, published in 1900.²⁵ Heine-Geldern was not British and had little incentive to defend British rule or condemn the Burmese; he lived in America at the time of the publication of ‘Conceptions of State and Kinship’ and the article offers an essentially impartial scholarly narrative, one that has far less connection to the colonial establishment than the texts of Harvey, Furnivall or Hall.

Elaborating on the concept of parallelism that forms the main focus of the article, Heine-Geldern writes that:

It must not be forgotten that the cosmo-magic principle as applied to the state really forms only part of a much wider complex and resulted from a conception of the universe and of human existence which regulated, and to a large extent still regulates, also the private lives of individuals. ... When in Burma before any important undertaking they examine their horoscope and the lore of lucky and unlucky days, or when they kneel down for prayer on that side of the pagoda which in the cosmological system corresponds to the planet of the weekday on which they were born, they act on the same principle which governed the structure of their empires, their ideas of kinship and the ritual of their royal courts.²⁶

Thus, in addition to the view of the state as vehicle for the dharma and the king as its defender, there was a Buddhist cosmological element to how the Burmese regarded their polity. This also contributed to the essential character of the Burmese state; it was seen as serving an astrological purpose. Heine-Geldern points out that while the ‘Burmese, Mon and Thai literatures are still very imperfectly known,’

²⁴ Erika Kaneko, “Robert von Heine-Geldern: 1885 - 1968,” *Asian Perspectives* 13, 1 (1970), 1; Gérald Gaillard, *The Routledge Dictionary of Anthropologists* (London: Routledge, 2004), 223.

²⁵ James George Scott, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1900).

²⁶ Heine-Geldern, “Conceptions of State and Kingship,” 28.

yet there is overwhelming evidence of the cosmological basis of state and kingship in this area. This evidence is found in numerous passages in literature and inscriptions, in the titles of kings, queens and officials, in the “cosmic” numbers of queens, ministers, court priests, provinces, etc., in rites and customs, in works of art, in the layout and structure of capital cities, palaces and temples. One need only put these various items together to obtain a relatively clear picture.²⁷

The correct or ‘cosmic’ number was the number mostly closely aligned to the Buddhist macrocosm, with which the kingdom was intended to be in microcosmic alignment. ‘The empire,’ Heine-Geldern writes, ‘was conceived as an image of the heavenly world of stars and gods.’ Of this ‘heavenly world’ - the broader Buddhist cosmos - he provides the following synopsis:

In the Buddhist system...Mount Meru forms the centre of the universe. It is surrounded by seven mountain ranges separated from each other by seven annular seas. Beyond the last of these mountain chains extends the Ocean and in it lie four continents, one in each of the cardinal directions. The continent south of Mount Meru is Jambūdvīpa, the abode of men. ... The universe is surrounded by an enormous wall of rocks, the Chakravāla range. On the slopes of Mount Meru lies the lowest of the paradises, that of the four Great Kings or guardians of the world, on its summit the second paradise, that of the thirty-three gods with Sudarśana, the city of the gods, where Indra reigns as king. Above Mount Meru tower one above the other the rest of the heavenly abodes.²⁸

With this in mind, it is his assertion that in Buddhist kingship in Burma and in Southeast Asia efforts were made to align the realm, cosmetically and structurally, with this view of the universe; the fourfold division, Mount Meru at the centre, etc. One way in which this could be achieved was through the capital:

In Southeast Asia...the capital stood for the whole country. It was more than the nation’s political and cultural centre: it was the magic centre of the empire. ... Whereas the cosmological structure of the country at large could be expressed only by the number and location of provinces and by the functions and emblems of their governors, the capital city could be shaped architecturally as a much more “realistic” image of the universe, a smaller microcosmos within that microcosmos, the empire.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁸ Ibid., 16-9.

²⁹ Ibid., 17.

In the Burmese case specifically, Heine-Geldern cast his archaeologist's eye over Burma's capitals, making the following observation about the ways in which they internally reflected the cosmos:

In Burma the centre of the capital is invariably occupied by the royal palace [and] identified with Mount Meru. ... By erecting the palace in the centre of the city and by identifying it with Mount Meru, the lord of the palace, i.e. the king, became automatically the representative of Indra. We might even say that he was "the Indra" of this smaller universe, the Burmese empire. ... "King of the Golden Palace" was one of the most important titles of Burmese monarchs. ... It will suffice to say a few words about Mandalay, the last capital of independent Burma, built by king Mindon in 1857 A.D. The inner city was surrounded by a wall and moat forming a square of more than a mile on each side, its sides facing the cardinal points. The royal palace, which occupied the centre of the city, and more specifically the seven tiered tower over the throne in the great audience hall, was identified with Mount Meru. There were three gates on each side of the city, twelve in all, and they were marked with the signs of the zodiak, (sic) thereby indicating that the city was meant to be an image of heaven with its stars spread out around the celestial mountain in its centre.³⁰

Heine-Geldern informs us that these parallels need not only be structural, they could be personal; the Burmese king's person and his court were expected to conform to this pattern in their titles and relationships to one another:

The king was supposed to have four principal queens and four queen of secondary rank whose titles, "Northern Queen of the Palace," "Queen of the West," "Queen of the Southern Apartment," etc., show that they originally corresponded to the four cardinal points and the four intermediary directions. There are indications that at an earlier period their chambers actually formed a circle around the hall of the king, thereby emphasising the latter's role as centre of the universe and as representative of Indra, the king of the gods in the paradise at the summit of Mount Meru.³¹

So, indeed, was the bureaucracy and administration. The king governed with the aid of four chief ministers who, Heine-Geldern writes, each originally had charge of one quarter of both the capital and the empire; these corresponded to 'the four Great Kings or Lokapālas' - the guardians of the four cardinal directions. Those responsibilities had subsequently been delegated, however, to four

³⁰ Ibid., 19.

³¹ Ibid., 20. Heine-Geldern makes explicit his connection to and reliance on colonial materials when he cites James George Scott: 'Sir James George Scott's observation that king Thibaw's failure to provide himself with the constitutional number of queens caused more concern to decorous, law-abiding people than the massacre of his blood relations, shows how important this cosmic setting was considered to be.'

flag-bearing officers who each guarded a side of the palace and the capital.³² This numerological template for organisation manifested itself right down through the administrative hierarchy, with the numbers four and eight being repeated *ad infinitum*; there were, apparently, ‘four under-secretaries of state, eight assistant secretaries, four heralds, four royal messengers, etc.’³³ Further cosmological emphasis could be in the king’s coronation ritual, an event that according to Heine-Geldern and Harvey, upon whom he drew, was replete with Buddhist symbolism. The structure erected for this purpose was actually called *Thagya-nan*, ‘Indra’s Palace.’³⁴ The ritual was carried out by Brahmins; eight of them surrounded the king on his throne, handing him his regalia, raising a white umbrella above his head and anointing him with oils. Here the king is again a representation of Mount Meru. Eight noble maidens, one for each of the cardinal points and ‘intermediary directions’ paid homage to him and adjured him to rule justly. The king said aloud the words ascribed to the Buddha at birth: ‘I am foremost in all the world! I am the most excellent in all the world! I am peerless in all the world!’ – an exclamation in line with his status as a *cakkavattin* and ‘temporal Buddha.’ Last of all, he meditated on the ‘Three Jewels.’³⁵

Thus the ‘magic of parallelism’ raised the king to an exalted position. Yet this position was conditional, depending on how closely the king associated himself and the realm with the greater Buddhist cosmos. Failure to conform to these factors was extremely serious – the very fabric of reality could be disrupted. If the king does what is right, the moon and stars will stay on course, the rain will fall and crops grow. If he does not, the realm will become disturbed, including the natural world – trees will not flower and food will taste bad. Furthermore, as Gokhale subsequently wrote,

³² Ibid. The flags that these special officers bore corresponded in colour to the relevant side of Mount Meru: ‘the one representing Dhattarattha, the Lokapāla of the East, a white one, the officer representing Kubera, the Lokapāla of the North, a yellow flag, etc.’

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 21-2. Heine-Geldern reminds us that the use of the term ‘quasi-divine,’ rather than ‘semi-divine’ or just ‘divine’ is here important. Although the king was associated with Indra, he was not, as in Hindu and Mahayana kingdoms, descended from him, or his avatar. In Theravada countries like Burma, the king was not regarded in this fashion. He was not an incarnation; his was deification by association only.

³⁵ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 325. Heine-Geldern informs us that the king couldn’t necessarily relax once he’d been coronated. It was a distinct possibility that his legitimacy could be maintained only so long as he held on to his cosmological markers: ‘Yet, the fact that the king “was Indra” and therefore ruler of the country only as possessor of the empire’s Meru, the palace, involved great dangers. It worked as a constant temptation for would-be usurpers, be it from the ranks of the royal family or outsiders, as the occupation of the palace might be achieved by a coup-de-main with relatively small forces and usually meant the conquest of the whole empire. Many [kings] therefore were virtual prisoners in their palace which they did not dare to leave for fear it might be seized by an usurper.’ See Heine-Geldern, ‘Conceptions of State and Kingship,’ 22.

‘if a king acts immorally, his actions interfere with the functions of nature, such as timely rain, and there arise the three dangers of famine, epidemics and armed conflicts.’³⁶

To conclude, in his survey of the ‘cosmic state’ in Theravada Buddhist kingship in Southeast Asia, Heine-Geldern articulated a view that the symbology of the palace and throne were less an affectation than they were a requirement. Without possession of the empire’s Meru, the king was nobody. What is more, such possession was no guarantee of stability, since it lent itself equally to the authority of a legitimate king and to that of a usurper – possession being nine-tenths of royal law. On the other hand, a usurper could thus be counted on to maintain the tradition of his predecessors – indeed, he was more or less forced to.

The Sangha State: Discourse on the Role of Monks

Tamed, I would tame the wilful ; comforted,
Comfort the timid; wakened, wake the asleep ;
Cool, cool the burning; freed, set free the bound.
Tranquil and led by the good doctrines I
Would hatred calm.³⁷

- Prayer of Alaungsithu

With Heine-Geldern’s work we see the clear emergence of an academic narrative of the traditional Burmese state which sought to articulate the underlying cultural logic of that state. In this sense, Heine-Geldern’s work is more unambiguously operating within the paradigms of modern scholarship than was Harvey (on whose work Heine-Geldern drew.) Although Harvey’s narrative stands as the progenitor of modern historical writing on Burma, it can still be located within the frameworks of colonial discourse, as Alyssa Phillips has argued. By contrast, D.G.E Hall’s *Burma*, published in 1950 is recognisably modern scholarship. Hall’s prose is - unlike that of Harvey - sober and measured, prone to neither partisan emphasis nor hyperbole. To a present-day reader *Burma* feels less like an historical artefact and more like a reliable and realistic survey of Burmese history; it can be seen either as the last work of colonial-era academic scholarship or the first major work in

³⁶ Gokhale, “Early Buddhist Kingship,” 20.

³⁷ Hall, *Burma*, 21. The prayer is a Pali poem inscribed within the Shwegugyi Pagoda in Pagan. It is attributed to King Alaungsithu, who was a great-grandson of Anawrahtha. Alaungsithu is remembered for his patronage of Buddhism, his pious works and for being smothered by his son in the very pagoda where this inscription appears. The ‘glowing’ translation cited here is by Gordon Luce.

English to examine Burma in postcolonial terms. Within its pages, a recognisable narrative of a strong relationship between Buddhism and the precolonial state has been consolidated. This state is understood as being animated by its commitment to religion and as having a cultural logic informed by the concepts that I have termed the ‘cosmic’ and ‘dharma’ state. The excerpt from a poetic inscription attributed to a pious Burmese monarch cited above, is an example of how Hall’s work affixes the centrality of religion to the operations of the traditional Burmese state. In a passage that follows on from the quote above he writes:

Our matter of fact age would today condemn a ruler who neglected the pedestrian task of administration in order to concentrate on ‘useless’ temple building. But such an attitude of mind fails to grasp the ‘otherworldliness’ of the Buddhist ideal, which inspired these works of merit. ... The noblest minds of Pagan felt the fascination of Buddhism much as those of mediaeval Europe that of Christianity; reverence for the Religion and its Founder absorbed their whole being.³⁸

Here, Hall - following patterns visible in the work of Harvey - emphasises the significance of the king as head of the church and reiterates the notion that the king’s main duties were religious in nature, taking precedence over his administrative responsibilities. Similarly, Hall’s work highlights what is perhaps the most durable idea about Buddhism and the state in traditional Burma - that of the depth of the relationship between the Buddhist clergy - the sangha - and the premodern Burmese state. Hall’s discussion of the centrality of the relationship between the sangha and the traditional Burmese monarchy brings us to the final of the three models of the precolonial state that I have identified, that of the ‘sangha state.’ The sangha state concept stresses the mutual interdependence between the Buddhist order of monks and the kingship and the understanding that monks possessed an active role in the legitimacy of the king and the quotidian function of the Burmese state and society.

Hall is a key transitional figure in the evolution of English-language discourse about Burma, linking the colonial past with the scholarly world of postcolonial times. Unlike many of the other authors surveyed here, he did not come to Burma via the colonial civil service. Born in Hertfordshire in 1891, Hall was a career academic who was offered the inaugural chair of history at the University of Rangoon in 1921. He retained this position until 1934 when he returned to England and eventually became the head of Southeast Asian history at the School of Oriental and African

³⁸ Hall, *Burma*, 21-2.

Studies; it was here that he published his most influential work, including *Burma*.³⁹ As will be shown below, his statements in that work clearly set out the importance of the sangha-state-society relationship in traditional Burma, presenting the sangha as being of foundational importance in Burmese life. Hall's understated and factual style gives extra force to his picture of the central place of the sangha in the premodern state; the idea that the sangha, state and society formed an indivisible unity that was a defining characteristic of traditional Burma appears not as a contention or an interpretation but as a simple matter of fact. I should point out that in presenting Hall's work as articulating an image of Burma as a sangha state, I am not trying to argue that Hall was the creator or originator of the idea that the sangha was central to Burmese life. Perhaps to a greater degree than is the case with the dharma state and cosmic state paradigm, the idea of the importance of the sangha in Burmese life was a matter of widespread consensus shared by a broad spectrum of observers. Hall's work both reproduces older narratives and anticipates the academic consensus that appeared in succeeding decades. This section, therefore will combine discussions of colonial accounts of the 'sangha state' with postcolonial ones, attempting to demonstrate continuities while also pointing to the ways in which the discourse changed.

Summing up the connection between political power and the sangha in the precolonial Burmese kingdom, Hall writes the following:

The influence of the monkhood was vast, and although they never sat in the courts, the law-books which guided judicial decisions, were almost all compiled by monks. Burmese life centred round the religious shrines and the monasteries; and during the many times of disorder, when the civil government broke down, it was the Buddhist organisation, loose though it was, which held society together. It has well been said that "without studying their Buddhism, their priesthood, and their religious observances it is impossible to acquire any true insight into the Burmese character."⁴⁰

This is particularly interesting in light of Hall's earlier comment that the Burmese kings tended to neglect administrative functions in favour of their religious commitments. Not only did the monks exercise this significant political and even administration influence, they also possessed an important social role. Hall observed:

³⁹ C. D. Cowan, "Obituary: Daniel George Edward Hall," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 44, 1 (1981), 149-51.

⁴⁰ Hall, *Burma*, 137.

Every village had its pagoda and at least one resident monk, who held office by invitation of the villagers. The village monastery was also its school, where boys were taught not only the beliefs and moral precepts of their religion, but also to read and write. It was the universal custom for boys to don the yellow robe and enter a monastery at the age of puberty, and remain there for a year or two under instruction. There was thus a high degree of literacy throughout the country, especially in Upper Burma, where monasteries were more numerous than in the south.⁴¹

Each Burmese male not only learned his letters and numbers in a monastery, but also spent at least some weeks, and often longer, as a monk themselves. The king himself possessed such a connection to the sangha, as Hall attests:

The Buddhist Church was controlled by the king through a Thathanabaing ('possessor of discipline') and a council of ecclesiastics and laymen, all of whom he appointed. The administration was concerned with monastic discipline and the management of endowments to monasteries and shrines. ... As every king had received part of his education as a boy in the monastery, it was customary for him on his accession to invest its abbot with the authority of Thathanabaing. The country was divided into districts at the head of each of which was a Gaing Ok, whose task it was to settle disputes and maintain discipline. No monk as such could be dealt with by the secular authority. Where one was accused of a serious crime, however, a local magistrate might hold an inquiry and submit a report to the king. The council would then unfrock the offender and hand him over to secular justice.⁴²

Thus, the scholarly consensus on the 'sangha state' that is presented in Hall's work can be summed up as follows: the sangha was an object of deep and abiding reverence among the Burmese laity; the sangha as an organised and educated group possessed a powerful influence over all levels of Burmese society in both a moral and a practical sense; and that the role of the king as the head of the Buddhist faith meant that monarchy and sangha were bound tightly together in ties of mutual obligation.

An important feature of Hall's statements about the central role of the sangha is that they do not so much displace colonial-era discourse as continue it. Unlike many colonial-era observers, Hall does not treat the sangha as a negative influence on traditional Burmese life, yet he does reproduce a well-established tradition found in colonial writing of stressing the political importance of the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

clergy. An example of this discourse is *The Province of Burma*, published in 1907 (approximately two decades after the fall of the Konbaung kingdom) by the well-travelled Alleyne Ireland. Ireland published numerous works on several of Britain's colonies and saw with a coloniser's functional eye the political role of the sangha in Konbaung Burma. 'The Buddhist monks had a very considerable influence under the Burmese Government,' he wrote:

It was an axiom that no monk could utter a falsehood, and his word, therefore, was universally respected and accepted as true. He had access to the King and his ministers at all times, and those of the higher grades received specially stamped leaves to enable them to correspond with the court. They could and did exercise their influence in various ways. Sometimes a person ordered out for execution obtained his life and a pardon on their intercession. They were occasionally the only check on the tyranny and extortion of powerful officials. They obtained remission of taxes for the people in times of scarcity and disaster, or temporary relief when there was a local famine of crops. Very often it was only through the monks that men imprisoned for offences which no one remembered, for a term which had never been fixed, could obtain release.⁴³

Ireland observes that on the one hand, if a king was lacking in piety, or acted in a manner that was perceived to be unjust, the sangha could and would use their influence against his authority. On the other hand, they could preach submission to a just and legitimate ruler:

The *pongyi* could report on the conduct of officials, criticise their methods of government, have them removed or transferred, and offer suggestions for the amelioration of the condition of the people. Thus the *pongyi* was a power in the Government of the country,--a power constituted and fostered so as to place a salutary check on the tyranny and oppression of the officials, on the one hand, and to reconcile the people to the existing form of government, on the other.⁴⁴

Such is Ireland's emphasis on the political dimensions of the sangha's relationship with authority that he more or less implies that they were salaried employees of the state:

It was in tacit recognition of such services that the *pongyi* received from the State a monthly subsistence allowance, usually in the form of rice, but sometimes in money. In addition to this the monk's relatives were exempted from taxation, and he had also the privilege of being

⁴³ Alleyne Ireland, *The Province of Burma: A Report Prepared on Behalf of the University of Chicago* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1907), 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

amenable to the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts only, in all matters, even in those in which laymen were parties in the case.⁴⁵

Ireland concludes:

Thus under the Burmese government the pongyi...who theoretically had nothing to do with politics or with the affairs of this world, was really a political power – the only permanent force in a system where office was liable to be as transient and evanescent as the hues of the rainbow or the tints of the dying dolphin.⁴⁶

So, Ireland saw the relationship of patronage between the sangha and the monarchy most particularly in its political aspects, giving a strong impression of their importance in the Burmese kingdom. This view continued to be emphasised in the developing scholarly discourse. Furnivall, for example, sketched plainly a view of the basic characteristics of the relationship between the sangha and broader society that meshes with Ireland's observations:

In every village the monks, in a community singularly free of scandal, imparted to all the boys the elements of letters and practical morality. The monastic order, free to all and spread over the whole country, was influential but not oppressive, and Church and State, instead of dividing the country by their rival claims, left each other mutual support. ... This national civilisation was held together mainly by two strong links; the monastic order and the hereditary local chieftains. Through intervals of anarchy these survived, and it was round them that society grew up anew, but on the old lines, when order was restored.⁴⁷

Hall's assertions about the political significance of the sangha, which were produced in the same era as the work of Furnivall, can be seen as inheriting and summing up a discursive tradition that runs back to earlier writers. Hall and Furnivall's account of the sangha is in essential accord with what is found in the work of Harvey; in discussing the way in which monks exerted their influence as a check on overbearing monarchical tyranny, Harvey states:

Bodawpaya punished with death the drinking of intoxicants, the smoking of opium and the killing of any large animal, as an ox, or buffalo; and when he was in a really devout mood he

⁴⁵ Ibid., 72-3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁷ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 17. The chieftain-gentry, whom Thant Myint-U called the 'backbone' of Burmese administration, receive no special emphasis from Ireland, probably because the British dismantled that system after 1886. See Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 35.

would make drinkers drink boiling lead. In the provinces governors contented themselves with decapitation, but it was inflicted even for selling liquor, and sex was no exemption. The clergy would sometimes intervene, and their robes, flung over a criminal when he was kneeling under the executioner's uplifted sword, were so absolute a reprieve that government usually took steps to prevent their attendance; a person thus pardoned, for this or worse offences, became a monk's slave and had to dress in white, take vows and serve the monastery.⁴⁸

Thus, what is striking about all these statements about the role of the sangha is the degree of continuity that is observable over time. There is arguably a more durable consensus about the identity of Burma as a 'sangha state' than there is in the twentieth-century scholarly discourse about any other feature of premodern Burmese political life. The durability of these arguments can be seen in their continued presence in English-language scholarship produced after independence, reflecting both the influence of scholars like Hall on subsequent scholarship and the deep consensus about the importance of the sangha to the moral and political functioning of the traditional Burmese state. For example, John F. Cady, in his *History of Modern Burma* (published in 1958) states that '[On occasion] monks urged the deposition of unworthy monarchs; they sometimes led revolts, once aided royal personages to escape, and several times acted as interim regents ... Politically minded monks played prominent roles in arousing popular opposition to King Bagyidaw in 1831.'⁴⁹ Similarly, in his 1965 study *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Donald Smith notes that in 1875, the *sayadaws* of a drought stricken region in Upper Burma sent a memorial to the king, stating that the people there could not pay the taxes levied upon them. The issue was apparently resolved after consultation between the monks and a royal intermediary.⁵⁰ This sense of the central role of the sangha in the political history of premodern Burma communicated in the works of Cady and Smith and documented by the specific examples they cite, is expressed in more general terms in Trevor Ling's *Buddhism, Imperialism and War*, which dates from the 1970s. Ling writes as follows about the role of monks in Burma:

⁴⁸ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 278. In his footnotes, Harvey notes that Sangermano, an Italian missionary and witness, claimed that monks even attacked the 'ministers of justice' with sticks.

⁴⁹ Cady, *The History of Modern Burma*, 53-4.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 32.

It often became necessary for the Buddhist monks to intervene and exert upon kings and rulers the influence which theoretically the teaching of the Buddha expected to have in a Buddhist state. They tried to temper violence against dynastic rivals, or to reproach fratricidal kings.⁵¹

Ling's comments, produced seventy two years after those of Ireland, provide evidence for the high-level of consensus amongst twentieth-century scholars about the political role of the sangha, something which stretches back to before English-language scholarly writing about Burma attained a form that scholars of our own era could see as being the progenitor or ancestor of their own work. While the dharma state and the cosmic state are concepts that resulted from the displacement of colonial discourse about the traditional Burmese monarchy, to some extent the sangha state model has its origins in the Anglophone discourse of the colonial era and retains its influence in the present. As the core chapters of this thesis will suggest, scholars in the present are perhaps more likely to treat postcolonial Burma as a sangha state than as a dharma state or cosmic state.

To conclude, then: from the preceding sections we have articulated several key elements in the twentieth-century Anglophone academic discourse about Burmese conceptions of religion, society and authority. The notions of dharma state, cosmic state and sangha state are, respectively, the idea of the monarch as someone who both defended and was beholden to the dharma, the idea of the state as a mirror of the cosmic order and lastly, of religious functionaries as an integral part of traditional polities. With the publication of G.E. Harvey's history of Burma in 1937, fifty years after the demise of the Konbaung monarchy, the idea of the Buddhist sovereign that undergirds present-day scholarly accounts of Burmese traditional kingship can be clearly seen. Similarly the 1942 work of Robert Heine-Geldern explicitly sets out the idea that the kingdom was a model of the greater cosmos. The idea of the foundational importance of the sangha in Burmese social and political life that is a central theme of the 1950 history of Burma by D.G.E. Hall (and reproduced by almost all subsequent writers) has a more complex lineage with antecedents running back to the statements of colonial observers present when the Konbaung monarchy had only recently passed into history. The role of colonial discourse in creating modern scholarly narratives of Burma is a complex one; yet, the general academic view since the Second World War is that a great web of Buddhist belief surrounded and permeated the state and authority in traditional Burma and that colonialism in many

⁵¹ Ling, *Buddhism, Imperialism and War*, 27. Fielding Hall, colonial official and novelist, wrote: 'As for urging the greatest of all virtues on governors and rulers alike, they may be said to have interfered with politics, but this is not what is usually understood by religion interfering in things of state. It seems to me that we usually mean the reverse of this, for we are of late beginning to regard it with horror. The Burmese have always done so. They would think it a denial of all religion.' Cited in Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1898.) 86.

ways disrupted this order (held to have been in existence since at least the time of Anawratha) is both an attempt to correct the narratives of the colonial era and a continuation of some of them. In the next chapter, the critical accounts of the Burmese kingdom and religion that were produced by colonial observers – most of them long forgotten by scholars – will be the focus of my analysis.

Chapter Two

English-language discourse on Buddhism and the State from Colonial and
Precolonial European observers

Introduction: Glorious Past, Debased Present

Ye that will tread the Middle Road, whose course
Bright Reason traces and soft Quiet smoothes;
Ye who will take the high Nirvâna-way,
List the Four Noble Truths.¹

- *The Light of Asia*

The early twentieth-century scholarly discourse on the traditional Burmese Buddhist monarchy that was discussed in the previous chapter challenged and continued an earlier tradition of English-language writing about Burma and Buddhism – that of non-scholarly colonial-era observers writing between the early nineteenth and late twentieth century. I began this thesis with the scholarly discourse because its picture of the nature of the traditional Buddhist monarchy is in broad terms still accepted by the majority of scholars writing on Burma in English. In that sense, it provides a benchmark against which we can read both non-scholarly British colonial discourse and postcolonial Burmese Buddhist modernist discourse. In this chapter, through the examination of the colonial discourse, most of it by authors who have been forgotten in the present, I point to the complexities of the picture of Buddhism and Burma constructed by that discourse, while also attempting to show the long-term influence of some of its narratives.

By the late nineteenth century, Buddhism had acquired a modest degree of prominence in European academic and popular discourse. In works like Edwin Arnold's epic narrative poem *The Light of Asia* or those of scholars like T. W. Rhys-Davids - founder of the Pali Text Society² - Buddhism was presented as being possessed of unusual characteristics; it was positive, pure and most interestingly, rational – a religion that was 'a complete philosophical and psychological system, based on reason and restraint, opposed to ritual, superstition, and sacerdotalism' as Donald Lopez has put it.³ Indeed, in his 2008 book *Buddhism and Science*, Lopez argued that many powerful and persistent ideas about Buddhism and Buddhist practice - particularly the idea that Buddhism and science enjoy a special compatibility - can be found in this Western 'discovery' of Buddhism in the nineteenth century. The development of this discourse seems to owe much to historical and epistemological

¹ Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia: The Great Renunciation* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009), 175.

² "The Passing of the Founder," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 7, (1922), 1-21.

³ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., "Introduction," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. David S. Lopez (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7.

accidents, including perceived similarities between Sanskrit sutras and fashionable nineteenth-century intellectual ideas, the shift in academic writing from amateur observers to professional scholars and textual authority, as well as the individual dispositions of certain philologists and observers. Generally speaking, however, the characteristics of this observed (or invented) Buddhism were consistent. For the purposes of this chapter, there are three aspects of this observed philosophical Buddhism that are of particular interest.

First, true Buddhism was perceived to be textual and as something that could be understood only through scripture. Early European scholars of Buddhism emphasised that it was an Indian religion that needed to be approached through Indian texts; since Buddhism was dead in India, it could be rebuilt from its relics as a pure, austere philosophy without contest.⁴ Second, this textual Buddhism was primarily a moral philosophy and was essentially compatible with reason. Finally, this rational religion predated and rejected the ritual, mysticism and superstition that nineteenth century observers associated with Buddhism in their own times.⁵ Some of these tendencies have been pointed out by Elizabeth Harris, whose study *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter* surveyed numerous English-speaking authors from the period and their observations about Sri Lanka. For example, the colonial official Jonathan Forbes, writing in 1841, stated that the metaphysical elements of Sri Lankan Buddhism were:

an interminable labyrinth of absurdities seemingly without object and certainly without amusement ... I consider the whole system of gods to be quite unconnected with the religion of Gautama, and the superstitions of snake, demon and planetary worship he openly condemned. ... The works which contain the principles of Buddhism [are separate from the] commentaries and discourses.⁶

Those principles, however, are

⁴ Indeed, as Lopez puts it, it could be studied wholly in European libraries; the French scholar Eugene Burnouf is for him the defining example of this. Burnouf, who died in 1852, was a gifted translator and scholar yet never left Europe, rarely left Paris and never met a Buddhist. Nonetheless, armed only with a collection of Nepalese texts, his ‘prodigious Sanskrit skills, his dogged analysis, and his imagination of what must have been, he created a historical narrative of Buddhism - from pristine origin, to baroque elaboration, to degenerate decline - based entirely on his reading of a random group of texts that arrived on his desk, as if from nowhere.’ Nonetheless, Lopez contends that Burnouf single-handedly defined Buddhist scholarship in Europe for centuries to come. See Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, 170-5.

⁵ Some even flattered themselves as the heirs of this philosophy, citing the Indo-European language link. According to Lopez: ‘the early centuries of Buddhism in India were deployed to evince the vitality of classical Indian civilisation, a vitality that had long since vanished in India and lately manifested itself in Europe.’ Cited in Lopez, “Introduction,” 6. See also Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, 7.

⁶ Jonathan Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon* (London: Richard Bentley, 1841), 203-6. Gautama is the name of the historical Buddha.

contemplative, humane, peaceful and regulated by plain moral laws...the excellence and simplicity of which may astonish those who have only heard it (Buddhism) mentioned to be condemned as an impure, cruel unintelligible portion of paganism.⁷

For Forbes and his contemporaries the Buddha was not in any measure divine; rather he was an exceptional human being, whose doctrine was a simple, intelligible and unitary system of ethics found solely in the texts, (usually the Theravada scriptures, the Tripitaka) and not in the sensuous and debased Asia of the present. As Lopez puts it:

In a sense, the stone Buddha of India, where Buddhism was long extinct, had been brought back to life by a strange process of scientific reanimation; the dead was made living by a new science. This new Buddha...was vivified by European scholarship, the academic study of Buddhism or, as it was called in those days, “the scientific study of Buddhism.” It was this Western science, fuelled by the study of dead language, that built a Buddha whose teachings could be compatible with science.⁸

This pure, ‘classical’ Buddhism was an artefact, a transcendental truth invented and controlled by Europeans, and was a benchmark against which, according to Lopez, ‘all the Buddhisms of the modern Orient were to be judged, and to be found lacking.’⁹ Europeans had access to the truth of Buddhism, which most Asians had lost. Elements of this attitude can be seen in nineteenth-century English-language interpretations of Buddhism in Burma, too. For instance, Harold Fielding Hall, whose writings on Burma will be extensively examined in this chapter, stated in his 1908 work *The Inward Light* that:

The reverence is for the teaching, not for the teacher. If Buddha were all but forgotten, such of his teachings that were true would last; they would not suffer. If in years to come men forget Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and their names be buried in oblivion, how would it alter truth? ... Even if it were shown for certain that there was never Siddharta an Indian prince, though many beautiful things would disappear from Buddhism, the essentials would remain. Because it is the science of the evolution of man’s life and soul, which men can test for themselves and see the truth.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 305.

⁸ Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, 153.

⁹ Lopez, “Introduction,” 7.

¹⁰ Harold Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 223.

Indeed, here our themes are made explicit; the Buddha, far from being a god is almost mundane, superfluous to 'such of his teachings that were true' - truths that are empirical and can be verified. These Buddhist truths are not simply to be verified, but contributed to through vigorous effort:

And if as the years go on new truths come into sight, they can be added to the old. For it is progressive and not fixed and finite. It is a ladder reaching always upwards. ... It is a science men may work at always, striving after new truths as the world grows wider. For it must be remembered that it has at present progressed little beyond where it was after the death of the immediate disciples of the Buddha.¹¹

The idea that Buddhism is a perfectible, rather than perfect faith needs further explanation and will be returned to; for now, it suffices to point out that in this reading, everything true about Buddhism was established virtually in the Buddha's lifetime. The intervening centuries and the Buddhist societies of the present are irrelevant to that truth. Indeed, many observers of nineteenth-century Burma were quick to point out that Burmese Buddhism did not measure up to that truth, or was in fact another religion entirely. Another official, John Nisbet, wrote in 1905 that:

Owing to the fact that Burmese Buddhism is in reality but a superimposed layer, it is difficult to estimate correctly the influence that the purely Buddhistic religious philosophy exerts on the national character and on the daily life of the people.¹²

English-language (usually British) discourse about Buddhism in Burma from this period consists generally of two elements. Firstly, statements about an idealised Buddhism of their own invention and secondly, the inevitable failure of Burmese Buddhists to live up to that ideal. The British (and others) admired the Buddhist religion but did not admire the Burmese. The religion was in essence modern, the Burmese were not. The religion was rational, the Burmese could not be. The British thus drew a clear distinction between their admiration for Buddhism and the actual Buddhism that the Burmese practised, which was variously seen as lax Buddhism, corrupt Buddhism or not really Buddhism at all, but actually animism. Therefore, this section will consider the threefold nature of Buddhism in British discourse - that it was rational, scriptural and original - and the belief that

¹¹ Ibid., 223-4.

¹² John Nisbet, *Burma Under British Rule and Before* (Westminster: A. Constable, 1905), 154. Born in Edinburgh in 1853, Nisbet served in the Indian Forest Service and was made Conservator of Forests in Burma in 1895, retiring in 1900.

Burmese society and religious practice itself did not possess or measure up to that threefold nature. It will do this with reference to the images of the dharma state, sangha state and cosmic state put forward by the scholarly discourse that displaced this colonial narrative.

Firstly, instead of a cosmic Buddhist state splendid in its aligning of history with belief, most British observers saw in Buddhism only an austere, almost mathematical doctrine that did not and could not match an irrational and degenerate Burmese present. Secondly, instead of the righteous dharma state, the observers saw only a Burmese tyranny that was unsupported by Buddhism, which in the British interpretation had no place for kings. Lastly, instead of the sangha state with its engaged and influential priesthood, the observers saw impious and interfering monks whose actions could not be reconciled with the doctrinal insistence on reclusion. In sum, the three core oppositions are: Buddhist purity versus Burmese degeneracy, Buddhist reason versus Burmese tyranny and - in the case of the sangha - pious Buddhist withdrawal versus Burmese monastic meddlesomeness. It was these three sets of opposing images that were subverted and reinterpreted in the English-language discourses of the twentieth century that this thesis examines - scholarly discourse and the discourses of English-speaking Burmese Buddhist modernism.

The Alabaster Image: Idealised Dogma versus Corrupt Practice

Though the religion inculcates benevolence, tenderness, forgiveness of injuries, and love of enemies - though it forbids sensuality, love of pleasure, and attachment to worldly objects, yet it is destitute of power to produce the former, or subdue the latter ... In short, the Burman system of religion is like an *alabaster image, perfect and beautiful in all its parts, but destitute of life*.¹³

- Ann Judson

Some of the earliest comments on Burmese Buddhism from European (in this case American) observers come from the Judsons, the famous couple who established a Baptist mission in Rangoon in 1817. In their letters and journals, collected and published as ‘An Account of the American Baptist Mission to the Burman Empire,’ the Judsons recorded impressions of Burmese Buddhism as ‘pure’ yet distant from real life, possessing a certain clarity and straightforward logic yet failing to

¹³ Ann Judson, *An Account of the American Baptist Mission to the Burman Empire: In a Series of Letters, Addressed to a Gentleman in London* (London: Printed for J. Butterworth and Son, 1823), 96. Ann’s missionary husband, Adoniram Judson wrote the first Burmese-English dictionary and grammar and suffered dramatically when imprisoned in Ava during the First Anglo-Burmese War.

translate itself into the sensibilities and practices of the average Burmese. Much was made in the Judson's narrative of the Burmese proclivity for crime and despotism, yet this was held not to be a racial characteristic, but rather proof of the powerlessness of Buddhism to exert a civilising influence on the Burmese. The Judsons state: 'the Boodhist (sic) system of morality is pure, though it is destitute of power to produce purity of life in those who profess it.'¹⁴ Likewise they write:

Although the Burmans have every motive, according to their system of religion, to practice good works, yet no people could be worse. ... It may be said of the Burman, as of every other pagan religion, there is no power in it to make men better, and its best precepts are no criterion, by which to judge of the moral character of its devotees.¹⁵

Here is an early expression of the idea that Burmese Buddhism is good in theory but bad in practice. Among later colonial-era writers this concept is expressed through the notion that 'dogma' is the standard by which practice must be judged and always found wanting. The Judsons, seeking converts, contended that like other non-Christian religions, Buddhism had 'no power in it to make men better' and that 'its best precepts are no criterion by which to judge the moral character of its devotees.' In other words, the religion itself was by nature unworthy and the Burmese would be redeemed by becoming Christians. By the late nineteenth century when colonial control had been established, however, the argument was that the Burmese were unworthy of the religion. Despite this contrast, there is continuity here, insofar as Buddhist doctrine was seen by the Judsons as standing apart from, or irrelevant to, Burmese everyday life. The underlying thinking is captured most expressively in the passage by Ann Judson that heads this section: Buddhism as an 'alabaster image,' flawless, yet remote. It is a 'dead' religion; yet what is meant by 'dead?' For the Judsons, it was dead in the sense that it was never alive - a clever likeness of a living religion. For the colonisers, the alabaster image was more like a tombstone: the religion was 'dead' because it had perished. There is a continuum in the construction of the Buddhism of the texts as a pure and worthy faith, and the Burmese as its unlovely, unworthy inheritors. The rhetoric varied, yet ultimately it was Europeans who appointed themselves the judge of what was 'Buddhist' and what was not. In this section, therefore, we will consider two things: the ways in which the British

¹⁴ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 83-4. The Judsons saw the Burmese as intelligent potential converts, held down by their rulers and by their religion and not as squabbling children to be governed or as inveterate thieves or liars: 'a lively, industrious and energetic race of people...farther advanced in civilisation than most of the Eastern nations.' People who lay outside the scope of the Rangoon mission, however, were casually assigned negative qualities on the basis of their race.

burnished the perfection of Burmese Buddhism and the ways in which they found Burmese society corrupt and wanting.

By the late nineteenth century, Burma had been conquered, annexed and incorporated into the colony of India as a province. At this point, European colonial officials and travellers were recording their impressions of the country, including its religion. Harold Fielding Hall, who was quoted in the preceding section, was one of the most sympathetic of these observers of Burma and Burmese Buddhism. Born in Ireland in 1859, he spent more than twenty-five years in Burma, first as a coffee planter, then as a political officer and magistrate. He was struck most especially by the rational power of the religion. In *The Inward Light* he wrote that

Buddhism is a very simple faith. It is not made of dreams nor revelations, nor founded on the supernatural. *It is the science of the evolution of the soul within the body.* It is what men have seen and feel and know. It has ideals, beautiful ideals. They are not sunset clouds hung far in space remote from us: their base is on the earth, the spires ascend from the strong and sure foundations of the things that are. *It has a theory of this world that agrees with all that science has discovered.*¹⁶

In the highlighted passages, Fielding Hall emphasised that Buddhism *is* a science and is in *accord* with science, and that Buddhism's beauty is one with its rationality: 'It has,' he wrote, 'a promise of Immortality, the only beautiful and reasonable Immortality the world has known.' All of Buddhism's strengths are here explicitly understood as strengths that rational science also possesses: it experiments, it is correctible. Buddhism, he wrote, is based on the observations and knowledge of men, there is no 'cast-iron dogma.' Rather 'whatever statements or deductions it makes are liable to correction if wrong ... it seeks always new truths to add new steps to climb towards an infinite.'¹⁷ Elaborating on this theme, he insisted that the Buddha did not 'destroy or 'deny' the Hinduism of the day, but rather sought to 'build' and 'affirm.'

¹⁶ Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 4-5. Emphasis mine, both times. Note the deliberate association of Buddhism with evolution, the nineteenth century iconoclast's equivalent of heliocentrism. Fielding Hall continues: 'They told him all they knew of the souls of trees and beasts, and he listened and he understood, because the truth was coming to him. He told them all that Western science has discovered of the body, how it had evolved from lower forms, and they listened and they understood, because the truth was in them. ... He told them how in the long history of the world the forms had changed under the stress of necessity. They heard him and they understood. It was not a new idea, but one they had always held though dimly, and not worked out as Western science has worked it. They had known always that the bodies of men and animals had risen. This truth was in harmony with other truths they had within them.' See *Ibid.*, 40-1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

He did not come to denounce this world or rob it of happiness, but to add another world, to add a higher, more enduring happiness. He came not to displace one truth with another, but to perfect truth with truth, joy with joy; to round our fleeting time with an eternity. And therefore Buddhism is nothing by itself. It is not, it never pretended to be a complete truth, to be a temple in itself. It was but another story added to that great building whose feet are in the earth, whose summit rises up toward heaven.¹⁸

Thus, like science and unlike other religions and philosophies, Buddhism is not simply an eternal, fixed truth, but involves an empirical process of discovery. Fielding Hall made this association of Buddhism and science even more explicit when he compared it unfavourably to the Semitic religions:

True religion is the real science, and like all knowledge that is sure is built up from below. There are those who say that all religions are built on ghosts and dreams and visions, but that is not so. Only Semitic faiths are so built even in theory – every Eastern faith is a science; expressed, no doubt, in hyperbole, extravagance, with many accretions of the marvellous added to the religion, nevertheless a science.¹⁹

For Fielding Hall, the foundations of Buddhism, unlike those of Christianity or Islam, whose bases are ephemeral, are solid. It possesses a pure and rational core, despite being barnacled with ‘accretions of the marvellous.’ All religions possess these accoutrements, he argues, but to compare them is to confuse form over substance: Buddhism’s core is solid. This view is shared by other writers, who attribute the problems with contemporary Burmese Buddhism to encrustations of animism. Another colonial official, R. Grant Brown, who was stationed in Burma from 1889 - 1917, contends: ‘Any Burman will tell you that Buddhism is the only religion of the Burmese.’ he wrote. ‘A person who is not a Buddhist is not regarded as a Burman.’

Yet, though Buddhism plays the most important part in the lives of the people, there is another religion which influences most of them in varying degrees. That religion is animism, or the worship of spirits. ... But on the whole, Buddhism is maintained in its purity as a godless religion, a system of philosophy and ethics, with an ascetic order of monks who influence the people by their conduct as much as by their teaching; while the desire of mankind for gods is satisfied by the other religion, which is frowned upon by Buddhist teachers and is observed

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 76.

more or less secretly and shamefacedly, but which, nevertheless, has its festivals attended by many thousands of professing Buddhists.²⁰

Animism may exist in Burma but it is not to be confused with the 'pure, godless religion' of original Buddhism. Indeed, in the twentieth century, English-speaking Burmese Buddhists would become obsessed with stripping away the accretions to reveal the 'substance' of Buddhism.

Other colonial authors shared Fielding Hall's impression of Buddhism's rationality, but did not share his sympathetic stance. They damned with faint praise, seeing Buddhist reason and purity as cold and unfeeling. Nisbet, for example, lauded Buddhism as 'by far the purest and noblest of creeds,' but in the same breath labelled it 'cold, cynical and thoroughly selfish.'²¹ In a passage that comes earlier than the one quoted above, he noted that:

Buddhism...is a purely selfish religion. While it cannot be denied that many of the duties imposed by the Buddhist law upon human beings for their guidance in this life are beautiful teachings, yet they are cold and cynical. They absolutely lack sympathy. They do not inculcate charity or anything like doing to one's neighbours as we would that he should do unto us. The bestowal of alms, offerings of rice to priests, the founding of a monastery, the building of a bridge or of a resthouse for the convenience of travellers, are all works of religious merit...prompted not by love of one's fellow creatures but simply and solely in order to place so much credit to one's own current life account. Selfishness is the sole motive for which good works are undertaken. That they may be of benefit or convenience to other people does not enter at all into consideration, except in so far as that determines the fact of such particular performance being ranked as a work of merit. It is to save himself from punishment or degradation in a future state of existence that works of merit or benevolence are carried out by a Burman.²²

Buddhist charity is reduced by Nisbet to a cold simplicity: it is an act calculated to 'credit' one's life balance so as to gain rewards and avoid punishments in the next life. The teachings may seem beautiful or generous, but are in reality calculating and manipulative.

The key point here is that both Nisbet and Fielding Hall agree that Buddhism has a reasoning core, although they disagree as to whether that was an asset or a liability. It seems that there was

²⁰ R. Grant Brown, *Burma as I Saw It: 1889 - 1917* (New York: F.A. Stokes, 1925), 102.

²¹ Nisbet, *Burma Under British Rule*, 154. It should be noted that Nisbet considered Buddhism the 'purest and noblest' of only the non-Christian religions.

²² *Ibid.*, 94.

something seductively modern about what the Europeans saw as Buddhism's 'quantitative' approach to spirituality. The loaded terms 'sin' and 'virtue' are exchanged for the neutral terms 'merit' and 'demerit.' Upon death, one's status is determined by not by an inscrutable God, but by an algorithm, whereby one's suffering is commensurate to one's tally of merit. All in all, it sounded rather like an impartial natural law, like the law of gravity or the law of supply and demand. Such comparisons were indeed made by the more sympathetic Europeans (like Fielding Hall) and later Burmese champions of this empirical interpretation. Even critics like Nisbet seemed to display a touch of admiration when they described the religion of Burma as 'cold' or 'cynical.' 'Coldness' can be read as implying 'rationality,' 'cynicism' can be read as implying 'logic.'

This raises a key question. If Buddhism was modern and rational enough to impress Fielding Hall to such eloquence and for the postcolonial elites to eventually choose it as the philosophical rationalisation for their state-building and industrialisation, then why were the Burmese themselves not 'modern?' It was self-evident, after all, that they were not - the British did not colonise modern countries. The answer lay in the *kind* of Buddhism that the Burmese practised, and the *way* they practised it.

C.M. Enriquez, who as noted in the introduction wrote a number of books on Burma (*A Burmese Enchantment*, 1916; *A Burmese Loneliness*, 1918; *A Burmese Wonderland*, 1922) typifies efforts to address this conundrum through the representation of Buddhism as the idyllic opposite of materialism. 'The catastrophe of the present war has its origins in hate and craving,' he wrote in *Loneliness*.

They *must* bear their fruit according to the Law. So also, the hate of to-day will likewise come to harvest later on! Thus the Buddha taught. So the wheel turns inexorably. Civilisations fall to bits. Only broken pottery remains, and dim memories of dead dynasties. Consider the infinite eternity which will blot us out. Learn the lessons of the hills which are not easily moved, of rivers which lose themselves in the sea, of wind which sighs in the pines, and is gone. Escape lies in simplicity of heart.²³

For Enriquez, the power of Buddhism was not in its science, but in its simplicity. 'Now we are only cogs in a complex machine, slaves of its output, and victims of our own invention,' he lamented.

²³ C.M. Enriquez, *A Burmese Loneliness: A Tale of Travel in Burma, the Southern Shan States and Keng Tung* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1918), 62.

‘Revolting against materialism, we may well seek refuge in the philosophy of Buddha. It goes to the root of things, and gives peace of mind.’

The people about us are so free and happy ... It is impossible not to compare regretfully their sheltered peace of mind, with all the multitude of complications which disturb our own. Consider our little span of life, and how hard we strive. Yet, like these simple folk, we go forth hence naked out of it. I do not suggest that we can help materialism. It is bequeathed us from the past. Doubtless it is based upon necessity. I only compare it with the contentment we rather despise as primitive.²⁴

With platitudes like these, Enriquez and others reimagined Buddhism as being the simple mindset of happy peoples oblivious to their situation, whose unavoidable tutelage in maturity it was the coloniser’s sad duty to perform. In this fashion, a colonial official like Herbert Thirkill-White, who was Lieutenant-Governor of Burma from 1905-1910, could assert that for the Burmese:

progress and the strenuous life in themselves have no attraction. We are trying to teach him our ideals, to show him how far superior is our civilisation. When we shall have succeeded, we shall have spoilt the pleasantest country and the most delightful people in the world.²⁵

Buddhism’s purity, in this case, was in its innocence, its simplicity and its distance from the mature realities of the modern world. Even the usually sympathetic Fielding Hall indulged in this characterisation, in his work *A People at School*, though to him, Buddhism’s dominant role in Burmese life was more of a failing than a strength, despite its rational core:

In the Burma of the Burmese there was nothing so prominent as their religion. In those days it dominated all things. What was the first thing you saw as you approached a village? It was the spires of the pagodas and monasteries rising amid the trees. From their height, their beauty, their situation on all the highest elevations, on all the bluffs beside the river, they dominated the view. They were the highest, the greatest, the most frequent expression of humanity. It seemed as if all the people's lives lay under their shadow and influence. And in reality it was so. Buddhism had come into the life of these people as religion has rarely come into the life of any other people. From the cradle to the grave it held them, not in bonds of discipline but of influence. It

²⁴ Ibid., 62, vi. Enriquez’s preface begins with the following memorable lines: ‘The wire hums an unfriendly song, - “You are all of you my slaves,” it says. “I am an order - hum. I am a counter-order. Refer, and hesitate. You must not act.” Sometimes it sings another refrain: “You are heirs,” it cries, “to all the fret and worry of materialism. You are strangers in this far land, isolated from your surroundings by great anxieties.’

²⁵ Harold Thirkill-White, *A Civil Servant in Burma* (London: E. Arnold, 1913), 47.

penetrated their lives with its subtle currents, leading them whither it would - softening, sweetening, weakening.²⁶

The Burmese Buddhists had no ambitions or fears, or rivals, intellectual or physical. 'Into this country,' Fielding Hall wrote, 'has come the British Government with sword and rifle, preaching another faith, not newer but older, the oldest in the world.'

For before all prophets and teachers there lived on earth the God Necessity. Before all evangels, older than all faiths, older than mankind, older than life, co-equal with the world, was his gospel of efficiency. He lives still and his gospel endures. The world is to the man who can best use it. ... She is not for the weak, the foolish, the idle, the dealers in ideals, the dreamers of dreams. Especially she is not for those who deny her. She never yields her pleasures, her glories, her perfect beauty to those who scorn her. Like a fair woman, she is to the man who woos, who fights, who will if need be carry off and defend by force. Life is to the strong, the brave, the doers.²⁷

Buddhism, he maintains, is 'a very beautiful religion full of great thoughts, full of peace and beauty...it is the softener of life, the sweetener.'

It gives solace to the fallen, to the weak, a safe asylum for the broken in life. It guards the bays where the storm-driven souls put in to refit. It is the gospel of the sick, the wounded, the dying. But it is not the leader and the guide of men. Its teachings in themselves...tend to discontent with the world as it is, to dreams and fancies, to seclusion and idleness, to cowardice and untruth, to neglect of all the world gives.²⁸

To Fielding Hall, while Buddhism may have been a noble faith, it had gained too powerful and exclusive an influence over the Burmese. He believed that the country would thrive when religion and secularism complemented one another. Secularism is 'necessity,' the creed that the world is there to be used and the strong must displace the weak. Religion is the 'conscience' to heal the wounds and restrain the soldiers. Both are 'true.' His analogy is that nations need both armies and hospitals. Buddhism in Burma has overpowered 'necessity,' swaddling the Burmese and making them children. This notion that religion and realpolitik are complementary phenomena anticipates arguments that would be found later in postcolonial Burmese discourse.

²⁶ Harold Fielding Hall, *A People at School* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 247.

²⁷ Ibid., 248-9.

²⁸ Ibid., 250.

A more common and less sympathetic view of Burmese Buddhism than that enunciated by Fielding Hall was that in Burma the religion had become degenerate or corrupted. British colonial officials, visitors to Burma and scholars in Europe saw no problem in declaring themselves the best judges of what was real Buddhism, and in viewing Asian religious practice as having degenerated from an original purity. On the one hand, Europeans were quite capable of placing orthodox Burmese Buddhism on a pedestal; Scott called it ‘the purest form of that faith existing - the nearest to the teachings of Prince Siddharta.’²⁹ On the other hand they could declare that the practice of individual Burmese Buddhists was corrupted and inferior. No denomination or sect extant in Asia at the time could truly measure up to the standard of Buddhist practice they held in their mind. In this narrative the expertise of native Buddhist practitioners was not to be acknowledged or yielded to. Enriquez, for example, argued that Buddhists in Burma had fallen far from the noble origins of their religion:

We have entered upon a crowded, mechanical age of materialism; but we find the Law still true in every detail. Its foundation is perfect logic. It still meets the need of man. Man, however, is morally weakened by the influences of the age. He is less able to appreciate Truth, less inclined to follow an austere path. Therefore we see Buddhism [in] decay and decline.³⁰

One reason for this decline, he argues (as did Fielding Hall), was that during the centuries intervening between the time of Buddha and the period in which Enriquez was writing the dharma had become cluttered and clustered with myths and exegesis:

The Buddhist Law itself, as now presented, is a tangle of legend and formulae with which priests, politicians, commentators and translators have obscured it for 2,000 years. These books would heap up into a considerable mountain... Buddhism was a serenely simple philosophy as it left the lips of its founder in parables. Otherwise it could not have fired the imagination of the world. Something of its beauty, its logic, its tenderness is still visible through a fog of corruption.³¹

²⁹ J George Scott, *Burma as It Was, as It Is, and as It Will Be* (London: George Redway, 1886), 116. Similar statements were made by Fielding Hall, who wrote that the Burmese ‘alone of modern people retain the spirit of Buddhism as it was understood’ and Max and Bertha Ferrars, who declared that ‘the seven millions of Burma...are the practical Buddhists of the world.’ Cited in Max and Bertha Ferrars, *Burma* (Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1900), 2; Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 12.

³⁰ C. M. Enriquez, *A Burmese Wonderland: A Tale of Travel in Lower and Upper Burma* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1922), 191.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 191-2.

The Burmese no longer practised or perceived the ‘true’ Buddhism that had been buried beneath the intellectual detritus of the Burmese past and the degenerate practice of the present. ‘Their Buddhism is an empty show,’ he wrote, ‘impregnating it is true their thoughts and speech from force of habit, but still meaningless; an affair of showy charities and festivals which are partly formal, partly amusing and partly ostentatious, but wholly devoid of deep feeling.’³² Monks, as the most visible and ostensibly the most diligent of Buddhists, were singled out by British observers for special opprobrium. Charles Crosthwaite, Chief Commissioner of Burma from 1887 to 1890, described Buddhist monks as a ‘thoroughly lazy and densely ignorant set of men’ and decried their ‘superstitious ignorance [and] their inability to disentangle the moral teaching of their great founder from the cobwebs of fairy tales, about the form and nature of the earth and the like.’³³

Other writers took their sense of the contrast between the manifest inferiority of Burmese society and the supposed sophistication of the Buddhist religion a step further, and denied that most Burmese were Buddhists at all. Focusing on what Fielding Hall called the ‘accretions of the marvellous,’ they presented these as the entirety of Burmese religious life, negating Burmese Buddhists’ claim to the religion’s admired textual core. In 1891, the Catholic Bishop of Rangoon, Paul Ambrose Bigandet wrote that:

The Buddhism of the people forms little or no part of their daily life. They hold that Buddhism has is the hold that a cold, somewhat cynical theosophical system has over the imagination and sentiments of the better educated amongst the people. ... From the day of [the Burman’s] birth to his marriage, and even when he lies on his death bed, all the rites and forms that he observes are to be traced to animistic and not to Buddhist sources. ... Even the *pongyis* themselves are often directly influenced by the strong undercurrent of animistic religion which underlies their faith in Buddhism.³⁴

Animism here denotes the belief in and propitiation of various spirits, called *nats*. A number of authors saw in *nat*-worship the definitive proof that Burmese practice was irreconcilable with true Buddhism.

³² Ibid., 196.

³³ Sir Charles Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma* (London: E. Arnold, 1912), 38, 340.

³⁴ Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 75. Bigandet spent most of the nineteenth century in Burma and was the Catholic Vicar Apostolic of Lower Burma from 1870 until his death in 1894. He wrote an early book on Burmese Buddhism that is often cited.

Another clergyman, Reverend H.P. Cochrane, explained the significance of animism in Burma as follows: 'Before the adoption of Buddhism,' he wrote in *Among the Burmans: A Record of Fifteen Years of Work and Fruitage*, 'the Burmans, Shans and Talaings were spirit-worshippers, pure and simple. Spirit-worshippers they still are, with the forms of Buddhism for a veneering.'³⁵ According to Cochrane, the Burmese are not Buddhists and never were. Their practice is polluted with spirit-worship, a 'primitive' religion.

At the advent of Buddhism the worship of evil spirits, by propitiatory sacrifice, prevailed throughout Burma, among all races. It is not to be supposed that the adoption of Buddhism dispelled these superstitions. ... "Animism supplies the solid constituents," says a recent writer, "that holds the faith together, Buddhism the superficial polish. The Burman has added to his Animism just so much of Buddhism as suits him, and with infantile inconsequence draws solace from each in turn." Spirit-worship is his every-day religion, Buddhism for special occasions.³⁶

Cochrane's views were echoed by Nisbet, who stated quite plainly the significance of the idea that Burmese Buddhists were essentially animists: 'just as, if you scratch a Russian, it is said you will find a Tartar, so also

if you could look into the inner-most recesses of the ordinary Burmese mind, you would find a vast number of Burmese Buddhists to be in reality practically little else than spirit worshippers. The fact seems indisputable that the foundations of belief *are much more frequently primitive spirit worship than the true Buddhism or religious philosophy founded by Gaudama*. Hence, when the Census Report of 1891 tells us that there are nearly 7,000,000 Buddhists in Burma, or over nine-tenths of the total population, the figures must be understood as *simply including all those who choose to call themselves Buddhists*.³⁷

³⁵ H.P. Cochrane, *Among the Burmans: A Record of Fifteen Years of Work and Fruitage* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1904), 99. The Shans and Talaings (or Mons) are minority groups that are predominantly Buddhist.

³⁶ Ibid., 134-5. Cochrane, as a Christian missionary was more fiercely critical than most. At one point he describes Burmese Buddhists as 'emissaries of Satan.' He was, nonetheless, capable of occasional acuity, like when he noted that 'much has been written on Buddhism, besides the translation of the Buddhist's sacred books. Little, however, can be learned from books of Buddhism as one finds it expressed in the life of the people.' See Ibid., 113.

³⁷ Nisbet, *Burma Under British Rule*, 107. Emphasis mine, both times. The rest of the passage reveals something of the politics of the term spirit worshipper: 'A Burman, who may be at heart a spirit worshipper, would be ashamed to admit himself to be this; it is much more convenient and respectable to call himself a Buddhist. Can we blame him for being pharisaically conventional? Spirit worship is in Burma a despised religion still professed only by less than 170,000 persons, or little over one-fiftieth of the total population, who are almost entirely wild jungle tribes. But while it has gradually given way to Buddhism nominally, as a matter of fact the primitive *Nat*-worship or geniolatry usually remains the true cult of the rural population.' The 'animist thesis' thus draws on a label that was considered contemptuous and primitive even among the Burmese themselves.

This point deserves special emphasis. Nisbet's assertion is that the Burmese cannot be trusted to identify the true content of their own religion. Only an individual conversant with the true 'religious philosophy' founded by the Buddha could judge that. The animist practice that had crept into Buddhism disqualified Burmese people from making a proper appraisal of their own beliefs. Brown, quoted earlier, 'proves' this through an interesting inversion. He deliberately refuted the animist thesis in the following terms:

Some writer once remarked that Buddhism was a veneer overlying a solid structure of animism, and the statement has since been repeated in gazetteers and census reports and other publications till it has become almost a commonplace. Yet I can find no justification for it. If it refers to outward observances, there is hardly any country where religion is so much in evidence as in Burma. ... Animistic observances, on the other hand, have to be sought out, and many Europeans hardly suspect their existence.³⁸

Buddhism, however, he sees everywhere, in the righteous asceticism of the monks and in the temperance of the Burmese as well as in all outward observances.

If the influence of religion on conduct is meant, I do not think the assertion can be any better justified. ... The monks are probably as strict in their observances as any large religious body in the world, and compare very favourably with those of other Buddhist countries. Most laymen, too, obey the prohibitions against alcohol and the taking of life, and these run counter both to strong human instincts and to animist practice.³⁹

With these statements, Brown may seem less critical and less inflexibly doctrinaire than other observers, yet there exists in his mind nonetheless a 'correct' Buddhism - and animism has no part in it. 'Good' Buddhist practice is still that which has no animist element, or any role for monks beyond asceticism and 'strictness.' The message we receive is that if Burmese Buddhism is better than other varieties, it is because it has kept itself as free as possible from the 'accretions of the marvellous.' Thus we see that despite his sympathetic position, Brown's praise for Buddhism is dependent on the same standards as those that motivate the criticisms of Cochrane and Nisbet: that a Buddhism incorporating folk traditions was bad, and one free of such things was good.

³⁸ Brown, *Burma as I Saw It*, 102-3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

To summarise: there was a broad consensus among the colonial observers that had appointed themselves the arbiters of what was Buddhist. They believed that authentic Buddhism was drawn from the texts. It possessed a simplicity and rationality and should not be stained by the accretions resulting from unfitting sangha and lay activity, including spirit-worship and ritual that had been placed upon it. As Ireland wrote:

It is the fashion nowadays to say that Buddhism is not a religion at all, but a system of philosophy or a code of morality. Since, however, a system of philosophy hardly satisfies the hopes and fears of human nature, it is not surprising to find that animistic religion prevails side by side with Buddhism, and...has a great hold on the people.⁴⁰

If a phenomenon in Burmese Buddhist belief or practice was not present in whatever idealised version of Buddhism that the British carried around in their heads, that phenomenon was labelled deviant. What then, we might ask, was the British attitude toward the figure at the apex of traditional Burmese Buddhist society, the king?

Invisible Dharma State versus Visible Tyranny

That despots professing the religion of Buddha have been often cruel, cannot be denied; that its admirable laws have little power to control his nominal followers, may be admitted; yet it is unfair to charge Buddhism with the crimes of those who disobey its injunctions, defy its commandments, and dare its threats of future punishment.⁴¹

- Jonathan Forbes

The Inward Light, Fielding Hall's narrative exploration of Burmese Buddhism, is written in the form of a bildungsroman. The nameless protagonist, who is a clear surrogate for the author, has an accident on the road near Mandalay and convalesces in a Burmese village. There he comes to know the nature of Buddhism. In one chapter, he reflects on the fall of Mandalay and the last king, Thibaw:

And looking down upon the city he remembered many things ... There was the march of our columns up the river, the weak resistance, the want of organisation, of courage and of leading

⁴⁰ Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 71-2.

⁴¹ Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon*, 305.

among the Burmese troops. There was the surrender at the Palace door below there; the vacillation and weakness of the King; the want of patriotism, of intelligence, of honesty amongst the Ministers. There was the broken, scattered resistance afterwards, which had never any chance of success.

And now, he notes, all the old institutions of the kingdom had passed away:

the crown, the government, the soldiers, the Courts of Justice, and everything that pertained to them were gone. They had disappeared. Of all that had been, there remained only the people and the monkhood. One institution and one truth alone remained, because in that alone had its truth been kept strong and pure and clear; because there alone were men honest and sincere and heart-whole in cherishing their truth.⁴²

Fielding Hall's mouthpiece does not think much of the Burmese kingdom. The king and his ministers, the courts, the army, they were all just so much clutter, to be swept away revealing the 'true' makeup of Burmese society, the people and the monkhood. 'Nothing remains in Burma but the peasant in his family and the monk,' he repeats, 'because of all classes of men these alone kept their truths. Therefore they remain. But the rest are gone, swept into oblivion because they neither saw their truth nor kept it.'⁴³

Why does Fielding Hall reduce Burmese society to these two groups, disregarding all others? The answer is that he, and observers like him, believed that canonical Buddhism had no political dimension. There was room only for two groups: the sangha, which was sacred and the laity, which was temporal. British observers did not recognise the importance of Buddhism in the structures of the precolonial Burmese state and in public life generally. They could not acknowledge the existence of the entity that I refer to as the 'dharma state;' a Buddhist society was merely a society of Buddhists - the traditional state was not a true Buddhist institution. As such, the king could not be a Buddhist figure, and if he was not a Buddhist figure, he was just another tyrant.

⁴² Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 187-8.

⁴³ Ibid.

This section will seek to establish that precolonial and colonial era English-language discourse did not recognise the religious role of the king as it could not be incorporated into the sangha/laity dichotomy. An early example of this is given in the work of the Judsons, who met the Burmese king Bagyidaw in 1820. In the dharma state paradigm, the king is a Buddhist figure in his own right, a kind of earthly analogue to the Buddha. The king's role was mandated by the dharma; it was his function to defend the dharma and the dharma could not thrive without his presence in Burma's capital. The Judsons, in contrast, saw the king as a 'typical' Oriental despot; his opposition to Christianity was the expression of a tyrant's whim rather than a matter of policy or part of the inherent cultural or religious makeup of the state. For instance, in relation to the reluctance of interested Burmese to convert to Christianity, Judson observed that they:

all agreed in opinion, that the king would cut off those who embraced it, being a king who could not bear that his subjects should differ in sentiment from himself, and who had, for a long time, persecuted the priests of the established religion of the empire, because they would not sanction his innovations.⁴⁴

The Burmese, for their part, when they urged the Judsons to petition the king for approval for Christian conversions, were arguably recognising his role as the arbiter of what was religiously acceptable. The king looms over the Judsons' narrative as a figure of some mystery, power and inevitability. They came to believe that the future of their mission depended on the acceptance of a petition to the throne for permission to proselytise. This permission was not forthcoming: when an audience between the Judsons and the king was eventually held, he cast aside their translated scriptures almost immediately. We can argue that this is a concrete manifestation of the king's foundational obligation to protect the dharma, and not as the Judons saw it, a matter of a despot's unwillingness to embrace Christian truth.

Perhaps the best example of this negative attitude towards the king and ignorance of his religious role is the discussion surrounding the decision to annex Burma as a province of India. In 1885, the British invaded Burma for the third time, completing the process of conquest begun in 1824-6 and

⁴⁴ Judson, *An Account of the American Baptist Mission*, 149.

continued in 1852-3.⁴⁵ On November 28, Mandalay fell. At this time, Grattan Geary, a British journalist, was on a steamer heading up the Irrawaddy. Since the exact nature of rule in post-war Burma was then uncertain, it was his intention 'to go to Mandalay and endeavour to hear there, and on the way, what the people most directly concerned, next to ourselves, had to say on the subject.'⁴⁶ In his book *Burma after the Conquest*, Geary recorded his puzzlement with the aversion of the Chief Commissioner of British Burma, Charles Bernard, to the idea of deposing Thibaw in favour of direct rule. 'He imagines,' Geary wrote, 'that the Burmese dote on a monarch; that the King at Mandalay, whether Theebaw or another, is the god of their idolatry, and he holds that it would be foolish to cross them when it is so easy to realise their ideal.'⁴⁷ Somewhat scornfully, he went on:

But the Chief Commissioner might, it is urged, reflect that if the Burmans pay an idle homage to the idea of a King of their race, they prefer in practice to enjoy the immunity from crucifixion, disemboweling, and other agencies of civilisation which they procure in British Burma. ... This absolute conviction that the Burma's are eager to be annexed is exhilarating and I feel that we have at last discovered a reasonable and reasoning population which has an enlightened sense of their own interests and have none of the prejudices which render the task of governing other people so thankless.'⁴⁸

The British were thus not unaware of the reverence that the Burmese had for their sovereign, but most believed that it was muddleheaded and could easily be set aside. Geary also refers to the opinion of Edward B. Sladen, who was at one time the British Resident at the Court of Ava. He is described as a 'vigorous advocate of annexation' and declared that the Burmese 'are not only desirous of being annexed, but they are praying for annexation as a deliverance from intolerable oppression.'⁴⁹ Sladen, who one would not expect to have been ignorant of the king's religious functions as he was at court, nonetheless dismissed regard for the sovereign as 'superstitious

⁴⁵ Each of these wars resulted in decisive British victories and a corresponding loss of territory for the Burmese. The southern coastal and delta regions became 'British Burma' and the kingdom itself was reduced to its interior heartland, which the British referred to as 'Ava' or 'Upper Burma.' These changes weakened the Burmese monarchy but the old relationships remained unaltered; indeed, the kingdom's loss of its more heterogenous territories and reduction to its Burman heartland had, if anything, strengthened the identification of faith, state and king. See Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 2.

⁴⁶ Grattan Geary, *Burma After the Conquest: Viewed in its Political, Social and Commercial Aspects* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Revington, 1886), 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6. Geary supposed that this view was due 'to an extraordinary predilection for Burman ideas and sentiments' on the part of the Chief Commissioner.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 294-5.

reverence' - an attitude consistent with the idea that only the sangha had real religious responsibilities.

Other authors competed to label the king as corrupt, inefficient and a tyrant. In late 1885, a former official wrote to the *Times* claiming that the Burmese would welcome annexation and that 'for many years Burmans have flocked into our territory to avoid the exaction and injustice of the King's officials.'⁵⁰ Similarly, in Mandalay Geary spoke to the 'energetic and indeed impassioned' French Catholic Bishop, Dr. Bourdon, who assured him that

the Burmese...were utterly disgusted with the slavish system maintained by the dynasty; the kings did not look upon themselves as the highest magistrates and servants of the country, but as its absolute masters and owners; they conceived that they were under no obligation to their subjects, but held fanatically, that their subjects belonged, body and soul, to them. The people are now, the reverend Bishop declared, quite tired of all this, and of all that resulted from it – oppressive extortion, insecurity of life and property, and general hardship. They see that their countrymen in British Burma are well off, and they wish to be under the same Government.⁵¹

Bourdon counselled Geary against the British appointing a protected prince; 'that family, he maintained, was incurably tainted by despotism; under any sovereign of that house the same despotism, corruption, and incapacity would infallibly spring up again.'⁵²

James George Scott gave a full-throated defence of colonialism and corresponding critique of the Burmese kingdom in *Burma as it was, as it is and will be*. Published in 1886, Scott's work took every opportunity to portray the Burmese regime as cruel and exploitative, presenting a stark contrast between the misery of the people in Upper Burma and the happiness of the people in British Burma.⁵³ Like Sladen, Scott also mentions the connection between cosmology and legitimacy merely in order to downplay its significance. He relates that

the arrival of our troops in the country was marked by a most favourable omen. During the advance there was an almost continuous rain, a most unusual thing in Upper Burma in the

⁵⁰ E. Garnett Man, *The London Times*, 14/12/1885. Man identified himself as the 'late Legal Advisor to Her Majesty's Government in Burmah.'

⁵¹ Geary, *Burma After the Conquest*, 323-4. 'If your conscience, said the Bishop, does not allow to you to keep the country now that you have got it, why did you come here and depose Theebaw?'

⁵² Ibid., 324.

⁵³ Scott, *Burma as It Was, as It Is, and as It Will Be*, 109-11.

month of November, but an earnest of a fine harvest in the month of February. The Burmese are a very superstitious race, and they will consider this rainfall, which has averted what seemed the certainty of a famine in the country, as a proof that the British arms are supported by the powers of Nature.⁵⁴

Yet ultimately, Scott regarded this as unimportant:

Such an indication was, however, hardly wanted. We may be sure that they will accept our rule willingly, and that under its influence they will grow prosperous and forget the pride they enjoyed in having a ruler of their own race, however bad he might be.⁵⁵

Like Scott, Nisbet also demonstrated an awareness of a supramundane role and responsibility for the king, only to deny that these functions were legitimate. ‘The Excellent King of the Rising Sun and Lord of the White Elephant,’ he wrote sarcastically

no doubt horrified by the bloodshed ordered in a moment of terror, or of alcoholic excitement, or of both, was probably one of the most miserable of all the men within his kingdom, for at this time, though he had been a *Patama Byan*, or graduate with the highest possible honours in theology, he fell far below the usual standard of Burmese Buddhists with regard to abstinence and self-denial. A few years before he had attained, as a novice, the highest honours at the public examination in religious philosophy... and as king he was virtually the head of Burmese Buddhism. Hence, if he had any belief at all in the doctrines enunciated by Gautama, he must have felt convinced that in the next state of existence he was doomed to fearful torments in one of the lowest regions of hell.⁵⁶

Nisbet knew or had been told that the king was ‘virtually the head of Burmese Buddhism,’ yet he ultimately could not reconcile that position with Buddhist doctrine as he understood it. He dwelt on the fact that Thibaw had been a novice monk and imagined him torn between the demands of state

⁵⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Nisbet, *Burma Under British Rule*, 210.

and the ‘doctrines enunciated by Gautama.’⁵⁷ It seems that the king could not be a true Buddhist figure - a monk he could be, but a king, never.

To return to the early phase of the establishment of British rule and to Geary, whose book charts his unease with the annexation and his recognition of the religious significance of the king, we can see that he spoke with several Burmese on his travels who stressed the need to maintain the kingship. In the town of Pokoko, the acting-*wun* (official) warned him that the British

ought at least to leave “a nominal King” at Mandalay. A King was the head of the country, and religion could not do without one. A King was considered by the people as the head of religion, and represented God to their ideas.⁵⁸

In Mandalay itself, the *thathanabaing*, or primate - head of the loose ecclesiastical hierarchy that governed the sangha - told him that ‘he did not know who would now reign. But whoever the prince might be, if he protected religion, he would be a good ruler.’⁵⁹ Geary eventually concluded that it was necessary for the incoming government to support Buddhism in an official capacity. ‘Unless some measure of the kind be taken,’ he wrote ‘religious anarchy may be looked for.’

The monarchs of the house of Alompra were defenders and supporters of the faith, and had come to be regarded as the secular heads of Burmese Buddhism. Now the King has been sent out of the country, we hear at every turn that a “nominal king” at least is necessary for religion, which means that whatever arrangement in regard to foreign affairs and the like the English may choose to insist upon is of secondary importance as compared with the secular headship of the religion. If a protected prince be not set up, it will probably be found indispensable to give official recognition to the status and powers of the Ruler of Religion (*thathanabaing*) and his Synod at Mandalay, for a purely British administration will have no other bond of social unity to replace that which has disappeared ... It will take some years to procure for a Chief

⁵⁷ Actually, Thibaw had no trouble in framing at least one of the unsavoury demands of statecraft - war - in a religious manner. On the eve of war the Hludaw, the Burmese ministerial Council of State, issued a proclamation that read in part: ‘These heretics, the English *kalas* (barbarians), having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion...are making a show and preparation [to wage war.] If, notwithstanding, these heretic *kalas* should come [then] His Majesty, who is watchful that the interests of our religion and our State shall not suffer, will himself march forth.’ Cited in Ni Ni Myint, *Burma’s Struggle Against British Imperialism 1885 - 1895* (Rangoon: The Universities Press, 1983), Appendix D.

⁵⁸ Geary, *Burma After the Conquest*, 71-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 106-7.

Commissioner, or even for a Lieutenant Governor, that “superstitious veneration” which, to Colonel Sladen’s scorn, the Burmese wasted on King Theebaw and his house.⁶⁰

Geary came to realise that attachment to the ruler was based not on ‘native pride’ or personal loyalty but almost exclusively on his role as patron of the faith. Nonetheless, he did not believe that the king’s religious role went beyond enforcing ecclesiastical discipline. Here, Geary argues that so long as Buddhism is ‘officially supported,’ the problem of the sangha and laity will take care of itself. But in the dharma state paradigm, the king needed to be Buddhist, act in a Buddhist manner and appease the demands of cosmology in order to defend Buddhism. Geary’s statements demonstrate that for him, as for many others, the sangha was really the only group in Burma upon whom it was incumbent to ‘act Buddhist.’

In this section, we have seen that the British observers did not acknowledge the king’s responsibilities in terms of the dharma. Instead they either applied their own standards of political legitimacy, like the fostering of material prosperity by the state, or applied their own understanding of Buddhist morality to the king’s behaviour. The British placed greater emphasis on cruelty or inefficiency as criteria for determining royal legitimacy or illegitimacy than on the king’s religious responsibilities. The strict code governing the conduct of monks was recognised by the British as being relevant to the decisions of kings but it was the narrow interpretation of what constituted a Buddhist society - a wholly secular laity, a wholly spiritual sangha - that determined whether or not the Burmese traditional monarchy could be considered properly Buddhist.

Less than a day after the fall of Mandalay, Thibaw was exiled to India, where he lived out his remaining days at Ratnagiri, a coastal city far from Burma. By February 1886, the question of Burma’s future status was resolved. The Viceroy of India, Lord Dufferin, arrived at Mandalay and assumed the designation of Governor of Burma. Over the following months and years, widespread rebellion against the new order erupted throughout Burma. Many of these uprisings coalesced around princely pretenders and justified themselves through religious outrage at the dismissal of the king and the loss of his function as defender and patron of religion.⁶¹ Interestingly, one of the things that British observers found most confronting about these insurrections was the visible participation

⁶⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁶¹ For a more detailed exploration of the importance of Buddhism and the participation of monks in the post-annexation uprisings, see Jordan Carlyle Winfield, “Buddhism and Insurrection in Burma: 1886 - 1890,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20, 3 (2010).

of monks. The role of the sangha in this violent rebellion arguably highlights two issues: the importance of religious concerns in the reaction to British rule and British criticisms of Burmese religious figures for acting against Buddhist dogma as the British understood it. The contrast between a politically active sangha and the British interpretation of the renunciant ideal will be the subject of the following section.

Passive Sangha versus Activist Sangha

A really pious monk could hardly become a dacoit chief.⁶²

- Harold Thirkill-White

In his 1922 book *A Burmese Wonderland* - a work that can seem cloying and patronising to a present-day reader - C. M. Enriquez recorded his disdain for how modern Burma was changing from the romantic idyll of his imagination. In his preface, for example, he wrote:

There are two Burmas. There is one with Diarchy which is dull enough, but affords sport to quite a number of people. The other is half esoteric. It is just a Wonderland. Like Alice, you can follow a White Rabbit down into it with pleasurable assurance of exciting adventures.⁶³

On the one hand, Enriquez sees an unpleasant Burma with ‘Diarchy’ and political consciousness; on the other, a fairyland with everything in its place. It is clear which of the ‘two Burmas’ Enriquez considers to be more authentic and he extends this way of thinking to his view of the behaviour of monks. ‘In the restless days in which we now have the misfortune to live,’ he wrote

the *phoongyis* have at once thrust themselves into politics with unseemly passion. Some openly repudiate their rules. Some have ceased to observe Lent. They attend political meetings in flat defiance of the *Thathanabaing* (Arch-Bishop) and hotly resent the re-appointment of a *Mahadan Wun* (Ecclesiastical Censor.) These things appear very strange, and indeed are indefensible in Southern Buddhism.⁶⁴

⁶² Thirkill-White, *A Civil Servant in Burma*, 186. The term ‘dacoit,’ meaning bandit, was commonly applied to any group of armed Burmese.

⁶³ Enriquez, *Burmese Wonderland*, v.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 102-3.

Here is a familiar paradigm. When monks behaved in a manner contrary to British expectations, they were ‘bad monks.’ To explain this ‘indefensible’ violation of Theravada practice, Enriquez offers a particularly interesting hypothesis; this behaviour is caused by an ancient Buddhist sect called the Ari, who had survived within the sangha and periodically resurfaced throughout Burmese history to wreak mayhem. The militant Ari - mentioned in one of the quotes from Harvey’s history of Burma cited in the previous chapter - are one of the villains of Burma’s founding myth; they supposedly dominated northern Burma before Anawratha cast them out. As such, they are almost comically anti-Buddhist - according to Harvey ‘they were bearded, grew hair four fingers long, wore robes dyed blue-black in indigo, practised boxing, rode horses, went into battle, and drank intoxicants.’⁶⁵ Most scandalous of all, they practised *droit de seigneur*. Harvey states that ‘they did nothing for the people. They had pretensions to clerkly lore, with books of magic and a Mahayana canon in Sanskrit, but they treated writing as a secret art with which to fake tree oracles.’⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Enriquez assured us that this group had continued to exist within the sangha and thus, when confronted with indefensible behaviour

...we recognise in them the old Ari Spirit which has asserted itself down the centuries whenever opportunity afforded. This sanctioned libertinism in a section of the Order has rendered the laity insensible. There is no indignant outcry against the *phoongyis*, because the Ari spirit is as old as Time. ... The Ari of old direct the disgraceful riots of *phoongyis*, and still live in the honoured monks [who] beg at dawn, and return to dusk to their wives and children.⁶⁷

Enriquez’s interpretation appears ridiculous to a modern reader, but it fits the basic pattern of colonial views of the sangha outlined in this chapter. This section will argue that this understanding dominated colonial discussion of the sangha in Burma, identifying how colonial observers defined the role of monks and how these observers utilised their own standards to judge the behaviour of the sangha and of the Burmese themselves. A monk was supposed to be totally removed from the secular world. The fact that the sangha in Burma acted in ways contrary to this was interpreted as a matter of bad conduct on the part of the *pongyis* specifically and further evidence of impiety or

⁶⁵ Harvey, *History of Burma*, 17-8.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 18. Harvey quoted the following excerpt from the *Hmannan Yazawin*, (Glass Palace Chronicle): ‘It was the fashion of these Ari monks to reject the Laws preached by the Lord and to form each severally their own opinions. They wrote books after their own heart and beguiled others into the snare. According to the law they preached, a man might take the life of another and evade the course of *karma* if he recited the formula of deprecation; nay, he might even kill his mother and his father. ... Moreover kings and ministers, great and small, rich men and common people, whenever they celebrated the marriage of their children, had to send them to these teachers at nightfall, sending, as it was called, the flower of their virginity.’

⁶⁷ Enriquez, *Burmese Wonderland*, 102-3.

degeneracy among the Burmese generally. Unable to understand the frameworks of the sangha state that the twentieth-century academic discourse on the traditional monarchy would set out, the British did not acknowledge either the religious role of the king or the interdependence of sangha and monarch. The mutual legitimation of king and sangha was invisible to the British and the traditional responsibility of the monks as a check on impious rule was naturally foreign to them, preoccupied as they were with the idea of the monks as a renunciant community. This is the final dimension of the Anglophone colonial narrative of Burmese Buddhism as non-modern, non-scientific and ultimately, non-Buddhist.

Colonial observers generally believed that the function of a monk was to withdraw from the world, follow the Eightfold Path and seek nirvana. Bigandet called those who adhered to this model ‘strict followers of the Buddha, who, like him [the Buddha,] have renounced the world to devote themselves to the twofold object of mastering their passions and acquiring the true wisdom which alone can lead them to the deliverance.’ He also notes, importantly, that ‘the regulations they are subject to and the object they have in view in entering the religious profession debar them from concerning themselves in affairs that are foreign to their calling.’⁶⁸ Similarly, Fielding Hall states in *The Soul of a People* that:

The Burman demands from the monk no assistance in heavenly affairs, no interference in worldly, only this, that he should live as becomes of a follower of the great teacher. And because he does so live the Burman reverences him beyond all others. ... If you would know what a Burman would be, see what a monk is: that is his ideal. ... As long as the monks act as monks should, they are held in great honour, they are addressed by titles of great respect, they are supplied with all they want within the rules of the Wini (*Vinaya*, the monastic code of conduct), they are the glory of the village.⁶⁹

Thus a monk is revered precisely because he lives a life separate and sacred. Fielding Hall reinforces this impression in *The Inward Light* when he argues that when monks have strayed from this path, they have brought themselves and the religion into disrepute. He asks, rhetorically:

⁶⁸ Paul Ambrose Bigandet, *The Life or Legend of Gaudama: An Outline of the History of the Catholic Burmese Mission from the Year 1720 to 1857* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 1995), 242.

⁶⁹ Harold Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People*, 132-4. Other authors, including Scott, agree: ‘Beyond their teaching, the monks act simply as models to the people. Buddhism is a very pronounced form of atheism...it is impossible for anyone to intercede with a Creator whose existence is denied on behalf of a man who can only attain to a higher state by his own pious life and earnest self-denial. The religious are, therefore, only higher members of a community in which every individual is striving at a greater degree of sanctity.’ See Scott, *Burma as It Was, as It Is, and as It Will Be*, 118.

Would it make his truth greater if he were to attempt to meddle with everything? Are we (monks) less honoured because we have not tried to make ourselves rulers and arbiters in all affairs of men? Where Buddhism has fallen into disrepute what has been the reason? Always the same, because its monks tried to be all things to all men, and so became nothing to anyone, even to themselves. But where they have kept their truth they have reaped honour and their truth has lived.⁷⁰

Nisbet offers an comparable, though less positive, summary of the importance of renunciation:

The *Pôngyi* does not assume the yellow robe for the purpose of visiting and preaching to the sick or ministering to the spiritual wants of those who are saddened with sorrow or suffering from sin. This cold, cynical, atheistic religious philosophy is essentially different from the sympathetic charity of Christianity ... The layman becomes a *Pôngyi* simply and solely in order to save himself in the next state of existence by the acquisition of religious merit during this life. He neither cares, nor pretends to care, about any other person's hereafter except his own. He has no cure of souls. He feels no call either to reason with those who disregard the law or to rebuke those who habitually transgress it. By dedicating himself to the religious life he simply intends to walk more thoroughly in the true path of the eternal law, so as to obviate the chance of his rebirth as a brute animal in the next state of existence.⁷¹

For colonial observers, the proper and accepted behaviour for the sangha is defined as forswearing the secular world and pursuing self-oriented spiritual goals. Some allowance is made for teaching and preservation of the scriptures but these are tasks that the laity also can perform. Only monks can perform as visible, yet sequestered, seekers of nirvana.

The sangha state paradigm, however, holds that *pongyis* possessed traditional roles and responsibilities that went beyond this narrow scriptural interpretation. According to the sangha state model, monks could and did act in ways that contradicted the European definition of a 'good monk.' We can argue that the most startling example of this was the active participation of monks in the anti-colonial movement. Writing about the time of 'pacification,' as the immediate post-annexation period was called by the British, a number of colonial officials commented on the role of monks in the turmoil. 'Wherever there was an appearance of organised resistance,' wrote Thirkill-White, 'Buddhist monks were among the chiefs. No political movement of importance has been without a

⁷⁰ Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 98.

⁷¹ Nisbet, *Burma Under British Rule*, 144.

monk as the leading spirit.’⁷² Similarly, Charles Crosthwaite observed that ‘some of the most serious and deepest laid plots were hatched in monasteries or initiated by Pongyis.’⁷³ Another, C.C. Lowis, Superintendant of Census Operations for the 1901 Census claimed that ‘it may be safely said that, but for the monks, the pacification of the country would have been completed far earlier than was actually the case.’⁷⁴ As to why this was the case, Thirkill-White mused that ‘in losing a Buddhist king, their position and influence must be lowered. They could hardly be asked to rejoice with us.’⁷⁵ Alleyne Ireland agreed:

So dominant a power were the monks twenty years ago that when, with the final annexation of Burma to the British Empire, the old order of things was changed and the priestly prestige was threatened by the introduction of a new system of government in which no place was provided for the monkish intermediary, there were few more pertinacious and dogged opponents to the British rule in the new territory than the wearers of the yellow robe.⁷⁶

Colonial officials here seem to have implicitly recognised the operation of dharma state or cosmic state principles. In their interpretation of the underlying causes of monastic unrest, however, observers with preconceived notions about appropriate *pongyi* behaviour attributed the resistance of the sangha to British rule not to defence of the traditional Buddhist polity but to loss of privileges. Some colonial commentators argued that monastic activism was a failing of individual obedience to the rules. Crosthwaite praised the monks that remained in their monasteries and ‘took no part in the troubles,’ and reiterated that *pongyis* in Burma, including the *thathanabaing* ‘neither personally nor as representative of the order interfered in affairs of State...as a religious he was would have, and was bound to have no concern with mundane affairs.’⁷⁷ Similarly, Fielding Hall believed that Buddhism was ‘stronger’ when monks interfered less in society, noting with approval when ‘a monk has become more strictly a monk, and meddles less with the world than ever.’⁷⁸

⁷² Thirkill-White, *Civil Servant in Burma*, 160.

⁷³ Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma*, 39.

⁷⁴ C.C. Lowis, ‘Report on the 1901 Census of Burma,’ in Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 73-4.

⁷⁵ Thirkill-White, *Civil Servant in Burma*, 190.

⁷⁶ Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 73.

⁷⁷ Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma*, 37-8.

⁷⁸ Fielding Hall, *A People at School*, 258.

Other observers denied that offenders were monks at all, labelling them *soi-disant pongyis* or wolves in monk's robes. Enriquez was one such, who wrote that

they have learned the strategic value of concealing purely political, selfish or vindictive aims under the cloak of religion. Nothing could be more damaging to the Law. It is time that true Buddhists resisted the position of the *Dhamma* for personal, political and utterly paltry ends, which are themselves subversive to Buddhism. ... The Order has already fallen so low as to deserve the contempt of many Buddhist (sic).⁷⁹

Thus, *pongyis* that engaged in unsanctioned activity were not monks at all, but just men in saffron robes who looked like monks. Once again, it is British expertise that determines the authentic and the inauthentic. Enriquez repeats the assertion that politics was anathema to the sangha and that any exception was a failure of discipline and morality:

It is, or was from B.C. 500 to A.D. 1920, essentially non-political. It has, by this wise aloofness from worldly affairs, survived countless disturbances and revolutions. The deliberate encouragement of *Phoongyis* to mix in politics, in defiance of the *Thathanabaing's* orders, is deplorable. Now the Sangha is certainly in danger. ... There is no discipline. Lazy persons, criminals and noisy politicians can enter it unquestioned - and do so. The Sacred Robe may screen Wolf Priests who carry daggers, attack people in Pagodas, promote riots, preach hatred and sedition, and in short outrage the essential laws of Buddhism.⁸⁰

Similarly, Maurice Collis, who served as a district magistrate in Rangoon, described politically-active *pongyis* as 'members of secret societies, half-educated, rude fellows, with a great authority over the lower class. Rough and overbearing...these people represented old-fashioned Burma, the Burma of ... the magical bandit, the Burma which believed in the coming of a deliverer-king.'⁸¹

In addition, there was the familiar refrain that Buddhist monks were actually animists in disguise; Bigandet wrote that *pongyis* were 'often directly influenced by the strong undercurrent of animistic religion which underlies their faith in Buddhism.'⁸² C.C. Lowis also saw animism at the root of this behaviour.

⁷⁹ Enriquez, *Burmese Wonderland*, 193; 198.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 198. Enriquez also reminds us of 'the licentious spirit of the Ari' lurking in the sangha, 'ever ready to assert itself when opportunity offers.'

⁸¹ Maurice Collis, *Trials in Burma* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945), 67.

⁸² Cited in Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 75.

The latter days of early British dominion were days of anger, hatred and malice, and it is not to be wondered at that the heart of the Church militant burnt within it. We have seen the result. ... Even as late as in 1897 a *pongyi* was able to collect a handful of fanatical laymen around him, and lead them to a hare-brained attack on the fort at Mandalay. All this active participation in things temporal is, as Sir George Scott points out, as little in keeping with the frigid precepts of the Great Law Giver as it would be with the pacific teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, and would not for a moment be countenanced by the laity but for the fact--now largely recognised--that the Buddhism of the people, whose spiritual guides the *pongyis* are, is of the lips only, and that inwardly in their hearts the bulk of them are still swayed by the ingrained tendencies of their Shamanistic forefathers, in a word are, at bottom, animists, pure and simple.⁸³

Ireland, who quoted Lowis, reiterated this point explicitly:

‘The explanation of the inconsistency between the Buddhist theory and the actions of the monks in interfering in affairs of government is to be found in the fact that Buddhism as the religion of the people is merely the outward label. The more powerful faith is that of Shamanism, which was the general belief of the people of Burma before their conversion to Buddhism.’⁸⁴

Here Ireland makes plain the challenge that colonial observers of Burma faced. There was an *inconsistency* between an imagined ideal Buddhism and an observed practice that needed to be explained. In doing so, observers seldom aligned their thinking with the latter, instead preferring to criticise contemporary Buddhism. There were exceptions, of course; Thirkill-White wrote that the aloofness of monks ‘has been exaggerated.’

In a country village, for example, the monk was obviously the most learned and disinterested, very likely the most intelligent, person. Inevitably he was sought as the arbiter of disputes. That monks often acted in that capacity, I have found abundant evidence in old documents produced before me in court. Some of these went back a hundred years, when the country was quite free from foreign influence, and cannot be regarded as indicating degeneracy of the monastic order.⁸⁵

⁸³ Lowis, “Report on the Census” in Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 73.

⁸⁴ Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 74.

⁸⁵ Thirkill White, *Civil Servant in Burma*, 184-5. He continues: ‘It has been said that the authority of monks depended solely on their personal qualities and religious character, that it had no secular sanction. As regards Upper Burma in the King’s time, nothing can be farther from the truth. Buddhist ecclesiastics relied on the arm of flesh. The King and his officers promptly and effectually enforced the commands of the hierarchy. Laymen were severely punished for ecclesiastical offences, and recalcitrant monks were imprisoned within the precincts of a pagoda, or compelled to do acts of penance.’

But such perspectives were few and far between. Instead, a strong English-language narrative of corruption, anti-clericalism and primitivism surrounding Buddhism in Burma has been bequeathed to us from the early colonial period.

The twentieth-century scholarly account of the traditional Burmese Buddhist polity challenged many key features of the colonial narrative. Instead of a degenerate Buddhism whose original purity had been sullied by animist superstition, a sangha whose renunciant vocation had been contaminated by political involvement, and despotic monarchs who had taken over a religion that had no real concept of the state, modern scholars see a dharma state in which the king was defined by his responsibilities as a *dharmaraja*, a cosmic state in which the ruler's position was grounded in a larger Buddhist cosmology that linked him to the workings of the universe and a sangha state in which monks were actively engaged in monitoring and upholding the king's moral behaviour.

Nonetheless, the scholarly narrative was not the only twentieth-century response to colonial discourse about Burmese Buddhism. Key aspects of colonial discourse – the celebration of a pure core and the contempt for a debased and primitive traditional practice and the disregard of traditional practice and interpretations – would be restated by non-scholarly writers on Buddhism in the years after the end of British rule. The spokespeople for these ideas would shift from British to Burmese and their goals would shift from the support of the British worldview to the championing of the new Burmese nation-state. These developments will form the subject of the next chapters.

Chapter Three

English-language discourse on Buddhism and Science in early Postcolonial Burma

Introduction: A Modern Buddhism

For us, followers of the supreme Buddha, faith is reasonable, and reason confirms faith.¹

- U Chan Htoon

If it (Buddhism) is to live, it must adapt itself and incorporate itself into the national needs. It must put a national truth above a scripture reading. It must remember there are higher truths than religion.²

- Harold Fielding Hall

These two quotes – one from Fielding Hall, whose sympathetic writings about Buddhism were extensively discussed in the last chapter, and one from U Chan Htoon, whose work is examined in detail below – illustrate the complex relationship between colonial discourse about Buddhism and that produced by postcolonial Burmese writers. This chapter shows how English-language discourse on the relationship between Buddhism and the state evolved when those producing it were Burmese ‘insiders’ – products of an English-medium colonial education. Unlike the scholars and colonial observers discussed in the preceding chapters, the writers surveyed here were both themselves Buddhists and citizens of an independent Burmese nation-state. Their discourse represents an attempt by those Burmese people who had been most affected by colonial rule – those who wrote and thought in English - to conceptualise the role of Buddhism in Burma when British rule had ended.

In 1958, the American ‘Institute on Religion in an Age of Science’ held its fifth conference on Star Island in New Hampshire.³ On August 22, the principal address was given by U Chan Htoon, Judge of the Supreme Court of the Union of Burma and president of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. Despite taking place in America, this speech is both interesting and important, as it is demonstrative of contemporaneous attempts by the Burmese Buddhist intelligentsia to engage with a core structure

¹ U Chan Htoon, *Buddhism: The Religion of the Age of Science* (New Hampshire, 1958), 18. Walton also cites this speech in his study, though he uses it for different purposes than I do. See Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought*, 64.

² Fielding Hall, *A People at School*, 251.

³ The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science was founded in 1954 and still exists today. According to its website, it aims to ‘formulate dynamic and positive relationships between the concepts developed by science and the goals and hopes of humanity expressed through religion.’ It continues to hold yearly conferences on Star Island and is the co-publisher of ‘Zygon,’ a quarterly journal on science and religion. See “Mission Statements” *IRAS*, last accessed January 7, 2017, www.iras.org.

of modernity. The theme of the conference was ‘What is the Role of Religion in an Age of Science?’ and the speakers had been provided with a series of questions that dealt, as Chan Htoon put it ‘with the problems of ... a world that is fast losing faith in the old religious beliefs.’⁴ In response to the suggestion that the various religions could be reconciled to science and each other, Chan Htoon remarked that no such understanding was possible, since: ‘each theistic religion claims its doctrines were revealed by a “Supreme Being” [and] none of the “divine revelations” can be altered in any fundamental way.’⁵ Science could only weaken them. Buddhism, on the other hand

is not a “divine revelation” which claims absolute faith and unquestioning obedience; it is a system for discovering truth and reality for oneself and therefore invites reasoned criticism and objective analysis.⁶

Chan Htoon reinforced this message when responding to the next question: ‘Is only one of them valid? If so, how can it be established in the minds of all men?’ The only way to do so, he claimed

is to put it to the test of realisation. First the question must be asked: are its doctrines compatible with reason and experience, and with the knowledge we have gained concerning the nature of the universe and of life? Secondly, does it offer us a way in which we, individually, can verify its claims in a manner which places it beyond all dispute?⁷

Basically, the question here is: can a religion be measured against science, and with science? This was not intended to be a rhetorical question, for Chan Htoon went on to declare that:

Buddhist philosophy is fully in accordance with reason and experience; it agrees with the general picture of the universe given by science and does not ask us to believe anything outside the normal order of nature. ... Buddhism does provide each of us with a means of verifying it for himself, through the practise of a scientific system of mental training and meditation which culminates in Vipassanā, or direct Insight.⁸

⁴ Chan Htoon, *Buddhism*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9. Except, he adds tongue-in-cheek, by a fresh “divine revelation.” He goes on to note that when attempts at irenic reconciliation have been made, they ‘have never attracted any large following because their efforts at reconciling the irreconcilable lead to a result that is even less acceptable to the rational mind than the original doctrine.’

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

The answer to both questions, Chan Htoon suggests, is yes: Buddhism is not only compatible with science; it can apparently be empirically tested with a ‘scientific system.’ In an ‘Age of Science,’ therefore, Buddhism is appropriately scientific. How did he explain this viewpoint?

‘In the struggle between religion and science in the West,’ Chan Htoon told his audience, ‘it is always religion that has had to give way.’⁹ Western religious ideas have been back-peddalling since the time of Galileo, he argued, yet in the case of Buddhism ‘all the modern scientific concepts have been present from the beginning.’

If physics says that the apparently solid universe ... is actually a flux of electronic energy, Buddhism said it first. If the scientific philosopher says that our senses deceive us in presenting this insubstantial series of nuclear events in the guise of solid, enduring matter, Buddhism anticipated him by saying the same thing. ... If the psychologist, neurologist and biologist say that there is no indication of an immortal soul in man, they have made the discovery two thousand five hundred years after the Buddha. If science says that there is no ground for belief in a Creator-god, it is merely confirming an essential doctrine of Buddhism.¹⁰

Buddhism does not depend on the dogmas ‘which science has exploded’ – Chan Htoon lists them – the Creator-god, the ‘immortal soul, a supernatural scheme of salvation or a particular “revelation”...to a select person or group of persons.’ Instead, there are such shared truths as the ‘correspondence between biological evolution and spiritual evolution’ and ‘the view that all phenomena, including life, are a flux of energies.’¹¹ In the context of the great global prestige of science in the 1950s and its corresponding challenge to organised religion, the location of these concepts within Buddhist doctrine was significant indeed.

As mentioned, these arguments were representative of a visible attempt in Burma to reconcile Buddhism not only with science but also with two other important aspects of modernity – socialism

⁹ Ibid., 9. The theistic inclination of the Institute can be inferred from its occasional indulgence in *plurium interrogationum*, ie: ‘Has there not been revealed to us...that man [is] a creature created by the cosmos, and thus ordained by it, and so endowed by that creator with a mind which can in its finite way learn to appreciate the whole, and to enter...into the grand scheme of development in which [the cosmos] is engaged?’ U Chan Htoon was not fooled. ‘Here is a wonderful mass of contradictions,’ he said. ‘It is obvious the word “cosmos” is being used simply as a substitute for “God.”’ See Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Ibid., 16-7. The ‘essential doctrine’ here is almost certainly *paticca samuppada*: the doctrine of dependent arising, also known as the ‘chain of causation.’ In this doctrine, existence is seen as a flux of interrelated events, none of which is independent or permanent. Hence the ‘series of nuclear events,’ the denial of the immortal soul and the denial of the ‘first cause.’

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

and democracy. (which will be discussed in the next chapter). The reconciliation of these ideas with traditional knowledge or the dominance of the former over the latter were among the most pressing questions of the day, not only in Burma but globally as well. To learn more about the Burmese attempting to answer these questions, let us explore the background of their champion at New Hampshire.

U Chan Htoon was born in 1906, in the village of Ainyagyi, near Pyapon, a part of Burma that had been under British control for more than fifty years. Three things are significant about his early education. First, he spent three years at the village monastery, where, according to a short biography by Dr Maung Maung ‘he learned and imbibed the fundamental precepts of Buddhism.’¹² Equally important was his first encounter with English, at the Anglo-Vernacular school in Pyapon, though his instruction there was to be cut short by the third factor – his involvement in the student strike and national schools movement of 1920, first as a striker and later as a student *and* teacher at Pyapon National High School.¹³ This trinity of Buddhism, English and nationalism was to be of continued and critical importance in Chan Htoon’s life.

Chan Htoon’s Anglophone education took him first to Ceylon, where he passed the matriculation exams in 1928, and then to London itself, where he studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1931.¹⁴ Upon his return he involved himself again in the nationalist movement, defending the revolutionaries in court. ‘For U Chan Htoon a profession was not enough,’ wrote Dr Maung Maung, ‘he had to have a cause. ... Thus [the] Barrister, scholar, Buddhist, became associated with a radical revolutionary movement.’¹⁵ This association was cemented when, after the war, he turned down British offers of high office to serve as legal advisor to the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, or AFPFL, the main postwar political organisation and eventual party of government. When the AFPFL was successful in its demand for independence, Chan Htoon became chief draughtsman of

¹² Dr Maung Maung, “Mr Justice Chan Htoon,” in *Dr Maung Maung: Gentleman, Scholar, Patriot*, 111.

¹³ The national schools movement, and the University Strike out of which it grew, are often fingered as being among the first stirrings of anti-colonial nationalism and ‘modern’ protest in Burma. The strike began in 1920 in protest against the admissions policy of the new University of Rangoon; it was decided that education had been subsumed into a British plan to perpetuate direct rule. Thus, national schools mushroomed as a ‘Burmese’ alternative to mission and government schools. These were often short of qualified teachers; Chan Htoon teaching at the same school at which he was a sophomore was not unusual. U Nu, later Prime Minister, also taught while studying at Myoma National High School in Rangoon. See Cady, *The History of Modern Burma*, 217-8; Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 8-9.

¹⁴ Dr Maung Maung, “Mr Justice U Chan Htoon,” 112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113-4. Other causes that apparently occupied his attention at this time included the Young Men’s Buddhist Association – an indication of the ongoing importance of Buddhism in his motivations.

the Constitution and Burma's first Attorney-General, later judge of the Supreme Court. Buddhism continued to influence his deeds and works; a particularly important example of this was his role as secretary of the Union Buddha Sasana Council, a government organisation devoted to the promotion of the faith. Indeed, Chan Htoon drafted the Bill that brought this council into existence.¹⁶

We can see that U Chan Htoon was not an insignificant figure in Burma's independence movement and particularly its postcolonial administration and so his musings on Buddhism carry an importance that goes beyond impressing his overseas audience in New Hampshire. They can, in fact, be seen as having political consequence in terms of the legitimacy of the postcolonial state and in terms of state-society relations. Most particularly, they can be seen as representative of a broader intellectual trend among Anglophone Buddhists in Burma. When Chan Htoon spoke (in English) about 'scientific' Buddhism, he arguably envisioned an essentially new religious tradition that would legitimise the postcolonial government's secular programs of development and democracy, including, for example, the representative institutions inherited from the British and the socialist state-building projects envisioned by the new leadership. When Chan Htoon told his American audience that 'where science is able to confirm the teachings of religion ... it changes its role from that of a destroyer of faith to that of an ally and most valuable friend' he was at the same time reassuring his Burmese countrymen of that same truth.¹⁷ This explicitly positivistic interpretation constitutes a significant departure from the way Buddhism was understood and practised in the old Burmese kingdom. Indeed, it had more in common with the 'pure' Buddhism that was 'discovered' within (or perhaps 'freed' from) pre-colonial tradition in Burma and elsewhere by Orientalist Western scholars like the afore-mentioned T.W. Rhys Davids.

Nor was Chan Htoon the only English-speaking, British-educated Theravada Buddhist concerned with the problem with science, and attempting to wrest his religion from cosmo-politics, spirit worship and the dominance of the sangha. At the time he was studying there, a similarly rationalist program of Buddhist revivalism was underway in Ceylon. Anagarika Dharmapala, the chief proponent of this Sinhalese "Protestant Buddhism" was then nearing the end of his life, yet more than thirty years earlier, at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, he too had stood before a

¹⁶ U Chan Htoon, "Causes which Led to the Enactment of the Bill," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 1, 1, (1952): 50-1.

¹⁷ U Chan Htoon, *Buddhism*, 9.

primarily Christian audience and had spoken on strikingly similar themes:

The message of the Buddha that I bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths. The Buddha taught to the civilised Aryans of India twenty-five centuries ago a scientific religion containing the highest individualistic altruistic ethics, a philosophy of life built on psychological mysticism and a cosmology which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity and reality.¹⁸

Dharmapala's Buddhist revival in Ceylon was arguably successful; his works, and those of his one-time patron Henry Steel Olcott, are still read and used in schools today.¹⁹ There seems little doubt that the young Chan Htoon was exposed to his ideas. Richard Gombrich, Gananath Obeyesekere and, more recently, David McMahan argue that Dharmapala's rationalist interpretation of Theravada Buddhism was calculated to counter the corrosive effects of Christian colonialism and missionaries and bolster the independence movement.²⁰

In the case of Burma, it can be argued that rationalist attempts to reconcile Buddhism with modernity do not dominate the history of the colonial struggle. Rather, most English-language histories of the period contend that more traditionalist movements and mindsets were predominant in anti-colonial resistance for most of the period of British rule. Studies suggest that while the adaptation of Western organisational techniques was effective in Buddhist resistance to the British (as in the case of the Young Men's Buddhist Association, or YMBA and the *sangha sameggi aphwes* [monk unions]) the popular understanding of Buddhism, particularly among the rural majority, continued to conform to precolonial norms. They saw the rule of the heretical English as damaging to the religion; the return to the (imagined) traditional order the only solution. The history of colonial Burma is peppered with *min-laung* (pretenders, or 'embryo-kings') who led uprisings to restore the old way of life. The greatest of these was Saya San, whose rebellion of 1930-2 took eighteen months and more than ten thousand troops to quell. One scholar writing in the 1960s noted

¹⁸ Ananda Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala* (Colombo: Government Press, 1965), 27. Dharmapala's English connections were even stronger than U Chan Htoon's; he was born *David* Hewavitarana in 1864 and attended Christian College in Kotte.

¹⁹ David L. McMahan, "Modernity and the Early Discourse of Scientific Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, 4 (2004): 909.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 905; Gombrich and Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, 202-41. According to McMahan, 'underlying Dharmapala's efforts to revitalize Buddhism was his deep resentment against colonial suppression of his native Ceylon. He aimed to rehabilitate Buddhism not only in the eyes of its Western detractors but in those of the colonised and demoralised Sinhala Buddhist population. ... Dharmapala vigorously opposed Christian missionisation and promoted a nationalistic revival to bring Buddhism back from its demoralisation.'

that Says San's 'status as pretender to the throne and his appeal to religion, with its mixture of traditional animism and folk-Buddhism, played on the messianic expectations of the Burmese peasant.'²¹ The other great figure to wield traditional Buddhist authority in the anti-colonial struggle was the political *pongyi* U Ottama who – despite using Western techniques and knowledge – has been seen by historians as essentially reviving the traditional role of the sangha as guardian of the dharma when he urged people and monks to reject impious British government and be more involved in politics. Monks that followed Ottama's lead had much popular support; according to Cady, politicians 'had little choice but to line up with the political *pongyis*.'²²

Cady argues that the power of the political *pongyis* over Westernised politicians and the appeal of Saya San's *min-laung* rebellion indicates that the importance of 'priestcraft and other theological shibboleths' remained central to the anti-colonial struggle in Burma. Indeed, according to one Burmese author, if English-educated political aspirants hoped to attract support for so nebulously Western a concept as 'Home Rule' then they 'burnt midnight oil over the Dhammapada, the Ten Major Zats, and the Buddhayamsa etc. ... Without a good acquaintance with the better known Sutta texts and stories they could not hope to hold the people.'²³ Most historians believe that this tension between global (or imperial) political standards that were 'progressive' and 'scientific' yet unpopular, and traditional forms of religious practice was not reconciled in the colonial period.

It is frequently argued that the persuasiveness of the political monks and of *min-laung* like Saya San lay in their claims as to the heretical nature of British authority: the monks in their grim warnings that the dharma faced destruction under Christians and Saya San in his promise to restore a righteous Buddhist kingdom. Historians argue that these 'traditionalist' concerns about religion remained important right up to independence. Yet in the end there was no restoration and the departure of the heretical foreigners was not total; the new Burmese state inherited both the political institutions of the British and – to a greater or lesser extent – the paradigm of progress, development

²¹ Solomon, "Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion," 210. Even more cosmopolitan Burmese felt Saya San's appeal. Mi Mi Khaing, attending a Catholic missionary school at the time of the uprising wrote that: 'The music and the splendour of Buddhist kingship in these days of government officials stirred the unrealised, half-forgotten roots in our breasts; it made us feel things we had known in some other world and brought tears to our eyes.' Cited in Mi Mi Khaing, *Burmese Family* (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 41.

²² Cady, *History of Modern Burma*, 232.

²³ Kaung, "A Survey of the History of Education," 12f. According to Aung San Suu Kyi, a greater emphasis on Burmese 'classical learning' by the 1930s meant that politicians from that era were more successful in communicating with the people than their predecessors. See Aung San Suu Kyi, "Intellectual Life in Burma and India under Colonialism" in *Freedom From Fear: And Other Writings*, ed. Michael Aris (New York: Viking, 1991), 135.

and global engagement that had been their justification for overlordship. In fact, the new government looked quite a bit like the old one – the one that had hanged Saya San. The question confronting the postcolonial elites, therefore, was how to foster legitimacy for their institutions and programs, especially in relation to the ‘traditionalists’ who had supposedly been at the forefront of resistance to colonial rule.

Donald Smith, in his book *Religion, Politics and Social Change in the Third World* argued that this was a situation faced by postcolonial societies in general and for which there was a common solution:

The elites, who provided the political leadership at the national level [were] confronted with a cruel dilemma. Significant socio-economic change and modernisation, as they saw it, depended in part on the continued secularisation of society and culture. ... On the other hand, in an age which increasingly assumed mass participation in politics, how could an elite maintain its political leadership solely on the basis of secular ideals still foreign to the masses? Religion, that traditional legitimiser of social, economic and political structures, once again presented itself as a qualified candidate for the job. The choice was between secular modernisation of society and religious legitimisation of polity.²⁴

The underlying dynamic of these state-societies, therefore, was a tension between modernity and tradition. And indeed, at first glance, postcolonial Burma appears to follow this pattern; it seems that ‘the elites’ chose to emphasise the national religion over participation in a global modernity. The government seemed eager to reassume the traditional mantle of defender of the faith through a plethora of Buddhist activity including pagoda construction and spirit-worship, while U Nu (Prime Minister at independence and for much of the fourteen years thereafter) presented such a powerful image of personal piety combined with the performance of ostentatious acts of religious patronage that many Burmese considered him to be a future Buddha.²⁵ A letter to an English-language daily following Ne Win’s coup d’etat in 1962 suggests this:

²⁴ Donald Smith, *Religion, Politics and Social Change in the Third World: A Sourcebook* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 2.

²⁵ Thus placing him in the tradition of Burmese kings, who also ruled by right of their great merit. See Dorothy Guyot, *The Uses of Buddhism in Wartime Burma* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1968), 44.

Our simple people are bound to have doubts about [the military coup], especially since U Nu has created such a tremendous build-up of his personality that quite a few misguided persons may even share his belief that he is in reality a *Paya Alaung*, Embryo Buddha.²⁶

It seems that Smith's 'largely traditional masses' had been appeased. Yet, in assuming an either/or choice between 'modernisation' and 'legitimacy,' Smith's framework has flaws. To paraphrase the introduction to a Sri Lankan publication of Chan Htoon's speech: one does not have to choose between 'the ethical values of religion and the contingent and variable expedients of materialism' when those values 'are recognized as being grounded in a rational view of life.'²⁷ In the eyes of Anglophone Buddhists in postcolonial Burma like Chan Htoon, it appears that there is no conflict between modernisation and its associated concepts of science and even democracy when one understands that Buddhism itself is modern, scientific and democratic. Chan Htoon gives expression to the idea that there was a significant movement to reform Buddhism – to make it secular – that was Anglophone in its expression. Chan Htoon and other Anglophone Burmese Buddhists (including U Nu, though he was perhaps the least enthusiastic participant) attempted to reconcile their religion with progress and, through the medium of English-language newspapers, publications and speeches, to inculcate a new, forward-looking, scientific Buddhist system that conferred legitimacy on the state and its programs. In this movement, we hear echoes of the narrative of 'pure Buddhism' produced by British and European observers of colonial and precolonial Burma, indicating continuity in the English-language discourse about Buddhism from the nineteenth to the twentieth century that spans non-Burmese and Burmese Anglophones. In equating Buddhism with modernity, the modernist Buddhist movement attempted to redress the colonial imbalance of knowledge vis-à-vis the West, reasserting the superiority of Burma's religious tradition over others and exporting it to the world, reversing pre-independence relationships. Chan Htoon's 1958 speech stands as an articulation of this intellectual movement. Below, this chapter will consider their efforts to reconcile Buddhism with science, rationalism, and modernity. This was done through an emphasis on the similarities between Buddhist dogma and certain scientific ideas, as well as an assertion that despite the veracity and power of science, it represented only half of a truly modern knowledge that would constitute a comprehensive Buddhist rationalist approach to both the material and spiritual aspects of existence.

²⁶ "A word of advice," *The Guardian*, March 6, 1962.

²⁷ U Chan Htoon, *Religion and the Age of Science* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1969).

The Origins and Uses of Buddhist Modernism

On all sides they saw the ceaseless, ebbless tide of foreign civilisation and learning steadily creeping over the land, and it seemed to him that unless they prepared themselves to meet it, to overcome it, and apply it to their own needs, their national character, institutions, their very existence as a distinct nationality would be swept away, submerged, irretrievably lost.²⁸

- U May Oung

As we saw in the previous chapter, in *The Inward Light*, Harold Fielding Hall presents a romanticised account of a European colonial official's encounter with Burmese Buddhism and the tranquillity of rural life. The book is novelistic in style, but was based on the author's own experience, as he worked in the colonial administration for more than twenty-five years. In one passage, the narrator encounters a lone Burman in European dress outside a pagoda and has the following conversation with him:

'They did not like my feet being covered,' and he looked down at his European boots. 'And yet,' he added, 'one cannot go without boots in English dress.'

'Do they mind? They don't notice mine.'

'They mind because I am a Burman. You are not. I am a Burman but not a Buddhist. That makes them angry. They turned me off.'

'Your sisters are in Burmese dress?'

'Yes, they like it. But I could not do it. I have risen above the people's dress. I am European.'

'Well then, why come at all?'

The boy kicked angrily against the stones. 'Can one live alone? Can one have no friends, and see everything going on and stand aside? I would join but they won't let me.'

'Suppose you too wore Burmese dress?'

'I mayn't. And if I did it would be all the same. They say I am not one of them. They look at me so,' and he scowled. 'If the other young men make friends with me, their fathers stop them. It does not so much matter to my sisters, for they are women, and besides—'

'But what besides?'

'They also light their candles at the pagoda. And why not?' raising his voice, as if replying to some inner question. 'Are they to have no husbands? Are they to live their lives alone?'²⁹

²⁸ U May Oung, "The Modern Burman: His Life and Notions," *The Rangoon Gazette*, August 8, 1908.

²⁹ Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 131.

This passage captures some of the dilemmas faced by colonised peoples when confronted with European civilisation, at least as these were presented in colonial discourse. In embracing the European way of life, Fielding Hall suggests, this Burman had lost a part of his own identity; as he ‘rose above them’ he found he no longer belonged and was anguished as a result. He wished to return, but found that he could not do so and yet remain ‘modern.’ The problem facing this lone Burmese was the problem facing all Burmese people. What was the solution? This section will argue that one of the key functions of this Buddhist modernism was that it offered an answer to the dilemma that Fielding Hall’s narrative constructs - it offered a means of ‘progressing’ in a European (or global) context while remaining true to Burmese (or local) identity. As in the Ceylonese case, the identification of ‘modernist’ elements in the Buddhist tradition bolstered national pride by validating Burmese culture and religion; since Buddhism and Burmese identity were seen as inseparable, demonstrating that Buddhism was modern meant that Burmese culture was essentially modern also.

The underlying dynamics of this situation have been studied by many historians writing on colonialism. The seminal work of Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, describes the conflicting goals that have typified ‘Eastern’ anti-colonial nationalism:

The “Eastern” type of nationalism...has been accompanied by an effort to “re-equip” the nation culturally; to transform it. But it could no do so simply by imitating the alien culture, for then the nation would lose its distinctive identity. The search therefore was for a regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at the same time its distinctiveness.³⁰

‘Eastern’ anti-colonial nationalism is contradictory because firstly, it rejects the alien intruder, yet seeks to imitate and surpass him by his own standards and secondly, because it simultaneously exalts, yet rejects aspects of the precolonial past. Why are these incongruities manifested? According to Chatterjee:

Nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonised people; it also asserted that a backward nation could ‘modernise’ itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which,

³⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 2.

even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of modernity on which colonial domination was based.³¹

Overall, histories such as Chatterjee's argue, the key factor shaping anti-colonial nationalism was the claim of the coloniser that not only were the colonised technologically backward, they were politically and - ultimately - culturally backward as well. Indeed, cultural backwardness was often perceived as being responsible for the political and technological backwardness. By contrast, the colonisers – or at least, their missionaries – claimed that it was their own culture and religion that were superior and responsible for their progress.³² Thus the contradictions arise from the attempt to become as modern as the coloniser according to the latter's definition (thus invalidating their claim to rule) while retaining a unique culture (which the coloniser had labelled backward). The colonised had to selectively champion those aspects of tradition that are conducive to self-rule in a modern nation state and reject those that do not. As Sarkisyanz put it: 'Ideologies of irresistible modern impact are reinterpreted in such a way that they can be derived from certain aspects of "indigenous" tradition. And these selected aspects in turn became nativistic symbols for the preservation of tradition.'³³ The process in Burma can be seen in Chan Htoon's speech quoted above: firstly, the rejection of Western culture and the colonial 'mission' via a rationalist critique of Christianity as an unsuitable philosophy for modern man; secondly, the co-opting of the symbols and ideologies of scientific modernity by demonstrating the lack of conflict between science and a purified, canonical Buddhism; and thirdly, the conclusion that the national religion of Burma was superior to that of the West because of that belief system's ultimate congruity with the technological *zeitgeist* and its suitability as the belief-system for global modernity.

The Buddhist modernist movement had a specific, combative function within the anti-colonialist milieu in the decades up to and during the Second World War; the movement anticipated the end of colonial rule and meant to strengthen Burmese national identity. Imperialism was fundamentally flawed; whether as adherents of an unscientific religion or as purveyors of an empty secularism, the British possessed no social or moral ideology to offer the Burmese people. Indeed, the reverse was

³¹ Ibid., 30.

³² Adoniram Judson wrote that 'as the religious systems of the heathen are *indissolubly* associated with false views on astronomy, geographical and physical sciences generally, if we can correct these errors, the religion resting upon them must necessarily be swept away.' Cited in Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson* (Boston: Phillips, Samson and Company, 1853), 208.

³³ Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds*, 217-8.

true. Sarkisyanz quotes the following statement from Anagarika Dharmapala, writing in the Calcutta *Maha-Bodhi Journal* in 1933: ‘Our duty is to give Dhamma to the British people. ... By the power of Dhamma they would see the unwisdom of enslaving nations to satisfy their ambitions. The compassionate doctrine will modify the cruel nature of British imperialism.’³⁴ The British were cruel imperialists because of their religion (or lack thereof.) The dharma of Buddhism would turn them into ‘good’ imperialists perhaps, like Aśoka, or at the very least would end their destructive activities towards Buddhism.

As mentioned, many progressive Anglophone Burmese had come in the early decades of colonial rule to see the presence of the British, their schools and their missionaries as having a toxic effect on the Buddhist religion and the national character. The Protestant Buddhism of Dharmapala and his Burmese equivalents were supposed to counter that corrosive attack through a deliberate revival and a response to both disparaging criticism and, paradoxically, to the creeping influence of Western knowledge. Criticisms of Buddhism as passive and fatalistic³⁵ or irrational³⁶ were countered or turned back on the British through emphasis on the canon and a selective rejection of traditional (non-canonical) religious activity. This was accompanied by the apparently paradoxical phenomenon of English-educated Burmese vilifying Western education. In 1908, Rangoon College was addressed by one U May Oung, or as he was known then ‘Maung May Oung, B.A., LL.B., Barrister-at-law, President of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association.’ According to Furnivall, who published the text of the speech and his own recollections of May Oung years later in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, he had studied for the Bar in England.³⁷ His lecture - a quote from which appears at the beginning of this section - was called ‘The Modern Burman.’ It warned that Western education was eradicating the understanding and observance of Buddhism, creating a generation lacking in morals and missing the most important component of Burmese identity.

³⁴ Ibid., 125.

³⁵ Even the sympathetic J.S. Furnivall called it ‘running away,’ while the Christian supposedly ‘stands and fights.’ J.S. Furnivall, *Christianity and Buddhism in Burma* (Rangoon: Peoples' Literature Committee and House, 1929), 6-7.

³⁶ The missionary Cochrane derided the canon as making ‘absurdly extravagant statements as to time, dimensions, space and numbers’ and argued that ‘modern geography [would] stampede the Buddhist system if taken into account’ Cochrane, *Among the Burmans*, 144.

³⁷ J.S. Furnivall, ‘The Dawn of Nationalism in Burma,’ *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 33, 1 (1948): 1. The title is significant, as Furnivall considered this speech to be among the first stirrings of nationalist sentiment following the annexation in 1886.

The titular ‘Modern Burman,’ by whom May Oung meant ‘the Burman who had received the not unmixed blessing of a Western education,’ no longer went to the monastery to imbibe the precepts of Buddhism as a boy. (May Oung’s ‘Modern Burman’ - like Fielding Hall’s - is a man, an assumption that a modern audience would consider inappropriate.) Instead he was ‘off to the English school, where the teaching was purely secular, and to pass his examinations was henceforth his sole aim and object.’

He arrived at manhood with very little knowledge of anything outside his English school books, with much less comprehension of his own religion and literature, with no settled convictions and no fixed purpose except to obtain some easy and ready way of obtaining his livelihood. He went out into the world, a Burman to all outward appearance, but entirely out of harmony with his surroundings.³⁸

Instead of Burmese ideals, the ‘Modern Burman’ had instead absorbed the self-oriented materialism of the British colonisers. The mission schools had taught him that life was about examinations and a good job, and when he married it was ‘usually for money or for mere good looks.’ He became indifferent or even hostile to Buddhism and aped the worst qualities of other nations and philosophies. ‘Had the new Burman assimilated and adapted the new notions to his own life?’ asked May Oung, ‘or had he merely substituted them for his own?’ It was the latter – and the problem here is that secular materialism is but half a philosophy, a hopelessly unbalanced way of looking at the world and life that is shorn of morality, spiritualism or community:

He (U May Oung) would ... rather see them followers of any faith that preached morality, than being without any religion at all, enemies to themselves, most dangerous examples to others. Take away Buddhism, put nothing in its place, and [you have] the powerful, iniquitous god of self, untrammelled, unchecked, unhindered.³⁹

Worse still was the fact that Buddhism was far more than a moral guide to the Burmese; it was the very thing that made a person Burmese. May Oung had no doubt as to the religion’s importance; he believed that Buddhism was the very thing responsible for the Burmese sense of community. Without it, ‘his nationality was not with him, as it was with other races, an ever-present reality, a circumstance to be proud of, a bond of sympathy between him and those around him.’ Without

³⁸ May Oung, “The Modern Burman,” 2-3.

³⁹ Ibid. ‘He would rather wish to see them Christians, Mahomedans, Hindus (so long as they were good, Christians, good Mahomedans, good Hindus.)’

Buddhism and the sense of community and patriotism that it engendered, the Burmese could not compete with the other people in his own country.

Although he regretted the decline of monastic schooling in Burma, May Oung made an important concession. 'It was true,' he argued, 'that the exigencies of modern life did not permit of a similar training' for the young men who grew up in towns at that time.⁴⁰ What the Buddhists of Burma needed was a substitute for the old system, that preserved the 'regard and the reverence' for the national religion in the new, modern circumstances. May Oung congratulated the members of the Rangoon College Buddhist Association for having set out in the right direction and exhorted them to 'try to give to others the benefit of their training and their knowledge.'⁴¹ Furnivall called this speech 'The Dawn of Nationalism in Burma;' it is also quite clearly a call for a revival and renewal of Buddhist practice. The two are closely related. 'There was,' May Oung concluded, 'a spirit of reform in the air, a gradually increasing demand for improvement accompanied by unmistakable signs of social and religious activity.'⁴² The Rangoon YMBA of which May Oung was president was an important part of this connection between reform and resistance in the colonial period.

The confidence of Burmese Buddhist modernists in the value of their religion gained strength in the decades that preceded and followed the First World War. For it was only Theravada Buddhism whose fundamentals had so neatly anticipated science, and while (as we have seen) colonial discourse emphasised the degeneracy of Burmese Buddhism, there was a counter discourse that claimed that it was in Burma that Buddhism had been preserved, 'more carefully and more exactly in its form as it came from the lips of the Lord Buddha himself' (to quote James George Scott, writing in 1883 under the pseudonym Shway Yoe).⁴³ Donald Lopez points to the power of emphasising the scientific nature of Buddhism, 'in light of theories of social evolution of the day, which saw an inevitable advance of humanity from the state of primitive superstition to religion to science.' By claiming to be a science, Buddhism, labelled as 'primitive superstition...leaps from the bottom of the evolutionary scale to the top.'⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Shway Yoe, *The Burman: His Life and Notions* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 96.

⁴⁴ Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, 24.

By the postcolonial period, however, circumstances had changed. Buddhism was not under threat from impious and alien rule; Buddhist government had returned and Burma had been made safe for the dharma. Buddhist modernism served a new purpose and had new goals, although it retained some of the core characteristics displayed in the colonial era. The Anglophone elites still rejected theism as irrational and insisted on the convergence between Buddhism and science, yet this was no longer oriented to the rejection of the British and their administration. Indeed, if anything, the *opposite* was now true; the purpose was now explicitly to ‘capture modernity’ – to show that Burma could do a better job of being modern than the modern West, garnering support for postcolonial policies and institutions. Most importantly, however, it intended to do so while showing that Burma remained Burmese (that is, Buddhist.) Buddhist modernist ideology served to boost national sentiment, but in a subtler way than it had during the colonial period. Rather than simply amplifying calls for self-rule, Buddhist modernism was put forth as the only philosophy for a technologically advanced and progressive civilisation. Buddhism, and the associated and progressive ideologies of rationalism, socialism and democracy were offered to the world as a credible alternative to the great feuding world-systems of the time: theistic capitalism and atheistic communism. Francis Story, a European who lived in Burma at this time and was an active participant in the modernist movement, summed it up well:

‘Buddhism, ... is pre-eminently the science of the mind. With this weapon of purity and knowledge we can cleave the darkness of ignorance that threatens to envelop the world, and can re-establish the law of righteousness. It is to the young people of this Buddhist land of Burma that we appeal for the preservation of religion. ... A new instrument and a new power have been placed in their grasp; they are the heirs of a great body of scientific and technical knowledge which is theirs to use for good or ill. But let it be remembered that they are also the inheritors of a great and unchanging wisdom that far transcends any worldly knowledge, and it is only by the right understanding and application of this wisdom of the Dhamma that they can be guided and inspired to turn their other knowledge to good account. *The future of mankind rests with Buddhism, for it is the Path of Purity which is also the Path of Peace, the only true and lasting peace for humanity.* May its sublime light of understanding and universal benevolence irradiate the world, to bring happiness and liberation to all beings.’⁴⁵

Despite this confidence that Buddhism provided for the development of an independent Burma on an autonomous course derived from indigenous resources, postcolonial elites tended to maintain

⁴⁵ Francis Story, “The Elementary Principles of Buddhism,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 1, 2 (1953), 23. Francis Story was born in England in 1910 and was exposed to Buddhism at a young age. He lived for many years in Burma, India and Sri Lanka and wrote a number of books on Buddhism.

rather than overthrow the governmental institutions of colonialism. Chatterjee makes the following broad observation about the political reorganisation of former colonies:

[They do not] attempt to break up or transform in any radical way the institutional structures of ‘rational’ authority set up in the period of colonial rule, whether in the domain of administration and law or in the realm of economic institutions or in the structure of education, scientific research and cultural organisation.⁴⁶

For the modernist Burmese elites, the question was how to reconcile the ‘rational authority’ of the structures erected by colonial rule with their evolving, yet fundamentalist interpretation of Buddhism and vice versa. Although they defended the rational authority of the political, economic and cultural institutions left by the British, these elites were neither inclined nor able to embrace a state reduced to cold scientific logic nor could they launch a wholesale attack the traditional Buddhism of the majority of the Burmese population. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this reconciliation – and indeed, the very survival of the colonial-style institutions that made up the newly independent Burmese state – was that it precluded any revival of the precolonial, royalist, traditional style of Buddhism that the British had criticised as backward and passive and the Anglophone Burmese with their emphasis on the Pali Canon had tried to look beyond or ignore. To conclude Chatterjee’s above quotation:

On the other hand, [they do not] undertake a full-scale assault on all pre-capitalist dominant classes; rather, [they] seeks to limit their former power, neutralise them where necessary, attack them only selectively, and in general to bring them round to a position of subsidiary allies within a reformed state structure.⁴⁷

Substitute the words ‘pre-capitalist dominant classes’ with ‘precolonial religious orthopraxis’ and this more or less sums up the situation in postcolonial Burma. The following section will detail the manner in which this was done.

⁴⁶ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 49.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Buddhism and Science: Points of Similarity

There is nothing in this faith stereotyped forever, nothing to be accepted, because someone has said it or dreamed it or prophesied it. If there be anything untrue it were better out of it, and all new truths must be added to it. Yet it must be remembered that the new stands always on the old, and when old is true and new is true the edifice lasts forever.⁴⁸

- Harold Fielding Hall

When attempting to integrate Buddhism and science, the modernist Burmese were attracted by concepts that we might see as being of three kinds, which I refer to as the fundamental, the controversial and the novel. I use the term 'fundamental' to designate concepts, like the 'scientific method' of verification alluded to by Chan Htoon above, that suggested fundamental similarities between science and Buddhism as philosophies. The term 'controversial' refers to rhetorically powerful concepts that caused controversy because of the challenge they presented to Western religion; the denial of the 'first cause' and the immortal soul are examples of these. The category 'novel' denotes concepts that hinted at the predictive power of the Buddha in anticipating even the most cutting edge scientific breakthroughs. Buddhist modernists were particularly attracted by concepts that incorporated the three dimensions of the fundamental, the controversial and the novel - evolution, for example, as Dharmapala presented it at the World Conference of Religions in 1893. Evolution has at its heart the notion of cause and effect, just as science itself does. Evolution's challenge to theistic religion is well documented and hardly resolved even at the present day and in the late nineteenth century it could quite possibly be described as representing the cutting-edge of new ways of thinking about the world.⁴⁹ Of course, by the time Burma possessed its own independent government, evolution was not quite so new, yet it remained revolutionary in the sense of the controversy it continued to engender vis-à-vis the theistic religions of the world.

Francis Story's treatment of evolution is an excellent example of the rhetorical devices used by Anglophone Burmese Buddhists in postcolonial Burma. In his book, *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge* (published in Rangoon), he tells 'the story of evolution as presented in the Buddhist Canonical Books.'⁵⁰ Beginning his narrative, Story notes first that in order to find the truth, one

⁴⁸ Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 224.

⁴⁹ McMahon, "Modernity and the Early Discourse of Science in Buddhism," 901.

⁵⁰ Francis Story, *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge* (Burma Buddhist World Mission: Rangoon, 1952), 31.

needs to exclude ‘commentary and tradition,’ and return to the ‘Aggannya Suttanta of the Digha Nikaya.’ This is consistent with the emphasis on the fundamentals of Buddhism being pure and rational. Aspects of Buddhism that did not align themselves neatly with science could be dismissed as un-Buddhistic accretions, cluttering the perfection of the authentic dharma. Story goes on to remind us that the target of the original sutra was a Brahmin - the ancient discourse mirrors the modern; neither Christians nor Brahmins perceive the universe correctly and the sutra in its telling and retelling reveals the truth to unenlightened theists. Story’s summary of the sutra begins as follows: after an interval in an ‘aethric state’ the universe begins again and beings are reborn upon earth by ‘spontaneous generation (Opapatika).’ This, according to Story is ‘a very significant phrase when we consider the scientific theory of the first generation of life from chemical combinations and solar radiations, possibly cosmic rays, on this planet.’⁵¹

The description of the earth that follows indicates a state that closely corresponds to the period known to geologists, when, after the formation of the Fundamental Gneiss, an age ensued during which the steam in the atmosphere began to condense and fall down to earth pouring over the primordial rocks and gathering into depressions as lakes and oceans. This must have been a period of thick clouds and darkness; in the actual words of the Sutta, “one world of water, dark, and of darkness that maketh blind.” A more accurate description could not have been given by an eyewitness.⁵²

Here, Story includes as many references to various scientific theories and discoveries into one paragraph as he possibly can. He makes his points through the sheer volume of supporting examples, but the passage is also significant for the way in which scientific description and explanation is subsumed within Buddhist terminology and discourse. The term *opapatika*, for example, applies to a miraculous form of birth that is also associated with gods, ghosts and reincarnation in hell; Story insists that it is the equivalent of ‘spontaneous generation’ or abiogenesis – the development of life from inorganic matter.⁵³ The sense we get is that virtually every scientific concept possesses a Pali analogue in the Buddhist system of knowledge. In his 2004 article on scientific Buddhism, David McMahan states that the implication of these types of

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 31-2.

⁵³ The other three forms of birth are all associated with organic matter in some way, although the third, *samsedaja* or ‘birth from moisture’ is quite possibly a better fit for the term ‘spontaneous generation’ as it applies to the reproduction of insects, including the appearance of maggots in rotting flesh. For a *very* detailed and contemporary discussion of these concepts and others see Nārada Mahāthera, “The Buddhist Doctrine of Kamma and Rebirth,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 3, 1 (1955): 53-78.

arguments is that ‘the Buddha himself understood these scientific ideas...though they had been discovered only recently by the West.’ As Story puts it: ‘the more the understanding of the student of Buddhism deepens and widens, the more he becomes amazed and impressed by the further proofs of the Omniscience of the Exalted Buddha that become revealed to him.’⁵⁴

Further examples of these techniques occur in Story’s treatment of the issues that relate to nuclear physics. Here, he argues that the three basic marks of existence that all things share - the *tilakkhana* - are present even at the atomic level. *Anicca* or impermanence he describe as the ‘state of restlessness, unbalance and continual arising, decay and passing away of the units of atomic and electronic energy that compose its physical substance.’ *Dukkha* – suffering – is ‘the state of disturbance and unbalance in all phenomenal things...existing in the nuclear strength of the atom as well as well as in the growth, decay and death of the physical body and the arising and passing away of the successive moments of consciousness.’ Lastly, *anattā* is the idea that

there is no permanent self or soul of a being, or even identity of an object from one moment to another. All that can be found is a causal process, a current of casual dependence. Science tells us that there is no actual identity between an atom at one moment and what we choose to call the same atom at another moment; its existence is merely a linked chain of casual relationships, a current of activity or energy. In the same way, there is no real identity between the infant, the child, the youth, the man, and the old man ... All the physical cells of the body die and are replaced many times during the course of one lifetime, and the body itself changes in appearance through the gradual accumulation of these minute changes.⁵⁵

Here, Story pairs new theories relating to atomic particles with the well-established understanding of cellular biology to demonstrate that both are representative of what might be called a Buddhist ‘grand unified theory’ of existence – *paticca samuppada*, the doctrine of ‘dependent arising,’ wherein all phenomena are subject to the three marks; a series of interrelated events of which none are independent or permanent. As with the theory of evolution, this idea of the connection between

⁵⁴ McMahan, “Modernity and the Early Discourse of Scientific Buddhism,” 901; Story, *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge*, 32.

⁵⁵ Story, *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge*, 35.

Buddhism and physics combines aspects of the fundamental, novel and controversial categories and was explored by others in Burma.⁵⁶

Ideas of the parallels between Buddhist doctrine and science could and did include scientific notions so well established that they were not novel, speculative *theories*, but fundamental, established *laws*. Association with the laws of science also seemed to confer some of the certainty of scientific ‘law’ upon those Buddhist doctrines also referred to under the title of ‘law.’ So, for example, Story could compare the ‘law’ of karma with the so-called laws of cause and effect and gravity. Speaking of karma, he excoriated Western attempts to ‘find human motives and human purposiveness in what has been shown to be an impersonal amoral mechanism...a view that is essentially emotional rather than scientific.’

It is not the function of the law of Kamma (karma) to “save” or to “punish” anyone; its function is to maintain the process of Samsara (the cycle of death and rebirth), just as the function of the law of gravity is to make life on earth possible. Its results are only “good” or “bad” as we interpret them from our human standpoint. The law of gravity is not concerned because a man falls from a high building and breaks his neck. The law of cause and effect is not operated by any external agency with the object of “teaching” human beings. ... The theistic idea, together with man’s projection of his own personality and values into a scheme which had no place for them, is the root cause of all such confused theorising.⁵⁷

Connecting gravity with karma – and linking both with the ‘law of cause and effect’ – placed the Buddhist idea in the realm of objectivity; that is, karma was fundamentally objective, as opposed to the subjectivity of ‘the theistic idea’ that sought to identify a human personality behind impartial natural laws. This critique of theism served an important purpose in Buddhist modernist rhetoric, which I shall go into later. For the moment, however, the above passage from Story serves to identify a final and particularly important aspect of this association: the idea that Buddhism reflects the very scientific method itself. Buddhism is *empirical* – verifiable through observation and experience. It is, as U Chan Htoon put it above, ‘a system for discovering truth and reality for oneself and therefore invites reasoned criticism and objective analysis.’ To complete Story’s quotation:

⁵⁶ One author, named U Aung Than, referred to the Aditta sutra or ‘Fire Sermon,’ wherein the Buddha declared that ‘everything, O Bhikkus, is burning...burning with the fires of lust hatred and ignorance.’ Here, Aung Than points out, ‘we find a precursor of the scientific knowledge that matter is in a continuous state of combustion.’ See Thiri Pyanchi U Aung Than, “In Quest of Truth,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 1, 2 (1953): 38.

⁵⁷ Story, *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge*, 67.

Buddhism requires a scientific objectivity of outlook, a faculty for seeing things as they are without emotional reactions or any tendency to indulge in emotional interpretations. It is not possible to understand Buddhism while retaining the outlook on life of a sentimental spinster.⁵⁸

Many others made similar observations about the nature of Buddhism as the religion of objectivity and investigation. An excellent example comes from U Nu, who in a speech entitled ‘A New Approach’ (published in 1953) stated that:

Nowadays when a person discovers formulas for making Penicillin, jet-plane, atomic bomb, etc., and announces them to the world, scientists make experiments with them. The people should not fail to make similar tests with the discovery made by the Buddha, which invites personal investigation. Let us not approach it as a religion. Let us approach it as a formula and way of life for annihilating doubt, hate, fear, carnal or any other desires and cravings. It is my sincere appeal to you that you all should make serious efforts to test this formula and way of life, in the same way as scientists would test any new scientific theory discovered by any of them.⁵⁹

Similarly, a monk could write in *The Light of the Dhamma*, an English-language Buddhist journal published by the Burmese government, that:

Unlike the revealed religions Buddhism does not require blind faith to prop up and vivify dogmatic mysteries. ... Buddhism being based on the results of experience and knowledge is wholly a scientific system. ... it is the product of experience tested in the light of reason. ... It is scientific because it deals with present human experiences and submits them to a thorough psychological analysis and finally bases its conclusions on the results of such analysis.⁶⁰

This idea of Buddhism’s core being reason rather than faith is at the very heart of much Buddhist modernist discourse and is the most fundamental metaphor in the ‘fundamental’ category of concepts; it was, in Buddhist modernist rhetoric, the deepest and most telling difference between Buddhism and every other religion in the world. Chan Htoon’s explanation for this scientific lucidity is, as stated above, that Buddhism is not ‘divine revelation’ but an objective system for

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ U Nu, “A New Approach,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 1, 2 (1953): 17.

⁶⁰ Jinananda Thera, “The Right Knowledge of the Path to Bliss,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 1, 3 (1953): 11. *The Light of the Dhamma* was published by the Union of Burma Buddha Sasana Council, which was established by government act in 1953.

uncovering truth and reality. It is, in fact, scientific and the Buddha himself a kind of scientist. The Buddha was

‘the only religious teacher to bring scientific methods of approach to the questions of ultimate truth. ... Buddhism continues where science leaves off; it carries scientific principles to higher planes of realization. It shows that the laws of physics are the counterpart of spiritual laws and that there is a common meeting-ground for both.’⁶¹

It is for this reason that Chan Htoon could claim convincingly ‘there is no point at which science comes into conflict with Buddhism, nor is it ever likely to do so’ and furthermore, that the truth the Buddha discovered could be verified and accessed by anyone through the process of meditation (or, as Chan Htoon put it, ‘scientifically arranged and systematic mental exercises.’)⁶²

The key, of course, is the emphasis on the Buddha – the ‘enlightened one’ – being the discoverer of truth, rather than the receiver of truth. The Buddhist modernists focused on the Buddha’s essential humanity; though he was extraordinary, he was ultimately a rational human being who through strenuous effort uncovered the truth of the universe – the dharma. Thus, he is lauded by them variously as ‘the first scientist,’ or ‘the supreme analytic philosopher [and] anatomist,’⁶³ ‘strictly a psychologist’⁶⁴ or the ‘great Physician’:

When a doctor is called to treat a sick patient his first task is to diagnose the nature of the disease. When he has done that, he discovers its cause, and knowledge of its cause tells him what treatment should be given. The method of the Buddha was precisely the same; the great Physician diagnosed the disease, went on to discover its origin, and thus was able to prescribe treatment.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid., 9, 16.

⁶² Ibid., 6.

⁶³ Piyadassi Thera, “The Philosophy of Change,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 2, 2 (1954): 50-1. The quote in its entirety: ‘The Buddha is known as the *Vibhajjavādā*, the Teacher of the Doctrine of Analysis. He, verily, is the supreme analytic philosopher. Here “analytic philosopher” means one who states a thing after resolving it into its various qualities, putting the qualities in proper order, making everything plain. ... As an anatomist resolves a limb into tissues and tissues into cells, the Buddha analyses all component things into their fundamental elements.’

⁶⁴ Bhikku Silacara, “Buddhist View of Religion,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 3, 1 (1955): 9. Bhikku Silacara (a Scottish Buddhist ordained in Burma in the early twentieth century) wrote that, ‘Unlike the majority of the great religious teachers of the world, the Buddha is strictly a psychologist [who] makes his concern the states of consciousness we find in man and, in the ultimate analysis, takes nothing to do with the states of matter in the hypothetical universe which we have constructed out of our states of consciousness. ... Buddhism, in fact, deals with the actual world, the only actual world there is, the world that each man knows immediately within himself, the other being only a hypothetical one drawn from that one within him. Essentially the Buddha is always a psychologist, never a cosmologist.’

⁶⁵ Story, “The Elementary Principles of Buddhism,” 25.

As Fielding Hall had earlier claimed: ‘He was to them no prophet but a Darwin of the Soul.’⁶⁶

Similarly, the Buddhist modernists focused on the literal, canonical interpretation of what it meant to be a follower of the Buddha – to be one who understood the Four Noble Truths and walked the Eightfold Path. A true Buddhist actually attempted to follow in the Buddha’s own footsteps, to grapple with the truths of suffering, to discover how to extinguish craving and finally, to attain enlightenment – just as he had. Naturally this meant applying the same empirical reasoning as the Buddha himself had applied to existence. The Sri Lankan monk Piyadassi Thera, writing in English for the *Light of the Dhamma* in 1954 described the *arahant* (one who has attained Enlightenment after the Buddha) as the ‘true philosopher, the true scientist who has [realised] the deepest truth possible to humans.’⁶⁷ It is for this reason that Nu could describe Buddhism in the most functional language, as a ‘formula’ – a tool – for the elimination of craving and doubt. Emphasis on the individual quest for salvation had some interesting consequences for orthopraxis in Burma, including, arguably, the growth of the *vipassana* lay meditation movement and a reduced emphasis on the sangha.⁶⁸ For now, it suffices to say that capturing the scientific method itself for Buddhism was a powerful rhetorical point – Buddhism was not only *compatible* with science, but inherently scientific.

In 1959 a Burmese commentator could remark in the Rangoon English-language press that

there is no compulsion in Buddhism. The Buddha taught us not to believe a certain thing simply because we have heard it spoken by a learned person or because it is a tradition. We are even to reason and judge His words. Only when we are satisfied that the teaching is reasonable and is conducive to the happiness of one and all, we are asked to believe and practise it. That’s one of the reasons why scientists and philosophers have remarked that Buddhism is scientific.’⁶⁹

The author seems to be paraphrasing the *Kālāma* sutra, which served as the flagship text for this renewed emphasis on pragmatism and objectivity in Buddhist orthodoxy and practice, much as the *Aggañña* sutra was seen to demonstrate the Buddha’s literal understanding of evolution. It is often

⁶⁶ Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 178.

⁶⁷ Piyadassi Thera, “The Philosophy of Change,” 53.

⁶⁸ For more detailed discussions of this movement and its implications for state-society relations, see Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*; and Turner, *Saving Buddhism*.

⁶⁹ “Thoughts on Thadingyut,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 1959.

seen as the passage in the Pali Canon that is the most evocative of free-thinking and analytical ideas and continues to be cited up to the present day. In the period under discussion, it was naturally a popular topic. The inaugural issue of the *Light of the Dhamma* includes a speech by Myanaung U Tin, ‘former Minister of Health and Local Government,’ originally broadcast on 29 May 1952. Warning against the excesses of fanaticism, he quotes the relevant passage in its entirety:

In the well-known Kalama Sutta, the Buddha advises us “Do not believe what you have heard; do not believe in traditions, because they have been handed down for many generations; do not believe in anything, because it is rumoured and spoken by many; do not believe merely because a written statement by some old sage is produced; do not believe in conjectures; do not believe in that as truth to which you have become attached by habit; do not believe merely the authority of your teachers or elders. After observation, analysis, when it agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and gain of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.”⁷⁰

There are various translations of this famous passage from the sutra, yet this one that appeared in the *Light of the Dhamma* is particularly noteworthy because the terminology used emphasises ‘the scientific principles of observation, analysis and induction’ as Tin himself puts it.⁷¹ These principles do not change, he points out, and the one who adopts the view of a scientist will never be seduced by fanaticism or bigotry; instead that individual will be a paragon of tolerance. Nonetheless:

it behoves us to test the validity of any creed by the scientific method. Buddhism is empirical and free from dogmas. As followers of the Buddha we must not be dogmatic. Our approach to any creed or ideology should be without any bias or prejudice. We must not impose our views on anybody; on the other hand, we cannot allow anybody to impose his will or views on us. The Buddha says: “Ehi Passiko”, which literally means “come and see.” In modern parlance, “See, if it works: if so, accept it.”⁷²

In Tin’s reading of the *Kālāma* sutra, there is no substantive distinction between Buddhism and the scientific method. The same adjectives are used to describe both – the Buddhist/scientist is ‘without any bias’ yet ‘able to show his tolerance and goodwill.’ Buddhism possesses no doctrines that are

⁷⁰ Myanaung U Tin, “Buddhism and Modern Creeds,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 1, 1 (1952): 26.

⁷¹ In one translation, for example, the words ‘after observation, analysis, when it agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and gain of one and all’ are replaced by ‘realise by yourselves that views are unwholesome, faulty, censured by the wise and that they lead to harm and misery.’ This alternative translation is from a book by David Maurice, an Australian who - like Francis Story - was active in the Buddhist modernist movement. See David Maurice, *The Lion’s Roar: An Anthology of the Buddha’s Teachings Selected from the Pali Canon* (London: Rider & Co., 1962), 61.

⁷² Tin, “Buddhism and Modern Creeds,” 27.

incompatible with science; it is the very extension of scientific thinking into the secular sphere. U Chan Htoon asserted that the Buddha was able to anticipate modern discoveries through the rigorous application of this thinking. Indeed, a logical extrapolation from this idea is that the Buddhist philosophy contains scientific truths as yet undiscovered by even the brightest of Western intellectuals. In his address to the conference on Star Island, Chan Htoon told his audience that if the ‘subtleties of Buddhist psychological analysis...were to be studied systematically by competent Western specialists (they) would completely transform modern ideas concerning the nature of the mind.’⁷³ From this perspective, Buddhism and science are not mutually exclusive – they are mutually reinforcing. ‘It satisfies the intellect and the heart in equal measure,’ Chan Htoon said, ‘and it gives hope founded upon a rational and verifiable faith. To the Buddhist there is no question of having to decide between faith and reason. For us, followers of the supreme Buddha, faith is reasonable, and reason confirms faith.’⁷⁴ To be Buddhist is to be rational, so all rational beings should naturally be Buddhists.

Tolerance and goodwill towards other faiths notwithstanding, it is a foregone conclusion that when those lesser creeds and ideologies are subjected to the Buddhistic/scientific test they will be unacceptable to these rational men and women. This gives rise to the final rhetorical flourish for the Buddhist modernists – if Buddhism is the superior philosophy, then naturally everyone should embrace it. To deny it would be as absurd as denying logic itself. Myanaung U Tin at the close of his speech urged his listeners to say: ‘Why not try our way of life?’

for the attainment of peace, for yourself, for your family, for your country, for the world – nay, for the attainment of Nibbana (nirvana,) the Eternal Peace? Buddhism is a way of Life not only for those who seek truth...but for all those who wish to live and let live peacefully in the short span of life on this earth which is but a speck in the illimitable space of the cosmos.⁷⁵

Every religion makes this claim to possess the truth that will deliver salvation, of course, but what was interesting about the Buddhist modernists was their assertion that Buddhism was uniquely well suited to the modern world; only their religion could answer the challenge of modernity. It was the duty of Buddhist modernists to spread their great philosophy to the globe.

⁷³ Chan Htoon, *Buddhism*, 6.

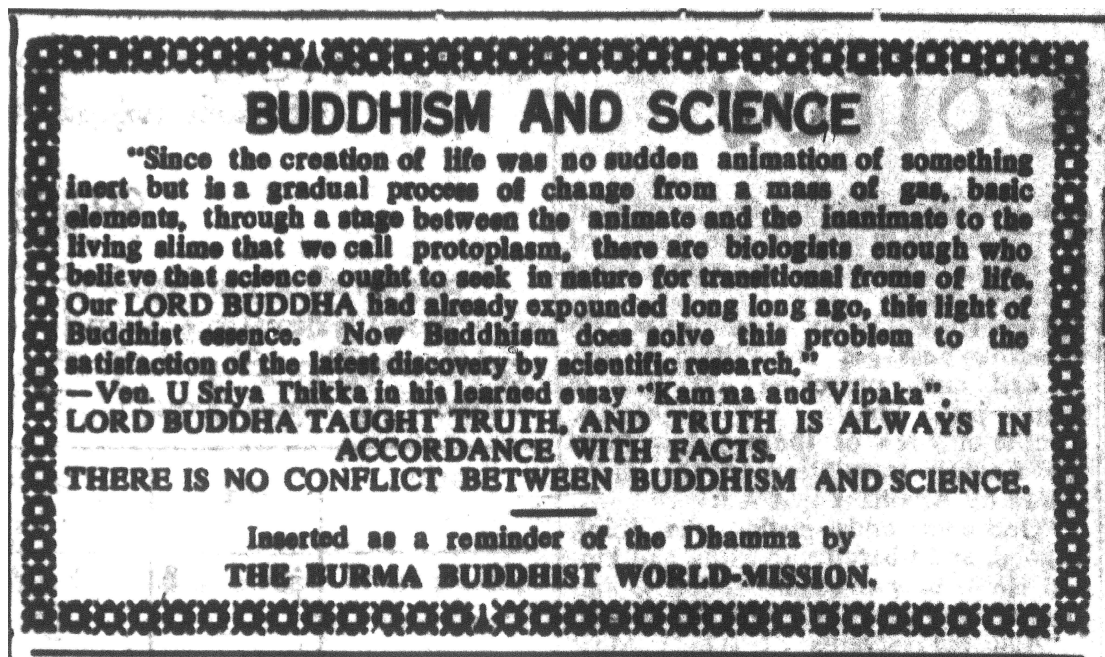
⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁵ Tin, “Buddhism and Modern Creeds,” 27.

These ideas were not solely found within the government and government organisations. For example, on 9 February 1954 the following ‘advertisement’ appeared in *The New Times of Burma* under the heading ‘Buddhism and Science’:

Since the creation of life was no sudden animation of something inert, but is a gradual process of change from a mass of gas, basic elements, through a stage between the animate and the inanimate to the living slime that we call protoplasm, there are biologists enough who believe that science ought to seek in nature for transitional forms of life. Our LORD BUDDHA had already expounded long long ago, this light of Buddhist essence. Now Buddhism does solve this problem to the satisfaction of the latest discovery by scientific research.⁷⁶

This was, according to the advertisement, an excerpt from a ‘learned essay’ by the Ven. U Sriya Thikha. ‘Lord Buddha taught truth’ it declared in capital letters, ‘and truth is always in accordance with facts. There is no conflict between Buddhism and Science.’ Thus, ‘scientific Buddhism’ was a serious issue in the 1950s.



The advertisement. (September 2, 1954.)⁷⁷

This is further evidence that Chan Htoon’s ideas are in line with what other people were saying at the time: that the ‘truth’ of Buddhism can be perceived in the ‘truths’ of science (and vice versa), and furthermore, this understanding was no innovation or reinterpretation but age-old (thus, the

⁷⁶ “Buddhism and Science,” *The New Times of Burma*, September 2, 1954.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

advertisement as presented as a ‘reminder.’) Evolution, the straw that broke the back of the camel of theism, poses no threat to Buddhism; evolution was revealed ‘long long ago.’ It also shows that Chan Htoon’s speech (which took place four years later than this announcement) was not simply the view of a single individual expressed at one particular meeting but rather was the reflection of a string of local discourses about science in Buddhism in circulation in the 1950s.⁷⁸

The logical conclusion of the claim of Anglophone Buddhists that their faith was utterly scientific, implacably anti-traditional and unmistakably distinct from the theism of the West was that Buddhism was not a religion at all. Chan Htoon and others hinted at this, with their claims that Buddhism is a ‘system’ and the equivalent of empiricism in the spiritual sphere. But others went further, such as the author of a letter to the *Guardian* newspaper entitled: ‘Is Buddhism Religion?’ Writing in August of 1961, when the most exciting issue concerning Buddhism was its imminent installation as the ‘State Religion,’ Maung Sein cautioned the framer of the required amendment to the constitution that the word ‘religion’ could scarcely be applied to Buddhism:

‘Religion’ denotes absolute faith in a personal God entitled to obedience. It implies all pervading presence of a Supreme Authority recognised as a permanent God. It implies recognition of that God as the Creator of the universe.

But Buddhism does not accept the concept of a permanent God. ... It is only a doctrine, a system of philosophy discovered by Gautama Buddha by His Supreme Self-Enlightenment. To include Buddhism in the connotation of the English word ‘religion’ would be like identifying Buddha with the ubiquitous God, The Creator.⁷⁹

Declaring Buddhism to be a ‘philosophy’ or ‘only a doctrine’ and specifically *not* a religion disentangled it from superstition, rites and rituals and especially from Christianity with its ‘permanent God’ and its dogma of received truth which science had undermined. Buddhism was thus brought even closer to the ‘science’ from which it is supposedly indistinguishable, a theory of knowledge based on reason, analysis and facts.

⁷⁸ The Burma Buddhist World-Mission, who commissioned the advertisement, was founded in 1950 by Francis Story. The organisation embodied a number of factors associated with the development and politicisation of Buddhist modernism in Burma, including the involvement of a handful of Buddhist converts. See Anagarika P. Sugatananda, *Sangiti Commemorating the Chattha Sangayana* (Rangoon: Rangoon Gazette, 1956), 115-6.

⁷⁹ Maung Sein, “Is Buddhism Religion,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 1961.

A layman declaring that his faith is not a faith at all may seem surprising enough, yet on at least one occasion a practising monk spoke about Buddhism in similar terms. Seven years before Maung Sein's letter, in March 1954 the Western-educated members of the Rangoon Law Courts Buddhist Association invited Taungdwingyi Ashin Okkata to give a sermon in Court No. 6 of the High Court. According to an article in the *New Times of Burma* 'several judges of the various Courts in Rangoon were present along with members and distinguished guests.'⁸⁰ In his sermon, the monk cited the Orientalist Max Müller's four foundations of religion: the belief in the existence of God, faith in the efficacy of rites and rituals, belief in an eternal soul and belief in the transmigration of the soul. Ashin Okkata reportedly declared that none of those points could be found in Buddhism. However:

The learned Bhikku (monk) was nevertheless surprised to find Max Muller calling Buddhism a religion. Nothing could be far (sic) from the truth. Religion abhorred experiment and investigation, despised criticism, discouraged reason and denounced free thought. Buddhism encouraged investigation, experimentation, free thought, sound judgement, and it was definitely against blind belief and superstition. Hence religion and Buddhism were poles apart.⁸¹

These themes resonate with the arguments that were expounded by Chan Htoon in his speech four years later. It is not clear that free inquiry and objective, fact-based judgement, not to mention experimentation and empirical investigation are values that are explicitly advocated in the Buddhist scriptures (even if they may be implicitly referred to in those texts.) They are, however, concepts that are closely associated with science - particularly 'experimentation,' the heart and soul of scientific advancement. When asked what Buddhism was, if not a religion, the monk replied that 'Buddhism was system of ethics, philosophy and psychology.'⁸²

⁸⁰ "Buddhism is not a Religion: Ashin Okkata's Interesting Sermon," *The New Times of Burma*, March 19, 1954.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid. Ashin Okkata was not the only monk commenting on the issue of science and religion. In a lecture on 5 July 1952, the 'well-known Buddhist monk and philosopher U Thittila claimed that the world had no more time for religious dogma, while Buddhism – by virtue of its rational and scientific nature – would have nothing to fear from science.' Despite these examples, Sarkisyanz observed that few monks participated in 'modernistic reinterpretation,' which remained a chiefly lay phenomenon. See Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds*, 193, 201-2.

Buddhism and Science: Complementary Philosophies

Religion must stagnate and die, stifled by word and letter, or it must live by often repeated revelations, all incapable of proof. No living knowledge could progress like that. Science is not like that, it could not live in such a condition. It was attacked by dogma, stifled, contrary to truth, science is the only true way of finding truth. And true religion is the science of the soul.... That is the principle that Buddhism has always worked upon. It never says, "You must believe because *I* say so." It says, "This is truth as far as we can see, and those who doubt let them test and try if it is truth or not."⁸³

- Harold Fielding Hall

One of the most important reasons why Buddhist modernists argued that Buddhism was the right religion for the modern world was that science, though the gold standard for 'truth,' could not answer certain questions. Despite their lauding of objective scientific reasoning, Buddhist modernists saw materialism – an otherwise obvious characteristic of the belief system on which an objective worldview would be grounded – as a sterile, immoral philosophy. This section will address the ways in which Buddhist modernists attacked materialism as an arid 'half-philosophy' and insisted that, just as religion was nothing without the support of science, so too was science, ultimately, nothing without spiritual and moral guidance and context.

In *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge*, Francis Story scoffs at the 'shallow optimism' of the early followers of Darwin:

Natural evolution in the biological sphere is not a steady upward progression as it was once thought to be. It is a hazardous series of experiments, some of them successes but the great majority failures. ... Evolution is accompanied by retrogression; species become degenerate and "go down" in the scale, and there is no indication of any guiding principle aimed at a definite goal.⁸⁴

Story argues that strict utilitarian principle of the 'survival of the fittest' does not explain all of the physical changes or characteristics displayed by various organisms. Indeed, he points out that 'if the scheme of evolution were solely directed towards survival, the single-cell, self-propagating prototypes would have fully answered the purpose and evolutionary progression would not have

⁸³ Fielding Hall, *The Inward Light*, 79.

⁸⁴ Story, *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge*, 28.

needed to pass on to any higher stage.’ In some instances, he notes, ‘far from helping a species to survive, development of a more delicately adjusted physical mechanism has made it more vulnerable.’⁸⁵ As such, neither progressive improvement nor utilitarian survival can be seen as constituting the ‘driving force’ behind evolution. Story offers a different interpretation of what drives evolution: craving. ‘Behind all this complicated process,’ he writes, ‘we find the sole driving and directing force to be the craving for increased and more accurate sensory experience, which can only be obtained through improved faculties of mind and body.’

It is thus possible to trace two principles at work, one aiming at preservation and the other no less clearly directed towards the extension of hedonic experience; but it must be understood that the preservation of the species is only an incidental to the need for attaining the more important goal of hedonic fulfilment.⁸⁶

Story argued that neither a naive belief in evolution as progress nor a cynical view of evolution as a utilitarian drive for survival is sufficient to explain the phenomenon. Rather, Buddhism provides the answer that materialism cannot. This excerpt is but one instance in which Buddhist modernists insisted that their faith complemented science, as opposed to discussing how science confirmed their faith. Importantly, it was expressed in quite a scientific way, one which acknowledged the authority of the scientific account of natural processes (which, as we have seen, was understood as being inherently Buddhist in character.) In his speech to the Christians at New Hampshire, Chan Htoon poses the question: ‘For better crops is it more effective to take our gifts to the geneticist and chemist than to the altar?’ and then answers it as follows:

Most educated people would place their reliance on the scientists. And in this particular field they would be right. Religion, as Buddhists understand it, has nothing whatever to do with good crops. If the fields have not been tended, diligently and fertilised as they should be, no amount of supplication at the altar will produce better crops.⁸⁷

In this formulation, sovereign (or government) and state are no longer scrutinised for their ceremonial performance on the basis of crop failure. Rather, good government is scientific government. Nonetheless, Buddhism and Buddhist morality have a fundamental place in Burmese

⁸⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Chan Htoon, *Buddhism*, 13.

life and in the government itself, which are not guided by a techno-instrumental or materialist view of the world. The above quotation continues:

And if the cultivator's past Kamma is bad, no amount of science will prevent blight, unseasonable weather or sickness from ruining his work. ... Any farmer, knowing from his own experience how often what appears to be sheer "chance" has ruined his crops, despite all his precautions, will be bound to agree that the Buddhist explanation fits the facts better than any other.⁸⁸

The implication is that there are questions that science cannot answer, yet Buddhism can; there are problems that science cannot solve, but which Buddhism has. The farmer's karma and the genetics of his crops are both involved in determining whether or not the crop will be successful.

We can suggest that what Buddhist modernists in Burma were arguing about the need to supplement science with Buddhism illustrates the same line of thinking that Chatterjee sees as being a foundational aspect of nationalist thought in colonial India - the idea that while the West was superior in its material culture, the East was superior in terms of its spirituality. Chatterjee observes that 'true modernity...would lie in combining the superior material qualities of Western cultures with the spiritual greatness of the East.'⁸⁹ The Burmese, following the logic of this paradigm, had taken a perceived weakness - a supposed lack of progress - and turned it into spiritual excellence. They then sought to weld the epistemological concepts of Buddhism and science together as essentially complementary philosophies. It was not enough for science to be the measure by which the 'truth' of Buddhism was verified; Burmese Buddhism - and hence, the Burmese themselves - would capture science as both a verifying and verifiable phenomenon, and would supplement and extend it with Buddhist insights into causal processes.

Thus while Chan Htoon went to great pains to establish that Buddhism is scientific, he also hinted strongly at the idea that science is itself Buddhistic; that the laws of science are mirrored in the laws of Buddhism as well as vice versa. Chan Htoon is able to locate for us at least two of the Buddhist 'marks of existence' within the scientific tradition:

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 50-1.

Most thinking people are now agreed that science, with all its wonders will never be able to create a heaven in this world. We have seen how, when one disease is brought under control, another source of disease arises. Bacteria which have been mastered by science proceed to transform themselves, and in the course of a few generations produce a variant of their type which is immune to the old attack... Disease, old age and death will always be with us; and this being so, human life will continue to be imperfect, darkened always by the shadow of grief and uncertainty.⁹⁰

The process of scientific discovery itself, therefore, conforms to the Buddhist notion of *anicca*: impermanence. Neither health nor youth nor life can be made everlasting through technology. Similarly:

Every achievement of science, from the internal combustion engine onwards, has brought in its train as many perils as it has provided comforts. ... People are killed by automobiles and airplanes; they are electrocuted by labour-saving devices and death frequently comes to them via the surgeon's knife or the doctor's hypodermic syringe. These mishaps are called accidents, but there is also the misuse of scientific discoveries due to man's greed, hatred and ignorance or disregard of moral laws. ... Life must always be a balance of opposites; there is nothing that has not its evil as well as its beneficial aspect.⁹¹

No scientific advance brings any joy (*sukkha*) without corresponding *dukkha*: suffering, the second of the marks that distinguish all living things.⁹² Chan Htoon suggests that science and Buddhism are not distinct philosophies. Rather, they are more or less the same philosophy applied to two different spheres of experience; the same techniques used to answer different questions. 'Science is concerned with discovering the causes of phenomena,' Chan Htoon assures us. 'So also is Buddhism.'⁹³ The study and practice of Buddhism is entirely compatible with science, since science has been present in Buddhism from the beginning. And the process of scientific discovery and development will also lead to Buddhism, since there are questions which neither theism nor materialism alone can answer.

⁹⁰ Chan Htoon, *Buddhism*, 7-8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹² As for the third mark, *anatta* or 'no-self,' Chan Htoon does mention it and, unsurprisingly enough, places it within a contemporary framework. He does so through a comparison with the automobile, a product intimately associated with modernity: 'Just as an automobile is composed of the engine, with its various parts, the chassis, the wheels, the upholstery and so on, no single item of which by itself constitutes the automobile, but which when all put together on the assembly-line make the finished product, so a living being is formed of the various elements of mind and physical substance...the "self," therefore, is a phenomenal product of various causes; it is not an enduring or self-existing entity.' Cited in *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

These questions are not restricted to abstract metaphysics or karmic rationalisations for accidents. In the quote above Chan Htoon mentioned that scientific discoveries were often misused due to immorality. He identifies this immorality in a specifically Buddhist way: ‘greed, hate and ignorance’ which are the three canonical roots of evil – *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. When he speaks of ‘disregard of moral laws’ there seems little doubt that he means the moral laws of Buddhism. Thus, one of the ways in which the total philosophy of ‘Buddhist science’ (or scientific Buddhism) is significant is that it possesses a moral dimension that merely secular science lacks. Other public intellectuals beside Chan Htoon have spoken on this particular issue. As early as 1948, U Ba Yin, a former Minister for Education under colonialism wrote that ‘European philosophy is still in the primary stage and their much exalted science is still in its infancy on *essential* matters. ... Europe has lost its old morality and is now a moral void.’⁹⁴

On 12 April 1959 U Thant, then Burmese Representative to the United Nations (and later Secretary-General), gave an address at a conference where he stressed the importance of the ‘spiritual aspects of education’ and warned that ‘technological progress unaccompanied by a corresponding moral and spiritual progress’ was leading the world to certain doom.⁹⁵ ‘Through knowledge,’ he said, ‘man can delve into the very depths of cosmic space and manufacture terrible weapons of mass destruction, but unless it is coupled with understanding and insight, the power that men have obtained will recoil upon themselves to their destruction.’ Scientists ‘toying with nuclear fission’ were like children playing with knives, he observed and noted that hospitals in advanced countries were filled with mental patients. ‘It is terrifying to think how many scientific chairs are similarly occupied,’ he added. Thant concluded that since eastern education was based on spirituality and Western education on intellectuality: ‘education’s major problem was to bring East and West into harmony.’ He then made his point more explicitly by warning against the wholesale adoption of a ‘soulless intellectualism.’⁹⁶ The main points of the speech are obvious. Science, rather than improving the world was instead providing it with greater opportunities to destroy itself, as it lacked a corresponding system of morality and spiritualism. Although Thant states that ‘the spirit of

⁹⁴ Po Yarzar (U Ba Yin), “Letters to a Communist Nephew. Letter IX,” in *The Burmese Review*, January 10, 1949 cited in Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds*, 193.

⁹⁵ “U Thant on Spiritual Aspects of Education,” *The Guardian*, April 12, 1959.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

tolerance [is] the essence of all great religions⁹⁷ it seems clear that he looks to the East (and to Buddhism) as the source of this system. After all, no Burmese were tinkering with atoms. The implication is that the West has turned away from its own belief systems; they are not up to the task of providing a convincing ethical context for modern technological civilisation. The East, on the other hand, can. In this context, the bringing of 'East and West into harmony' will create, in the sphere of education at the very least, an integrated philosophy - the same arguments expressed in the speech of U Chan Htoon.

In a similar vein is a speech given by U Nu (then out of office) less than a week later, on 17 April at the Conference of World Religion and Freedom in Dallas, Texas, entitled 'The Dilemma of Man In An Age of Technology.' In this speech, Nu addresses the theme of the East and the West. East and West, Nu points out, each offer a different 'means to human welfare and happiness,' namely the spiritual road versus the technological. Nu observes that the freedoms from drudgery, ill-health and isolation that technology offer should have encouraged men to discover and strive for the 'ultimate goals' of happiness and human satisfaction. Yet, 'the more progress there is in the field of science and technology, the more man seems to get enwrapped in his own self and to fail to discover a true scale of values relating to happiness and contentment.'⁹⁸ He even went on to say:

It may, in fact, be claimed that in parts of the world where technology has not yet had such an impact as in the West, human values are better preserved and man on the whole seems to be happier. This is especially true of countries which have a deep spiritual background. ... The two forces – technological progress and spiritual calm and happiness – seem to pull one against the other; the more progress there is the less happy and contented man seems to get.⁹⁹

At first glance, Nu appears to be lashing out against technology and progress, insisting that people were happier in the piety of the past, but he goes on to articulate a thesis not dissimilar to Thant's cited above. 'Let me say straight away' he opines, 'that I do not consider these two forces as opposites – or even as contrary means of obtaining the same objective.' No community, Nu argues, can advance its own welfare, security and happiness without taking advantage of technological progress – 'no matter what its background or the strength of its spiritual past.' Thus the problem:

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ U Nu, "The Dilemma of Man in an Age of Technology," *The Guardian*, April 20, 1959.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

is not one of reconciling opposites – or throwing up one’s hands and declaring them irreconcilable – but of finding a common denominator and directing both these two forces into one common channel flowing toward the ultimate end of human happiness and security.¹⁰⁰

This is the ‘dilemma’ of a technological age. Nu’s concludes his speech with an anticlimactic exhortation to be more ‘contemplative,’ but his message is plain. People lose sight of what is important unless they can find the ‘common channel’ for both mundane and supra-mundane concerns. Secular science on its own lacks the moral and metaphysical dimension to ensure human welfare and happiness. And as Chan Htoon has argued, only one religion makes a suitable counterpart to science.

What Nu and Thant were implying or hinting at, other authors have stated explicitly. In 1953, the Union Buddha Sasana Council began publishing *The Light of the Dhamma* and an article by Francis Story entitled “The Elementary Principles of Buddhism” appeared within its pages that first year. Story made the following observations about the interconnectedness of Buddhism and science:

Scientific thought today is at so many points touching the fringe of philosophy and metaphysics that it seems inevitable that within the next few decades the barrier which has for so long held them apart, and in some sense in opposition, must be broken down. We have reached the stage when we can justly ask ourselves whether the scientific and the religious approach to life and its problems are as incompatible as we have been led to believe.¹⁰¹

Story argues that science involves some foundational assumptions that go untested, just as religion involves some reasoning; the point where they meet is Buddhism. To reinforce this idea, Story reminds us that just as religion ‘fails’ when it cannot incorporate scientific truth, so too does pure science when it does not acknowledge the answers that metaphysics provide to the ‘unknown factors of life:’

Those who believe that materialism is the last word in scientific belief are already very much behind the times. Philosophers and scientists ... are not yet prepared to admit the dogmas of revealed religion, but they are no longer reluctant to acknowledge the existence of realms beyond the materialistic comprehension. In fact, many have declared the materialist viewpoint untenable in the light of modern physics. As a scientific theory materialism is dead; it only survives as a political doctrine.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Story, “The Elementary Principles of Buddhism,” 21.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Although it appears that from the Buddhist modernist point of view science and Buddhism are more or less indistinguishable, in point of fact this insistence on ‘interconnectedness’ achieves the practical *separation* of Buddhism from science and the placing of Buddhism within a sphere that science cannot penetrate: Buddhism is the philosophy of the ‘realms beyond the materialistic comprehension’ and of ‘essential matters’ (such as moral questions) that science cannot explain nor answer. While science is forever removed from the provinces with which Buddhist doctrine is concerned, Buddhism suffers no such deficiencies as it predicts and absorbs any and all scientific discoveries or observations. In the long term, there is an imagined ‘grand unified theory’ towards which all scientific and Buddhist truths lead inexorably, but in the period before this unification is achieved Buddhism cannot be held subordinate to scientific discovery, nor can it be subjected to scientific analysis. As such, Buddhist modernism was an ideology intended to legitimate the ‘modern’ structure and programs of the postcolonial state while preventing that very ‘modernness’ from corroding or subverting Burma’s identity through a rationalist critique of its religion. It is this process that completed Buddhism’s transformation into a truly ‘modern knowledge.’

As part of this process of rectification, ‘scientific’ Buddhism rejected those aspects of the religious tradition that were irreconcilable with science. One consequence of this is that unscientific government was unacceptable to a Buddhist modernist. The scorn for Western theism seen in the anti-colonial discourse of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s remains, but postcolonial Buddhist modernist discourse extends this hostility to those aspects of traditional religious practice that are theistic, irrational or non-canonical in nature. The content of the Buddhist modernist critique of ‘unscientific’ aspects of traditional Burmese religious practice is the subject of the following chapter, as are the efforts to reconcile Buddhist modernism with the two other great ideological emblems of modernity at that time: socialism and democracy.

Chapter Four

English-language discourse on Buddhism and the State in early Postcolonial Burma

Introduction: A Modern Buddhist State

There are some who repeatedly assert that the Hon'ble the Prime Minister who changed his prefix of *thakin* (master) to *U* is turning dictatorial, turning rightist or leftist. I am sorry I cannot agree with them. The Hon'ble the Prime Minister, contrary to his illusion as a democrat, is imperceptibly moving towards absolute monarchism as "*Bawashin Mintragyi*," the Arbiter of Human Destiny.¹

- U Tun Pe

On 13 August 1953, U Tun Pe fronted a press conference in Rangoon. He had been serving as Minister of Union Culture in U Nu's second postwar government, but had resigned the day before and called the press conference to announce his reasons for doing so. His statement was initially given in Burmese but was translated into English, published and circulated shortly thereafter. Tun Pe was generally unhappy with the conduct of the government and felt that his views were not being heard in cabinet, yet he reserved his ire almost exclusively for Nu himself. The Prime Minister, he argued, was a poor democrat. He was an authoritarian who preferred the counsel of monks to that of his elected colleagues and was insufficiently concerned with the people's economic welfare, diverting funds from the development of social services toward his pet projects.² Tun Pe told the press that while these projects were usually religious in nature, they were quixotic, showy and self-glorifying. Nu was skewing Burma's religious policy in an incorrect and wasteful direction because of his desire to gain merit and titles for himself. For instance, Tun Pe expressed his reservations about the decision to convene the 'Sixth Buddhist Council' or synod and especially the idea of founding an expensive Buddhist University, which he claimed would be the 'white-elephant of the Union of Burma.'

If the idea of founding a Buddhist University emanates from necessity then I have no objections. If the idea is merely a pretext to confer the title of Convener of Sixth Buddhist Synod...and Founder of Buddhist University without any preliminary plan and if again, the idea is merely to please one's vanity and to please the whims of sychophants (sic) including *phoongyis*, then I said I would have to object.³

¹ U Tun Pe, *Why I Resign from the Cabinet?: Statement Before Press Conference on August 13, 1953* (Rangoon: A.M.A.K. Press, 1953), 2. The title *thakin* means 'master.' Formerly the term used to address Europeans during the colonial period, anti-colonial nationalists adopted it to show that the Burmese were their own masters.

² *Ibid.*, 7, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

Tun Pe makes the point that he is not opposed to Buddhist-inspired legislation per se, but rather that there is a 'correct' form that Nu does not adhere to. As he puts it: 'All Buddhists will naturally support all the "good" policy as regards Buddhist Religion.'⁴

Lastly, the most sustained criticism that Tun Pe levelled at Nu was that the Prime Minister was acting as if he were a king, an 'absolute monarch' and the 'Arbiter of Human Destiny.' This criticism brought together Tun Pe's dissatisfaction with various elements of Nu's behaviour, his authoritarianism and his disdain for his parliamentary and party colleagues and preference for the counsel of monks - who whispered in his ears, 'just as old Burmese queens did during her precious time of combing the hair of kings'⁵ - but most especially the way in which Nu was determining religious policy. Nu's attempts to garner titles and make merit like a king were undermining the state, the people and even his own personal journey towards enlightenment:

It is time for him, if ever he feels he is the real guardian of his Union's welfare, to concentrate on Law and order. I emphasise here again that he - throwing away his best chance - is devoting more of his time to religious affairs in monarchical style for his self-glorification. I have every sympathy for him but if he really wishes to attain *Nirvana* he should *resign from the leadership at once*. ... I am bold enough to assert that the Hon'ble the Prime Minister, subjective as he always is, is obsessed with his pet ideas in lob-sided manner for his self-glorification - not for the masses.⁶

What is clear here is that Nu's 'royal Buddhism' is unsuitable for a nation that is modern and democratic, concerned with the welfare of the masses in both a spiritual and economic sense. As such, Tun Pe's invective is an early example of the kinds of statements that reformist Buddhists made regarding what kind of behaviours, institutions and ideologies were considered acceptable for a modern Buddhist state. As with Tun Pe, there were efforts to disentangle 'good' Buddhist policy and practice from the traditional, superstitious and 'royal' practices of the past. Others went further and attempted to show that the democratic and socialist goals that Tun Pe faulted Nu for failing to adhere to or enforce *did* in fact align with that 'good' Buddhist policy. In other words, this chapter sets out the efforts on the part of Anglophone Burmese Buddhists to establish the correct institutions and ideologies for a modern Buddhist state.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ibid., 17. Emphasis in original.

Earthly State: The Rejection of the Magical

We propitiate the *Nat* for fear of the Tiger, but the *Nat* proves worse than the Tiger.⁷

- Burmese expression

Dear Sir. I am a Government servant, lower division clerk earning Kyats 126.75 per month. I had heard from the radio...and read our Hon'ble Prime Minister U Nu's speech of 4th July. I really felt very disappointed as I think it was fruitless for us. This speech was full of Pali which I cannot understand and long tales which I do not like to listen.⁸

- The Guardian

The academic discourse on the traditional Buddhist monarchy that emerged at the same time that Buddhist modernists were articulating their vision of a reformed Buddhism held that in the old Burmese kingdom, the sovereign was obliged to 'walk the way of the righteous' – rule according to the dharma, patronise the sangha, behave as a paragon of Buddhist virtue and practice and possess all the cosmological symbols of sacred authority. This last point in particular was significant, since spiritual misconduct on the part of the ruler was perceived as having serious material consequences. 'If the king does what is right,' one recent scholar observes, 'his ministers and all his people do also, the moon, sun and stars stay evenly on course, rain falls and produces crops.'⁹ If the king fails to meet these conditions, the whole natural world, animal and vegetable, will fall into disharmony; trees will not flower, and crops will fail or taste bad. The importance of this ritual symbology was apparent in the 'traditionalist' resistance to colonial rule; the rebel Saya San invoked it in his bid to restore the Burmese monarchy. He possessed all the regalia of a Buddhist king – white umbrella, crown, sacred slippers and a palace (made from bamboo) – and built his capital on Alantaung Hill in Tharrawaddy, deliberately invoking an association with Mount Meru, the centre of the universe.¹⁰ In contrast to this emphasis on expressing parallelism with an imagined greater cosmos in the 'traditional' Buddhist worldview, U Chan Htoon and other Anglophone Buddhists in the 1950s were attempting to de-emphasise the supernatural and mythological aspects of religious tradition.

⁷ Thakin Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy* (Rangoon: Supdt., Govt. Printing and Stationary, Burma, 1949), 33.

⁸ "An LDC Moans," *The Guardian*, July 12, 1960. The speech referred to in this letter was an address to Burma's public servants, excerpts of which were published in the *Guardian* on July 5. It is a good example of U Nu's style - each time he exhorts them to cultivate integrity or humility, it is accompanied by a Buddhist analogy or example. See "Provisions to be Made to Protect Public Servants," *The Guardian*, July 5, 1960.

⁹ Collis, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 465.

¹⁰ Solomon, "Saya San," 209. In case there was any doubt, he gave his capital the name *Buddharaja-myo* or 'Buddhist King Town.'

For example, in 1961 a Buddhist named Aung Than Tun (M.A., B.L.) criticised the government in an English-language newspaper for neglecting the material in favour of the spiritual:

Our P.M. as we understand is a devout Buddhist, but he has overlooked an important point in Buddhist teaching. According to our religion, i.e. Buddhism, one has to exert one's own efforts to reach Nirvana and no one can help him to achieve this end. ... Neither our P.M. nor Buddha can help anyone attain salvation or Nirvana. ... I hope and wish our P.M. amidst his multitudinous duties, to concentrate (sic) on the material aspect of the people's welfare [and] not forget a Burmese saying "One can observe the precepts only when one's belly is full."¹¹

While U Nu might be devout, the shining example he sets for the people is ultimately unimportant; Buddhism is a personal affair and the true responsibilities of government lie elsewhere. Other letters from the period complained also about wasteful ostentation in the area of religion, 'the derogation of the sublime into the ludicrous' as one put it: the construction of the Kaba Aye pagoda was singled out for opprobrium, as was the leadership's indulgence in spirit worship.¹² Like Chan Htoon, these Anglophone Buddhists were clearly worried by 'superstition' in government policy that was in conflict with material development. Indeed, Aung Than Than hinted that 'people's welfare', economically speaking, was much more conducive to 'salvation' than state patronage of the religion.

For the Buddhist modernists, with their emphasis on doctrinal purity and rational, logical practice, the very worst criticism that certain British made about Burmese Buddhism was the idea that the Burmese were spirit-worshippers at heart, and the Buddhism of the Pali Canon was, as Ireland put it, 'merely the outward label.'¹³ In this instance, the primitivism of the Burmese that provided the justification for the establishment of colonial rule in Burma was also the explanation for Burmese resistance to the British: colonialists argued that the Burmese approach to religion was barbarous, however noble the creed they had inherited from India might have been. There can be little doubt that the idea that Theravada Buddhism was a veneer covering the activities of 'demon-worshippers' was one that irritated the Buddhist modernists. In proving their doctrinal purity, the modernists were often eager to attack the long-tolerated animist traditions and would no longer tolerate their practice by the government, as the following section will seek to demonstrate.

¹¹ Aung Than Tun, "Religion and Politics," *The Guardian*, April 4, 1961.

¹² "Letter to the Editor," *The Guardian*, February 10, 1959; "Letter to the Editor," *The Guardian*, February 13, 1959.

¹³ Ireland, *The Province of Burma*, 74.

In 1961, the space race between the United States and Russia captured the imagination of Burmese cartoonists. One cartoon from the *Guardian* showed that paper's mascot Po Nyan reading about the manned space flights of that year, and remarking that they were 'visiting the abode of nats (and) meeting the celestial beings.' Wanting to meet them also, Po Nyan offers a bowl of fruit and begins to pray. Yet what he takes to be the presence of the spirits turns out to be a monkey, which – laughing – upsets his offering, steals his fruit and leaves him at a loss. This cartoon, which appeared on 21 May mocked a recent decision by U Nu's government to construct a pair of *nat*-shrines, one in Rangoon and one in Mandalay. This cartoon and others like it are illustrative of the ways in which the performative criteria for government in Burma were interpreted in ways that emphasised earthly accomplishments. (See the following page.)

It is generally held that worship of the animist '*nats*' (spirits) possesses no doctrinal basis within the Buddhist scriptures, but is nonetheless a practice of long standing in Buddhist Burma. As was the case in many Buddhist countries throughout Asia, indigenous deities were eventually incorporated into the Buddhist cosmology and pantheon in a position subordinate to the Buddha. Historians note that when Anawrahta converted to Theravada Buddhism he built a pagoda that incorporated thirty-seven 'court-approved' major *nats*, reputedly stating that: 'Men will not come for the sake of the new faith. Let them come for their old gods and gradually they will be won over.'¹⁴ The cult of these 'royal' *nats* gained permanence and were a factor in the legitimacy of monarchical government right up to the annexation following the Third Anglo-Burmese War. An Indian observer in the early twentieth century wrote that Buddhist monks did not disapprove of *nat*-worship - indeed, it was 'gladly tolerated' - and that this attitude had in fact strengthened the religion: 'drawing the people nearer to them and Buddhism and building up a common ground from which the rational and the emotional, the intellectual and the primitive could equally draw their sustenance and inspiration.' Despite this positive appraisal, he hinted nonetheless at a certain incompatibility between Buddhism and the spirits when he noted that 'the most learned and wise *theras* (elders) no doubt look down on them.'¹⁵ In any case, almost all commentators contend that *nat*-propitiation has been an important part of Burmese culture and society for centuries; indeed, the 'thirty-seven *nats*'

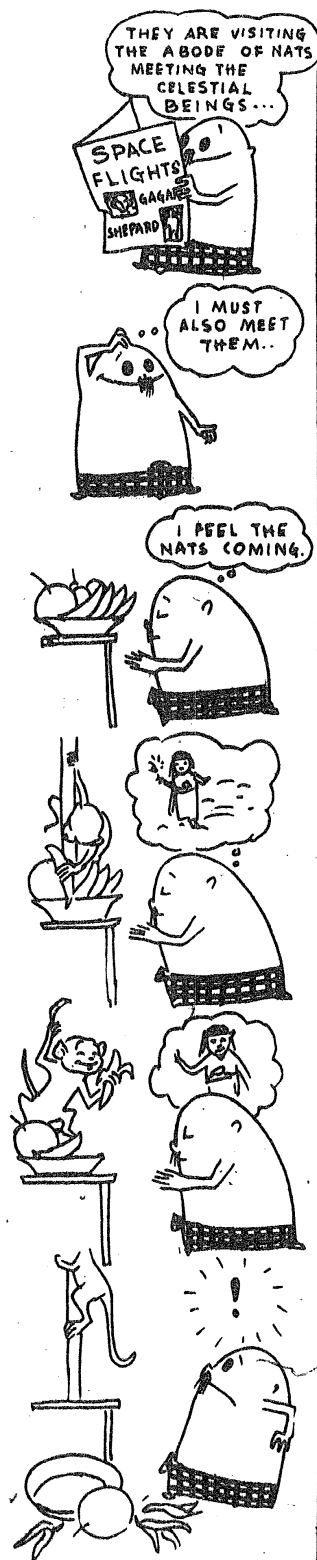
¹⁴ Nihar-ranjan Ray, *An Introduction to the Study of Theravada Buddhism in Burma* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1946), 263; Victor Lieberman, "Reinterpreting Burmese History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, 1 (1987): 187.

¹⁵ Ray, *Theravada Buddhism in Burma*, 268-9.

PO NYAN

(alias)

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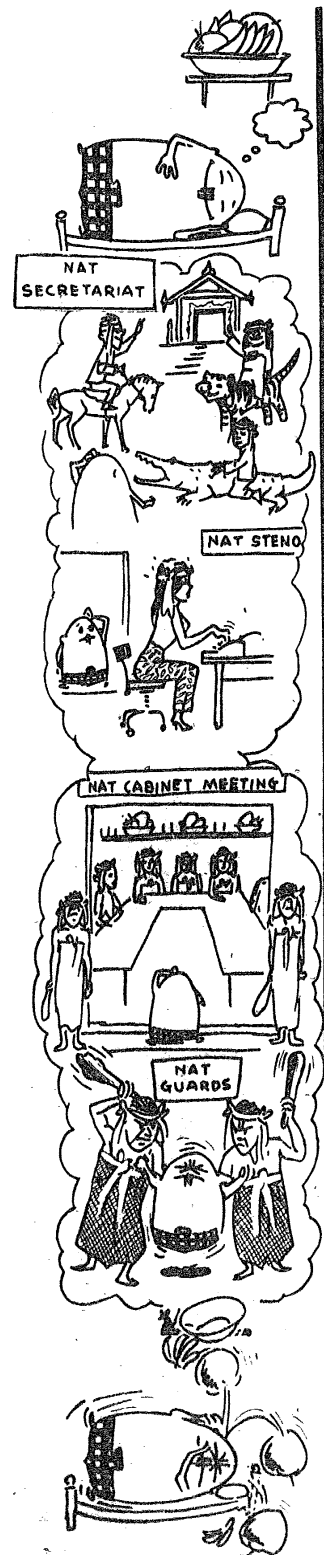
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PO NYAN

(alias)

MISTER WISE



Two cartoons featuring the *Guardian's* mascot, Po Nyan, lampooning belief in *nats*. The one on the right clearly mocks any association between *nat*-worship and government. (May 21, 1968, May 28, 1968.)¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, May 21, 1961; *The Guardian*, May 28, 1961.

are still worshipped today, although their identities have changed over time.¹⁷

A sense of the political legitimacy derived from the worship of *nats* can be inferred from the ‘Rebel Oath’ of the kingly aspirant Saya San, which began with the words: ‘Oh come and witness our oath, O Brahmah and all great Nats of the world above.’ It went on to say:

Protect and help our religion, O ye greater and lesser Nats of this world and all worlds...deliver us quickly from the unbelievers and their Government. Grant us liberty, and to the Galon King dominion over this land.¹⁸

Saya San’s rebellion was the largest and most widely supported rural rebellion in the colonial period; his appeal to the *nats* demonstrates the enduring appeal of this tactic of legitimization into the colonial era. Postcolonial Burmese governments, we can argue, were all obliged to recognise the existence and importance of belief in the *nats* in political life, whether they supported or opposed such belief.

Indeed, a number of political figures in independent Burma engaged in *nat*-propitiation, both in and out of government. In July 1959 for example, U Nu’s ‘Clean’ AFPFL party (then out of government) made offerings to the *nats* at the Kaba Aye pagoda. According to the *Guardian*’s coverage of that event (the title of which was ‘Nu Invokes Supernatural Aid’) ‘over one hundred various kinds of *nats*...were invited to the feast of luscious fruits prepared on the specially arranged altar.’ Nu then asked the *nats* to ‘maintain internal peace, to protect the country from internal and external dangers, and to create amity among the people.’¹⁹ The article also observed that this particular ceremony, the *balinatsa* or ‘feast of the spirits’ was a controversial event ‘because of its un-Buddhistic features.’ Nu was, nonetheless, a strong believer in this practice, maintaining that it was permissible under Buddhism; he made the *balinatsa* a semi-official event while he was in government. He also made it plain that he engaged in *nat*-propitiation on behalf of the Burmese nation, in his capacity as Prime Minister. At the dedication of a *nat* shrine in Maymyo on 8 May 1961, Nu gave - according to one sardonic commentator - a ‘great invocation’:

¹⁷ For an account of *nat*-propitiation in more recent times see Mandy Sadan, “Respected Grandfather, Bless this Nissan,” *Burma at the turn of the 21st Century*, ed. Monique Skidmore (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 90-111.

¹⁸ C. V. Warren, *Burmese Interlude* (London: Skeffington & Son, 1937), 92-4.

¹⁹ “Nu Invokes Supernatural Aid: Clean AFPFL Leaders Perform Ceremony for Propitiation of Spirits,” *The Guardian*, July 19, 1959.

Ye Bummacos (nats of earth) Rokkhacos (nats of trees), Akascos, (nats of skies) and nats of Sun, Moon, Fire and Rain, not excluding Kandawshinma (Lady of this great lake) ... I, the Prime Minister and the multitudes of Burmese citizens hereby...offer you coconuts, bananas and also eats of various sorts. As a sure result of this...may the powerful nats guide the citizens and act in such a way as to fulfil whatever they wish and long for! [We] pray that...this great lake which is the grace of this town and whose name and fame resound throughout, be filled quickly, immediately and within a short period from now...²⁰

These ceremonies are consistent with the functions of spirit-worship identified by Manning Nash in his study of Burmese village life *The Golden Road to Modernity*: a supplementary system of metaphysics concerned with mundane, day-to-day emergencies and threats and for which the esoteric and timeless pronouncements of canonical Buddhism are little succour. Nash observed that Nu, ‘like a consummate politician’ utilised *nat*-propitiation as an aspect of traditional belief and in accordance with traditional expectations.²¹ Yet, the prediction and prevention of the phenomena with which this belief-system is concerned is also the province of modern science and technology. As Nash observed in a 1963 article, ‘the various supplementary predictive systems [are] in competition with these secular techniques of handling crisis and uncertainty.’ In urban Burma, he remarks, ‘*nats*, tattooing and alchemy are less an integral part of the religious life, and the educated tend to decry them as they make efforts to fit Buddhism and Western science into a harmonious, congruent world view.’²² In the eyes of Buddhist modernists *nat*-worship was thus both irreligious (from a doctrinal standpoint) and irrational (from a scientific standpoint.) As such, it represented an irresistible target for their critique.

For example, a letter to the editor dated 20 May 1961 criticised both the practice of *balinatsa* and the proposed construction of the two *nat* houses. ‘It used to tickle my sides,’ the author wrote, ‘whenever I read about our Hon’ble Prime Minister offering of *balinatsa*’s (*sic*) and also calling upon rain-gods to rain. ... But this time, it is different’:

He is doing it as the head of the Government. The shrines will be built at public expense. So it was with greatest distress, distrust and despair (all the three incidentally accompanied by

²⁰ “The Nats,” *The Guardian*, May 22, 1961. This is an abridged version of a much longer translation provided by ‘Sasanarakkhita.’ The original speech appeared in Burmese in the *New Light of Burma* on May 14, 1960.

²¹ Nash, *The Golden Road to Modernity*, 166, 280-1.

²² Manning Nash, “Burmese Buddhism in Everyday Life,” *American Anthropologist* 65, 1 (1963): 291.

greatest nausea too) that I, a devout Buddhist, read the news item in your columns about the Cabinet's decision to have two official Nat shrines built. It is ridiculous to learn that the Government that has declared to make Buddhism the State religion is now taking special interest in nat-worship.²³

An important point here is that this 'devout Buddhist' does not, as a matter of general principle, oppose religious activity on the part of the government. He does not consider it unscientific or wasteful to make Buddhism the state religion, for example. Rather, he is opposed to government activity that is in conflict with his interpretation of Buddhism. Also significant is his differentiation between the actions of an individual and those of the state - the criterion for acceptable ceremonial behaviour changes when it is the behaviour of authority. A Buddhist can squander money and effort on superstition, but a modern Buddhist government cannot do so and remain legitimate.

Another letter that appeared in the *Guardian* on May 22 is particularly interesting, as it represents the paired Anglophone Buddhist emphases on doctrinal purity on the one hand, and scientific rationalism on the other. The author styles himself 'A student of Abhidhamma' (the third - and most complex - 'basket' of the Tripitaka) and writes that 'we should analyse the conception of "*nat*-worship" with a view to find out its *cause as well as its effect*.'²⁴ *Nat*-worship, he claims, was the same as 'primitive god-worship' - a *miccha-ditthi* or 'wrong view' according to the Pali canon. God-worship, he writes, arose in prehistoric times, 'when people were in ignorance of much of the natural laws and phenomena of life [and when] the concept of the supernatural powers got very easily and quickly formed (*sic*) in the primitive minds.' The Buddha, however, taught humankind to dispel 'wrong views' through *sama-ditthi* - 'the correct understanding of the working of all natural processes' - the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path to enlightenment. The author concludes with a rhetorical question: 'How can a Buddhist, therefore, dispel the concept of god or *nat* worship while at the same time indulge in the practice of *nat* worship?'

The author's final statement rejects *nat*-worship on the basis of canon; no good Buddhist who cleaves to the doctrine will consider indulging in it. Yet, the main focus of his letter is on the unscientific nature of 'god-worship,' and conversely, on the essentially scientific nature of

²³ "Housing For Nats," *The Guardian*, May 20, 1961. The author of this letter is Sasanarakkhita, the translator of Nu's 'incantation' cited above.

²⁴ "State-Sponsored Nat Shrines" *The Guardian*, May 22, 1961. Emphasis mine. The author's claim to be conversant with the *abhidhamma*, which was traditionally the province of monks, indicates that he was likely a participant in the *vipassana* lay-meditation movement.

Buddhism. Unlike the theistic religions that were born of ignorance, Buddhism is inherently rational (the letter declares the Buddha's exposition of the law of karma to be 'highly scientific'), in conformity with the 'correct' understanding of nature and - it is implied - able to be confirmed empirically. 'God-worship,' on the other hand, can make no such claim:

The sun-god, the rain-god, the wind-god and many other gods...supposed to be controlling all the natural processes and all the activities of men are really the creations of the primitive minds. ... No attempt is made to test [their] correctness by logical reasoning.²⁵

An adherent of god-worship, therefore, can be neither Buddhist nor scientific. This idea continues to crop up in newspaper correspondence relating to the construction of *nat* houses. By late August, 1961, the government had elected to build only a single shrine at Mount Popa, the traditional home of the most powerful *nats*.²⁶ This was done for budgetary reasons, yet in a letter dated September 9, 'A Tax-Payer' was not mollified. The author insisted that the money would be better spent on 'Recognised Charitable Institutions' and warned that should the shrine be built, minorities like the Kachin would each demand their own.²⁷ The thrust of the letter is not fiscal, however, but doctrinal. 'A Tax-Payer' did not accept that the devout U Nu really believed in *nat*-worship, and insisted that only illiterates and ignorant women - 'who have been forsaken by their husbands [or] jilted in love' - practise it. Like Sasanarakkhita, he did not oppose the State Religion Bill; indeed, he emphasised its correctness when he noted that the religious minorities opposed it.²⁸ Rather, his objections are based on the incompatibility of spirit worship with Buddhist doctrines and, to a lesser extent, with reason.

The politicians who participated in *nat*-worship, on the other hand, insisted that it *was* compatible with Buddhism. In connection with the *balinatsa* described above, Nu's party issued a statement emphasising the traditional nature of the event. The statement is interesting because it reflects the notion that authority needed to engage in such ritual to guarantee the health of the nation:

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Nats To Have Only One State Shrine," *The Guardian*, August 29, 1961.

²⁷ "Buddhism and Nat-Worship," *The Guardian*, September 19, 1961.

²⁸ 'A Tax-Payer' goes further than most in his criticism of *nat*-worship, insisting that *nat-kadaws* (nat 'spouses' or mediums) are work-shy criminals or even brothel-keepers.

Various references to *balinatsa* (propitiation of the guardian spirits) in order to promote the peaceful prosperity of the people and the country may be found throughout the history of Burmese civilisation, in many historical works. During his term of service, Chairman U Nu has maintained this tradition for the sake of the peace and prosperity of the Union and the masses.²⁹

Of particular interest is the statement's implication that performance of the ritual had contributed to the defeat of the various insurgents plaguing Burma in the late 1940s and early 1950s:

In 1948, the Union of Burma was on the very brink of disaster, due to the insurrections. ... In [the] process of salvation for the Union, propitiation of the guardian spirits was performed so as not to break the tradition and in order to promote the cause of peace and prosperity in the country.³⁰

We can argue that popular support for this behaviour was based on the traditional notion that a positive outcome to uncertain events was tied to the moral or ritual behaviour of authority. As we have seen, however, Buddhist modernists did not believe that there was a causal link between the performance of propitiatory rituals by the state and the successful handling of difficult or uncertain situations.

Similarly, on 9 December 1961, the Director of Religious Affairs issued a statement in response to criticisms of the Popa *nat* shrine, insisting that the government had sought the opinions of 'leading Buddhist monks' who confirmed that the practice of making offerings had existed 'since the beginning of the Universe.' They were acceptable so long as they were conducted in accordance with 'Buddhist regulations' and not with the belief that 'only such acts would bring benefit or the reward of merit.'³¹ Additionally, the *Guardian's* front-page coverage of the issue included this sentence: 'Quoting history, the communiqué also argued that making offerings to the *nats* is the basis of prosperity of the area.'³² The argument put forward by the monks was a typical example of traditional Buddhist accommodation; the 'regulations' might include the understanding that images of *nats* must be accompanied by images of the Buddha in a suitable position of superiority. Yet for the Buddhist modernists, the paring back of Buddhist tradition to its textual core of 'cause and effect' left little room for such a theological sleight-of-hand in dealing with local beliefs and

²⁹ "Nu invokes Supernatural Aid."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Propitiation of "Nats" not heresy, Govt says," *The Guardian*, October 12, 1961.

³² Ibid.

customs. Indeed, some commentators insisted that *nat*-propitiation had no place in Burma's Buddhist history at all. Following the "Clean" AFPFL's statement on the historicity of *balinatsa* in July 1959, the editor of the *Guardian*, Sein Win (1922 - 2013)³³ stated that 'the religion has never encouraged the resort to invocation of the aid of *nats* and *brahmas* to achieve one's own self-seeking objectives....the practice puts the clock back to pre-Buddhistic Animist days.'³⁴ The editorial expressed incredulity that 'educated young Buddhist politicians' as well as Nu ('despite his deep study and learning of Buddhism') should indulge in this superstitious practice and he concludes that leaders should seek the support of the people and not that of the supernatural or 'Black Magic.' The idea that there is historical proof of the efficacy of *nat*-worship is therefore completely unacceptable; even more offensive is the notion that the prosperity of one region over another lay in the potency of its spirits and the worship thereof; worse still is the idea that guardian spirits, properly placated, had saved Burma from insurgency and collapse. Science and Buddhist modernism, it was argued provided reasonable explanations for these events, yet the government claimed that it was intervention with the spirit-world that had produced these results. The preceding editorial had declared with polemical stridence that such a representation 'entirely disregarded the sacrifices made by the members of the armed forces, police, civil servants and the people.'³⁵ This, along with the exhortation to seek the aid of the people exemplifies the Buddhist modernist focus on lay and social activism.

The government also attracted negative attention in the English-language press when its actions were seen as being guided by astrology. The broad consensus amongst historians that supernatural considerations, like *nat*-propitiation, were important to the legitimacy of precolonial Burmese monarchs was set out in the first chapter of this thesis. By far the most spectacular manifestation of astrologically-driven policy in the postcolonial period was when the government constructed sixty thousand sand pagodas across Burma in late 1961. On 26 November, the Ministry of Religious Affairs announced that 'to avert impending dangers and to achieve complete peace and tranquillity

³³ U Sein Win was the editor of the *Guardian* for most of the independence period prior to 1962. Fluent in English, Sein Win was no ally of U Nu and under his editorship, the *Guardian* aligned itself not only with Buddhist modernism but with the opposition 'Stable' AFPFL party that possessed strong ties to the Burmese military. A champion of press freedom, he suffered imprisonment under both democratic and military governments. Steinberg noted that with his passing, the era of vibrant Burmese English-language reporting and publication that had characterised the civilian era was finally brought to an end. See "Guardian U Sein Win: A Personal Appreciation," David I. Steinberg, *The Irrawaddy*, last modified October 28, 2013, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/guardian-sein-win-personal-appreciation.html>.

³⁴ "Invoking Supernatural Aid," *The Guardian*, July 19, 1959.

³⁵ Ibid.

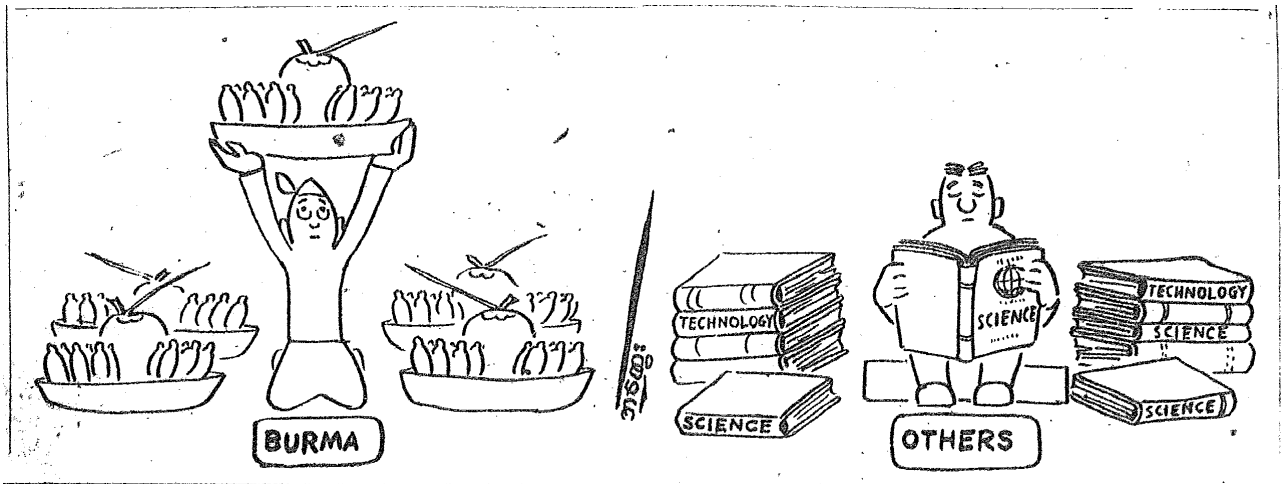
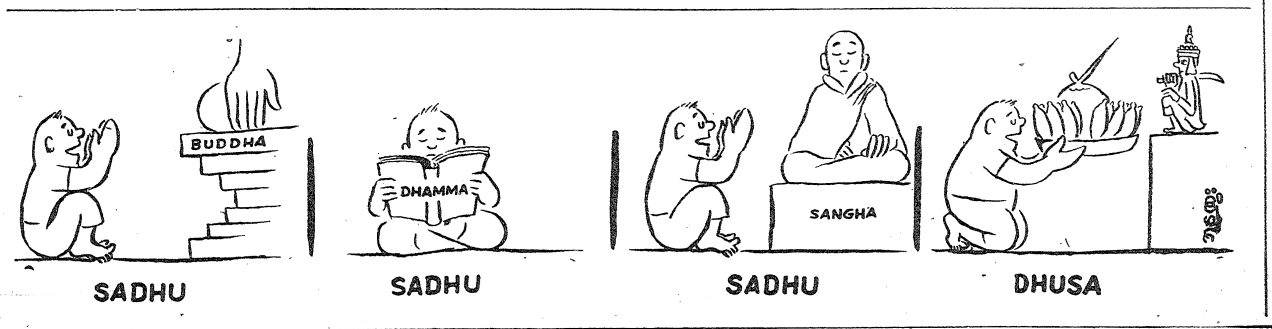
in the Union' sand pagodas were to be built in all the district towns. 'The pagodas should be nine cubits in height' the directive went on, 'and the umbrellas of the pagodas should also be in nine rings either in brass or iron.' Lastly, the directive insisted that the pagoda site be pegged 'between 6 a.m. and 8.24 a.m. on Saturday December 9.'³⁶ Less than a week later, a cartoon appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper comparing Burma's wasteful investment in superstition to the rest of the world's focus on 'science' and 'technology.'³⁷ On the day the pagodas were constructed, an editorial appeared in that same newspaper. It observed that the arrangements, despite coming from the Religious Affairs Ministry, carried the stamp of U Nu and it repeated allegations from his political opponents that in the past such initiatives had been conceived to gain merit for Nu himself. 'It is to be hoped,' it observed, 'that this time [he] will be spared such embarrassing allegations.' The editorial concludes with the similarly sarcastic hope that 'one day, all in good time, U Nu will perhaps tell us what kind of danger he has averted from us by the act done today - building 60,000 sand pagodas.'³⁸

Thus, the significance of the new imagined association of Buddhism and science can be seen in the hostility in the English-language press to activity that was seen as superstitious. When the government indulged in behaviour that seemed either contrary to the spirit of the Buddhist canon, (as the modernists understood this) or to the spirit of science, the reaction was swift and condemnatory. The true focus of government, the modernists contended, should be on material concerns, like technological and economic development. The progressive philosophy of socialism was seen as one means of meeting these goals and the relationship between Buddhism and socialism will be the subject of the next section.

³⁶ "Govt. to build Pagodas to avert dangers," *The Guardian*, November 26, 1961.

³⁷ *The Guardian*, December 1, 1961.

³⁸ "Merit with Sand," *The Guardian*, December 9, 1961.



Two cartoons criticising nat-worship. Sadhu is a Pali exclamation meaning that something is well done. Dhusa means 'sin.' The use of Pali is significant; it emphasises canonical practice over worthless ritual. (May 6, 1961, December 1, 1961.)³⁹

³⁹ *The Guardian*, May 6, 1961; December 1, 1961.

Buddhism and Socialism

Lenin thought that he could dry up the spring of human greed by the use of force but he found to his sorrow that he was wrong and the only way to uproot greed and selfishness was Buddha's way....rather slow but absolutely sure.⁴⁰

- U Ba Yin

Simplifying radically, we might define the Burma of 1958 as a Buddhist Welfare State, with the religion looking after a man's soul and a planned economy his body. Are these two concepts really compatible? Are they self-defeating? Can a convinced Buddhist, who knows that the things of this world are insubstantial and worthless, bring to the hard and tedious task of developing a still backward and badly war-ravaged country the energy and perseverance the job will require? The attempt to reconcile these two philosophies is the essential action of our current history.⁴¹

- Dr Kyaw Thet

In 1951, U Ba Swe was Secretary-General of the Burma Socialist Party and President of the Burmese Trades Union Congress. His leftist credentials in no doubt, he identified nonetheless as Buddhist and used religious terminology to describe and define Marxist concepts.⁴² He was also the Minister of Defence and Mines in the independent AFPFL government. The following examples are taken from a speech he gave in December of that year at the headquarters of the Trades Union Congress and they contain some familiar concepts. After stating plainly the importance of Marxism as the 'guiding principle' of the Burmese revolution, Ba Swe said:

Let me pause here to explain what Marxism actually is. Marxist philosophy rejects the theory of creation; but it does not oppose religion. In point of fact, Marxist theory is not antagonistic to Buddhist philosophy. The two are, frankly speaking, not merely similar. In fact, they are the same in concept. ... Marxist theory deals with mundane affairs and seeks to satisfy material

⁴⁰ U Ba Yin, "Buddha's Way to Democracy" *The Burman*, April 12, 1954. Cited in Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds*, 193.

⁴¹ Dr Kyaw Thet, "Continuity in Burma: the survival of historic forces" *The Atlantic*, last accessed January 7, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/02/continuity-in-burma/306816/>. Kyaw Thet was Professor of Burmese and Eastern History studies at the University of Rangoon and a visiting professor at Yale University.

⁴² As early as 1938, for example, he referred to Stalin as the builder of 'Lokka Nibban' or earthly nirvana. Cited in Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhist Economics and Buddhist Fundamentalism in Burma and Thailand," in *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Economies, Politics and Militance*, eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 377.

needs in life. Buddhist philosophy, however, deals with the solution of spiritual matters with a view to seek spiritual satisfaction in life and liberation from this mundane world.’⁴³

Here there are definite parallels with Chan Htoon’s insistence on the unity of Buddhism and science: they are not in conflict; they represent the same approach to different problems. ‘Both these philosophies are correlated.’ Ba Swe continues, ‘I dare say that you will agree with me regarding this statement when you study the two closely.’

I declare that I have implicit faith in Marxism, but at the same time I boldly assert that I am a true Buddhist. In the beginning, I was a Buddhist only by tradition. *The more I study Marxism, however, the more I feel convinced in Buddhism.* Thus I have become a true disciple of Lord Buddha by conviction, and my faith in Buddhism has grown all the more. *I now believe that for any man who has deeply studied Buddhism and correctly perceived its tenets there should be no obstacles to become a Marxist.*⁴⁴

Thus, the interconnectedness of Buddhism and socialism is so powerful that the study of one of these branches leads inexorably to belief in the other; they are mutually reinforcing. As Donald Smith reminds us, socialism, with its emphasis on economic development, was the dominant idea representing change for many former colonies in the immediate postcolonial period. Efforts were made by various Burmese political figures, U Ba Swe included, to reconcile Buddhism with their socialist programs. As with the association of Buddhism and pure science, the connection between socialism and religion was mutually reinforcing: the modern ideology gaining religious validation and the religious tradition gaining proof of its validity and relevance to modern life. As Smith put it: ‘if socialism makes religion relevant, religion makes socialism legitimate.’⁴⁵

Perhaps the best examples of the association of Buddhism and socialism among the Burmese political elite can be found in the speeches and initiatives of U Nu. U Nu was Prime Minister for almost all of the period between 1948 and 1962 (the only excepted periods being 1956-7, when he

⁴³ U Ba Swe, *The Burmese Revolution* (Rangoon: People’s Literature Committee and House, 1957), 7. Ba Swe is also careful to differentiate Burmese Marxism from Russian or Chinese Communism (‘They may prefer to hold the view that satisfaction of material needs is the ultimate consummation of life. But I don’t see it in that way. ... There are spiritual needs that remain to be satisfied’) and to emphasise that ‘Marxist theory occupies the lower plane, while Buddhist philosophy occupies the higher.’

⁴⁴ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Religion, Politics and Social Change*, 223. Hugh Tinker, in his contemporary study *The Union of Burma* observed that: ‘the Marxists within the Government, whatever their private views, are careful to subscribe publicly to the view that dialectical materialism and Nirvana are quite compatible.’ See Tinker, *The Union Of Burma*, 176-7.

stepped down briefly [and U Ba Swe, interestingly enough, took over] and 1958-60, two years of military government called the ‘Caretaker’ period) and was the most politically significant figure of that era. His personal piety is legendary, and his enthusiasm for Marxism can be seen in many of his policies as well as his youthful association with leftist anti-colonial organisations, including the *Dobama Asiayone*. Some might see him as perhaps a poor candidate for inclusion in the category of ‘Buddhist modernist’ – Thant Myint-U described his faith as traditional ‘with a colourful dose of Burmese *nat* worship and astrology thrown in’⁴⁶ – yet in his speeches we can discern his attempts to reconcile Buddhism with socialism; the phenomena which he believed would guarantee the future of Burma.⁴⁷

In 1948, for example, Nu gave a speech on May 1st (May Day) which – like many of his speeches – was rich in Buddhist allegory. In it the twin themes of Buddhism and socialism are intertwined. First, he lectured his audience on the legend of the ‘magic tree’ which ‘in the early days of the world...bore as its fruit all kinds of food and goods which the people enjoyed.’⁴⁸ Each took from the tree only what he needed, with ‘no idea of making profits.’ Yet thereafter, ‘greed appeared in the world and people began to pluck from these trees more than what they needed for their own consumption. Then according to the ancient legend, the wonderful tree disappeared.’⁴⁹ This story is consistent with the *Aggañña* sutra – mentioned earlier – in which the proto-humans of legend became ever more physically and morally imperfect as their sins multiplied.⁵⁰ Nu, however, diverges from the usual story at this point:

This, of course, is an allegory and the real meaning is that when greed and exploitation appeared in the world, the bulk of the people became subject to poverty and distress. The classes which practised exploitation and caused the disappearance of the magic tree have been leading the world astray since the time they arose. The new thought which seeks to bring the world back

⁴⁶ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 268.

⁴⁷ ‘By the end of the last war Burma was found to be in a most pitiable condition. When freedom came she had to start her life as an independent nation with her economic and social life completely shattered. She was soon plagued by widespread groups of Communists and other rebels who carried fire and sword throughout the country causing untold suffering and senseless destruction of life and property. Burma would have completely gone under but for this spiritual awakening and Buddhist renaissance.’ Cited in “Burma Leads the Way” *The New Times of Burma*, May 23, 1956.

⁴⁸ Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy*, 78-9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Sarkisyanz provides a comprehensive summary of the fall from grace in his chapter “Buddhist Traditions about a Perfect Society and its Decline and the Origin of the State.” When the proto-humans first arose, a ‘sweet creeper’ had given forth rice with no need of human labour and had renewed itself each day. Yet it became exhausted when men took more of it than they needed and stored it. This led to the division of the rice that remained as property, which in turn led to theft, the telling of falsehoods and eventually, violence as punishment. See Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds*, 10-2.

from the system of exploitation to a new age of the magic tree is briefly what is meant by Leftism. It behoves us, therefore to use, with all our energy, this Leftism as a means by which we will bring Burma to that magic tree.⁵¹

Here, Nu explains that ‘poverty and distress’ are caused first and foremost by the sin of greed, while ‘Leftism’ is put forward as its antithesis and the means to return the world to the paradise of the magic tree. Indeed, since the ‘fall’ from that paradise was inevitable as a manifestation of *anicca*, socialism is essentially promising an end to *samsara* – to all suffering and rebirth. As such, Nu’s ‘Leftism’ is imbued with a definite sense of morality and righteousness – it is the means for correcting impiety and exploitation even as it levels class and guarantees material prosperity – what Ba Swe called *lokka nibbana* or nirvana on earth. Socialism, therefore, becomes a way of encouraging ‘Buddhist’ morality and leading to a ‘Buddhist’ paradise. Furthermore, since socialism can be located in a Buddhist origin myth, it is an ideology that is in no way ‘foreign’ to Burma.

Nu was still using this metaphor more than a decade later, when in a speech expounding socialist ideology he insisted that the ‘early human world’ was socialist in nature but was destroyed by the ‘greed, pride and ignorance of people.’⁵² Greed (*lobha*) and ignorance (*moha*) would be familiar to Buddhists as two of the three ‘unwholesome roots’ of evil, the third being *dosa* – hatred. Pride (*māna*) is fourth on the expanded list of ‘ten defilements’ in the *Abhidhamma*. In a speech at the ‘Clean’ AFPFL Supreme Conference, held at the Kaba Aye pagoda in Rangoon in 1959, Nu stated his belief that poverty, as a consequence of the exploitation of one social class over another, was the source of all sin:

Socialism...was born out of the existence of the two social classes of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ with the former making capital of the other’s poverty. The poor people were deprived of a decent means of livelihood without uproar food and clothing while they were being exploited by the richer people. Poverty led to hunger, loosening of morals, increase in diseases, the prevalence of many prostitutes, increase in the number of thieves and dacoits and the danger of conflicts between nations.⁵³

⁵¹ Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy*, 79.

⁵² “U Nu Expounds Socialist Ideology,” *The Guardian*, November 17, 1959.

⁵³ “U Nu Studying Socialism,” *The Guardian*, September 30, 1959.

Socialism, Nu argued, in redressing this imbalance ‘had as its ultimate aim the eradication of all these evils,’ thus linking socialist means to essentially moral outcomes. In the election campaign of that same year, according to Dr. Maung Maung, Nu explicitly linked Buddhist and leftist morality when he stated that a socialist utopia (or “heaven on earth”) could be achieved ‘by the practice of love and consideration and the five precepts, the *pancha sila*, in daily life.’⁵⁴ By equating socialism with Buddhist morality, Nu and others could claim that socialism was in fact a Buddhist invention, just as science was.

As is well known, Nu’s association of Buddhism and socialism is concretely manifested in his government’s modernisation program, the *pyidawtha* plan. *Pyidawtha* was an eight-year economic development plan that began in 1952 and was concerned primarily with the improvement of infrastructure, agriculture, industry and ‘people’s livelihood’ through a welfare state, however, the plan also aimed at the creation of ‘the “new man” – that is, a responsible citizen who would participate actively and constructively in government, an intelligent, public-spirited individual.’⁵⁵ In the context of the interdependence of Marxism and Buddhism, *pyidawtha* can be seen as making the country more Buddhist even as it embraced development. By ensuring material prosperity for its citizens, as well as cementing a Leftist/Buddhist morality, *pyidawtha* (and socialism) creates conditions favourable to spiritual development as well. In a country where no one is hungry, or engaged in sinful profiteering, nirvana is surely but a single rebirth away. We can note here some connections with ideas about the underlying purpose of the old Buddhist kingdom set forth in the modern scholarly writing on the traditional state; Stanley Tambiah contends that the objective of the Aśokan polity ‘was that the populace be ensured material satisfaction and prosperity in order that Buddhist morality and religion may flourish.’⁵⁶ In identifying Buddhism with socialism (and science) Buddhist modernists were not, however, attempting to define the performative responsibilities of the state with reference to cosmological parallelism (and other ways in which the king ‘ensured prosperity’) but instead to define the responsibilities of the state in terms of industrial

⁵⁴ Dr Maung Maung, *The 1988 Turmoil in Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 31.

⁵⁵ Dr Maung Maung, “Pyidawtha Comes to Burma” *Far Eastern Survey*, 22, 9 (1953): 119. Authors have had difficulty translating the word *pyidawtha*, though in a visit in 1954 the Sri Lankan scholar and diplomat Gunapala Malalsekera was willing to give it a try: ‘Pyidawtha means “lovely, sacred land” he gushed, ‘and may Burma thus become even more lovely and sacred than she is now!’ There seemed little doubt in his mind that this program, ‘sponsored...for the social and spiritual amelioration of the masses of Burma’ was a Buddhist initiative. See “World Buddhist Council,” *The New Times of Burma*, December 10, 1954.

⁵⁶ Stanley Tambiah, ‘Buddhism and This-Worldly Activity,’ *Modern Asian Studies* 7, 1 (1973), 17.

and agricultural development and the levelling of society. Buddhism was presented as an agent of revolutionary change, rather than as a means for preserving cosmic and political equilibrium.

This orientation of the government's 'religious' responsibility also affected the role of the laity. Within the context of the *pyidawtha* program, the laity were required to participate in social work. As Nu put it in a speech in 1954, 'social work...fits in well with the implementation of the Pyidawtha plans, as its seeks to serve humanity by mutual help and cooperation.' Earlier he had also emphasised its conformity with Buddhism and the 'traditions' of Burma:

According to Buddhism, mutual help and spirit of service are an essential code of human conduct. The mutual help and spirit of service have been a feature of Burmese life among relatives, in village communities, and even in wider spheres of town life and national communities. *This trait is not foreign to our way of life, [it is] inherent in our social customs and traditions.*⁵⁷

Some observers of the period, including Melford Spiro, have pointed out that government sponsored social and charitable work was unpopular, owing in part to the idea of individual responsibility for salvation and the greater opportunities for merit provided by the construction of pagodas.⁵⁸ It seems that Nu was not unaware of this and he had a familiar explanation for it:

However, it is regrettable that the general attitude towards social work is one of apathy and indifference, due to the deterioration in human morality. *Sakka Vutti Sutta* and *Agganna Sutta* are quite explicit about the decay of love, compassion, joy in other's happiness and ability to withstand miseries. The decay of these four noble human feelings is responsible for the present regrettable attitude towards social work which is looked upon with indifference, if not with derision.⁵⁹

Here the 'traditional' attitude towards social work is explained as a failure of Buddhist morality, a position that is arguably consistent with Nu's earlier speeches about the fall from a primordial (and socialist) paradise. A restoration of these 'noble human feelings' would have precise material consequences – a greater participation in social work and the associated success of the *pyidawtha*

⁵⁷ "PM Opens First Social Services Conference," *The New Times of Burma*, January 26, 1954. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 172.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

program and an eventual Marxist heaven on earth. This idea of degeneration from an earlier, purer form of morality is, of course, very much a part of English-language Buddhist modernism.

The association of Buddhism and Marxism was not restricted to the political leadership of Burma – a letter to the editor published in the *Guardian* in 1961 also elaborates upon the above themes, as well as a number of others that we can identify as consistent with the ideas of Buddhist modernism. Writing in response to criticisms of Nu's promise to make Buddhism the state religion, 'Thiriyatana B.A., B.L.' insisted that the idea was appropriate, for if one considered Buddhism 'dialectically' and in its 'pure and unadulterated form' then one would realise that it is not a religion at all, but 'a universal guide for the betterment of the society.'⁶⁰ His use of the word 'dialectically' was not a coincidence; he went on to insist that Buddhists had nothing to fear from Marxism or, in fact, Communism. He used some familiar arguments:

The Marxist are as much atheist as we Buddhist are. (sic.) They deny God, His creation and soul-theory. The Buddhist hold the same view. The Marxist say everything, living or non-living is flux, movement and change. So do we and doth say our veritable law of *Anicca*. ... Even under Communism, Buddhism which does not come under the category of religion and so is no opium at all must have its own role to play.⁶¹

Likewise:

If you want to study Marxism, study it. And while studying it, don't forget to study Buddhism too. ... By studying it you might discover to what extent Buddhism can contribute in toning down if not doing away with the vulgarity and acquisitiveness and violence afflicting mankind to-day. Is not this that Marxists of to-day are striving for hard and thick?⁶²

Like Ba Swe, the author suggests that there is essential congruity between the ideas of Marxism and Buddhism – they are not only similar, but complement each other. Like Nu, he suggests that Buddhist morality and Marxist ethics are analogous, at least in their shared conception of

⁶⁰ Thiriyatana, "Religion and Politics," *The Guardian*, May 1, 1961. Along with this enthusiasm for Buddhism 'as taught by the Buddha untouched by priestcraft' Thiriyatana had a similarly 'Protestant' disdain for theistic religions: 'If you say that Buddhism is a religion ... under the definition as universally adopted and accepted in the West and India, [that is] ritualism, priestcraft, superstition, ceremonialism, metaphysical speculation, theological outlook and above all magic and miracles, then, I say, it is the sooner the better for our Government to drop it like a hot coal.'

⁶¹ Ibid. He also claims that Communists 'intelligibly and not blindly accept the scientific theory of *Anatta*, (no-soul) which is the *sine qua non* of Buddhism' – though unfortunately he does not elaborate on this.

⁶² Ibid.

wrongdoing. Finally, the author states plainly what Ba Swe and Nu have previously implied: that a leftist utopia leads inevitably to Buddhist nirvana.

But we as Buddhists and even as true Marxists shall keep to the Middle Way...and work hand-in-hand for our own emancipation and...of the whole of mankind, be he Communist; Socialist or Capitalist – emancipation from *Loba, Dosa & Moha* – from want, dire poverty, ignorance, diseases of all kinds, chronic social and economic injustices and humiliation and exploitation of man by man, from fear of World War of annihilation by weapons of mass destruction and above all from superstition, ritualism, priestcraft, ceremonialism, metaphysical speculation, theological outlook and black magic, and for the immediate achievement of “PEACE AND HAPPINESS” now and here – *U padisesa Nibbana*.⁶³

In using a Buddhist term, ‘*U padisesa Nibbana*’ for enlightenment to describe a decidedly earthly paradise, Thiriyatana was not simply putting a religious sheen on a materialist utopia; he was stating that there was essentially no difference between an enlightened Marxist society and an enlightened Buddhist one.

Not everyone was as enthusiastic as Thiriyata about the future of Buddhism under communism, however. During the colonial period, communism - or more specifically, Leninism - had been an appealing rationalisation for anti-colonial movements due to its explicit critique of imperialism - that is, until a number of communist movements began revolting against the governments of the newly independent states. At this point, non-communists in those states dropped Leninist ideas and vocabulary and it became instead essential to associate Marxism with a national phenomenon like Buddhism and to distance it from international communism.⁶⁴ This nativisation of socialist ideology was of course useful in combating the communist insurgency that gripped Burma during the late forties and early fifties, when erstwhile members of the AFPFL, the ‘White Flag’ and ‘Red Flag’ Communists under Thakin Than Tun and Thakin Soe broke away from the movement and waged a rebellion. In his autobiography, *Saturday’s Son*, U Nu made plain his belief that the communists had decided to abandon the democratic process and rebel only when told to do so by foreigners – the representatives of the successful Chinese and Russian communist regimes. Both Nu and Ba Swe’s efforts to link Buddhism to Marxism (and vice versa) can therefore be seen in the context of

⁶³ Thiriyatana, “Religion and Politics”. In a later letter Thiriyatana claims that this unknown term is equivalent to ‘*saupadisesa nibbana*’ – the enlightened state of one who has attained nirvana but has not yet passed away. See Thiriyatana, “Religion and Politics,” *The Guardian*, May 21, 1961.

⁶⁴ Frank N. Trager, “The Study Defined.” in Frank N. Trager, ed., *Marxism in Southeast Asia: A Study of Four Countries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 11.

nativising Marxist ideology – removing it from Russian, Chinese and even Western hands and placing it under the interpretive authority of the Buddhist (not communist) Burmese. Ba Swe hinted at this when he insisted that the Burmese revolution be carried out to fit the ‘local environment’ without slavishly following the Russian or Chinese model. These ideas also contribute to the concept of a ‘colonising’ Buddhist internationalism that was an alternative both to atheist communism and the (theistic) West. The Burmese communists had invalidated their claims to the Marxist legacy through their well-documented antipathy to religion. In 1954, Nu was quoted as saying:

To us, our religion is the greatest thing in life. We are a people whose whole life for centuries has been, and still is bound up with our religion. Therefore, we have resolved not to accept any creed that rejects religion.⁶⁵

Similarly, in an op-ed published in the *Guardian* in April 1959, one Nga Paw U asserted that

It would appear that in the blue-print for a Communist take-over in any target country the undermining and disintegration of any dominant religious influence in that country assumes a most primary and vital role. [Thus] the threat to Buddhism in Burma lies not in any another creed or religion but that of Communism. The Burmese Communists, both White and Red Flag, have long advocated and surreptitiously sought to spread their anti-religious themes in an attempt to disrupt the sway that Buddhism exerts over the people of the country; and thus be able to substitute their own alien creed.⁶⁶

The editorial published that same day reiterated this message, warning that Thakin Than Tun ‘would put to proletarian use all the gold of Shwedagon pagoda which was lying “waste.” ... Religion and public treasures are also considered legitimate booty by the Communists, and they will do what they like with such treasures in the name of glorious revolution.’⁶⁷ Plainly, religion and communism could not be reconciled.

On 3 October 1950 Nu gave a speech in Parliament in support of the Union Buddha Sasana Council Act. In this speech, he noted that one of the objects of the Council was to ‘counter the machinations

⁶⁵ “Burma Big Contrast to Indo-China in Winning War on Communism,” *The New Times of Burma*, July 29, 1954.

⁶⁶ Nga Paw U, “Communism and Buddhism,” *The Guardian*, April 4, 1959.

⁶⁷ “Menace to Religion,” *The Guardian*, April 4, 1959.

of those who are out to destroy the very foundations of the religion.’⁶⁸ These people had questioned the omniscience of the Buddha and worse, had declared that the Buddha was a lesser man than Karl Marx. ‘It will be one of the functions of this Buddhist organisation,’ said Nu, ‘to combat such challenges in the intellectual field.’

If any Marxist comes out with the statement that Karl Marx was a very wise man, it is not our concern to question it. But if he encroaches on our sphere and ridicules Lord Buddha whom we all adore and revere and if he has the effrontery to say that Marx was wiser than Lord Buddha, it is up to us to retaliate. It will be our duty to retort in no uncertain terms that the wisdom or knowledge that might be attributed to Karl Marx is less than one tenth of a particle of dust that lies at the feet of our great Lord Buddha.⁶⁹

It was argued that Buddha was the original Marxist, just as he was the original – and greatest – scientist. The error that the Burmese communists (as well as the Russian and Chinese communists) made is that they embraced only half of ‘socialism’ when they left out Buddhism. Marxism is an incomplete philosophy without the spiritual and moral counterpart that Buddhism represents. As with the case of science in the Christian West, Marxists who were not Buddhists practised only a vulgar form of the great, original belief-system. Thus, the key for determining who is a good Marxist and who is a bad one is how Buddhist they are.

Nonetheless, it was certainly *not* acceptable for the communists to champion their own ideology with the same equalising rhetoric. Nga Paw U, for instance, warned that the communists were seeking to undermine Buddhism: ‘first through all-out attack and, when that failed, to fall back on that age-old strategy “If you can’t fight them, join them.”’

The indirect approach has been along the similarities that are alleged to exist between Buddhism and Communism. ... There are, hence, not a few superficial likenesses between the two

⁶⁸ U Chan Htoon, “Union Buddha Sasana Council Act,” *The Light of the Dhamma* 1, 1 (1952): 47.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

systems; yet, this, while having some softening up effect upon some people, has not appeared to be quite very effective.’⁷⁰

An article published on 26 April 1959 reiterated this message, warning that ‘their supporters are now mouthing that their ideology is very similar to Buddhism,’ and that they claimed that:

that just as the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism are materialistic...so also the ideology of Communism is based on the objective realities of matter. They went so far as to refer to themselves as *Bodhisats*.... But none of the millions of Buddhists in Burma will allow Communist chicanery to foist a *pseudo* Buddhist materialism on them, especially after they had witnessed Buddhism scoffed, reviled, blasphemed and desecrated by the Burma Communists.⁷¹

The 1959 pamphlet *Dhamma in Danger* (actually published during the two-year ‘Caretaker’ regime) is quick to point out that the Communists were completely unable to reconcile their creed to Buddhism; in response to the question ‘Is it possible that the fundamentals of Buddhism and the Communist dialectical materialism square with each other?’ the Red Flag Communist leader Thakin Soe was reported as answering:

The ideology of Nibbana is an ideology of despair. Despairing of freedom in this world, in this existence, it seeks escape from this world and this life into Nibbana. ... Our dialectical materialism and the fundamentals of Buddhism are poles apart. ... A Burmese politician once sought to prove that Marxism supported Buddhism by pointing out examples where Buddhism squares with the discoveries of modern science. To such, Lenin had given the warning that a religion which had been processed to square with modern science is more crafty than simple old religions and therefore more harmful to the proletarian class.⁷²

⁷⁰ Nga Paw U, “Communism and Buddhism.” Actually, Nga Paw U, in contrast to the other people cited in this section, was unusual in that he denied *any* connection between Buddhism and Marxism: ‘In Burma, many are the attempts that have been made to co-relate Communism and Buddhism or to identify Marxism with Buddhism; and here, of course is joined an issue of the greatest importance. Are Buddhism and Marxism compatible? Despite these valiant efforts made to appear that they are so, it yet remains an irrefutable fact and inescapable fact that simply on the basis of the philosophical plane alone the two are in violent contradistinction.’ Nonetheless, Nga Paw U *does* subscribe to some modernist notions; earlier he notes in Buddhism, it is by one’s ‘scientific understanding and control of the physical forces of the world and the manipulation of the social forces he is expected to work out his own salvation.’ This is a reminder that the Buddhist modernist project was not monolithic.

⁷¹ “Dhamma in Danger,” *The Guardian*, April 26, 1959. A *bodhisat* (or *bodhisattva*) in Theravada Buddhism is an exceptional individual bound for enlightenment.

⁷² *Dhammantaraya (Dharma in Danger)* (Rangoon: Dir. of Information, 1959), i. This exchange reportedly took place at ‘the secret Party HQ’ in 1944 as part of a bureau called ‘Answers to Questions.’

Of all their crimes this seems to be the most grievous: their abandonment of Buddhism and their slavish adherence to Lenin, at best the producer of an inferior copy to Buddhism, at worst a heretic.

The purpose of the association between socialism and Buddhism was thus threefold, uniting socialism and Buddhism had cachet as a modern philosophy of development; it provided legitimacy for the state's own socialist programmes and it differentiated Burma from the international communist movement associated with the Soviet Union. Of course, there was another key difference between Buddhist modernism and the communists; the embrace of democracy. This will be the focus of this chapter's final section.

Buddhism and Democracy

[The memoir's] theme is perhaps that to be a good Buddhist is to be a good democrat.⁷³

- U Law Yone, translator's note to *Saturday's Son*

For hundreds of years in Burma and even during the colonial period, Buddhist authority was associated with the Burmese monarchy. Writing in the 1960s Cady argued that when an 'average Burman' contemplated home rule, even in the twentieth century, 'he thought automatically in terms of a revival of the kingship.'⁷⁴ The representative institutions whose establishment was a 'goal' of the colonial process and had been introduced in limited fashion in Burma were usually associated with the British and thus perceived negatively. The colonial official Maurice Collis observed that the system of dyarchy introduced in 1923 was so poorly understood yet so reviled among Burmese villagers 'that the term "diarchy" was taken to be a word of abuse.'⁷⁵ Even in postcolonial narratives, participation in the colonial legislature was often perceived by the new Burmese elites as collaboration: U Nu, U Ba Swe and other AFPFL leaders were proud of their past refusal to betray their principles for titles, wealth and such political influence as could be garnered through the colonial political system.⁷⁶ Yet following independence, the system of parliamentary democracy

⁷³ U Nu, *Saturday's Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), xiv.

⁷⁴ Cady, *History of Modern Burma*, 310.

⁷⁵ Collis, *Trials in Burma*, 27. 'Thus a man, losing his temper with his wife, would say, "You are a diarchy," as we might say "You are a damned fool."'

⁷⁶ U Nu, for example, pointed out in his memoirs that he refused to take up a government position offered to him by the Principal of Rangoon University. See U Nu, *Saturday's Son*, 53. For stories of other uncompromising revolutionaries see *Dr Maung Maung: Gentleman, Scholar, Patriot*.

was retained by the Burmese. Could theoretical support for democratic ideas and institutions be found in Buddhism, which had been associated with the monarchy for centuries?

One answer to this question framed the issue in terms of individualism. The historian U Kyaw Thet, writing in the *Atlantic* magazine in 1958, drew a contrast between the authoritarian political history of Burma and what he called the individualistic nature of Buddhism. 'Essentially,' he wrote, 'the teachings of the Buddha stress the importance of the individual - his salvation from the sorrows of the mind through dependence on his individual efforts.' A Buddhist could rely on no external power to affect the progress of his soul. This recognition of the importance of the individual, Kyaw Thet argued, 'has affinities with the basic concepts of Western democracy.'⁷⁷ Why then, did Burma not become democratic in accordance with the promise of their religion? The answer that Kyaw Thet offered is a familiar one: that it can be explained 'by reference to certain other cultural elements that came into Burmese life along with Buddhism' - specifically the Indian tradition of the divine monarch. Thus, the democratic potential and personal freedom that is identified within Buddhism was smothered by yet another 'accretion of the marvellous;' in this case the notion of the *cakkavattin*:

By his patronage and protection of the Buddhist faith, the king became the benefactor of all his people and thereby further strengthened his hold on them. His authority was justified as necessary to defend the purity of the precious faith and insure its survival. Indeed, the fact that he could be such a magnificent patron was accepted as proof that he had the most virtuous accumulation of meritorious deeds from previous incarnations to his credit and was therefore deserving of his superior powers. It was this religious sanction for the royal prestige which outweighed the tendencies toward decentralization of power...and the concept of personal freedom inherent in the teaching of the Buddha.⁷⁸

Kyaw Thet argues that the traditional relationship between monarchy and Buddhism in Burma was more parasitic than symbiotic. When the monarchy was strong, the true nature of Buddhism was suppressed and likewise 'as the force of the monarchical idea declined, that of Buddhism gained strength.'⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Kyaw Thet, "Continuity in Burma: the survival of historic forces."

⁷⁸ Ibid. I should point out here that Kyaw Thet does not disparage Indian culture; rather, he takes pains to list the gifts they brought to Burma: writing, mathematics, architecture and Buddhism not least.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

By this logic, the process of conquest and colonisation had the paradoxical effect of fatally undermining the idea of the monarchy, giving free rein to Buddhism's purer elements and furthermore clearing the way for the establishment of democratic Buddhism as a modern, national philosophy. As a colonial province of India, the Burmese were reminded constantly that they were undeveloped militarily, economically and technologically, perhaps culturally. Yet, if democratic representation was understood as the pinnacle of political progress and was a stated goal of the colonial 'civilising' mission (as the British indeed insisted it was), then the Burmese had evidence of their superiority in the form of their inherent and long-suppressed individualism:

Painfully aware that their national pride—even their continued existence—was manifestly debatable, the Burmese had to produce something tangible and traditional to justify their future as a separate entity. They found what they needed in Buddhism. The assorted Europeans might be richer, stronger, better trained, but it was comforting to know that all this was as nothing because they did not possess the jewel of the true faith. Buddhism began at this stage to acquire nationalist overtones, and, at the same time, its emphasis on individualism became increasingly significant.⁸⁰

As postcolonial Burma transitioned to a parliamentary democracy in 1948, the discursive association between Buddhism and democratic individualism was therefore inevitable, being both a result of recent history and something innate in the Buddhist religious temperament - it was much like that pertaining to Buddhism's relationship to socialism and science. 'The serious opinions of typical educated Burmese today will centre on his Buddhist convictions,' Kyaw Thet wrote, 'with his religion's spirit of humanity and individualism extending to a belief in a democratic form of government whose economy is state socialism.'⁸¹ This section will explore the ways in which modernist Burmese attempted to reconcile their religion with democratic individualism, in both a national sense and in terms of the transition of the Burmese laity from being subjects of a king to members of an international Buddhist community.

U Chan Htoon also believed in the essential congruity of Buddhism and democracy. In a speech given at the Sixteenth Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom, held in

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. Kyaw Thet nonetheless maintains that an acceptance of monarchy was maintained at a 'less conscious level,' by which he presumably meant less educated. He highlights 'excessive veneration' of superiors, elders and popular leaders as a symptom of this.

Chicago in August 1958 (the same month as his speech at Star Island, New Hampshire) Chan Htoon told his audience that Buddhism, as the religion of self-reliance and individual responsibility, was inherently democratic:

Buddhism requires that the freedom of the individual to determine his own destiny and to choose the kind of life he lives must never be subordinated to group interests, which seek to mould him to a standardized pattern and so deprive him of the initiative necessary for his spiritual development. For this reason the Buddha opposed caste distinctions, seeing in them an attempt to confine people in a rigid framework that would stultify their growth and prevent the full realization of their potentialities. Buddhism is democratic, but makes no attempt to achieve a classless society...it classifies men according to their character and natural abilities. It is thus the antithesis of the totalitarian concept in which the individual has only a group-existence subordinate to the needs of the State.⁸²

Chan Htoon argued that democracy was the most suitable political system for Buddhists, just as socialism was the most suitable economic system and science the most suitable technical and intellectual system – and for similar reasons. A socialist society was seen to guarantee a certain standard of living conducive to the attainment of personal enlightenment. A democratic society, according to Chan Htoon, provides similar guarantees, pertaining instead to the rights of the individual in the face of autocracy:

[Buddhism] is thus the antithesis of the totalitarian concept in which the individual has only a group-existence subordinate to the needs of the State. The State and its laws exist for the individual, not the individual for the State. They are merely the instruments by which men are enabled to live together in just and liberal relationships with the greatest amount of freedom consistent with a disciplined society.⁸³

The underlying logic of the position taken by Chan Htoon (and by other Buddhist modernists) was that if Buddhism flourishes in a democracy, then democracy in turn is guaranteed by the Buddhist values of tolerance and self-reliance. In addition, it proved that Burma was already ‘modern.’

Chan Htoon was promoting this notion a number of years before his lectures in America. In 1950 he gave a speech explaining the causes for the establishment of the Union Buddha Sasana Council, which as Attorney-General he had helped bring into being. In this speech, Chan Htoon observed

⁸² U Chan Htoon, *Buddhism and the Age of Science: Two Addresses* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1962), 9.

⁸³ Ibid.

that despite Burma's status as 'the leading Buddhist country, where the influence of Buddhism on the people is strongest and studies in the Buddha's Teachings are most vigorously carried out' the country was consumed with 'widespread disorder and ruthless killing.'⁸⁴ The reason for this, Chan Htoon argued, was that Burmese Buddhist *practice* had declined as a consequence of foreign dominion, and that the country had become 'like a rudderless ship sent adrift from spiritual moorings.'⁸⁵ So far, this is consistent with both Buddhist modernist and broader, pan-cultural complaints about societal ills being caused by the decline of religion. Understandably, Chan Htoon went on to assert that a revival of religion would bring about a great improvement in the social and cultural life of Burma. What is significant, however, is his claim that such improvement would make itself felt in the realm of development and most particularly in the area of democracy:

Now that we have got back our independence, it is our duty to promote all the spiritual and material wellbeing of our people. Above all we must promote our religion - the main spring of our civilisation, culture, law and customs. We shall be able to consolidate our position in strength and unity as a sovereign independent nation on democratic principles as embodied in the Constitution, only if we follow the creed and ideology that are in consonance with our present conditions and past history and our common beliefs and aspirations.⁸⁶

This strong statement is further reinforced when he asks: 'What is the most essential factor for true Democracy to take root and flourish?' He answers himself:

I may say that 90 to 95% of the population in Burma are Buddhists. If all these people would observe and practise the Teachings of the Buddha, there would be no cause for fear or anxiety on the part of the minority groups, and the country would undoubtedly become a radiant example as a true Buddhist country, run on the highest principles of justice and democracy.⁸⁷

Finally, after extolling the Buddhist virtue of tolerance, he makes the following claim:

⁸⁴ Chan Htoon, "Union Buddha Sasana Council Act," 49-50.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 50. Interestingly, one of the 'moral failings' that Chan Htoon describe is that the 'prices of many consumer goods, such as as textiles etc. are very low in Ceylon, while as a result of inordinate greed they are very high in Burma.'

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

I therefore believe that if the remaining 5% would also act according to the Dhamma we would have laid a firm foundation ... to maintain social order on the basis of the eternal principles of justice, liberty and equality.⁸⁸

In other words, ‘justice, liberty and equality’ are inherent in Buddhism and are best guaranteed through Buddhist practice, or at least the practice of Buddhist morality.⁸⁹ It seems that the religious minorities, be they Christian, Muslim, Hindu or animist are no more democratic in orientation than they are scientific.

Nor was this view restricted solely to well-known figures like Chan Htoon and U Nu. In a letter published in the *Guardian* newspaper on 26 March 1959, the author, U Hla Maung, took the paper to task for its frequent condemnation of parliamentarians. (This was during the ‘Caretaker’ dictatorship, which the *Guardian* supported.) The ‘depravity’ of the post-war years was not the province of politicians alone, he argued, it was also a failing on the part of the masses. The return of democracy need not be feared so long as there was an ‘intellectual or moral awakening’ among Burmese. Hla Maung had a number of suggestions as to how this might be achieved but laid greatest emphasis on the need for ‘a truly Burmese or Indigenous type of democracy free from elements which are pernicious and foreign to our traditions and culture and not sacrificing ethical and spiritual growth to material prosperity.’⁹⁰ We can safely assume that the ‘traditions and culture’ to which he is referring are those of Buddhism, as are the ‘ethics’ and the ‘spiritual growth’ mentioned.

Laying further emphasis on the similarities between Buddhist tolerance and democratic values was a letter to the *Guardian* dated 11 August 1961. In this letter, Maung Sein, the author, was appalled at Nu’s insistence that certain ethnic minorities (Arakenese, Mons and Shans) support his bill to make Buddhism the state religion in return for greater political autonomy. The demand, he

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ The idea that a non-Buddhist could practise the morality at the textual core of Buddhism (as opposed to the superfluous rituals and traditions) crops up elsewhere in Anglophone Buddhist discourse. The Italian Buddhist monk, U Lokanatha, in a lecture at Rangoon University told how in America he had been asked ‘Is it possible to practise Buddhism without renouncing Christianity?’ His answer: ‘Don’t worry. Simply walk on the Noble Eightfold Path. If you walk on the Noble Eightfold Path everything will take care of itself but, do walk on the Noble Eightfold Path. No matter what label you keep. It makes no difference.’ Cited in ‘A Sermon delivered to students at Rangoon University by U Lokanatha a Buddhist monk formerly an Italian Roman Catholic,’ *The Light of the Dhamma* 1, 1 (1952): 64.

⁹⁰ “Higher Morale,” *The Guardian*, March 26, 1959. He did not elaborate on what these ‘elements’ were.

argued ‘is at once undemocratic, opposed to parliamentary ethics and last but most important, un-Buddhistic.’

He has been back from a continuous period of forty-five days of secluded piety during which he must have unavoidably meditated on toleration and magnanimity without which practice in Buddhism will only be a sham. Coming out from such an intensive meditation for self-enlightenment, he must be expected to be calm, serene, tranquil, and in fact, permeated with all the good qualities appertaining to the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment. He must be able to avoid the ten (Dusareik) evils. He must be prepared to forgive any harm done to himself. But what have we got from him?⁹¹

We can note the difference between this negative account of Nu’s very public retreat to ‘fast, pray and tell beads at the summit of Mount Popa not only for the good of his own soul but also for the good of the country’⁹² (as one editorial sarcastically put it) and the approval accorded to acts of ascetic cultivation by the king in the dharma state paradigm. Maung Sein’s conception of piety and his conception of the performative criteria for legitimate Buddhist government stresses the close alignment of Buddhist piety and proper Buddhist government with democracy and democratic values. For him, Nu’s ostentatious devotion to Buddhism was less important than his apparent lack of Buddhist tolerance and magnanimity – which in turn made him not only a poor leader but also a poor democrat – and according to the standards of Buddhist modernism, a poor Buddhist.

Maung Sein was not the only person to express this Buddhist modernist disdain for Nu’s ritualism. The *Guardian* in particular published a number of editorials and letters on the subject. In one, ‘Premier’s Journey’s’ the editor Sein Win asked rhetorically if prayer and meditation at Mount Popa (not to mention *nat*-worship) could solve the problems with the ruling party. Nu’s party, he wrote, is so fractious that it cannot function while he is not present, which is a problem when he goes off for forty-five days and insists on not being disturbed. According to Sein Win, Nu needed to concentrate on ‘fixing democracy, not prayer.’⁹³ Another letter to the *Guardian* criticised Nu’s government for its wasteful expenditure on religious display, crying ‘we cannot but try to open the eyes of the Burmese public who don’t think for themselves but who are hypnotized by public manifestations of

⁹¹ “PM’s Demand,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 1961.

⁹² “Summon from the Mount,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 1961.

⁹³ “Premier’s Journeys” *The Guardian*, December 13, 1961.

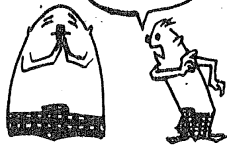
PO NYAN

(alias)

MISTER WISE



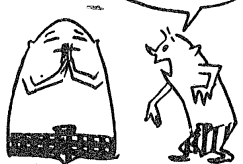
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23 PERSONS
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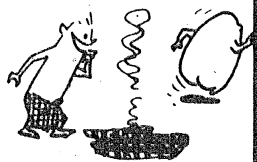
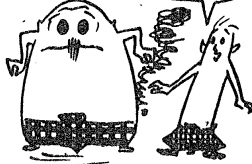
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DIED IN SHIP
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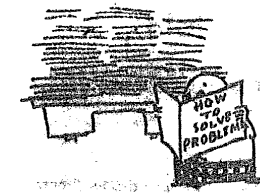
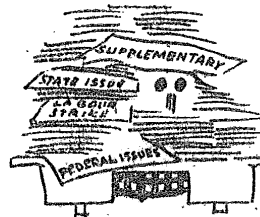
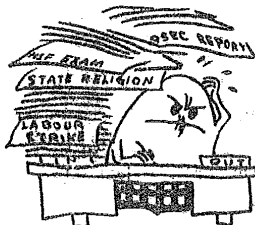
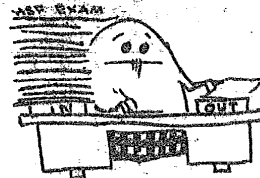
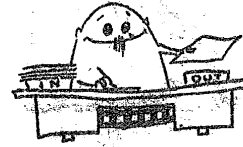
SIR,
YOUR LONGYI
ON FIRE



PO NYAN

(alias)

MISTER WISE



Two cartoons featuring the *Guardian's* mascot, Po Nyan, lampooning Prime Minister U Nu for his retreat into meditation during a time of crisis. (May 7, 1961, July 16, 1961.)⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *The Guardian*, May 7, 1961; *The Guardian* July 16, 1961.

religious mania, bead-telling and vipassana performance and sweet words.⁹⁵ Yet another made the following sardonic observation after Nu's return from Mount Popa: 'It is widely recognised that Meditation is the source of Wisdom. A pronouncement by the late Hermit of Popa Taung is therefore anxiously awaited.'⁹⁶

We can suggest that Nu would have found these contemptuous letters confusing. According to Ingrid Jordt, in *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, he considered meditation, specifically meditation by laypeople, to be a critical part of building a democratic Buddhist state. Like Chan Htoon above, Nu subscribed to the notion that Buddhist values and democratic values were the same, or at least complementary. Jordt wrote that:

U Nu's conception of democracy was not premised on the sovereign will of a people made up of independent-minded citizen individuals. Rather, democracy was the end result of having already unified and established shared norms and values - especially Buddhist universal, causative, objective, and self-evident moral values.⁹⁷

Jordt sees the *vipassana* or insight meditation movement as a key element of Nu's project of building a democratic, united Buddhist citizenry. *Vipassana* is a movement associated with Buddhism modernism generally and with Burma particularly, as its modern manifestation was devised by Burmese monks, most notably the Ledi Sayadaw (1846 - 1923).⁹⁸ It emphasises meditation by laypeople, who traditionally were not obliged to meditate. Nu was involved in giving the movement official recognition, and reputedly encouraged everyone from government officials to prisoners to practise *vipassana* meditation.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ "First Things First," *The Guardian*, January 13, 1962. The author of this letter does not declare if they are themselves Buddhist or not.

⁹⁶ "Meditation," *The Guardian*, July 16, 1961. The remainder of this letter is a joke about a monk whose first words following a seven-year vow of silence are to complain about his diet. It cements the impression of the author's disdain for ritual.

⁹⁷ Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 176. In *Saturday's Son*, Nu wrote: 'In promoting the ideal of democracy, two things were essential; first to identify the natural enemies of democracy; and, second, to educate the leaders as well as the masses in the value of moral cleanliness, self-restraint, the spirit of compromise, and willingness to accept the verdict of the people as expressed at the polls, and to imbue them with such a spirit that they would be willing to die in defence of democracy'

⁹⁸ See Braun, *The Birth of Insight* for a detailed biography of the Ledi Sayadaw.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-30. Jordt states that U Nu's government actually freed prisoners who attained a certain rank in insight meditation, on the grounds that such people had become enlightened and would no longer sin.

Lay meditation represented a performative shift away from the sangha and towards an engaged Buddhist laity; a position consistent with Buddhist modernism and, more generally, with the idea of a participatory democracy. We can argue that the change in the form of political sovereignty was reflected in the expectation that the citizen-laity would at some level assume the responsibilities towards Buddhism that the king had previously fulfilled. An example of this can be seen in the Sixth Great Buddhist Synod, which took place in Rangoon from 1954 to 1956.

According to a souvenir album published by the Union Buddha Sasana Council in 1956, the purpose of the Sixth Great Buddhist Synod (or *Chattha Sangayana*) was ‘to revise the Texts...to print [and] to distribute them all over the world with the object of preserving the Dhamma; and to enable the Union of Burma, in co-operation and collaboration with all Buddhist countries to promote the Buddha Sāsana.’¹⁰⁰ This was a lengthy, yet intensive process wherein the texts were recited and checked for errors, involving many hundreds of monks and a series of purpose-built structures, including an artificial cave and the Kaba Aye pagoda. It was calculated to coincide with the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s enlightenment. At its conclusion in May 1956, Nu gave an address at the ‘Ceremony for the Presentation of the Tipitaka Books.’ The speech, which appeared in translation in the *New Times of Burma*, covered familiar Buddhist modernist territory: for instance, he insisted that there were ‘two methods in working for the progress and welfare of mankind’ - the mundane and the supramundane. The former applied to individual livelihood and the accumulation of wealth and through the latter, a person ‘works not only for his progress and welfare in the present life, but also for the purpose of reaping the resultant effect of happiness in his future existences and...to attain Nibbana.’¹⁰¹ The distinction between the ‘mundane’ and the ‘supramundane’ is here interesting, since according to Nu’s rhetoric, the ‘supramundane’ apparently incorporates not only individual spiritual activity but the ‘progress and welfare’ of mankind as a whole. The Synod has become a collective responsibility of all humanity, rather than something whose patron was the monarch as *dhammaraja*. Its sponsorship was also aligned with Buddhist modernist goals like internationalism and the significance of the citizen-laity. Consider the following excerpt from Nu’s speech:

I should like to mention a striking feature in the holding of the present Chattha Sangayana. In the case of the five previous Sangayanas, the Sasana Dayakas were the absolute monarchs. They

¹⁰⁰ *The Chattha Sangāyanā Souvenir Album* (Rangoon: Union Buddha Sāsana Council Press, 1956).

¹⁰¹ “Burma Leads The Way,” *The New Times of Burma*, May 24, 1956.

thought that the holding of a Sangayana is not the concern of the public, but it only concerns the king. Thus they did not seek the co-operation of the people. They held the councils within their own territories and did not receive the help and co-operation from other countries. [Now,] we find the following...the Sasana Dayaka is not a despotic ruler, but a people who are striving their best for the Sasana with great faith.¹⁰²

Sasana dayaka means patron of the religion. The meaning here is clear. With the transition from a monarchy to a democracy, the defender and patron of Buddhism was now the laity as a whole, just as sovereignty rested with the citizenry rather than a king. And in further contrast to the king, sitting at the centre of his demesne, in an essentially personal relationship with his sangha, we have instead the citizen laity acting in cooperation with the sangha, each other, and with the broader Buddhist community of the world. This sentiment was shared by other speakers. At the same event, a speech was given by Justice U Thein Maung in his capacity as ‘President of the Central Organisation for the Celebrations of the Successful Conclusion of the Chattha Sangayana and the 2500th Anniversary of the Buddha-Sasana.’ It reads in part:

I most respectfully and happily declare that the offerings made now are of a much higher and nobler quality compared to the great meritorious deeds done in the past. The great offerings made in ancient times were either competitions between Rulers and their subjects or offerings made by millionaires but the present offerings and deeds of merit are a joint and united effort of the Government and citizens of all classes.¹⁰³

Thus, not only have the Burmese laity usurped the religious responsibilities of the king, they fulfil them in a manifestly superior manner.

U Chan Htoon was also present at the celebrations in his capacity as Honorary Secretary General of the Union Buddha Sasana Council. He too gave an address, where he informed his audience that

It may be said that the scope of the Chattha Sangayana is much wider than that of the previous Councils both in geographical extent and in relation to the number of countries and people of different races who have taken part. ... Therefore this Chattha Sangayana can truly be declared as an International Sangayana - a universal undertaking having the co-operation and

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid. Apparently, Justice U Thein Maung’s full title was the Hon’ble Agga Maha Thray Sithu, Thado Thiri Thudhamma Justice U Thein Maung.

collaboration of all the Bhikku Sangha and the Buddhist peoples of all the countries of the world.¹⁰⁴

In this statement Chan Htoon made clear the universalist emphasis that this Synod possessed in contrast to those of the past. Now, the whole Buddhist world could support and be involved in a Synod that nonetheless took place in Burma - a triumph for the former colony and its religion.¹⁰⁵ Chan Htoon continues:

The time, which countless generations of Buddhists have been looking forward to as the beginning of a new era of unprecedented glory and influence of Buddhism has come. There is a belief common to all Buddhist that in the new era ushered in by the 2500th Anniversary...the Buddhist way of life will become universal and peace and goodwill prevail among all men. There are indications to assure us that this belief is coming true. We see with wonder and elation the Buddhist awakening and renaissance in the whole world in the past two years.¹⁰⁶

It is no coincidence that this new era coincides with the revival of Buddhism in postcolonial Burma and its 'People's Sangayana,' as Chan Htoon called it. He concludes his speech with a familiar message:

The doctrine of Hate, which the evil forces rooted in Greed and Delusion are trying to force upon the world, hold a real threat to the very existence of man in the present age of atomic and hydrogen bombs. Buddhism alone can meet this challenge and dispel this doctrine of Hate, since the teachings of the Buddha are built on a basis of compassionate love and supreme reason. Let all of us Buddhists, therefore endeavour to the utmost limit of our power and ability to bring the teachings of the Buddha to the hearts of all men so that there will be universal peace and goodwill, happiness and prosperity.¹⁰⁷

In the present age where technology outpaces morality, only Buddhism - democratic, rational and progressive - is a fitting philosophy for the modern world.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. He continues: 'I would, therefore, most respectfully declare that the time has now come to go through the length and breadth of the world and spread the Buddha-Dhamma and as contained propounded in these Texts of the Chattha Sangayana edition.'

¹⁰⁵ In point of fact, the Synod involved minimal participation from non-Burmese monks, save a very small Thai contingent and some cooperation with Sri Lanka. See Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, 276-7; and particularly Chris Clark, "The Sixth Buddhist Council: Its Purpose, Presentation, and Product," *The Journal of Burma Studies* 19, 1 (2015), pp. 79-112.

¹⁰⁶ "Burma Leads The Way"

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

To conclude this chapter, therefore, we have seen the ways in which the Burmese perpetuated and reinterpreted English-language discourse about the essential nature of Buddhism and its relationship with the key institutions and ideologies of science, socialism and democracy. By tightly linking a corrected orthopraxis with these essentially modern ideas, the Burmese elites hoped to silence critics - at home and abroad - boost legitimacy for the new state and its programs, shatter the sluggish, superstitious stereotype of the colonial era and embrace a dynamic Buddhist future. The following chapter sets out systematically how these ideas map onto continuities and discontinuities in the Burmese state.

Chapter Five

Transformation, Comparison and Analysis

Introduction: The Dharma State versus the Science State

As we saw in the first chapter, English-language scholarly discourse about premodern Southeast Asia presents the Aśokan paradigm as the main socio-political model for Theravada Buddhist states before the advent of Western colonialism. This paradigm asserts that the purpose of authority and empire - symbolised by Aśoka as the exemplary Buddhist monarchy - was to provide the opportunity for the practice of Buddhism morality and the quest for enlightenment. In Stanley Tambiah's reading, the Aśokan paradigm involved the monarch assuming responsibility for a certain degree of material prosperity as well as for the preservation of the dharma, and most modern scholars would see the traditional state as a religious entity possessed both physical and metaphysical functions.¹ Yet many historians would also argue that in Burma, at least by the time of the late Konbaung dynasty, the priorities had shifted and the function of the state and the responsibility of authority had become almost entirely supernatural/religious. It is not that scholars generally claim that the state had no stake in the prosperity of the realm; rather they see such prosperity was guaranteed by spiritual, as opposed to material or economic practice. As we have seen, the scholarly discourse holds that this practice was twofold: doctrinal and cosmological. The king was obliged to act in accordance with the dharma (i.e.: to act morally); he had to be engaged in 'works' that were perceived as supporting and/or preserving the dharma (building pagodas, patronising the sangha, etc.) and he also had to order his affairs and those of the realm in accordance with the greater Buddhist cosmos (by possessing the requisite number of queens, palaces, administrative districts, etc.)

Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that most modern scholars believe that traditional Burmese kings possessed no real responsibility to improve or enhance the material welfare, the 'standard of living' for his subjects (with one notable exception, which I will return to momentarily); the material domain was, scholars generally concur, directed at providing a basis for spiritual undertakings. Scholars draw attention to the fact that almost all of the *dasa rajadhamma* - the ten virtues of a good king - are religious qualities associated with Buddhist morality; non-violence, almsgiving, keeping the precepts, etc. Only two, *pariccaga* and *khanti*, (generosity and patience) are qualities that could be portrayed as desirable from a modern political standpoint. The responsibilities of the king (and thus of the state) are not primarily administrative; indeed, a recent

¹ Tambiah, "Buddhism and This-Worldly Activity," 17.

authoritative history of modern Burma by Thant Myint-U presents the main responsibility of royal government as being the management of the capital:

The rulers of Ava drew a firm distinction between between *pyi-yay*, the ‘business of the capital’ and *ywa-hmu*, ‘the affairs of the village.’ While the business of the capital was the business of the king and his ministers, the affairs of the village called for only occasional attention. Many royal edicts, with an air of finality, simply called on the people of the countryside to live in peace and prosperity under their hereditary chiefs.²

According to such narratives, the ‘business of the capital,’ was mostly religious; large-scale ‘state projects’ requiring corvée labour (excluding wars) were almost always religious in nature, paying only spiritual, not material dividends.³

Modern academic discourse on traditional Burma suggests that the only real material beneficiaries of state largesse were *pongyis*, maintaining the sangha being not merely a merit-making activity, but a concrete way in which state authority could preserve the dharma (the transmission of the teachings being the chief responsibility of the monkhood.) Such activity is understood by historians as having ranged from regular donation to the construction of monasteries, the ultimate gesture being the calling of a great Synod to revise the teachings. Thant Myint-U draws our attention to the last premodern Synod that was called by Mindon, the penultimate Burmese monarch, at a time of crisis for the Burmese kingdom when it had been reduced to a landlocked fragment. The calling of the Synod tends to be construed as having been an effort by Mindon to secure his own legitimacy at a time when the monarchy was under pressure and alternative means of doing so, like victory in war, were not available. Thant Myint-U writes:

The decline in royal prestige resulting from the second defeat at the hands of the British and the loss of Pegu impressed upon Mindon the need to meet or even exceed what was perceived as the ‘traditional’ ceremonial and religious obligations of a Burmese monarch. ... Mindon must have seen the usefulness, at a time of increasing threats to royal authority, of strengthening religious institutions through lavish patronage, and to associate the state, especially the monarchy, as closely as possible with a reinvigorated and centralised Buddhist Sangha.⁴

² See Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 75.

³ For a more detailed examination of these concepts see Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles*, 66; and Michael Aung-Thwin, *Myanmar in the Fifteenth Century: A Tale of Two Kingdoms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2017).

⁴ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 75.

This narrative sees Mindon is seen as having made efforts at a time of great change to reaffirm the state's basic function as preserving the dharma and supporting the sangha. According to the dharma state paradigm, therefore, Mindon saw the state above all as an agent for the preservation of the dharma. In this account, *pongyis* are the only group with any enduring influence over authority, as well as the only group to which the state guaranteed a 'standard of living,' they might be described as the only real 'citizens' of the dharma state. From the perspective of the dharma state and sangha state models, monks were in partnership with the king and the main group in Burmese society that possessed enduring 'rights' and 'responsibilities.'

As the first chapter of this thesis argued, modern scholarly discourse has consistently argued that the main determinants of legitimacy in Burma were Buddhist ones and they were mostly spectral, physically removed from the majority of the Burmese people, but were still an aspect of common participation in the Buddhist *sasana*. The state, this paradigm asserts, was not obliged to provide for its people in a material sense: the exaltation of the *pongyi* as the paragon of Burmese Buddhist life is understood as showing that the old Burmese state more or less discouraged concern for the material. Rather, the only 'goal' of the Burmese subject is supposed to have been enlightenment and the only responsibility of the state is supposed to have been to the dharma. In this account, state authority was charged with minimising craving, preventing people from being controlled by their desires. The scholarly narrative holds that in the traditional Burmese state, desire for wealth, status, power or whatever were all seen as forms of craving and thus an impediment to the attainment of enlightenment.

A good example of how modern scholarship has conceived these issues can be found in the way it has portrayed premodern attitudes towards *loki pañña* or 'this-worldly knowledge,' under whose rubric comes all understanding that is unrelated to the attainment of nirvana, including 'technical' knowledge, such as an understanding of the natural world, but also astrology, alchemy and other such 'occult sciences.'⁵ Sarkisyanz asserts that premodern Buddhism 'did not promote curiosity about nature and the empirical world, just as Gautama Buddha had held aloof from such "low" arts and sciences as were not directed towards his goal of deliverance from suffering.' Rather:

⁵ Tosa, "The Chicken and The Scorpion," 159; Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought*, 82-3.

the intellectual achievements of traditional Buddhist Burma were directed towards the single purpose of liberation from Impermanence; intellectual will was directed towards the overcoming of transitory phenomena and deliverance from them. Indifference towards the transitory world of the senses was the ideal. ... What was thought predictable in nature, like natural harmony and natural calamity, was attributed to causation from the sphere of the ethical Law.⁶

Sarkisyanz's arguments form part of a larger set of claims in the scholarly discourse about the relationship between the Buddhist dharma and modern accounts of the nature of the physical world. Gokhale notes that the term dharma is usually translated as 'law' but it has also been interpreted as 'truth' or even 'norm' – a straightforward description of the workings of the universe.⁷ We can summarise this academic consensus on the nature of traditional Buddhist understandings of the relationship between the dharma and knowledge of nature as follows: the teachings of the Buddha have a monopoly on certainty and what is true. What might now be termed 'scientific knowledge' is – while not false – considered to be of less importance than *lokuttara pañña*: the higher knowledge of the supramundane. In this interpretation, the premodern Burmese state can be seen as effectively discouraging innovation in favour of preserving a comprehensive, extant and static view of the world. What is the end result of all this? Since the state is held to be religiously, as opposed to materially oriented, and its legitimacy is derived from religious activity, authority in Burma is understood as being engaged in 'selling' *stability* - social and religious - as its performative responsibility.⁸ In the academic narrative, the state, like the sangha, serves as a device for resisting *anicca* - impermanence. This is not a contradiction - it keeps the dharma intact (and pure); it keeps the microcosm properly aligned with the macrocosm to prevent catastrophic change in the environment when the 'norm' becomes unbalanced.

As the first chapter observed, the modern English-language scholarly account of the nature of the traditional Burmese Buddhist monarchy was brought into being through Burma's entry into the

⁶ Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds*, 98-9. Also: 'Insights into mechanical manipulatability of nature was obstructed by the Buddhist pursuit to realise the all embracing unity of life...the unity of man with all beings, the unity of man with nature. Human control over the phenomenon of nature presupposes man's consciousness of separation from it; in Burma monistic or pantheistic attitudes, affected by the pre-Buddhistic animism of Southeast Asia, militated against the scientific observation of nature, and thereby delayed technological achievement.' Sarkisyanz concluded that 'therefore, the Burmese Empire lacked a basis for technization and ultimate effectiveness of its military power.'

⁷ As Gokhale put it: '*Dhamma* is not to be understood as a metaphysical system or sectarian creed which could differ from time to time or prophet to prophet. Rather it is taken to mean righteousness, propriety, norm ... This *dhamma* is a mystic force obeying its own inexorable laws and rewarding and punishing kings in its own cosmic right...it regulates not only the conduct of the state and its subjects but also the order of nature.' Cited in Gokhale, "The Early Buddhist View of the State," 736.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the tension between the concepts of *lokuttara pañña* and *loki pañña* and their relationship to political thought in Burma see Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought*, 96-126.

modern world as a province of the British Empire, which ruptured the link between Buddhism and the state that had existed in the Konbaung dynasty and its predecessors. The British colonial enterprise of which Burma had become a part was materially oriented; it functioned to facilitate the extraction of material resources on the one hand, and justified itself as improving the ‘living standard’ of the Burmese through development and modern governance on the other; as Kipling’s famous poem put it: ‘to fill the mouth of Famine / And bid the sickness cease.’⁹ For different reasons, colonial officials, the scholars of the late colonial and postcolonial eras and anti-colonial nationalists all implicitly or explicitly contrasted the material orientation of Burma’s British rulers to the purportedly more ethereal responsibilities of the traditional Burmese king and the dharma polity. The British placed particular emphasis on the concept of ‘law and order,’ and, as mentioned in the second chapter, believed that the Burmese would set aside their belief in the religious importance of kingship in favour of the safety and stability that British rule would bring.

Indeed, scholars have defined the entire colonial state-building project as based on the idea of ‘Improvement’ – the idea that economic development and social reform would lead to political stability. The concept of ‘law and order’ cherished by colonial officials like Edward Sladen, mentioned in Chapter Two, was but a facet of this. Writing on the Indian context, the scholar Ranajit Guha stated that the trope of ‘Improvement’ ‘...informed all all efforts made by the colonial rulers to relate non-antagonistically to the ruled.’¹⁰ ‘Improvement’ was a flexible concept: it incorporated both rhetoric and realpolitik. Much of colonial ‘economic development,’ including the ‘standardisation of weights and measures...the modernisation of instruments of credit and means of transport’ supported the fundamentally acquisitive nature of colonialism in Asia; similarly, many of the initiatives undertaken by colonialists enacted the project of ‘civilising’ the East. The target of most of these projects of ‘improvement’ and ‘civilising’ were the elites, who were made the recipients of a Western education, as well being the focus of ‘constitutional and administrative measures to accommodate [them] in a secondary position within the colonial power structure.’¹¹ This limited partnership in the colonial project was intended to cause these elites to defer to the goals of the West through simple exposure to ‘enlightened’ notions and European standards. Also, by making them material stakeholders in the colonial enterprise it was hoped that they would

⁹ Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden: The United States & The Philippines Islands, 1899,” in *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 1929.)

¹⁰ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 30-1.

¹¹ Ibid.

become comfortable with and dependent on the status quo. As Lord Cornwallis wrote with reference to the Indian context:

it is a matter of the [ultimate] importance...that the proprietors of the lands should be attached to us, from motives of self-interest. A landholder, who is secured in the quiet enjoyment of a profitable estate can have no motive for wishing for a change.¹²

Broadly speaking, the British did not seek to fulfil the traditional expectations that the Burmese held concerning the religious functions of the state and the exercising of legitimate authority as these are articulated in the Aśokan paradigm. Hostility to ‘superstition’ aside, the British had a deliberate policy of religious non-interference in their colonies following the Indian Mutiny of 1857.¹³ In addition, we can argue that the British never bothered to ‘sell’ their understanding of state structure to the Burmese. Acceptance of the status quo was understood to occur osmotically, via ‘Improvement.’ Indeed, the empire was so unconcerned with its own legitimacy that, in the name of administrative efficiency, it incorporated the Burmese kingdom into the colony of India. Historically, the Burmese saw themselves as having little in common with India - despite India’s cultural influence on Burma, they considered themselves religiously, politically and ethnically distinct from India (the Burmese word for Indian - *kala* - is also their word for alien.) The militant Burmese monarchs of the seventeenth century made war on India in part because they considered them unfitting custodians of Buddhist relics. By incorporating Burma into their Indian colony and everything else they did, the British believed that they were giving the Burmese what they *needed* (modernisation) but were not aware they *wanted*. This was the so-called ‘white man’s burden,’ which, as Kipling put it, reaped a reward of ingratitude, ‘the blame of those ye better / the hate of those ye guard.’¹⁴ As many postcolonial scholars have observed, the colonial state ultimately depended on the exercise of violence rather than persuasion. The colonial apparatus asserted its legitimacy by citing criteria that were largely invisible to the Burmese people and therefore deeply unpopular, even among the English-speaking (Buddhist) elite, the recipients of much of the coloniser’s civilising largesse.

¹² Ibid., 32.

¹³ This policy was given expression in Queen Victoria’s proclamation of 1858, which reads, in part: ‘Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity, and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion, we disclaim alike the right and desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects ... we do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure.’ See “Queen Victoria’s Proclamation” *Wikisource*, last accessed January 7, 2017, en.wikisource.org/wiki/Queen_Victoria's_Proclamation.

¹⁴ Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden.”

A key example of the way in which the new colonial orientation affected Burma can be seen in the role of the sangha. His faith in law and order notwithstanding, Edward Sladen stressed the importance of the state-sangha relationship when he argued that the people of Upper Burma might welcome the British, ‘if only we did not interfere with religion so seriously as we have done since we took possession of Lower Burma.’ By ‘interference’, Sladen actually meant the studious refusal of the British to enforce the *Vinaya* (the monastic code of conduct) and the ecclesiastical hierarchy headed by the *thathanabaing* in the Raj.¹⁵ As noted earlier in this thesis, in precolonial Burma, the office of *thathanabaing* was the means by which the Burmese kings enforced orthodoxy on the sangha, preventing indiscipline and schisms. Such actions were part of the interdependence of king and sangha and the responsibilities of a *dhammaraja*.¹⁶ Sladen argued that if British gave legal force to the *Vinaya*, appointed ‘an archbishop and bishops ...with lawful authority to control the priesthood,’ then the monkhood would be propitiated – even loyal – and social order guaranteed.¹⁷ It can be suggested that because the British did not give legal backing to the *Vinaya* they made enemies of the people and the monkhood. Under the kings, the academic discourse contends, *pongyis* had occupied a place of great importance as the living symbols of the ‘goal’ of pursuing nirvana, as well as being seen as the repository of the teachings that made it possible. Under colonialism, the only ‘goal’ of a British Burmese subject was simply to be economically productive and their only responsibility was to obey colonial (not dharmic) law. For the colonial state, which had no mission to defend the dharma, *pongyis* were at best irrelevant; at worst they were deemed unproductive troublemakers on account of their involvement in politics and the anti-colonial movement. A quotation from Furnivall illustrates this British view:

Nowadays the monk [is not] so helpful to the village, and in particular the Order has lost its hold on education. ... To-day the children of the wealthier and urban classes are sent to lay schools to pass examinations. Pali, the classical language of the monastic curriculum has *no market value*

¹⁵ Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma*, 180. The result of this refusal, Sladen wrote, was that the ‘power of the priesthood (in Lower Burma) to regulate church affairs is almost nil, their influence for good has vastly deteriorated, and Buddhism...is broken up into numerous sects and schisms, without and beyond all ecclesiastical control.’

¹⁶ ‘The Burmese king’ one author observed, ‘was the protector of the Buddhist religion and the ecclesiastical commission appointed by the king was the mechanism on which the Buddhist clergy relied for power to unfrock its undesirable members.’ See Ma Mya Sein *Burma* (Edinburgh: Oxford University Press, 1943), 21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

[so] the monks in general are now among the most unenlightened of the people instead of, as formerly, their leaders in cultural development.¹⁸

In speaking of the market value of Pali, Furnivall describes (but does not necessarily endorse) British colonial perceptions of the relationship between religion, culture and the economy. Yet this quotation also alludes to another key concept of colonial ideology; the idea of ‘enlightenment’ – something quite different to the Burmese understanding of the term. This was the ‘light’ towards which the colonised were to be led to bring them out of bondage.

Both the British colonial and the Burmese postcolonial states staked a certain amount of their claim to legitimacy on the ‘right of displacement.’ For the British in 1886, their legitimacy sprang from the destruction of the backwards Burmese kingdom and its replacement with a modern administration. The challenge of building a new state atop the ruins of the old was not an unfamiliar one for the British. Their approach was simply to extend the existing system of colonial rule from India, annexing Burma as a province of the greater Raj. The idea that this ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach might be ill-suited to the administration of Burma did not occur to the British; they were broadly convinced of the legitimacy of their policy because they perceived it as bringing progress and order. For an example of this attitude, let us consider an extract from *The Coming of the Great Queen* by Major Edmund Charles Browne. This book, like Geary’s, was published shortly after the annexation, a time when insurrection was rife and the issue of legitimacy was particularly important. In response to the questions: ‘Is accession of this new territory...likely to result in good or evil, profit or loss to ourselves?’ and ‘Will our advent bring blessings and peace to these people themselves?’ Browne answered, firstly, that it had indeed been for the good and cited a number of reasons, including the facts that ‘order, and a firm and consistent government have been substituted for a chronic state of anarchy [and that] obstructions to trade have vanished, and a new field for mercantile enterprise has been opened up.’¹⁹ As for the second question, which was, basically, the question of Burmese happiness under British rule, Browne wrote:

¹⁸ Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 200-1. Emphasis mine. Furnivall also makes the observation that ‘Buddhism, as ordinarily understood by the Burmese monk, is wholly incompatible with Western individualism, and even the strictest monk, though he may hold aloof from anti-British agitation, tends to sympathise with it and condone it.’

¹⁹ Major Edmund Charles Browne, *The Coming of the Great Queen: A Narrative of the Acquisition of Burma* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1888), 245-6. Similar reasons include the notion that ‘Lower Burma will reap the benefit of there being no longer an Alsatia wherein every brigand can find a safe refuge,’ and the fact that the ‘opportunity is afforded us of employing large numbers of educated Englishmen...who would otherwise be idle.’

‘If riches and personal comfort, protection of property, just laws, incorruptible judges and rulers, are blessings as a set-off against Utopian dreams of freedom, then Jack Burman has a happy future. ... To-day (one year since the annexation) ...new roads have been made, and are well kept. New houses...have sprung up all over the city to replace the miserable wooden sheds which had previously existed. Money seems to have sprung up from the soil, in which it had probably lain hidden for generations.’²⁰

From these answers we can glean certain insights into the British notion of legitimacy by displacement. The anarchy of the Burmese court, with its royal monopolies and barriers to trade had been replaced by a ‘consistent government’ that had opened the door to British commerce. Along with the reassuring edifices of ‘free trade’ and the ‘civil service,’ there was tangible evidence of Burma’s modernistic ‘Improvement’ in form of the new houses that had quite literally replaced the decrepit older structures. In British eyes, further proof would shortly appear in the form of railways, hospitals, schools and most particularly, prisons - as Orwell put it, ‘those huge durable jails which the English have built everywhere between Gibraltar and Hong Kong.’²¹ A British colonial official who experienced a pang of doubt as to the good work of empire need only glance (or point) at one of these solid symbols of the civilising project in Burma. And, in British eyes, the final, damning proof of the legitimacy of colonial rule was the contrast between the inability of the precolonial Burmese to realise their economic potential and the economic development the British saw themselves as having brought. Great wealth, Browne tells us, had been beneath the noses of generations of uncomprehending kings and *wuns*, yet it was only beneath an enlightened British administration that this wealth was brought forth.

‘Displacement’ thus depends on the new order being the antithesis of what came before; the British appear to have been convinced that under their rule in Burma, there was enlightenment where there had been darkness, order where there had been anarchy and progress where there had been stagnation. ‘My own belief,’ Browne concluded, ‘is that, here as elsewhere, wherever our soldiers and sailors carry our flag, on whatever spot we set our foot firmly, we govern for the material good and prosperity of mankind.’²² The British were thus convinced as to the legitimacy of their state-building project. However, the notion of the ‘dharma state’ would lead us to believe that these notions did not resonate with the majority of the Burmese, as their criteria for legitimacy were

²⁰ Ibid., 248.

²¹ George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1934), 15.

²² Browne, *The Coming of the Great Queen*, 248.

wholly different; they were based on the maintenance of the dharma and public works for the benefit of religion.

The Burmese postcolonial government also laid claim to legitimacy on the basis of the ‘right of displacement;’ in their hands, the state had returned to indigenous rule after years of foreign dominion. Nonetheless, like the British, the idea (or fact) of displacement proved unequal to the task of formulating a coherent and popular legitimacy for the new state. The problem for the Burmese was the concept of displacement as antithesis, ie: how can ‘indigenous’ rule be made distinct from that of the colonial period? One possibility was to achieve legitimacy through a restoration of the structures of the traditional Burmese polity. This was more or less impossible, since the monarchy had been destroyed in 1886 and its scions were deceased or scattered. Furthermore, popular opposition to the British had been centred most powerfully around the idea that the British were unfitting custodians for Burma’s religious traditions. If the postcolonial state was to define itself as the antithesis of the colonial state it would need to patronise Buddhism in some shape or form in order to possess a viable legitimacy.

A further problem was the concept of modernity. The postcolonial Burmese state needed to be both traditional, as explained above, and modern. While traditionalism arguably came from below, the pressure to ‘modernise’ arguably came from the top. The Anglophone Burmese elites believed that Burmese safety and prosperity depended on technological and industrial development and on participation in the modern internationalism represented by the United Nations and (eventually) the Non-Aligned Movement. Yet, as we have seen, there were certain key obstacles to the modernisation drive. Some were historical - the legitimacy of the colonial project, such as it was, lay in its claim that it was the only way by which ‘premodern’ societies could be safely and successfully integrated into the global society and the global economy. There are grounds for saying that the annexation of Burma by the British had made the entire region economically safer and more profitable; it was no longer a ‘lawless harbour for brigands’ nor an antiquated obstruction to free trade.²³ The Burmese elites needed to prove to themselves and to the international community that they had outgrown the need for (or had never needed) the intercession of the British Empire in order to participate in global modernity. However, within Burma itself the concepts of ‘development’ and

²³ In describing Burma, Browne used the term ‘Alsatia,’ referring to the Whitefriars Monastery in London that was a refuge or ‘sanctuary’ for criminals until the late seventeenth century. In using this comparison, Browne - an ardent expansionist - demonstrates his unease at the thought of a place where law and good governance did not reach. See *Ibid.*, 245.

‘progress’ that had been the *raison d’être* of the despised colonial regime were objects of deep ambivalence, while the frameworks of the traditional monarchy, even if they could have been restored, were not compatible with postcolonial realities. There was, therefore, no clear blueprint in Burma’s recent past – precolonial or colonial – which could be used to create a modern Buddhist republic.

It is not that other blueprints were unavailable. The universalistic concepts of democracy and socialism, upon which the Burmese elites were to base their political and economic systems respectively, were aggressively championed by two dominant powers in the postwar period; the United States and the Soviet Union. These groups also laid claim to being ‘scientific,’ via the discourse of modernity and development. The dilemma that this presented to the Burmese elites was that to associate themselves too closely the Soviet or American ‘blueprint’ was to be captured by their universalism - at a time when they had only recently extricated themselves from another universalist system, the British Empire. However, the antithesis of universalism - national particularism - presented an even less appealing option. The movement most closely associated with particularism - fascism - had been thoroughly discredited as a consequence of the Second World War. Indeed, opposition to fascism had become an important part of the Burmese political landscape; the nationalist alliance that had emerged to take the reins of power was actually called the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League.²⁴

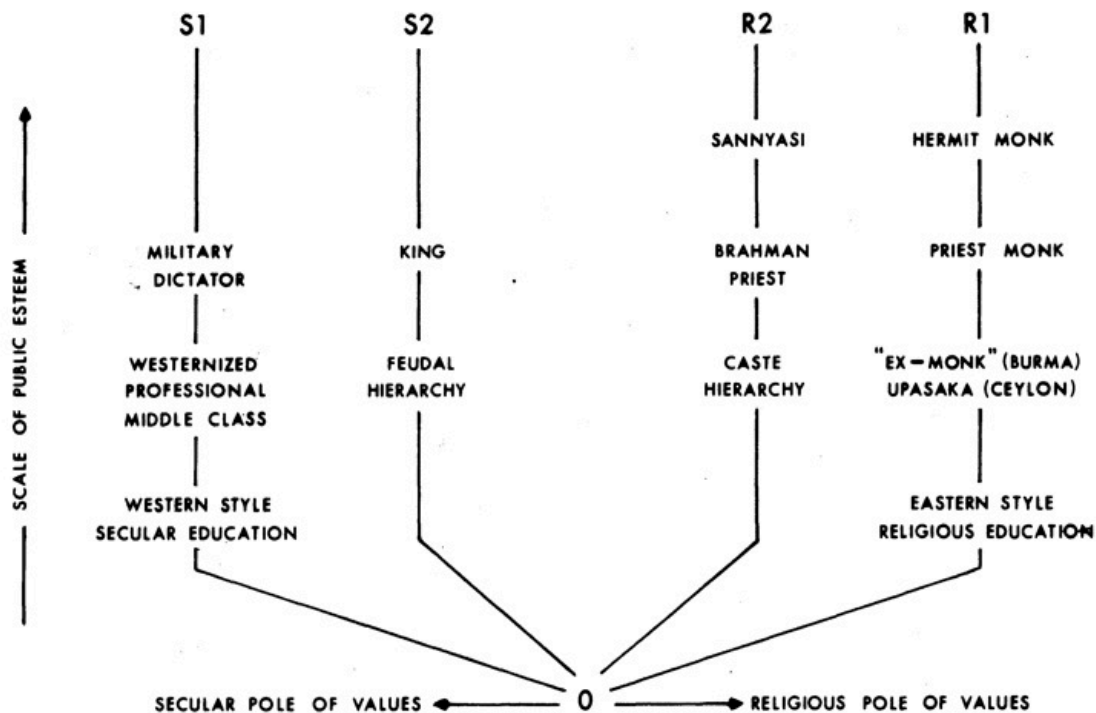
The postcolonial Burmese elites were thus faced with a conundrum. The elites involved in state-building were torn between the traditionalistic (ie: religious) and nationalistic demands of the Burmese people they represented and their own internationalist and developmental inclinations. Studies of post-traditional societies have invariably noted this problem, and have generally assumed that legitimacy could be based only on a dichotomous choice between either modernisation or traditionalism, or by an equally dichotomous choice between isolationism or international engagement. In mapping this predicament in 1973, Edmund Leach asserted that politicians in postcolonial Burma and Sri Lanka had to be ‘culturally bilingual.’

In order to operate in the sphere of international diplomacy or to participate in the benefits which may flow from the various agencies of the United Nations, the leader needs to play the

²⁴ The titular ‘fascists’ were initially the Japanese, who occupied Burma from 1942 - 1945; the label was later applied to the British.

role of a secular, cosmopolitan Westerner. Yet if he is to retain the allegiance of his homeland supporters he must demonstrate a nationalistic hatred of colonial oppression and local religious values.²⁵

Leach presents these alternative models as being mutually exclusive. He offers a diagram of four such ‘channels of esteem:’



Leach's diagram. (1973).²⁶

In Leach's system, S1 represents the path of colonial-era secularism, R1 represents canonical Buddhism and S2 and R2 represented Burmese traditionalism in its monarchical and animist manifestations respectively. Leach implies that a politician may occupy any and all of these 'channels' throughout his career, but not at the same time. In coming up with this framework, Leach sought to 'make comprehensible certain sequences of political action which might otherwise seem totally inconsistent,' such as the pious U Nu's *nat*-worship or the strongman Ne Win's royal

²⁵ Edmund Leach, "Buddhism in the Post-colonial Order in Burma and Ceylon," *Daedalus* 102, 1 (1973): 51.

²⁶ Ibid.

aspirations.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, the diagram places Buddhism and ‘Western-style’ secularism at opposite ends, suggesting that in this collection of irreconcilable ideas, these two are the least reconcilable of all.

I suggest that the problem of reconciling unpopular or unfamiliar secular ideas with popular yet unhelpful traditional ones that Leach articulates was apparent to postcolonial state-builders in Burma. A few of them may even have carried around something that looked like Leach’s diagram in their heads. What Leach’s analysis seems not to acknowledge is the Burmese solution to the problem articulated in the 1950s and early 1960s: the creation of the new ideology of Buddhist modernism that - as we have seen - captured the ‘modern’ through the deliberate conflation of science with religion. This ideology subverted the universalist/particularist dichotomy by making what was local - Buddhism - universal. In asserting the essential compatibility of the scientific method and the Buddhist dharma, the Burmese elites embraced empirical science as the ‘gold standard’ for truth (as had most of the world, including the US and the USSR), while at the same time denouncing the competing ideologies of the Cold War (theistic capitalism and atheistic communism) as morally bankrupt. Westerners were undoubtedly technically advanced, yet their religion was tarnished by its fundamental irreconcilability with science. On the other hand, in denying any form of spiritual philosophy, the atheistic materialism of the world’s communist regimes lacked an ethical dimension. Only Buddhist modernism represented a coherent philosophy that was modern and scientific, and yet was also moral and - importantly - local. It reaffirmed Burmese moral and cultural superiority at the local as well as the global level, challenging the existing world-systems and overturning the universalist/particularist dichotomy that supposedly confronted them. With regard to Leach’s schema, we can observe that by embracing a rational interpretation of Buddhism and rejecting theism in both its Western and local (animist) manifestations, the Burmese effectively merged S1 and R1 and excised S2/R2 as backward or as heretical. This was a positive alternative to the ways that the competing systems dealt with their religious traditions: quarantine in the case of the capitalist West (the separation of church and state and the exaltation of the free market) and total destruction in the case of the communists.

²⁷ Ibid., 52. Notably absent from Leach’s chart is any mention of democracy or Marxism; he dismisses these philosophies as being more ‘idea’ than ‘fact’ in Burma. Rather, the only working ‘channel’ for secular legitimacy was the ‘rational efficiency’ of the colonial regime. According to Leach, for a secular Burmese to attain any level of public esteem he must aspire to the role of ‘military dictator,’ the native equivalent of the British Lieutenant-Governor.

Unlike the insurgent *pongyis* and princes of the post-annexation period, the new Burmese elites did not seek to reset the structure of authority and the state to its precolonial incarnation. The dharma state and the institution of the monarchy (notwithstanding its destruction) were seen as ill-suited to modern Burma for several reasons. One of the most concrete of these was the presence of prominent ethnic minorities within the boundaries of the new nation that had gained political consciousness and would not identify with a king from the Burman ethnic majority (the scholars' arguments about the capacity of the traditional dharma state to cross ethnic lines notwithstanding.) Indeed, the first president (the head of state) of independent Burma was Sao Shwe Thaik, a member of the Shan minority. In addition, there were fundamental 'existential' problems that faced the new nation of Burma. There was a pressing need to improve the material welfare of the country - Burma had been devastated during the forties and the socialist AFPFL was committed to its reconstruction. More broadly, the elites were also committed to technological, economic and industrial development. The old 'dharma state' model that could be read about in Harvey's history of Burma seemed ill-equipped to address such issues.

The scholarly discourse on the traditional Burmese monarchy understands the 'dharma state' as being primarily committed to spiritual welfare and to the preservation of timeless 'truth' in which all questions of substance had already been answered. Scholars would generally concur that neither economic activity, industrial development nor scientific discovery had ever been actively encouraged by the dharma state. At best, the academic discourse suggests, such endeavours were tolerated; at worst, they were frowned upon as aspects of 'craving' and impediments to enlightenment. The dominant image of the traditional state is that it cared only about keeping things as they were, yet the postcolonial Burmese elites desired change. A state based on 'science' was the answer, but the Burmese elites of the early independence era would not adopt either of the prevailing ideological blueprints for constructing a modern science state. The capitalist world-system that had informed British state-building in Burma was tarnished, by imperialism and through its association with a belief system that was breaking down through contact with the very forces the Burmese hoped to harness. The global communist movement, on the other hand, was ideologically appealing but was associated with a local insurgency that could no longer be subsumed within the rubric of anti-colonialism. It is arguably for this reason that Buddhist modernism also attempted to lay claim to Marxism; the satisfyingly anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and pro-developmental aspects of that philosophy could, like science, be made local and the influence and legitimacy of the global communist movement (and its problematic adherents in the Burmese

countryside) could be made illegitimate; for even as Christians were unworthy of science because of their religion, communists were unworthy of Marxism because of their lack of religious commitment.

Buddhist modernism thus represented a non-reactionary critique of Western modernity. It emphasised and affirmed the cultural and spiritual superiority of Asia over the West, yet it did not urge a retreat from Western institutions or technology. Rather, it insisted that the high sciences of the West, from particle physics to dialectical materialism, were in fact Buddhist ideas seen through a glass, darkly. Buddhists (particularly Burmese Buddhists) were the true inheritors of science and their way of life was the one best suited to a scientifically advanced civilisation.

Building Ivory Towers: The Cosmic State versus the Earthly State

Quite a lot of us are beginning to feel that U Nu is running true to his old form of injecting misplaced sentiment and religion into the day to day administration of the country and thereby unnecessarily, and perhaps unwittingly making a mess of things.²⁸

- *The Guardian*

We can remain faithful to our past, yet live consciously and gladly in the twentieth century.

We can be proudly independent, yet a willing partner in the community of nations.

We can blend successfully the religious and spiritual values of our heritage with the benefits of modern technology.

To the creation and perpetuation of this great New Burma, we bend our backs and commit our hearts.²⁹

- *Pyidawtha: the New Burma*

²⁸ "Blunders of U Nu," *The Guardian*, June 28, 1960. This quotation comes from a guest editorial by an anonymous 'retired official.'

²⁹ *Pyidawtha: the New Burma. A report from the Government of the People of the Union of Burma on our Long-term Programme for Economic and Social Development*, (Rangoon: Economic and Social Board: Government of the Union of Burma, 1954.), 2.

In his folksy, disingenuous autobiography, U Nu admitted to possessing many of the faults that his critics ascribed to him; he did so mostly by turning these failings into virtues.³⁰ He told falsely modest tales of the inconvenience his great piety and reverence for life caused for counterinsurgency, his entourage and the public.³¹ He did not deny that ‘sentiment and religion’ influenced his behaviour and decisions, nor that this often created problems; rather, he took pride in the strength of his convictions. There was, however, one criticism that Nu the memorialist bridled at and flatly denied: the claim that he was influenced, guided by and obsessed with the practices of astrology and *nat*-worship. Nu’s interest in traditional Burmese animism and astrology is, however, a matter of public record. Authors from Donald Smith to Thant Myint-U have commented on his ‘eclectic brand of Buddhism’ with its ‘colourful dose of Burmese *nat* worship and astrology thrown in.’³² His participation in *balinatsa* was covered in Chapter Four, as was the construction of sand pagodas to improve the national horoscope while he was Premier. Perhaps most notoriously, the date and time of Burma’s independence (4 January 1948, 4.20am) was selected by Nu on the advice of astrologers.

In the memoirs, Nu is not unaware of this reputation; in a section entitled ‘Attitudes to Astrology’ he begins with the words: ‘No biography of U Nu would be complete without a reference to fortune-telling and *nat* worship’ - a statement that resonates with the title of the book, *Saturday’s Son*, itself an astrological metaphor.³³ He goes on to state that he shared the usual Burmese fascination with these notions while a youth, but became disenchanted with them. He provides a familiar narrative of discovering the truth in the Buddhist scriptures:

Two years serious study of religious literature confirmed him in his belief in the Three Noble Gems – the Buddha, the Law and the Assembly. His reading of the *Pokbanna thok*, one of the

³⁰ For example, Nu was occasionally criticised by those who believed his elevation to the leadership after the assassination of Aung San and his cabinet was incommensurate with his achievements and abilities; these included Sein Win, who called him ‘throne-chased Nu’ and ‘the man of destiny,’ arguing that he had risen without effort or meaningful participation in the independence struggle. Cited in Sein Win, *The Split Story: An Account of Recent Political Upheaval in Burma with Emphasis on AFPFL* (Rangoon: The Guardian Ltd, 1959), 3-9. Nu’s biography subverted these attacks by portraying its author as an unassuming man who wished only to write and meditate but was not allowed to retire – an outsider with good intentions stymied by intrigue, his trusting nature and his high morals.

³¹ These include his refusal to sanction an incendiary attack on rebel positions for fear of civilian casualties and damage to religious edifices, his total ban on cattle slaughter out of religious guilt (and not, as he told the public at the time, because of a shortage of draft animals) and his insistence on being driven from Bogor to Jakarta instead of flying so that he might rescue insects from carnivorous plants. See Nu, *Saturday’s Son*, 304-5.

³² Thant Myint U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 268-9; see also Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 121.

³³ U Nu, *Saturday’s Son*, 306. The title refers to the Burmese belief that a person’s character is determined by the day on which they were born - ‘Saturday’s sons’ being mercurial and hotheaded. It is consistent with the book’s portrayal of himself as a man of passion, yet contradicts his vehement eschewal of astrology.

Buddha's sermons, gave him an insight into what was clearly intended to be a revelation. ... In that sermon, the Buddha categorically stated that the inanimate planets could have no influence whatsoever on the lives of human beings and that anytime in which one was doing good deeds, saying good words, and conceiving good thoughts was an auspicious time.³⁴

Nu claimed that reading this sermon destroyed his belief in astrology and other 'superstitious practices' and that they never influenced him again. The sand pagodas, he writes, were not his initiative; indeed he claims to have put a stop to them 'since they were susceptible of being desecrated or stamped out of recognition by human feet.'³⁵ Nu admits to the practice of *balinatsa* in both a private and public capacity, yet insists that it was both doctrinally acceptable and meritorious. As for the famous moment of independence, Nu claims that it was his subordinates who consulted the astrologers, presenting him with two propitious dates, of which Nu chose the first for the *eminently practical* reason that it brought independence two days earlier.

Why was Nu so strident in his denial of astrological and animist influences? His visible association with these phenomena resonated with many Burmese people, particularly villagers; in his study of rural Burma, Manning Nash called Nu a 'consummate politician' for his utilisation of 'all parts of the religious spectrum in the belief system of the peasantry,' including the construction of *nat*-shrines and his 'careful attention to astrological portents.'³⁶ Yet Nu is more proud of policies and initiatives that were less popular, like banning fishing and the slaughter of cattle or - importantly - championing government support for Christianity and Islam. Why boast of his support for non-native religions, but deny astrology and try to hide animism behind Buddhist doctrine? The answer lies, we may argue, in the fact that the book was written for posterity, in 1975. Astrology and *nat*-worship were no longer acceptable for a Burmese head of state, despite their enduring popularity with certain elements of Burmese society. The criteria for effective Buddhist government among the literati precluded the propitiation of *nats* and seeking the counsel of astrologers. This section of the chapter will argue that the shift in the *raison d'être* of the state from 'averting catastrophe' to 'guaranteeing prosperity' meant that the legitimacy of the state which was formerly tied to the

³⁴ Ibid. 306-7.

³⁵ Ibid., 309. The culprit, apparently, was the minister of religious affairs, who had ordered the construction without Nu's knowledge while he was on a meditative retreat.

³⁶ Nash, *The Golden Road to Modernity*, 280-1. According to Nash, the villagers believed that Nu's meditative retreats were timed to coincide with periods when his horoscope was inauspicious, thus 'doing himself and the nation a favour by removing himself from the affairs of government during a period when he could not, due to planetary influences, make wise and useful policy decisions.'

performance of symbolic (though visible) gestures to stave off imagined crises, was now a matter of visible outcomes.

The precolonial ‘cosmic state’ was understood as being consciously structured in harmony with the greater Buddhist universe. In this system, unpredictable real-life phenomena were caused by friction between the Burmese microcosmos and the Buddhist macrocosmos; it was hoped that accidents, bad harvests and disasters could be avoided through proper alignment with the ‘known.’ The scholarly image of the cosmic state - like the dharma state - sees it as a construct designed to engender stability and permanence: the status quo, essentially. Rather than encouraging innovative new state structures or organisations, in the cosmic state paradigm both the form and the substance of the state and its administration conformed to a mythos that was centuries old. Additionally, the scholarly discourse contends, the cosmic state was modest in its ‘goals;’ assuming that the pattern was in place and conditions ideal, then the hoped-for outcome would be that nothing would change. The sun and moon *would not* fall from the sky, crops *would not* catastrophically fail, the people *would not* rebel and the only wars you would have to worry about would be the ones you started yourself. In mirroring the seemingly immutable universe, the cosmic state is therefore designed to resist change. As with the dharma state paradigm, the cosmic state structure hopes to slow or arrest universal decline, in this case by maintaining the stability of the environment and society.

Neither the policy nor the practice of the ‘cosmic state’ were mandated by the Pali Canon, but scholars would suggest it was a natural companion to the dharma state; they would see it as having provided a more day-to-day means of resisting impermanence than the exhortations of canonical Buddhism, which deal with a timeline of aeons. The discourse suggests that authority in Burma could (and was expected to) avoid calamity and preserve the dharma by making decisions in accordance with Buddhist cosmology, possessing the requisite number of queens, propitiating the *nats* and, importantly, making merit. Merit-making (by which I mean religious activity calculated to create merit, as opposed to merely moral behaviour) is often depicted as an excellent example of the way the ‘cosmic state’ adapted doctrinal absolutes to local state-building circumstances. Merit making is generally portrayed as an individual affair, in which there was no sharing or external salvation and prayer has no power. The merit (or demerit) you earn is held to have been specific to the individual, as the individual’s fate was thought to be. The general picture in the academic

discourse is that Burmese kings spent a great deal of time making merit.³⁷ However, this is seen to have been more than an individual effort - it was expected as an aspect of his role as a *dharmaraja* - merit-making behaviour was, the academic narrative contends, virtuous behaviour and to rule virtuously was to rule in accordance with the dharma. Evidence to support this picture of the traditional ruler's responsibility can be found in the canon: 'If he who is considered the best among men behaves unjustly, how much more so will other people? ... When a king is unjust the whole kingdom suffers. When a king does what is right, the whole kingdom is happy.'³⁸

It is generally thought that this moral dimension was bolstered by the idea that the king actually made merit on behalf of the kingdom: as the head of the nation and the preeminent *sasana dayaka*, the king served as a nexus between personal and public merit-making. These ideas merge in the case of the king's public works and to a lesser extent, his efforts to propitiate the *nats*, resulting in the notion of 'merit for the salvation of the kingdom.' One might argue that regarding statecraft, the dharma state paradigm represents the theoretical guidelines, or the ideal, while the cosmic state represents the day-to-day efforts to run a Buddhist kingdom. In this respect, the academic idea of the cosmic state is very similar to the idea of the 'theatre state' as defined by Clifford Geertz, wherein power is exercised through and for ritual and spectacle; in this narrative the court and its symbols - which in the Burmese case included the construction of pagodas and propitiation of the sangha - 'formed not just the trappings of rule but the substance of it. Spectacle was what the state was for; its central task was less to govern...than to display in liturgical form the dominant themes of [the] culture.'³⁹

With the creation of the 'science state,' however, the performative criteria for the postcolonial Burmese government had shifted from the spiritual to the material. The 'people's welfare' was no longer linked solely to visible religious activity that possessed invisible outcomes. The legitimacy of the science state depended on practical activity - not necessarily highly visible - that possessed measurable and progressive outcomes. We might call this the 'earthly state.' Thus, what we can call the 'earthly state' was, like the cosmic state, the result of day-to-day efforts to accomplish this

³⁷ See for example Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, 56-7, 148-9; Michael Aung-Thwin, "The Role of Sasana Reform in Burmese History: Economic Dimensions of a Religious Purification," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38, 4 (1979), 672-3, 687. Michael Aung-Thwin noted that propitiation of the sangha, a typical merit-making activity, constituted a significant proportion of state expenditure even in times of extremity: he notes that the figure was approximately forty-three percent in 1885, the year of the final British conquest.

³⁸ Cited in Collis, *Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities*, 464-5.

³⁹ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 38.

progress at the local level - the Burmese manifestation of the principles of science in statehood. Even the government's religious initiatives were 'earthly' and practical in nature. For instance, economic development and technological modernisation were important aspects of government responsibility, but acceptable 'earthly' behaviour also included religious work that preserved or propagated the austere canonical core of Buddhism that was valued by the modernists - this included missionary work (among the non-Buddhist hill tribes or abroad) or the holding of the Great Buddhist Synod. All of these (with the exception of the Synod) lacked the visibility or spectacle of the initiatives of the traditional Buddhist monarchy, but, in contrast with the practices of the traditional state, all anticipated outcomes that were tangible or practical - *including* the Synod, which despite its invocation of historic glamour involved serious Buddhist modernist objectives, specifically the revision and purification of canonical texts and their translation into vernacular languages.

In contrast, activities that we would see as being associated with the cosmic state were not tolerated by the proponents of the earthly state. Such activities included *nat*-propitiation, pagoda construction or merit-making on behalf of the country by its leaders.⁴⁰ Decisions made in accordance with astrology or the magic of parallelism were likewise considered illegitimate; instead the modernist Burmese boasted of governing in accordance with scientific ideologies and systems such as democracy or Marxism - which, as we have seen, they insisted were compatible with Buddhism. Language or actions on the part of government that hinted at anything other than the purportedly clear-cut atheism of the canon were criticised in the English-language press. In June 1961 a humorous poem about the construction of *nat*-shrines appeared in the the *Guardian* newspaper. The poem included the lines 'the *Nats* are sore / and want a change / with housing best. / So two we built / for them to nest, / a shrine up country, / one down South, / though we live / from hand to mouth.'⁴¹ As such it asked: why are houses being built for spirits when people are homeless and starving?

⁴⁰ Jordt notes that Nu's merit-making in particular was not accepted uncritically: "A monk who had participated in the the Sixth Buddhist Synod told me with real disdain that U Nu was merely interested in using the sangha and state as a gigantic merit field within which he could attend to his own future life supports and fulfilment of his bodhisattva vow." See Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 198. Reflecting on this, Jordt argues that the *dhammaraja* paradigm that Nu sought to exploit had lost its potency in favour of an alternative, utilitarian focus embodied by Ne Win; arguably, this owed something to the influence of Buddhist modernism.

⁴¹ "Nat Housing Board," *The Guardian*, June 4, 1961.



Poem with cartoon *nats*. The poem satirises AFPFL factionalism as well as government mismanagement, authoritarianism and waste. (June 4, 1961.)⁴²

This brings me to my next point. Despite the attempt on the part of the elites to establish rationality as the standard for legitimacy, the Burmese government throughout the 1950s continued to engage in activities that seem to be associated more with the traditional state than with Buddhist modernism. U Nu, as we have seen, engaged in *balinatsa* and was the driving force behind the construction of the Kaba Aye pagoda, while the Ministry for Religious Affairs constructed sand

⁴² Ibid.

pagodas and issued statements defending its participation in *nat*-worship. Clearly, there were competing voices among the Burmese elites and the Burmese government. The earthly state failed to establish its legitimacy definitively with the Burmese people. Why?

The first reason lies in the distinction between the cosmic state, understood as essentially 'theatrical,' and the earthly state as essentially productive. At the risk of introducing confusing new terminology, we might call this the cosmic 'theatre' state versus the earthly 'results' state. As mentioned above, the cosmic/theatre state is generally perceived as having engaged in visible and ritualised uses of state power; indeed, Geertz's account of the theatre state argues that power could not be legitimately used except in ritual fashion. The earthly/results state, on the other hand, possessed new institutions and ambitions that presumably lacked resonance with the majority of Burmese people. As we have seen, much effort was made by postcolonial Burmese Buddhist elites to show the link between tradition (in the form of canonical Buddhism) and these new institutions, yet these efforts, published in books and newspapers, were chiefly intellectual, relying on arcane reasoning and philosophy. As such, Buddhist modernism lacked the visible majesty of the traditional state.

The banality of earthly state activity meant that the focus was - from necessity and by design - on the outcomes of such policies - hence the term 'results' state. The government's legitimacy was dependent on achieving its new Buddhist aims of development through modernisation and industrialisation; it had to live up to such promises as it made in *Pyidawtha: the New Burma*, including a 50% increase in per capita production within five years.⁴³ Yet the *pyidawtha* initiatives were failures, leaving the government in the unenviable position of having invisible activity coupled with invisible outcomes. We can argue that part of the problem with this dependence on practical but elusive results was the fact that the Burmese elites were not practical men. They were not technocrats and Buddhist modernism presented a non-technocratic view of science. The Anglophone Burmese elites were comfortable with logic and theory, drawing compelling parallels between classical texts and the most modern of scientific hypotheses but they lacked technical expertise; as products of the colonial education system, which intentionally excluded vocation training from its curricula, they were mostly lawyers, teachers and arts graduates. The *pyidawtha*

⁴³ *Pyidawtha: the New Burma*, 18.

plan, for example, outlined ambitious goals yet was short on detail, reflecting the lack of technical expertise on the part of those who designed it.

Therefore, the modernist Buddhists found themselves in a situation where they could build neither pagodas nor factories. They lacked the desire to build the former, and the expertise to build the latter. The only thing they could build, we might argue, were ivory towers; intellectual edifices that failed to provide concrete outcomes. As such, it is unsurprising that the postcolonial Burmese government often took the path of least resistance and invoked the grandeur of the traditional state as a means of ensuring legitimacy.

The failures of the earthly state were that it could not develop in accordance with the goals of Buddhist modernism, but nor could it live up to the rationalism of that ideology. The elites tried to tell the Burmese people that a true Buddhist state was modern, rational and developed, yet the Burma of the 1950s and the early 1960s that was sketched satirically in the poem ‘Nat Housing Board’ was backward, ‘irrational’ and poor. ‘Most of the misfortunes that have befallen us in this country have been mostly due to the lack of effective leadership,’ the *Guardian* editorialised in April 1961. ‘Prime Minister U Nu...has never displayed any great ability in the technique of administration [and instead] relies on ‘metta’ and appeal.’⁴⁴ *Metta* (loving-kindness,) though not one of the *rasa rajadhamma* is frequently seen as the most important Buddhist virtue, prized by monarchs and monks alike. ‘This “metta” approach,’ the editorial continues, ‘may work well in the winning of a place in the sentiment of the people, but it is proved to be ineffective against such practical problems as spiralling consumer prices and worsening security conditions.’⁴⁵ The irony here is that, arguably, Nu’s ‘metta’ approach did not *cause* the practical problems of economic distress and social upheaval, they were a *response* to them, in the sense that these failures compelled him and others in the government to pursue alternative, more traditional paths to legitimacy. A further irony is that despite its domestic failures, the modern Burmese state was quite successful on the international stage, insofar that it was accepted uncritically as a member of the global community of nations.

⁴⁴ “Effective Leadership,” *The Guardian*, April 8, 1961.

⁴⁵ Ibid.



PREMIER ATTENDS HTI HOISTING CEREMONY; Prime Minister Dr. Nu attended a *hti* (umbrella) hoisting ceremony held at the *Paya Ngasu Dhammayone* (five-Buddha Prayer Hall) on Panbingyi Street, Kemmaidine, yesterday evening. The ceremony was attended by over one thousand people including some foreign visitors. Pictures show (left) Dr. Nu with members of the Saywingaba Ahpwe hoisting the *hti* and (right) two foreign visitors (a boy and a lady) behind two men dressed in ceremonial Court dress of Burmese Ministers in the days of Burmese Kings, apparently deeply interested in the proceedings.

U Nu participating in a *hti*-hoisting ceremony (the symbolic completion or capping of a pagoda) in Rangoon on 28 February 1962. This image appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper. (March 1, 1962.)⁴⁶

Modern State, Modern World: U Thant and Buddhist Internationalism

I am making a plea...for a dual allegiance. This implies an open acceptance of belonging to the human race as well as to our local community or nation. ... Perhaps my own Buddhist upbringing has helped me more than anything to realise and to express in my speeches and writings [the] concept of world citizenship.⁴⁷

- U Thant

A nation-state is permitted its traditions and eccentricities, but participation in global diplomacy and commerce (and access to any benefits that flowed therefrom) meant reconciliation to a certain fixed universalism. For the rationalist bureaucracies of such international organisations as the United Nations, that universalism was defined in the postwar decades primarily by science. The global prestige of science had never been higher than it was in the 1950s and early 1960s; technology was seen as having unlimited potential to either help or harm the human race. In 1963, for example, the

⁴⁶ "Premier Attends *Hti*-Hoisting Ceremony," *The Guardian*, March 1, 1962.

⁴⁷ U Thant, *View from the U.N.*, (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 453.

Secretary-General of the UN noted in a speech to the United Nations Conference on the Application of Science and Technology for the Benefit of Less Developed Areas that while it was one of the priorities of the UN to ‘stimulate scientific and technological investigation and exchanges,’ attention needed to be paid to the relationship between science and society. He reminded his audience of the ‘vastly increased powers it has given to the forces of war and destruction,’ and mused that ‘in some way, in the unfolding of its unavoidably complex processes science must be made to remain aware of its human origin and its human destination.’⁴⁸ His argument was that there should be a moral dimension to science, with science having moral outcomes.

As mentioned, the modernist Burmese believed that they possessed a philosophy that was congruent with science and capable of capturing the spirit and substance of global modernity. It represented a solution to the conundrum posed above, that of how to ‘humanise’ science. Buddhism and science were complementary philosophies, they argued; Buddhism anticipated science and science led to Buddhism. Buddhist ethics could therefore define and guide science, just as scientific discoveries reinforced Buddhist beliefs. When one recognised this, science could not be turned to immoral purposes, nor would discoveries be stifled or distorted as happened when primacy was given to an unscientific set of beliefs. This was the secret to a moral science and a moral world. The modernists offered this as an alternative not only to the world-systems prevailing at the time, namely theistic capitalism and atheistic communism, but to those that it was designed to replace - traditional Buddhism and the British empire. As far as ‘world citizenship’ was concerned, the Burmese modernists were done with global empires, with the *cakkavattin* and his sangha, just as they were done with the global proletariat and his entrepreneurial cousin in the West. Instead, they offered the mantle of the Buddhist international citizen-layperson. Burma, they believed, had the recipe for a genuine lay Buddhism that would solve the problems of the world and build a scientific, yet spiritual utopia. And as the reformers sold this idea abroad, they were changing it at home; they changed it as they sold it, for it was a creative endeavour that worked both ways. Using the example of writings and speeches by Secretary-General U Thant, this section will show that the Burmese modernists championed Buddhism as the only suitable religion for the modern world.

When the modernist Buddhists visualised the ‘international citizen’ they perhaps saw something that looked a great deal like U Thant, Burma’s representative to the UN from 1957 to 1961 and

⁴⁸ U Thant, *Towards World Peace: Speeches and Public Statements 1957 - 1963* (New York: Yoseloff, 1964), 195-6.

Secretary-General from 1961-1971. He is, of course, the Secretary-General that I quoted in the paragraph above. If U Nu was representative of modernist Buddhism's domestic failure, then Thant was proof of its triumph internationally. Like Nu, Thant was a pious Buddhist, whose religion informed his career and personal life. Yet in the way they presented their practice, Nu and Thant seemed to occupy opposite ends of the spectrum. Where Nu was charismatic and flamboyant, with his public vows of chastity, his merit-making and his aphoristic speeches, Thant was neutral and understated in his speeches and public behaviour. Where Nu was anachronistic, embracing *nat*-worship and astrology, Thant was rational, emphasising private meditation and mindfulness. Where Nu was divisive and inefficient, making religious policy on the fly and disrupting the function of government with meditative retreats,⁴⁹ Thant was a picture of discipline and efficiency. This contrast is particularly interesting given that Nu and Thant were close friends, and that Thant had served in Nu's cabinet as minister of information from 1948 to 1953 and as prime minister's secretary from 1954 to 1957.⁵⁰

U Thant's autobiography, *View from the U.N.* is a history of the various global crises that occurred during his time as Secretary-General and his perspective on these events. Even so, only one section (aside from the conclusion) moves away from straightforward description into any kind of moralising or introspection. This is the second chapter, called 'How did I conceive my role?' where he writes:

To understand my feelings – and my conception of the role of Secretary General – the nature of my religious and cultural background must first be understood. ... As a Buddhist, I was trained to be tolerant of everything except intolerance. I was brought up not only to develop the spirit of tolerance, but also to cherish moral and spiritual qualities [and] most importantly, to attain a certain degree of emotional equilibrium. I was taught to control my emotions through a process of concentration and meditation.⁵¹

Within this paragraph are several statements that would without doubt have resonated with the beliefs of modernist Buddhists. The usual Buddhist virtues of tolerance and humility are lauded, but

⁴⁹ Before one such retreat, according to *Saturday's Son*, Nu told his Cabinet: 'My friends, I go to the Meditation Centre tomorrow. I have a vow to keep to attain the *thin-khar-ru-pek-kha nyan*. ... Until then do not send for me, even if the whole country is enveloped in flames. If there are fires, you must put them out yourselves.' Nu, *Saturday's Son*, 195.

⁵⁰ Donald M. Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 448.

⁵¹ Thant, *View from the U.N.*, 20. He goes on: 'Of course, being human, and not yet having reached the stage of arahant or arhat (one who attains perfect enlightenment), I cannot completely "control" my emotions, but I must say that I am not easily excited or excitable.'

so too is the 'process of concentration and meditation' leading to the very rational outcome of emotional equilibrium. This forms a contrast to the stance of U Nu, who though a champion of lay meditation in Burma was somewhat compromised in this area by his traditionalism and other erratic behaviour, perceived and actual.⁵² Thant did not speak constantly about his religion, yet as shown by the quotation heading this section, he made it plain that Buddhism was his main inspiration. He also emphasised that Buddhism underpinned his conception of his own role as an international figure and - significantly - of the role of the responsible 'planetary citizen.' Furthermore, he seemed intellectually engaged with the ideas popular with the modernist Buddhists. In a speech on the theme of development that he gave in May 1962 he said:

The record of the human race is not all of war and horror. It has been sustained through generations by quiet contemplation and all-encompassing love. Only the love has been limited by poverty. Today it can be as unlimited as its instincts dictate. There is no greater liberation than this and it is with this fundamental moral imperative that I would end and say, with the poet Auden, 'We must love each other or we must die.'⁵³

The language certainly has a Buddhist flavour, with its talk of 'quiet contemplation' and 'liberation.' It also echoes the Buddhist modernist emphasis on development as a moral imperative; suggesting that freeing people from poverty is as important as freeing them from samsara. This is a responsible use of the power of science and technology, one that is aware of its human origin and destination, reflecting the moral dimension that Buddhist modernism brought to the earthly sphere. Thant expanded on the theme of what constituted a moral use of science and technology in his 1963 speech on 'Science and Technology for Underdeveloped Areas,' from which I have already quoted, above:

If it is true that we are in a process of going through a great technological revolution, must we not raise our sights, in the area of economic development, to a level commensurate with these scientific advances? ... The truth about the developed economies today is that they can have, in terms of kind and scale of resources, what they decide to have. The means are therefore no longer a limiting factor; the will to use our many and varied instruments of change and growth is the only limitation. It is well within the power of modern man to eradicate the vast areas of

⁵² Even Nu's '*vipassana* performance,' attracted criticism for being irrational and disrupting the function of government, nor could it escape associations with traditionalism, with certain sections of the public believing his retreats to Mount Popa (the traditional home of the *nats*) were astrologically inspired. Alternatively, as Ingrid Jordt has pointed out, Nu's belief in *vipassana* extended to a basically unfounded confidence in the power of meditation to rehabilitate criminals and ensure the virtuous behaviour of cabinet ministers. See Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 30.

⁵³ Thant, *Toward World Peace*, 163

poverty in a world of plenty. ... Scientific advances and new techniques exist waiting only to be redirected to the neglected problems.⁵⁴

Thant saw the power of technology as boundless - what was holding humankind back was a lack of will, a failure to make the 'decision' to eradicate poverty. This represented a moral failure on the part of the developed economies, who instead of helping their fellow men had invested in war and destruction. In a 'world of plenty,' he believed, there is a clear moral obligation to use the resources granted by science and technology to free people from poverty through development. This is consistent with what the Burmese postcolonial elites were saying about Buddhism and science in Burma; that there was a connection between developing the country and making it more Buddhist, that there was a Buddhist moral imperative to use science to improve people's lives. Thant is articulating the internationalist applications of this new moral philosophy. Since poverty exists in a 'world of plenty,' the prevailing moral orthodoxy of the developed economies - Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union - is perhaps inherently flawed and Buddhism is an obvious alternative.

Thant wrote in the conclusion to his memoirs that 'a new quality of planetary imagination is demanded from all of us as the price of human survival.'⁵⁵ Yet Thant and his fellow Burmese modernists hoped to make an existing philosophy - Buddhism - into the intellectual and moral context for that imagined global fraternity, with Burma as its source and example. The challenge was to balance the emphasis on Buddhism's universalist and universalising tendencies with the championing of the superior Burmese variety. If the internationalists placed too much emphasis on the cultural aspects of Burmese that made it unique, they risked alienating their international audience through its exoticism and its apparent incompatibility with the discourse of science. Arguably, U Nu failed as a representative of modernist Buddhism because his practice - despite incorporating a variety of modern concepts like lay meditation, etc. - was too 'local.' Nu was an ardent champion of the modern concepts of democracy and socialism and argued eloquently for their universality as well as their essential compatibility with Buddhism, yet his words did not match his deeds - too much of what the British had labelled as Burma's native 'backwardness' was visible in his public behaviour. Ultimately, Nu needed to appeal to Burma's domestic political audience who were unimpressed with Buddhist modernism and rewarded his ostentatiously traditional practice with electoral success.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 338-9.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 453.

This was not the case with Thant, who could promote a different view of Burma's cultural landscape to an essentially non-Buddhist audience internationally. In 1958, while he was still Burma's Representative to the UN, he gave an address in Philadelphia at the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences that was entitled 'A Burmese View of the World.' After providing a definition of the concepts of socialism and democracy, Thant noted that

Burma is committed to a system of parliamentary democracy; Burma believes in democratic ideals and the dignity of man. Burma is thoroughly averse to the idea of dictatorship in any shape or form. ... They (the Burmese leaders) feel rather strongly that the rebuilding of their country would be meaningless if the democratic ideals are discarded. The type of society they are trying to evolve is not patterned after maxims mechanically lifted out of textbooks. They see to it that its roots are in the Burmese soil, Burmese history and Burmese background.⁵⁶

One could be forgiven for believing that this stated 'aversion' to dictatorships referenced only Communist totalitarianism and military authoritarianism, with some leftover ire targeted at British imperialism. But what of Burma's precolonial political system (rather more despotic than democratic) - did Thant's declaration constitute a rejection of that too? It is hard to imagine how democracy could be reconciled with the structures of the traditional monarchy. Yet nonetheless, Thant insisted that the 'roots' of democratic socialism lay within Burma itself. Democratic socialism may have been a 'new culture, a new civilisation' but it was defined by the values of the past. What were these values? In the remainder of his speech, Thant identified pacifism ('We are convinced that it is not the path of wisdom to form military blocs, to enter into a hectic armament race and to rant hysterically at each other'), tolerance ('Regardless of his beliefs, traditions, ideologies, and the economic, social and political systems to which he subscribes, he must learn to live with his neighbours') and equality.⁵⁷ Though Thant does not mention Buddhism, one does not have to dig far down in the 'Burmese soil' to find a potential intellectual origin for these concepts. As such, the speech manages to equate the modern concepts of socialism and democracy, the Buddhist virtues of tolerance and pacifism with a sense of Burmese nativism. The Burma that Thant described was a Buddhist landscape yet it was also a modern one, whereas for Nu, we can argue, it was more traditional and cultural; studded with pagodas and invisible spirits. The opposite is true

⁵⁶ Thant, "A Burmese View of the World. (Address delivered at the 62nd Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, at Philadelphia, April 11, 1958.)" in *Towards World Peace*, 16-7. Ironically, Burma became a military dictatorship later that year.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

for Thant - in *View from the U.N.*, he never mentions his country of birth save in the context of his religion: Buddhism is Burma's most significant feature, for him and for the world.

Thant could not reject national identification; doing so would be anathema to the aims of the Buddhist modernists. In his wordy conclusion to *View from the U.N.*, he wrote: 'I am not decrying that form of nationalism that prompts the individual citizen to appreciate and praise the achievements and values that his native land has contributed to the well-being and happiness of the whole human race.'⁵⁸ Thant placed much emphasis on the importance of individual choice and awareness in his concept of world citizenship - an emphasis he admitted was probably informed by his Buddhism. Also significant here is his hint about values that have contributed to the 'well-being and happiness of the whole human race.' One wonders if militant religions or ideologies, whose adherents prosper only to the detriment of other peoples and concepts, were in Thant's mind when he made this statement. Thant rejoiced in 'national and cultural uniqueness' yet he decried rigid ethnic or regional classification, saying that 'when we apply...adjectives to nations or groups of nations, what we are in fact doing is describing our own emotional reactions to those who have our disapproval or approval.'⁵⁹ Here he emphasises the all-important notion of equality, a concept central to the modernist conception of Buddhism and one that the modernists believed Burma epitomised.

Equality was also an important concept for the modernist Buddhists, particularly in terms of its international mission. Adherents of Burmese Buddhist modernism would have argued that their conception of their religion with its emphasis on individualism and laicisation represented a more egalitarian and inclusive framework for global modernity than did most of its competitors. Communism, for example, seemed to be dedicated to the idea of equality between all people, yet it divided communities by virtue of their 'class.' Thant argued in 'A Burmese View of the World' that this concept of class and the associated notion of class struggle meant that there was a 'clash of interests' in communist societies and that communism denied 'individual freedoms.'⁶⁰ Naturally, he offered Burmese democratic socialism as a means of ensuring economic levelling without the divisive or destructive clashes or revolutions associated with the communist view of the world. Thant also argued that capitalist societies were little better than communist ones: in the same speech

⁵⁸ Thant, *View from the U.N.*, 453.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁰ Thant, *Toward World Peace*, 28-9.

he noted that even the democratic capitalists possessed and oppressed colonies and legislated against their own minorities. Neither side was fit to set the terms for the solution of the world's problems:

Let us not delude ourselves with the oversimplification of the world issue. The issue today is not only that of Communism versus Democracy. The more essential issue is the division of the world into the weak and the strong, the prosperous and the abject poor, the ruler and the ruled, the master race and the sub-human. Therefore, if the war for democracy has any meaning, it is necessary that we all sit together and create here and now the conditions that will guarantee freedom, justice, well-being and equality for all.⁶¹

In the rhetoric that U Thant deployed we see efforts on the part of the modernist Burmese to campaign for a Burmese-centred Buddhist internationalism, to wrest their history and their future away from external hegemony, as well as refuting the old British claims of backwardness by presenting international modernity as an essentially Burmese (as opposed to Soviet or American) concept.

The State Religion: The Sangha State versus the Democratic State

Here, in our Burma, there is opposition in certain quarters to the conception of a Buddhist State Religion - and...the opposition is almost entirely political, by elements apprehensive about the allotment of administrative jobs, or of interference with education. The religious aspect is largely ignored.⁶²

- *The Guardian*

In April 1961, a letter to the editor was published in the *Guardian* newspaper, titled 'Religion and Politics.' It offered a synopsis of several modernist Buddhist concepts regarding governance and the state. The author, U Tin Hla, stated plainly that Buddhism and politics could not be separated. The Buddha was born a prince, he pointed out, and his religion 'has the heritage of politics from the ruling circle.' He argued that

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "The Season of Goodwill," *The Guardian*, December 25, 1960.

Buddhism has not its bases on dogmatic blind faith or belief, but a rational philosophic guide to humanity. ... Buddhism is so closely connected with life of humanity, it is hard to separate them. ... Politics being part of life, who can separate life or politics from Buddhist religion?⁶³

In addition, Tin Hla argued that Buddhism possessed no power to suspend common sense or to make a country over in its own image; Buddhism is ‘merely a spiritual and material guide, it never claims supremacy over any Government of any country.’ Rather ‘it merely helps the kings and governments to lead their subjects to the right path.’⁶⁴ Naturally, citizens that follow the ‘right path’ will not simply be law-abiding, but Law-abiding. He goes on to say that a Buddhist government cannot concern itself with only one sphere of human existence:

Though I may not agree in many matters with our Premier, I absolutely agree with his view that a government which looks after the material welfare of its people is only doing half of its duty. I consider that the paramount duty of any and every government is to do for the good of all its subjects both materially and spiritually.⁶⁵

According to Tin Hla, Buddhism is not a religion but a guide to all aspects of human endeavour and existence, and not least politics. It silences no questions and stifles no discoveries. Most importantly, it is the only philosophy that addresses both the ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ aspects of life. Any government that failed to address both of these spheres could not call itself Buddhist.

All this is familiar to us from what we have seen of Burmese Buddhist Anglophone discourse in the years between the declaration of independence and 1962. Tin Hla’s letter was a part of the debate surrounding the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion in Burma in 1961. The previous month, U Nu had responded to an accusation that introducing religion into administration would destroy democracy. He argued, as Tin Hla did, that the state served spiritual as well as material ends. The idea that religion could harm democracy was a ‘half-truth,’ Nu argued; if human needs were wholly material that might well be the case, but man lives in a spiritual world as well as a physical one. The mixing of religion with administration would obviously be absurd if done for

⁶³ U Tin Hla, “Religion and Politics,” *The Guardian*, April 8, 1961. As such, Tin Hla noted, a Buddhist must practise *tha-ti-pa-htan* (‘total awareness of mind and body’) at all times. If everyone did so, he added, the world would soon walk the ‘middle path’ and be ‘blessed with peace, prosperity and happiness.’ These statements can be taken as further proof of Tin Hla’s reformist Buddhist inclinations, as they are clearly associated with the modernist concepts of lay meditation and Buddhist internationalism.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

material reasons (hence the concession of ‘half-truth’), but it was not being done for this reason; rather it was done for their ‘spiritual well-being’ of the citizenry:

Mixing of religion in administration in the interest of the spiritual well-being of the people was desirable as long as such mixing would not amount to discrimination...there would be no distinction in class of citizens and no discrimination of the believers of other faiths, when Buddhism is introduced as State Religion.⁶⁶

It seems clear that Tin Hla agrees with Nu. Making Buddhism the state religion was an important step in reconciling the material with the spiritual and could scarcely lead to theocratic folly, as Buddhism was scientific. It seems clear-cut. Interestingly, however, Tin Hla’s letter did not represent the stance of the majority of correspondence on this issue in the English-language press. Indeed, the majority of opinions published in the *Guardian* opposed the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion - Tin Hla’s letter is one of the very few that whole-heartedly supports the idea. No editorial in the *Guardian* did so.⁶⁷ This section will argue that the reason for the resistance to the idea of making Buddhism the state religion lies in the changing understanding of the performative responsibilities of Buddhist government in Burma, particularly the obligation to be democratic. In addition, there was a link between opposition to the idea of a state religion and mistrust of the privilege and disproportionately influential position of activist monks, who generally supported making Buddhism the state religion of Burma.

In September 1959, U Nu, then out of office, made a policy speech at the ‘Clean’ AFPFL All Burma Supreme Council Conference. In the speech, he announced that if elected, he would make Buddhism the state religion. An editorial published in the *Guardian* shortly after noted that Nu had spent the last decade opposing such a policy. ‘His present declaration,’ they noted, ‘smacks of

⁶⁶ “Mixing Church with State, Destructive to Democracy,” *The Guardian*, 18-3-61. The accusation came from U Zan Hta Sin, a former Kachin State Minister, who had opined that democracy disappeared when religion involved itself in administration and when a ‘major race’ holds a chauvinistic attitude towards minorities. As a Kachin statesman, Zan Hta Sin represented both an ethnic and a religious minority as the Kachin are predominantly Christian.

⁶⁷ Indeed, the only other letter I could find supporting the state religion was by Hla Maung, a ‘Pensioner, (no party or politics)’ as he signed himself. Hla Maung, presumably a Buddhist, argued that the state religion would revitalise the religion and ‘give renewed moral and religious life to the Burmese.’ He also claimed that the ‘socialist economy should not wilt on account of religious fervour. How grand it would be if our planned socialist economy is lit up and vitalised by all that is good in all the religions which enjoy sanction and sanctity in Burma.’ He expressed regret that Islam did not become the state religion in Pakistan and urged Buddhists to show tolerance. Cited in “State Religion,” *The Guardian*, 8-8-61.

political expediency rather than a conviction'⁶⁸ Nu's political opponents, the 'Stable' AFPFL that had split from the main party earlier that year criticised this decision and reminded him about:

the modern concept to separate religion from politics. The newly independent republics were careful to not to declare a state religion to avoid misunderstanding, hatred and antagonism among people of different religious faiths in the country. ... Making Buddhism a State Religion will be accompanied by more harm than good.⁶⁹

Here is a complaint that fits neatly into the modernist Buddhist paradigm - to associate Buddhism and the state so explicitly was not 'modern.' The 'Stable' AFPFL's criticism of the proposal was one of the first, and certainly not the last. Many more would appear in the English-language press right up until the bill and the required constitutional amendment were passed and many of these statements display concerns associated with the ideas of Buddhist modernism.

The proposal to make Buddhism the state religion was straightforward; the 1947 constitution would be amended so that it read: 'Buddhism being the religion professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union shall be the state religion.' It would be incumbent on the government to promote and maintain Buddhist teachings, to maintain the accuracy of the texts produced by the Synod, to protect and restore Buddhist monuments and to listen to the sangha.⁷⁰ A common complaint levelled against the proposal was that the government already did all of those things.⁷¹ There were, however, criticisms made that were more indicative of the changing understanding of what constituted legitimate Buddhist government. One particular letter published in July 1960 is a good example. The letter, which was signed by one 'G.A.K.' was written in response to an earlier article that had criticised the state religion idea as 'antiquated' and against the constitution. The author makes several arguments against what he calls the 'theocratic state.' First, he argued that it was undemocratic:

Adoption of a state religion would create a sort of superclass who would be regarded as being nearer to the ideal of the citizen of the Union of Burma as envisaged by the laws of the state, as compared to the followers of other faiths. ... In this context, apartheid could be regarded as

⁶⁸ "Change of Heart," *The Guardian*, September 28, 1959.

⁶⁹ "'Stable' AFPFL Makes Counter Promises," *The Guardian*, December 14, 1959. The 'Stables' then made promises of their own to propagate Buddhism without 'racial dissensions.'

⁷⁰ "Constitution Amendment Act," *The Guardian*, August 1, 1961.

⁷¹ "Unnecessary Legislation," *The Guardian*, August 3, 1961.

being only one rung lower than that of the theocratic state in the climb towards the democratic state.⁷²

After all the efforts to present Buddhism as a philosophy that was essentially congruent with democracy, critics argued that Nu was now proposing to break the association between Buddhism and democracy, because making Buddhism the state religion would make Burma less rather than more democratic. Furthermore, tying Buddhism to the Burmese nation so explicitly would blunt its international appeal as a world faith; this leads to the author's second point:

The doctrines of Buddhism by being the most universal among the religious doctrines of the world concern the individual alone and are intensely personal matters. [It is] not something to be foisted on the political apparatus of the state. The religion as preached by the Buddha was devoid of authority, ritual, speculation, tradition and the supernatural. It was a religion of intense self-effort. Adoption of Buddhism as the state religion would therefore be against the basic doctrine of Buddhism.⁷³

Here is an excellent illustration of the author's deployment of Buddhist modernist concepts; a reminder that the religion 'as preached by the Buddha' was rational and scientific, eschewing 'tradition and the supernatural.'⁷⁴ An additional factor is the democratic emphasis on the individual, balanced against the universal appeal of a religion suitable for the whole world. The meaning is clear - Buddhism is too far-reaching a philosophy to be controlled or defined by a mere state. There can be no barriers between a Buddhist individual and the world. To tie it to the state is to return Burma to the benighted past. Furthermore, as the religion of 'inner strength,' Buddhism had no need to make a display of its own superiority. To do so, the author argues, 'could be interpreted as a result of an inferiority complex,' making the religion look weak or unsure of itself, and unsuitable as the faith that would bind the world together.⁷⁵ Many objections to the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion were couched in language or arguments that reflected the dream of the international.

There was a strong sense that the religion needed to measure up to standards of modernity and science that were accepted globally. Failure to live up to those standards meant not only that the

⁷² G.A.K., "The State Religion," *The Guardian*, July 2, 1960.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

imagined relationship between Buddhism and progress would collapse at the local level, (undermining the institutions, laws and programs of the postcolonial period) but would also undermine it internationally. Modernist Buddhism, it was felt, was ‘too big’ for Burma alone; its transcendental philosophy would only be limited by its association with a single country. A further problem with the state religion proposal, according to ‘G.A.K.’ was that Buddhism, as an empirical philosophy, began as a revolt against ‘accepted beliefs, tradition or authority’ and thus the value of state support for it was ‘superficial’ at best. Buddhism could define or challenge the state, but not vice-versa. To make Buddhism the state religion was unscientific, because it was anathema to the critical thinking characteristic of scientific enquiry. It flew in the face of the modernist Buddhist notion that everything should be questioned, including the religion itself. If one was not allowed to question, then the religion would weaken and become mere dogma - no different from communism or theism.

‘G.A.K.’ thus outlined three basic criticisms of the proposal to make Buddhism the state religion: firstly, that the plan was undemocratic, secondly, that it was unscientific or regressive and thirdly, that it was narrow-minded (in the sense that it indulged in national particularism at the expense of Burmese Buddhism’s international mission.) Subsequent letters and editorials appearing in the *Guardian* also criticised the proposal in these terms. For example, a letter published a few days later asserted that no state religion could ever be ‘advanced, progressive and democratic.’

I believe I am right in asserting that a great majority of liberal-minded and progressive citizens of advanced democratic countries uphold and endorse the position that there should be complete freedom of thought and consciences. In the matter of religion any movement or measure which is calculated to give a definite political status to any particular religion will be taken as unduly restricting the rights to be fully and equally enjoyed by the citizens of the country.⁷⁶

Furthermore, the author wrote that it was his ‘decided opinion that the followers of any religion having received the status of the State religion are most likely to be influenced by the prestige and worldly aspects of that religion.’ In other words, making Buddhism the state religion would mark a return to the gaudy traditional or primitive understanding of the relationship between state and religion: ‘a retrograde step. ... Are we to look upon the issue of the State religion as indication of political bankruptcy or regression?’ Any gains in prestige would be offset by a loss of ‘inner

⁷⁶ U.B.H., “The State Religion,” *The Guardian*, July 11, 1960.

spiritual strength.’⁷⁷ Thus, for the modernist Burmese, the plan to make Buddhism the state religion represented a retreat from modernity to an inferior system. Some even complained about the inappropriate attention and influence the bill would grant to the above mentioned ‘superclass’ - the sangha.

Later in July, a letter written in response to the one above agreed with G.A.K. and stated that ‘I hope that the members of the official committee will take careful note of what is published in these and other columns.’ The author (signed M.K.K.) stated that there were no end of religious initiatives and benefits in Burma already, and asked how making Buddhist the state religion would improve these existing advantages, especially since it would require ‘drastic change in the Constitutions upsetting the democratic principles enshrined therein.’⁷⁸ M.K.K. also expressed concern that the Buddhist modernist emphasis on the laity would be swept aside by the decision:

The Buddhist philosophy is not confined to Phongyis and Sayadaws only but is equally to be practised by laymen *in toto*. But this philosophy is not to be brought to the limelight only when a country declares Buddhism as the state religion.⁷⁹

Here is a hint that the modernist Burmese were mistrustful of the kind of influence and prestige that the sangha might accrue under a state that did not correctly emphasise the importance of the productive, rational laity. The traditional relationship between the sangha and state authority - whereby they lent legitimacy to one another with corresponding rights and responsibilities - was an anachronism. In a democracy, government was based on the ballot box, and modernist Buddhists viewed political activity by the sangha with a special horror. A monk could not stand for election and so should wield no more authority than any other person; his place was in a monastery pursuing nirvana, not advising government or persuading people how to vote. An editorial published in 1959 warned about the danger of mixing religion and politics, arguing that this could lead to ‘splitting the country and the people not only politically but also religiously.’:

Already the monks who have leant support to the “Clean” and the “Stable” factions are making themselves active in canvassing for votes for the side they favour. The result is that laymen of

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ M.K.K., “State Religion,” *The Guardian*, July 27, 1960.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

both sexes who habitually pay respects to the monks have themselves become divided because the monks they venerate have begun to take sides.⁸⁰

In 1961, and on a similar note, Ba Yin, who had served as Education Minister under the British contributed a scathing letter about the influence of *pongyis* in elections under the colonial system. ‘Having contested four successive elections in the bad old days of British rule I can speak with a certain amount of personal experience’ he wrote. ‘As political leaders we have to pretend to be saints. If was (sic) are real saints we won’t be playing the game of politics!’ Ba Yin outlined several instances where monks had exercised what he considered to be undue political influence:

In my first election I was defeated because, under instructions from the then president of the G.C.B.A., the late U Chit Hlaing, the *phongyis* asked the voters to boycott the election. I am a native of the Meiktila East constituency and the people wanted to vote for me but they were afraid to incur the displeasure of their *phongyis* and they refrained from voting. The *phongyis* had used undue influence in restraining the people from the use of their fundamental democratic right.⁸¹

Similarly, he wrote:

In my third election I was defeated again, on the separation issue. The *phongyis*, who liked me very much asked me to stand on the anti-separation ticket but, as a gentleman, I was unable to practise deception. As the election drew near the *phongyis*, by every means in their power, forced the people to vote for the anti-separation candidate. All my workers asked me to file an election petition but I flatly refused to do so. I told them that the voting was secret and if the electorate wanted me to represent them their *phongyis* were not inside the ballot enclosure to say 'no' to them.⁸²

The idea of *pongyis* as a privileged political stratum was incompatible with the idea of a state founded on modern principles, specifically those of socialism and democracy. The political clout that *pongyis* wielded was not commensurate with their actual economic contribution to the country, even considering their importance as teachers and clergymen. A letter published in August 1961

⁸⁰ “Religion and Politics,” *The Guardian*, December 15, 1959.

⁸¹ Ba Yin, “Wise Statesmanship,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 1960.

⁸² Ibid. The separation issue, which dominated the elections of 1932, was the question of whether or not Burma should be separated from the colony of India. As Ba Yin here implied, the pro-separation faction was defeated. Burma was eventually separated from India in 1937.

warned that the state religion plan would make the sangha a 'privileged class'.⁸³ Later that month, a group challenging the legality of the proposed bill stated, among other thing, that a 'theocracy' was incompatible with building a socialist state and concluded that 'the active participation of the sangha for the success of the State Religion issue showed that religion had been brought into politics and if this was not stopped in time it could cause misunderstandings'.⁸⁴ In February 1961, U Nu himself gave a speech warning monks against participating in demonstrations:

To the *phongyis* the Prime Minister recalled his all-out efforts in the promotion of the *Sasana* and prayed that they deal with him as *saya* to *dayaka* and promised his continuing efforts to promote the glory of the *Sasana*. The Prime Minister rendering himself to the guidance of the *phongyis*, emphatically stated that he would be constrained to take drastic measures should the *phongyis* get mixed up undesirably and against the tenets of the Order with elements who wish to make capital out of disturbed conditions in the country, and create or bring about disorder in the country.⁸⁵

Here, Nu reminds the monks of the proper form of their relationship with the state; he uses the terms *saya* - a respectful word meaning teacher - and *dayaka*, which means patron or donor. The role of a monk, therefore, is to receive alms and remain otherwise secluded - not to violate the 'tenets of the Order' by wielding their influence indiscriminately. An editorial published in the *Guardian* shortly thereafter noted that Nu had seen fit to lecture the monks 'on the need to observe the rules of democracy in ventilating (sic) their grievances.'

He told the monks that they should regard him as a disciple and not as an enemy with whom they should talk things over and negotiate to resolve any differences between the monkhood and the Government or to solve problems affecting the monkhood. He declared that if the monks regarded him as their enemy he in his turn could not consider himself any longer as a disciple but the guardian of the law who must uphold law and order.⁸⁶

⁸³ "State Religion," *The Guardian*, August 8, 1961. The letter states: 'Vide Section 43. B, of the Constitution (Third) Amendment Act, 1961, the Sangha throughout the Union shall be provided with special hospitals, completely set apart, and they shall be supplied with special foods prepared for them. Would not this section create a privileged class? Could the leaders of this country consider it just and fair that only Buddhist Monks should be given special hospitals?'

⁸⁴ "S.C. Asked For Writ To Stay Moving Of Constn. 3rd Amndmt. Bill," *The Guardian*, August 17, 1961. The group was made up of a variety of religious practitioners, not only Buddhists. Criticising the government's religious policies, they noted that 'what the country needed at the present time was peace and the rule of law but the Union Party Government in building *Nat* shrines and making Buddhism the State Religion was not attending to this need but was trying to make its power secure.'

⁸⁵ "P.M. Warns Against Violent Demonstrations," *The Guardian*, February 2, 1961. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁶ "Warning Against Violence," *The Guardian*, February 2, 1961.

The editor chose here to translate *dayaka* as ‘disciple.’ As noted above, ‘donor’ would be more accurate. The *Guardian* was generally critical of Nu and supported the military-backed ‘Stable’ AFPFL in the elections of 1960 that returned Nu to power. By using the term disciple, the paper implied that Nu was accustomed to taking instruction from monks and was susceptible to their influence. ‘Anything monks do is viewed with indulgence,’ the editorial continued, ‘[and] they were instrumental in playing an influential part in the movement which brought back the Prime Minister’s party to power at the last General Election.’⁸⁷ Disapproval of Nu and disapproval of the monks that actively supported him may be in confluence here, but there seems to be little doubt that such behaviour was considered in violation of ‘the rules of democracy’ - and of the Order - by modernists. Certainly Nu, whose memoirs are filled with dubious tales of him steadfastly facing down aggrieved monk petitioners, seemed to agree.⁸⁸

Overall, the modernists were made uneasy by any aspect of the proposed bill that seemed regressive or traditional. Nu, for instance, was singled out for criticism for acting like a dictator - or perhaps a monarch. Two editorials published in the *Guardian* in July, 1961 accused Nu of desiring the title of *sasana dayaka* (patron of the religion) and of governing more by emotion than wisdom, while an anonymous letter printed in August asked ‘Isn’t U Nu alone shaping the destiny of the country?’⁸⁹ As pointed out earlier, modernists argued that if scientific Buddhism becomes too associated with Burma historically (rather than Burma ‘ideally’) then it would lose its universalism. When the editorials and letters complained about the State Religion’s backwardness, wrongheadedness or crudity they were raging against a retreat into the Burmese past - what they perceived as a repudiation of Burma’s role as the leader of an international creed. To Buddhist modernists the establishment of the state religion would be a revival of precolonial symbols and priorities that was of interest and relevance only to Burmese. No one - or at least, no one in the West - had wanted to learn from the Burmese when the kings reigned. In contrast, the Buddhist modernists had much to teach the world, but only so long as they kept their creed modern.

⁸⁷ Ibid. The editorial refers to the election held in 1960, following the two-year ‘Caretaker’ period. Nu’s ‘Clean’ AFPFL party won, defeating the military-backed ‘Stable’ AFPFL.

⁸⁸ Nu, *Saturday’s Son*, 200-6.

⁸⁹ “State Religion,” *The Guardian*, July 21, 1961; “State Religion,” *The Guardian*, July 24, 1961; “Open Letter to U Nu,” *The Guardian*, August 1, 1961. Interestingly, when U Nu himself defended his decision, he also used modernist Buddhist rhetoric. Here is an excerpt from a speech he gave on the day the bill was enacted: “The persons who hold the....belief [that the state should be separate] accept the view that Government should provide the leadership in the execution of health, education, social and economic works for the public. If this view is correct that Government should provide leadership in works which offer well-being to the public in the short span of one existence why should not the view be correct that Government should provide leadership in works which offer well-being in the inestimably long future existences?” Nu went on to note that this was a question of ‘the well-being of the people of the world’ as well.

In this vein, complaints were printed about even trivial aspects of the bill, like its proposal for holidays on Buddhist sabbath days rather than on Sundays. The letter that complained about the sangha being a 'privileged class' also commented that in 'almost all Countries of the world, including Russia, India and Pakistan, Sunday is an internationally recognised holiday and still remains so. What great benefit, therefore, would Burma derive by deviating from this internationally recognised day of rest?'⁹⁰ An editorial noted, sarcastically: 'It is yet to be seen whether the Government will become more efficient and religious by closing its offices on the sabbath days rather than on Sundays which are international holidays.'⁹¹

In sum, the state religion debate highlighted the expectations Buddhist modernists had about the proper relationship between state and sangha. Making Buddhism the state religion would undermine the progressive and democratic character of the state and lessen Burmese Buddhism's international appeal. Furthermore, it would further privilege and embolden those elements of the sangha who defied the passive and contemplative role that Buddhism modernism assigned to them. Indeed their fears would seem to have been borne out when U Nu's government pledged to pass yet another amendment to the constitution guaranteeing *all* religions the right to teach their faiths and extending to them some of the privileges that the Third Amendment had granted to Buddhism. This was fiercely opposed by many *pongyis*, who held protest meetings and even, rather spectacularly, picketed the joint session of Parliament that passed this Fourth Amendment on September 25, 1961.⁹² Around two thousand monks blocked roads leading to the Secretariat compound, stopped cars and buses and extracted pledges from about half a dozen MPs not to vote for the bill. Most, however, had avoided the *pongyis* by arriving at dawn, some by taking off their jackets and *gaungbaungs* (headscarves); the two Speakers, on the other hand, had stayed in the compound overnight.⁹³ Later, the monks proceeded to the nearby Sule Pagoda, 'where they vowed that they would fight the Fourth Amendment and sacrifice their lives not only in this existence, but in succeeding ones as well.'⁹⁴

⁹⁰ "State Religion," August 8, 1961.

⁹¹ "Unnecessary Legislation," *The Guardian*, August 3, 1961.

⁹² "Monks Hold Protest Meets Against Fourth Amendment," *The Guardian*, September 25, 1961; "Monks Demonstration Ends Peacefully," *The Guardian*, September 26, 1961.

⁹³ "Monks Demonstration Ends Peacefully,"; "Fourth Amendment Ratified By Early-Rising, Elusive MPs," *The Nation* September 26, 1961.

⁹⁴ "Fourth Amendment Ratified."

As it happened, the *pongyis* did not have long to wait to see the end of the Fourth Amendment. In March, 1962, Ne Win seized power in a coup and abolished the constitution a day later. An editorial from the sympathetic *Guardian* noted that among the blessings that the coup had brought was the end of *pongyi* involvement in ‘riots,’ with the removal of religion from the political sphere.⁹⁵ But we can argue that the establishment of Ne Win’s regime also brought an end to the vision that Buddhist modernists had for Burma’s place in the world as a beacon of a scientific Buddhism. Subsequent decades to a very great extent muted the voice of Anglophone Buddhist modernism, which became much quieter in Burmese life than it had been in the years between independence and 1962.

⁹⁵ “Respite From Jargon,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 1962.

Conclusion

Dr Ba Maw, an English and French-educated barrister and political figure born in 1893, was Burma's head of state during the period of nominal independence under the Japanese occupation of 1942 - 1945. The following is an excerpt from a speech he gave, very possibly in English, in Japan in 1944 and cited in his memoirs of the period, *Breakthrough in Burma*:

Why did Asia lose her past heritage? Civilisation began in the East. The world's progress began in the East. Why did we lose what we had gained in the past? The answer can be very simply given. It is that East Asia lost the past because she could not move out of it into the future. She got stuck in it. In a materialist age she could not adjust herself to the materialist environment. She tried to be spiritual both in spiritual and material times ... The new world is neither for the materialist or the idealist; it is for the realist.¹

Ba Maw was here speaking in support of the Japanese war effort. After the war he was imprisoned briefly by the Allies and in 1946 he returned to Burma and political life, but he never again held any office of significance. His comments here regarding the East's spiritual strengths and its material weakness and particularly the need for a balanced world view - one that blended both material and spiritual aspects, express many of the same ideas of the lay Buddhist modernists that wrote over the following decade. Ba Maw, too, was a Burmese nationalist whose worldview had been shaped by colonial education. Like the modernists, he sought to refute the claims made by colonial discourse about Burma and Buddhism even as he inherited and reproduced some of that discourse's core ideas. The modernists, like Ba Maw, believed that they were responding to a new world that was 'for the realist.' Buddhism, they claimed, was a religion for realists, with realistic goals; it was neither wholly material nor wholly spiritual, but encompassed both roles. It was both material and spiritual and neither material nor spiritual, making it a complete philosophy for the modern age.

Burmese people educated in English during the colonial era sought in the decades after independence to articulate a conception of Buddhism and its role in Burmese life that challenged the colonial discourse about Burma and Buddhism, but also inherited some of its key concepts. Figures such as U Chan Htoon and U Nu worked to imagine Buddhism as a philosophy that was modern, rational and congruent with the most cutting-edge and useful ideologies, as they understood them. Buddhism's rationalism made it compatible with science, its materialism made it

¹ Dr Ba Maw, *Breakthrough in Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 376.

compatible with socialism and its individualism made it compatible with democracy. All of these together made it modern, and its spirituality made it a religion. Its splendour - and thus Burma's - lay not in pageant, age or sacredness, but in its power to match and subvert the corrosive power of the new. This set it and Burma above all other nations and creeds.

Some of these ideas resonated with what was said about Buddhism by colonial European observers in the decades after the British annexation of Burma, and we can argue that the Anglophone Burmese Buddhist modernists were at least partly influenced by the picture of Buddhism constructed by colonial commentators. Like the English-educated Burmese Buddhists of the late colonial and early postcolonial eras, British colonial observers inhabited a world replete with contradictions. Scientific discovery had robbed Western religion of its relevance, modern life was seen as lacking a moral dimension or philosophical component. Some colonial-era British commentators believed that they found in Buddhism the answer to these problems; in Buddhism, but not in the Burmese. The Burmese could not possess a modern faith without the coloniser's civilising mission being invalidated. This led the British to construct a narrative of contemporary Burmese degeneracy, a fall from grace. The British construction of Burmese Buddhism was not simple; a glorious past contrasted with a decadent present, a religion that was pure, lucid and thoughtful contrasted with a practice that was cluttered, muddled with spirits, myths, sacrifice and illogicality. The monks belonged in their monasteries and the king belonged not at all. Colonial discourse constructed the traditional Buddhist monarchy (especially that of the later dynasties) and the religious practices that the monarchy sponsored as being opposed to the true spirit of original Buddhism. Buddhism had to be separated from the state to restore it to its original purity.

Between the 1920s and the 1940s a more sympathetic understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and the state in the precolonial era took shape, in the developing English-language scholarly account of Burmese history. In broad outline, this scholarly discourse understood the state as sacred, with the king possessing a strong religious function, ruling in accordance with a blueprint set out by the heavens and with the acquiescence and support of the community of the sangha. This discourse was first expressed in a few key texts, each a product of its time, as were the narratives of the colonial commentators and of the Buddhist modernists. Three core images of the traditional state – which I have referred to as the dharma state, the cosmic state and the sangha state – have shaped English-language academic discourse about the traditional relationship between Buddhism, authority and the state. This sympathetic picture of the traditional state and of Buddhism's role in it

informs most contemporary academic writing in English about premodern Burma. What is striking is that even those who see the Burmese regimes that have existed in the decades since independence as inheriting the structures of the traditional state would suggest that there was no real prospect for a restoration of the old Buddhist monarchy when British rule in Burma came to an end. Colonial rule fundamentally transformed the relationship between Buddhism and the state in Burma and the three strands of English-language discourse about the role of Buddhism in Burmese life that this thesis has studied are in different ways products of that transformation. Even the postcolonial Buddhist modernists were obliged to conceive of Buddhism in terms that responded to the structures of colonial rule and its discourses. The power of this sketch of Buddhist modernism, therefore, lies in the fact that its advocates had accepted that the Burmese state was essentially republican. The intellectual solidification of Buddhist modernism in the postcolonial period was such that its emphasis on Burma's identity as a scientific, democratic and socialist state determined the character of state-society relations and precluded a return to a premodern way of being, despite its status as an English, elite-level discourse.

The issues that this thesis has addressed point to a number of related questions. Firstly, why was British opposition to the traditional Burmese monarchy so strong? In the foreword to *Burma after the Conquest*, Grattan Geary wrote that he hoped the book would bring into focus 'the hopes and fears, the actions and the passions, in play during the interregnum in Burma, between the deposition of King Theebaw and [the pronouncement of] the decree fixing the future of the country.' In setting this stage, Geary mentioned 'Theebaw's crown - a fool's cap steeped in blood - lying in the mud, *no one caring to pick it up*.'² Here is a point of interest. As the historian David Cannadine points out in his work *Ornamentalism*, during the period of high imperialism the British usually preferred to work through local elites; this was increasingly the policy across the empire after the Indian Mutiny and Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858.³ The annexation of Burma and the abolition of the kingship represents an exception to this general rule and something of a puzzle to scholars. Given that we know a number of British observers admired Buddhism and saw the Burmese Buddhist community as a sangha/lay binary to which the king contributed nothing, I would argue that these attitudes played a role in the decision to exile Thibaw without a replacement. Perhaps they imagined

² Geary, *Burma After the Conquest*, iii. Emphasis mine.

³ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw Their Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 41, 44. Native princes and kings were increasingly seen as part of the splendid tapestry of empire and native hierarchies an exotic mirror of the proper order of British society, 'no longer reviled as alien and corrupt, but acclaimed as familiar and traditional.'

that in removing the king they were restoring Buddhism. Further English-language research would shed light on this question.

Another important question concerns the ideas of the Buddhist modernists. To what extent were later philosophies, particularly the socialist ideology of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, influenced by the Buddhist modernist concepts? The BSPP was the official political organisation of the one-party state established by Ne Win after he seized power in 1962. It was dedicated to the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism;’ its manifesto - the ‘System of Correlation of Man and His Environment’ - has been noted to possess Buddhist elements.⁴ U Nu’s memoirs were also published during this period and we have seen that he was quick to deny participation in *nat*-worship or astrological influences on his premiership, demonstrating the ongoing importance of the modernist dislike for those phenomena. To what extent did modernist ideas, particularly those relating to Buddhism and socialism, make themselves felt in the period from 1962 to 1989? Such research would need to be carried out in Burmese and would perhaps challenge prevailing attitudes that Ne Win derived religious legitimacy solely from royalist pretension.

A final research question is related to more recent history. Correctly or incorrectly, the showy religious devotion of Burma’s various military dictatorships is often noticed and commented on, as noted in the introduction to this thesis. Less attention has been paid to Buddhist legitimacy and practice on the part of the National League for Democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi, who have cultivated their own monks, engaged in *vipassana* meditation and championed an ‘engaged Buddhism.’⁵ What are the competing versions of politicised Buddhism that exist in Burma at the present day and what are their antecedents? What kind of debt do they owe to the Buddhist modernism of the early postcolonial period? There is potential here for both Burmese and English-language research. It is important to remember that this is not a question, as was argued by the journalist quoted in my introduction, of which political ideology ‘is a more fitting reflection of Burma’s Theravada Buddhism,’ rather, it is one based on the understanding that Buddhism has been imagined and shaped by various actors and agents in Burmese history to suit differing political, social or ideological goals. This is what the current trend of research on this issue in Burma scholarship seems to be trying to establish. My thesis has, I hope, deepened this understanding by

⁴ Jordt, *Burma’s Mass Lay Meditation Movement*, 200.

⁵ Stephen McCarthy, “The Buddhist Political Rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 5, 2 (2004): 67-81.

emphasising that there are strands of Buddhisms in Burma, and that there are many discourses about those Buddhisms. English-language discourse about Burmese Buddhism – both that produced by outsiders and by Burmese people themselves – is one of those strands, and this thesis has attempted to map some of its contours and to point to its importance.

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