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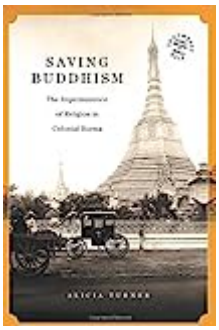

Alicia Marie Turner. *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. xiii + 221 pp. $54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3937-6.

Reviewed by Mike Charney (School of Oriental and African Studies)

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Commissioned by Thomas Borchert (University of Vermont)

Alicia Turner, an associate professor of humanities and religious studies at York University, has researched, exhaustively, the emergence and activities of lay Buddhist associations in colonial Burma. Turner has used a vast range of archival material gathered over the course of many years of fieldwork in Burma and in libraries and archives elsewhere. The resulting analysis is not only intellectually engaging and convincing, but also empirically satisfying. The opportunity to use these primary sources, some in English and Pali but largely in Burmese, in one research project was only possible because of Turnerâs very strong linguistic abilities and training. Structurally, the book consists of a theoretical introduction and first chapter, focusing on the discourse on *sasana* decline as a tool for Buddhist innovators and reformers, and conclusion discussing the implications of her findings. Chapters 3 to 5 are case study chapters, focusing heavily on the detailed history of Buddhist education in colonial Burma (chapter 3), the emergence of lay Buddhist organisations, their mechanics, and morality campaigns (chapter 4), and the *shikho* issue and shoe question (chapter 5).

Turner shows how everyday Buddhists in Burma progressively responded to colonial policies, a story she takes up to 1919 and the victory over the shoe question, succeeded in 1920 by a tipping of the balance in the minds of many young, anticolonial Burmese towards nationalism. At first, Buddhist projects in Burma fitted themselves into the new frameworks, accepting a smaller carbon footprint for Buddhism by delimiting Buddhism to the content of teachings only and not in the broader practice of pedagogy, and thus identified a space autonomous from state intervention. Burmese who sought to preserve Buddhism were thus able to evade the influence of the aforementioned colonial forces that sought to reshape as much as control Buddhism and Buddhists. A new imaginary, the lay moral community that had to take on the burden, formerly borne by the now-absent throne, of protecting the religion, would be a powerful one indeed. This was a democratized Buddhist identity that afforded space for the activism of women as well as men, not only as part of a community but also with a new kind of heightened status that they drew from their position as holders of lay organizational offices. It needs to be stressed, however, that Turner seeks to focus attention not on the nation, for nationalist historians have misframed early Buddhist lay organizations during the colonial period as merely political outlets for early nationalism, but on how Buddhist discourse during the colonial period, until the 1920s, âshaped a sense of collective belonging distinct

from the nationâ (p. 3).

Turner is interested in the Buddhist moral community not just as a form of identity but also as a means of fitting the Burmese of the colonial period into a longer history of Burmese reform that provided a way for them to understand the broader social and political changes taking place around them. Turner casts her net very widely for models and comparative examples for a very rich theoretical discussion of sasana reform and moral communities in chapter 2. She makes especially effective use of recent studies of Buddhism in colonial Sri Lanka and Cambodia from Anne Blackburn, Stephen Berkwitz, and Anne Hansen, among others. She also relies upon the doors that have been opened by the literature focused on innovations in the invention of tradition and identity studies, such as that by Penny Edwards and Thongchai Winichakul, work stemming in part from the late Benedict Andersonâs *Imagined Communities* (1983), to understand how identity could be changed by imagining through older traditions of belonging. These traditions go far back, but while they project and resonate into the present they are also fashioned with the tools their time. While Berkwitz has found in medieval Pali literature the idea of moral community to construct a Buddhist collective, Turner argues that the means of this imagining changed in the colonial period. These means are often the same as those of significance to national identity studies, the newspapers, journals, and tracts that made up colonial-era print culture, membership organizations, and reform campaigns. This requires different research methodology than applied by scholars to Buddhist communities of earlier eras but also creates new opportunities for detailed, empirical research. Most early modernists would drop their jaw at the diversity, range, and depth of the sources Turner was able to pull together and use to support her study.

Turner treats Buddhism as a dynamic force that interacted with its social and political context. As she argues, social and political developments could and did change the meaning of Buddhism, and this could also change the agendas and the understandings of Buddhism of those who engaged with Buddhism in various ways. From the first page of the book, Turner focuses on the importance of change produced by the fall of the Burmese king, Thibaw, and the ways in which Burmese understood the four decades that followed, from the 1890s to the 1920s, through the interpretive framework of sasana decline. Burmese reimagined their relationship with Buddhism as âas protectors of Buddhismâ to stave off the decline of the religion, and this reimagined relationship with Buddhism gave rise to a Buddhist moral community (pp. 2-3). In this way, Buddhist discourse on decline, as other scholars have also shown, is also âan active and motivating forceâ and its highlighting was a phenomenon seen in the period across the larger colonial-era Theravada Buddhist world (p. 24). The examination here is naturally focused on Buddhist studies literature, but there are also comparisons to the broader context of the colonial era, both regarding the Victorian colonial world and Southeast Asia, but these are limited to the form and culture of reform rather than to its mechanics and sociology. Beginning with the publication of Everett M. Rogersâs *Diffusion of Innovations* in 1962, there has grown a rich and extensive literature on the diffusion of practices, concepts, and technology within a social system for other contexts and time periods that might have added some useful insights to the many already logged in this important study. While applying to the phenomenon of lay Buddhist reform the methods of a field mainly associated with marketing research might seem crude, it might offer helpful perspective regarding information circulation and networks.

Turner is critical of Partha Chatterjeeâs notion of bifurcated colonial space discussed in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), in which a spiritual world, immune to colonial influence and dominance, held its own, allowing the distillation of a new national identity separate from a material world in which Europeans exerted hegemony. As Turner has shown, Chatterjee did not understand the degree to which âthe imagined âspiritual domain was already enmeshed in the European colonial project of differentiation and classification that produced religion as a separate categoryâ (p. 152). Throughout Turner expands the operational area, in a sense, of lay Buddhist activity, imagining and becoming part of the moral community in areas relegated to European dominance in conventional literature on colonial Burma, areas such as colonial schools. This was responsible for raising particular concerns, such as those over âthe Burmese Anglo-vernacular schoolboyâ (p. 63), the cadre of a new, future leadership in Burma that was troubling to lay Buddhists not because of their Western education but because of their lack of familiarity with Buddhist concepts. Such concerns in turn became vehicles for lay activism and further definition of the Buddhist imaginary.

At the heart of the contest between colonial authorities and lay Buddhists was the definition of the religion, the process of this definition being what Turner views as a technique of power and a âcultural mode of power and hegemonyâ (p. 10). Despite official State secularism un-

der the British Raj after the 1857 Indian Mutiny, colonial officials on the ground sought to shape and restrict the political potential of Buddhism in Burma and were thus actively imagining it in particular ways. It was essential to the operation of colonial administration, for example, to define religion as something different and separate from the other aspects of community life. This allowed the British to limit the claims made by the religion but also to regulate all other aspects of life identified as outside of the religionâs proper influence and viewed as secular in nature. Lay Buddhists also found in the defining of religion a âtechnique of powerâ with which to combat colonial authorities, although Turner stresses that the Burmese themselves defined religion in multiple ways, resulting in numerous internal debates in addition to the standoff with the colonial state.

One aspect of the present work that will interest many readers is how it contributes to a deeper understanding of the current condition of both the Buddhist community in Burma and the country itself. Turner concludes that Buddhism shifted in the 1920s from the object of political organizing to an instrument of organizing for political ends, âan â¦ element of a national identity and a means of mobilization to national endsâ (p. 139). But this new nationalism drew upon the model of Buddhist organizing. One legacy is that feelings of obligation to protect the religion have in more recent years exploded into attacks on the Rohingya ethnic minority group in Burma, on the one hand, and popular mobilization to defend monks from state prosecution (as in 2007), on the other. As Turner argues, these diverse experiences drew upon the same motivations to protect the sasana and are no less diverse than the projects of turn-of-the-century Buddhist associations, and reflect the durability of the interpretive framework of sasana decline and the notion of a moral community inherited from the latter. If this reviewer had to recommend only two books that would best carry someone to an understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and how Burmese view their place in society today, this would be one of those books. It has been their reimagined role in being responsible for the preservation of Buddhism that has carried everyday Burmese Buddhists through bad times as well as good and will continue to inform their relationship with their country and their society long after the current elections are over.

This book is a remarkable achievement, one that communicates across disciplinary boundaries within Burma studies and national boundaries that divide Buddhist studies. Given the current circumstances in Burma, it should be essential reading for any political scientist or historian who seeks to put the current climate in the country into context. The book is highly recommended for use in the classroom and by researchers who seek to understand the historical emergence of lay Buddhism and its place in the new Burma that is presently unfolding.