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Authors	Turner, Alicia
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alicia TURNER

Religion, the Study of Religion and other Products of Transnational and Colonial Imaginings

ABSTRACT: The category of 'religion' as contemporary scholarship has demonstrated is a fairly recent innovation, dating back only a few hundred years in Western thought, and 'world religions' as we think of it and as we teach it is an even more recent category, emerging out of European colonialism. Thus the academic study of religion is both the product and, at times, the agent of colonial modes of knowledge. And yet, it is perhaps because 'religion' continues to be invented and reinvented through connections across cultures that investigating the work of religious ideas and practices offers such fruitful possibilities for understanding the work of culture and power. This article investigates religion and the study of religion as a mode of anti-colonial practice, seeking to understand how each have the potential to cross boundaries, build bridges and produce critical insights into assumptions and worldviews too often taken for granted.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Study of Religion, Colonialism, Buddhism

Alicia TURNER is Assistant Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies at York University in Toronto and the Editor of *The Journal of Burma Studies*. She specializes in the study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia with an emphasis on the period of British colonialism in Burma/Myanmar. Her research focuses on the intersections of religion, colonialism and nationalism. Her forthcoming book *Saving Buddhism: Moral Community and the Impermanence of Colonial Religion* explores the fluid nature of the concepts of *sāsana*, identity and religion through a study of Buddhist lay associations in colonial Burma. Her current projects include a collaborative project on European Buddhist monks and a biography of U Dhammaloka, an Irish sailor turned monk and anticolonial agitator at the turn of the twentieth century. She is also beginning work on the study of Buddhist networks from the margins in colonial Southeast Asia and a digital archive of Buddhist publications from this period.

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The academic study of religions, or at least the branch of it that I practice, starts with the working assumption that the religious traditions we study are the historical product of human imagining and invention. Even where we might wish to be most sympathetic to the tradition and concede that ours is not the only possible mode of truth, we take as our object of study the aspects of religious thought and practice that are necessarily human products. That they are products of human imagining and invention means that they are constantly subject to reimagining, reinventions and contestation. Religious ideas, worldviews and practices are changed over time by religious actors to respond to contemporary needs and struggles. For the most part, it is the process of imagining and reimagining, invention and reinvention, and the not infrequent contestation, that form the subjects of our studies.

Scholars of religion are fascinated by religious inventions and contestations mainly because so much is at stake. To take a definition from Bruce Lincoln who has shaped much of my thinking on these matters, religion is 'that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal' (Lincoln, 2012, 1). Religious discourses locate their authority beyond the human and offer fundamental descriptions of the nature of the world beyond human power to shape or control. They have an ability to naturalize such descriptions, placing them beyond debate and form them into unquestioned assumptions about the nature of the world, and its workings in cosmological, social and, often, political terms. Therefore inventing and contesting religious practices and discourses has the power to construct and realign the contours of one's world in potent ways; it offers an ability to define and reshape what is fundamental in transcendent and nonhuman terms. Such imaginings and contests capture the interest of scholars of religion because they are so potent. Religion offers the power to create and image of the world at the most fundamental levels. Therefore contesting religious traditions is contesting society at its most fundamental levels.

Just as we approach the religious traditions we study as human creations, we are forced to acknowledge that the broader category 'religion' is equally a human product and equally problematic because, like all definitional acts and categories, it seeks the power to shape that which it defines and contains. Scholars of religion have not always been attuned to this problem at the core of our discipline. In fact, many of those theorists counted as foundational to the academic study of religions were actively engaged in universalizing and naturalizing the category of religion with problematic implications. Work like that of Talal Asad (1993) and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) has brought the history of the category of 'religion' to the fore in recent years. In fact, however, critiques of the category of religion well predate the advent of post-colonial studies in the academic study of religions. Over three decades ago, Jonathan Z. Smith offered a warning to scholars of religion in the words that opened his book, *Imagining Religion*.

> If we have understood the archaeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of

> religion. That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expression that might be characterized as religious—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study (Smith 1982, xi).

Smith's purpose was different from that of Talal Asad and much of the post-colonial approach to these questions that has followed. Smith pointed out the invented nature of the category of 'religion' in order to shape and improve the academic study of religion—he did not propose that we abandon the category as an organizing devise. More to the point, Smith was attempting to shake things up in the field: asking scholars of the day to question their basic assumptions. Mainly he sought to draw attention to that fact that we are making an intervention in the world when we choose our data and our objects of study. Smith was looking to contest the reigning paradigm and destabilize assumptions in the field. In this, he was acting as a bit of a rabble-rouser, I would argue, a character trait of many good scholars of religion.

However, I am here to tell you that Smith was flat wrong. 'Religion,' that is the category of religion, is not the invention of the scholar's pen. If only it were—because we scholars of religion do not have that much power and impact in the world. Our books are read by our colleagues, but they tend not to build great bridges or great empires. To claim that the power to imagine and construct the category of religion was contained in the scholar's pen was a bit of academic hubris on Smith's part.

Unfortunately or not, 'religion' is made and remade in the world. And importantly, parts of this imagined beast were made and remade in the colonial world and through the colonial encounter. Such a division of the world into two: religion and secular, was a key intervention of colonialism, one that worked to reshape and control local populations and local worlds. However, it was not a simple hegemonic imposition that produced a single new worldview. This is in part because Europeans did not bring a single or simple category of 'religion' with them. There was (and is) no single category of 'religion'. 'Religion' in the colonial world, as elsewhere, was fluid and contested. And given that it was, like the religious traditions we study, invented, fluid and contested, colonized people quickly got in on the game of inventing and contesting its boundaries and its nature. They worked, just as Europeans did, to shape what 'religion' would mean in concrete terms. This arguing over 'religion' and contesting and shaping its boundaries and capacities was a key arena for challenging colonial power.

In many ways I see the study of these two things—contesting and reimagining religious traditions themselves and contesting and reimagining the category of 'religion'—as two key objects of study for contemporary scholars of religion. They are two avenues for exploring the work of power in culture and the implications of our academic work.

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My work is focused specifically on religion and colonialism. By this, I mean both that I am interested in how colonial power and the experience of colonialism shape a particular religious tradition: Buddhism in Burma, and that I pay particular attention to the problematic category 'religion' and the ways in which it operated as a technique of colonial power. I investigate how contesting or challenging definitions of religion became a mode of resisting colonialism. More simply put, I work on people from the fringes of British colonial empire at the turn of the 20th century talking to each other about the experience of colonialism and its fault lines and how Buddhist modes of thought and practice worked to address problems, build connections and reimagine their own worlds.

The subject of my largest project, looking at Buddhist associations in colonial Burma, explores how Burmese lay people built upon long-standing Buddhist concepts, particularly the idea that the Buddhist teachings were slowly slipping away and redefined old techniques of Buddhist reform to respond to the colonial situation. In the process they came to inflect and redefine the meaning of fundamental concepts and assumptions about what constitute the core of the Buddhist teachings. This in turn reshaped their worldview, identity and the social-political world in the process. This aspect of my work is a study of those reimagining and contesting the religious tradition as a means of restructuring their social world: the project of Religious Studies that I discussed at the top.

The second half of that project was exploring the work the category of religion in the colonial context. That is, looking at how the colonial state in the civilizing mission required Burma and Buddhism to respond to their universal and colonizing categories of religion and secular. More than this, I explore how various colonial officials and actors redefined the concept of religion to facilitate different projects of Empire. Religion proved a fluid and fairly subtle political technology in Burma. I am interested in how defining religion and redefining its contours operated as a technique of colonial power. How did locating certain practices and not others inside this category work to produce colonial subjectivities and forms of modern self-regulation along the lines of Foucault's governmentality?

However, in Burma at the turn of the 20th-century this image of religion as a blunt tool of colonial power is not the full picture. I came to realize in the course of this research that categories, like religious traditions, are open to contestation. Burmese Buddhists became quite adept at the game of defining and redefining the category of religion for their own, often anticolonial, ends. I came to see the category religion as a field for debating the limits of colonial power, both the limits of state authority and the limits of the colonized subject. For example, I explore how Burmese boys, who were singled out to perform a bow in which they prostrated themselves on the floor in front of their European schoolteachers, constructed careful arguments that this particularly servile form of respect was in fact a religious act and therefore could not be performed in a secular space of the government school.

The events in Burma would contest Smith's assertion that only scholars imagine and invent religion or imbue it with classificatory and disciplinary power. The category 'religion' became a site of contention in the colonial world. Many parties had a stake in the definition and redefinition of religion. Whether as a limitation on state authority, a potential medium for colonial governmentality or

resistance to state interventions, Burmese and Europeans alike were invested in the messy work of defining and contesting religion in its local manifestation. Thus religion is invented not in the scholar's study, but in the fray and the interaction with real and immediate stakes.

My other foray into seeking to understand religion and its relationship to colonialism is carried out in conversation with two of your own Ireland based scholars: Brian Bocking and Laurence Cox. Together we have been exploring the history of those who crossed numerous boundaries of British colonial empire in the name of Buddhism. Our collaborative project studies U Dhammaloka a Dublin-born sailor and hobo, who for reasons yet unknown, ordained as a Buddhist monk in Rangoon Burma in 1900. Dhammaloka went on to an illustrious career as a Buddhist organizer and advocate railing against what he thought to be the evils of colonialism. He has revealed to us a much larger world of working-class European men who built affiliations with Asian Buddhists that defied colonial divisions of race and class through religion. These interactions open a range of questions and I am less and less convinced that I understand all of the lessons and challenges that pose. What their experience makes abundantly clear is that religion, specifically Buddhism, for a number of historically contingent reasons, was understood to have the power to build connections between those who were marginalized on the various fringes of Empire. In this, 'religion' and religious ideas and discourses served as a potent source of anti-colonial ideas and practice. This project pushes us to explore what religion could mean for these various colonial subjects—Irish Buddhist monks, Burmese villagers and Singaporean opium barons—and how it facilitated translation and opposition to colonialism.

These projects demonstrate how deeply the study of religions is necessarily a translocative study. Figures like Dhammaloka cross not just geographic boundaries bringing together diverse cultures from opposite ends of empire, but cross perhaps greater boundaries of class and race to force us to consider the work that religious discourses did to transcend as well as construct, human worlds. In the same way, the study of local Burmese Buddhists working to shape their own position requires that we realize a trans-locative approach. That is, the reality of British colonialism required that Buddhists negotiate discourses and ideas from outside their local world. And our own research must cross as many boundaries as those we study. We must acknowledge that the categories, ideas and analytic tools that we bring to the study of their religious world are the product of another world, another cosmos—that any history or analysis of religion is necessarily translocative. The category of religion itself, our disciplinary lynch pin, is the product of comparison and problematic translation and assimilation across boundaries in ways that only complicates our study of local religious traditions.

To return to the analogy that Smith began with—comparing religious imagining with imagining 'religion' allows us to see what is at stake when colonial actors contest categories of religion and secular. If, as I proposed, religious traditions offer one of the most powerful modes for constructing societies, social hierarchies and social interaction, holding the potential to reshape society or the understood world at its most basic level, then, to look at the secondary level, as Smith labels it, allows us to consider not imagining and reimagining religious traditions but

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imagining and contesting the category of 'religion.' As part of colonial encounter, the categories religion and secular are taken as to be natural, absolute and universal. Thus, contesting their boundaries, capacities and contents held great potential. Contesting a supposedly 'universal' category of religion, as the schoolboys did in colonial Burma, challenging its universality, negotiating its boundaries and scope, is about challenging the terms of cross-cultural interaction and colonial hegemony.

Moreover, studying contests over the category 'religion' have an equal importance for us as scholars of religion. Recall how Smith challenged us in that opening paragraph:

> For this reason, the student of religion, . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study (Smith 1982, xi).

It seems to me that careful observation of the colonial conflicts and confrontations, strategies for defining and at times defying religion could provide good training for the relentless self-consciousness that Smith requires. Noting, not just that religion was not fixed or universal, but how definitions shifted and were critiqued in practice in the colonial world and what was at stake in these maneuvers tell us something about the careful and fraught game we play when we set out to study phenomenon we label religious.

Our research as scholars of religion then is the work of critical analysis of how religious discourses shape society and its interactions, work that is based in our own training and rigorous knowledge of the individual traditions. But more than this, our work as scholars of religion is to respond to Smith and other's call to be self-reflective and self-critical, to acknowledge that our object of study, the category 'religion' is based not just on comparative and trans-local work, but on power relations. That 'religion' as we know it is necessarily the product of colonialism and colonial power.

Studying and Teaching Religion

I study religion for mainly the same reasons that I teach about religion. And, in fact, in the harried world of a contemporary academic it is often when I am forced to think about how and why I teach that I am able to think most critically about how and why I study. So, why teach religion? This is a question often posed to us by university administrators, sceptical colleagues from other departments and even more sceptical parents who would prefer that their students study business or law.

I teach religion because it offers the best training in the critical cross-cultural analysis that I see at the heart of a liberal arts education. Studying religion, if done right, should force a student to seriously consider and understand the inner workings of worldviews not her own, but also to instruct her to step outside and criticize the interests and power relations of that worldview and ultimately to engage in self-critical reflections on her own worldview. Put simply: it should train

students in cross-cultural understanding, analysis and critical self-reflection: the basic skills I would suggest of not just good scholars but good citizens.

Studying religion holds a different potential than other disciplines that offer cross-cultural study, such as anthropology or literature, because those discourses that we lump together under the category of religion are often the most potent modes of ideology. Religious traditions propose worldviews that are total and often totalizing. They claim to describe the entirety of the world and human existence as well as aspects well beyond material explanation and verification. Thus, they construct a total world and worldview and place the authority for this discourse beyond human power. Unlike other discourses and ideologies that must work hard to naturalize their claims and embed them into the collective psyche as a set of unspoken and unquestionable hegemonic assumptions, religious traditions already have this naturalizing and hegemonic power built in. Thus any study of religion is first a study of understanding and dismantling the unquestioned assumptions that make up a social world.[1]

My goals for my students in Religious Studies courses are threefold, or perhaps better said, they form three stages. First, I demand that my students understand the inner workings of a religious worldview. They must gain a fluency in its fundamental ideas and assumptions. They must understand how its ritual actions are meant to produce real effects. They must be able to explain why and how certain descriptions of the nature of the world, such as karma and merit, or sin and salvation, shape one's orientation and one's actions. Well beyond the study of doctrine and ritual, this first aspect of the study of religions is deceptively simple. I ask my students not just to 'know' this empirically as facts, but to gain an understanding such that they are able to think inside the system. They must be able to begin to predict its workings, its contradictions and its potential conflicts.

This is quite difficult because it requires that students set aside, temporarily, the assumptions of their own worldview. They must bracket their own religious and secular assumptions to be able to work inside a different religious tradition. At first, students agree to do this out of hand: the costs seem well worth the pay off of better understanding something new and quite different. But as they begin to get into the work, they realise it is much more difficult than they had first understood. They must first set aside assumptions that religion is about 'God' or even about 'gods' and assumptions that religious people are superstitious, or duped, or backward, or driven only by economic status or poverty. Then students are forced to set aside assumptions that certain religious people are more peaceful, more rational, closer to nature or more 'spiritual' than others. They are forced to set aside their assumptions of what constitutes ethics, what constitutes value, how gender is constructed and performed and what constitutes identity. It is exhausting work. And it is only the first step.

However, it is the step that is fundamental to what we claim we are doing in academe: teaching students to think differently. And it is the most fundamental step in cross-cultural understanding and anti-colonial praxis.

[1] This is an effective argument for the study of religions that has the potential to win over critically minded administrators and colleagues, but it is not as effective on students' parents who would as often as not rather leave some hegemonic assumptions unquestioned.

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Once students have stepped inside another religious worldview, come to an understanding of the colour of the sky in this world and the inner workings of its discourses, it is time to step back out again, time to begin the process of being analytical, critical and rigorous. I force them to ask: Who benefits from such a construction? How does this ritual produce social hierarchies? How does power operate in and through these institutions? This is the moment of taking apart the hegemonic assumptions, of opening up the clock workings to see how, and for whom, they tick. This is the moment when we look at how different interpretations and contests within the religious tradition work to reconstitute power and authority in human society. It is the work of criticism. I would say this type of analysis is the heart of post-enlightenment academe.

The first step of cross cultural understanding is not sufficient alone, but neither can students proceed to this critical analysis until they have taken that first step. At moments they will try to jump right into this, but it always ends in failure by reproducing the prejudices that the first step asked them to set aside. It is an insufficient combination of the two that produces those cringe-worthy papers that claim that "Islam oppresses women" or "The Dalai Lama uses Buddhism to create peace" without critically defining 'Islam,' 'oppression,' 'women,' 'Dalai Lama,' 'Buddhism' or 'peace'. But neither is the critical work of this second stage reductionist, as some students who do not want to do the work, will claim. Respect of cultures and religions not our own requires that we submit them to the same rigour as other ideas. Critique, serious and rigorous critique, even when not welcomed by the religious actors, is the work of respect and fair treatment. To offer anything less is paternalistic and colonial (Lincoln 2012, 2).

The process does not stop there. There is a third moment that I work to make happen for my students. The work of religious understanding followed by critical analysis should prompt a return to one's own worldview with new and self-critical eyes. I often tell my students that I do not expect that much of the specific content from my courses will matter very much in their future lives. I would be shocked to discover that the debates over the ordination of Buddhist nuns have any bearing on their lives four years later. However, the skills learned in this process provide a framework for criticizing one's own assumptions, particularizing one's own worldview and potentially becoming a broader person.

This is how it is supposed to work in my classroom. It is obviously an ideal type, never fully realized in practice. It is never actually three steps but a set of continuous recursive loops. Laid out in this systematic way, however, I think it tells us something of how and why we should study religion in our scholarly research as well. We begin our training by developing an expertise in a specific culture and tradition: learning languages, reading texts, becoming immersed as much as possible within the tradition to understand its inner workings. This is where we develop our expertise as researchers, but our research lives are the work not of translation or apologetics but the work of criticism—be it in historical, political or cultural modes. The final step I hope for in my students, the work of viewing one's own worldview with new and critical eyes, is very much the work that the discipline is doing now. It is the work of questioning and criticizing the category of religion and asking difficult questions of the power relations that produce and facilitate our own study.

Pedagogical Complications

The real life complications of a teacher are not all that different from our real life complications as researchers. And sometimes it is the complications that teach us the most. To teach religions and to train students to think critically and cross-culturally in this way requires that the teacher think ahead about which sets of assumptions she will have to disrupt. When I taught at a small liberal arts college and a second tier commuter university in the American Midwest these assumptions were fairly easy for me to predict because many were the same ones that shaped my undergraduate world.

However, when I arrived in the classroom at York University in Toronto, I had my own assumptions turned on their head. Here, white, Christian and mono-cultural students are a distinct minority and delightfully so. York is the immigrant university in one of the fastest growing multi-racial immigrant centres in the world. Our students come from around the world and each brings experience, languages and religions from at least two if not three or four cultures. The diversity is staggering. These students arrive with very good skills for thinking cross culturally because they live between multiple cultures. Many of their families have arrived in Canada in their lifetimes or in the recent memory of their parents. Family weddings and funerals almost always require transcontinental flights. They are themselves very much trans-locative studies. So the assumptions they bring to the work of understanding other cultures happens in conversations across the tutorial table. They bridge worldviews forged in Jamaica, the Philippines and Beijing to try to understand Buddhist village life in Cambodia. At times my pedagogical technique is just to stand back and admit how much I have to learn.

This cacophony does good work of disrupting my own practice in teaching and studying religion. For example, in my Introduction to Buddhism course, I spend much of the first semester teaching Buddhist doctrine, texts, history and ritual practice, that is, training students to understand the doctrinal object 'Buddhism' that is the product of world religions textbooks. At the end of that semester students answer a test in which they would tell you that Buddhism is about the four noble truths, detachment, enlightenment and compassion, among other things. I immediately follow with a new book by Justin McDaniel (2011) that forces students to question this doctrinal and textual view of Buddhism by presenting the lively practical world of Buddhism in Thailand, with magical monks who consecrate protective amulets, banish threatening ghosts and chant protective formulae. McDaniel's book was written to be a disruption of scholarly assumptions in Buddhist studies, forcing us to question why we privilege the textual, philosophical and meditative over the magical, practical and ritual aspects, when the later makes up the majority for everyday Thai Buddhists. I teach the book to get students to question their own assumptions that locate real religion in philosophy, doctrine and texts and to force them to ask if there is a single or true core to Buddhism. Most take the point and all love the book because its materials include horror films and popular culture.

One student's response forced me to rethink whose assumptions were being assumed. This student is Lao, born in a refugee camp in Thailand, whose family had

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settled in Toronto after time in different Lao communities across North America. He came up to me late in the second semester and explained that this had been a confusing course at first. He had arrived in the course knowing he was a Buddhist, but was surprised to find all of these doctrines and texts he had never heard of before the first semester. The textbook introduction to Buddhism had offered bewilderingly little of what he knew of Buddhism from his experience. But when we began to read McDaniel's book, everything made more sense. His grandfather was a ritual expert in the chanting tradition that McDaniel presented. He had found himself chanting along with the readings—singing it out at times. The disruptive text that I intended to use to encourage students to question their assumptions was actually quite familiar, whereas the first semester normative texts were disruptive. Where McDaniel and I had sought to turn Western normative assumptions on their head, my student had called us out on our own normative practice, reminding us that not everyone starts from a doctrinal, rationalist and textualist idea of Buddhism.

Teaching and studying religion poses yet greater challenges all too defined by colonial power. As part of disrupting assumptions and asking students to think inside the workings of another's worldview, I regularly lecture on bullet-repelling tattoos. I do this in the context of explaining the efficacy of taking and observing moral precepts. In Burma, Buddhist lay people frequently (every month or half month) ritually vow to observe five moral precepts. Taking this vow and not violating it for a specified amount of time (usually just the day) produces merit that is useful for future rebirths. Taking more precepts for longer periods produces more merit. Those who observe greater precepts for longer periods of time, often ascetics and monks, are understood by the act of self-denial to accumulate a great cache of supernatural power called *hpoun*, which can be used for various purposes from offering protection to supernatural powers. The number of precepts observed directly correlates with social status as well. This practice of vowing moral precepts makes up one of the most fundamental and quotidian of Theravada Buddhist practices in Burma.

The power of moral abstention can be harnessed in heterodox ways as well. If one gets a certain kind of tattoo and at the same moment makes a vow to observe one of the five precepts, one gains a power of protection as long as the vow is kept. Thus insurgents fighting against the British colonial army in the nineteenth century and ethnic insurgents fighting the Burmese military in this century frequently get such tattoos and make vows.[2] The tattoo, so long as the vow is kept, is understood to make the person's body invulnerable to bullets and knives. Or, so the page from my lecture goes. The lecture is meant to disrupt students secular assumptions, get them past their knee-jerk reactions such as "how can they really believe that?" and help them think through how one religious concept operates in multiple and contradictory ways within a culture.

Most of my students enjoy that the lecture and I get a fairly predicable contingent of young men who come up to me afterward who want to tell me how 'awesome' they find the idea of bullet repelling tattoos. Usually these students want

[2] Normally this is a vow to abstain from sexual immorality, which is understood to be the most difficult for these young men to keep (Tannenbaum 1987).

to tell me about their own symbolic tattoos or their own experiences. Fairly often the 'spiritual' and 'transformative' power of drugs comes up. I take these comments for what they are: the work of exoticizing and valorising the mystical 'other.' They are a fairly pedestrian brand of Orientalism and evidence that our work in learning skills of cross cultural understanding and analysis is not yet done.

To their credit, these young men, and it is almost always young men, join a fairly long and distinguished tradition of Orientalizing bullet repelling tattoos. This is work that has used a worldview animated by religious power of moral abstention to demonstrate that Burmese Buddhists are naïve, easily duped, superstitious and above all irrational. That is, they use the tattoos as evidence that these are people who cannot be reasoned with but dealt with only by force. For reasons that are perhaps patently obvious, British colonial officials were fascinated with these tattoos. The British colonial state once famously attributed the blame for a major insurgency in the 1930s to fervour created by irrational fanaticism over these tattoos rather than issues of impoverishment and absentee landlordism that were the explicit content of the organizers' very public and rationalist rhetoric (Aung-Thwin, 2003 & Adas 1979) It seems that bullet-repelling tattoos also have a mystical power to repel intellectual analysis, critical thinking and reasoning, at least for colonizers and their post-colonial progeny.

However, when I gave this lecture one year, something different happened. After class, while the usual contingent of young men came up and regaled me, one young man stayed back. He waited patiently until everyone, even the TA, had left the room, clearly needing to discuss something important. At the beginning of the year when we each introduced ourselves in tutorial sessions, he had said that he is from Iran and that he had decided to take this course because his mother is a Buddhist Vipassana meditator. His comments and the timing were such that he implied that his ties to Iran were fairly recent and close—adding all the more interest to his multicultural, Iranian Canadian Buddhist background. He was, I believe, also the student who chimed in when another student asked why I had said that I did not like to admit that I am an American, explaining that I had earlier implied that I disagree with my government's foreign policy and my compatriots bigotries. Moreover, he had recently asked me for a letter of recommendation for film school, showing me his film portfolio that focused on street violence and the murder of a young man in an impoverished multi-ethnic public housing development.[3]

This student came with questions that were not exoticizing but practical and earnest: Could I provide him with manuals for such tattoos? Or technical specifications? Could I tell him the right chants and vows? Did I know of a ritual specialist in the Toronto area? His interest was genuine, but his questions were anything but academic. I surmised from his eyes that those he knew had a quite practical need for such protection. Bullets were flying through their lives and anything that might offer hope of protection was desperately required. Here, the lessons from another culture were not lessons to expand his rationalist, analytical critical anti-imperialist thinking. They were lessons he sought for their potential to keep people alive. He was looking for cross-cultural translation to do practical work.

[3] My thanks to this student for allowing me to write this and discuss our conversation that day.

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I have to confess my pedagogical preparations and inclinations were shaken. I am embarrassed to say I demurred. I said I was not an expert in that part of the occult, but that I knew of scholarly experts. I said that all of the ritual texts were in Burmese and had not been translated. I offered to refer him to some quite good peer reviewed journal articles. I took the coward's way out.

No matter how much I might do my best to help dismantle such projects through my life and work as scholar, the reality of violence and colonialism was all to concrete for this student. I was faced here with being the conduit of practical knowledge for protection from the violence of a larger colonial project, albeit of a religious nature whose efficacy I seriously doubt.

What is the role of the scholar of religion in this situation? What is the action that supports scholarship against colonialism? I did not know then and I still do not know. I did my graduate work under Bruce Lincoln who has dedicated a career to the proposition that revealing and analysing hegemonic and obfuscatory religious discourses is a means of dismantling their power. Perhaps more than any other scholar he has worked to expose and question the religious rhetoric that justified recent American imperialism by teaching us to think about how religious claims work to construct frameworks for violence. This is my mode of approach and the centre of my claim that the study of religion can work to oppose colonialism. And yet this framework for thinking about the study of religions did me no good in the classroom that day.

Why were this student's practical questions about bullet-repelling tattoos so challenging? I study religion to be able to take things apart and criticize their political implications. I work to convince my students to do, as I do in my scholarship: to acknowledge religious worldviews and treat them as valid as their own secular or religious perspectives. Here was a student who had taken me at my word. He treated the Buddhist metaphysics of tattoos seriously and with respect. He sought to understand its social implications as well as its material implications. However, he refused, for his own practical reasons, to make the final move of again marginalizing that religious world once the analysis was over. He wanted to challenge and intervene in his own world directly without translation through a secular, rationalist third term. Finally, I am forced to ask myself: Isn't this the translocal work of religion that I study? Is this so different from U Dhammaloka's Buddhism bridging Irish and Burmese experiences of colonialism? Or Burmese schoolboys learning to use the language of 'religion' to refuse colonial subordination? If not, why was this instance so jarring to me? His religious approach to working against our contemporary colonialisms is not my own secular atheist approach, nor should it be. But it seems that as a scholar I am somewhat implicated in both.

This unusual encounter made me wonder about the history of scholarship on bullet-repelling tattoos and its relationship to colonial project. Were there any lessons there for the anti-colonial study of religion? In my background reading I had noticed something interesting about the history of the study of bullet-repelling tattoos. Despite the British colonial officials' and early anthropologists' fascination with these tattoos, none of the colonial sources offered a description of how the moral vow provides the protective efficacy. This is quite curious given that in

Buddhist terms the tattoos make very little sense without the vows. The explanation I have always offered is that during the tense period of British colonial rule in Burma, scholars' informants decided that it was not the best idea to give away all of the mysteries of their defensive technologies. They may have thought that this ritual fact was perhaps best held back in the interests of 'proprietary military secrets.'

Contemporary anthropologists of religion have found their informants much more forthcoming, allowing them to publish on the complex relationship between vows and protection (Tannenbaum 1987). I know the scholar who has published this research well. It is not surprising that her informants trusted her with information about tattoos: she strikes you as a good confidant and she has proven herself a good ally to the Buddhists she studies over the years. She is someone you could trust not to reveal your tactical secrets to an invading army.[4]

However, in many ways this contemporary scholar is not so different from the friendly descriptions of the most famous British colonial ethnographer of the late nineteenth century, James Scott (Shwe Yoe).[5] He was well accepted by many of those he studied and it seems fairly implausible that during the many long nights he spent in those communities no one took him aside and revealed the true nature of such tattoos. The only other plausible explanation I can offer as to why the discussion of vows does not appear in his work is that this colonial scholar of Burmese culture and religion knew the connection between vows and tattoos, but chose for his own, perhaps somewhat anti-colonial inclinations, to leave that metaphysical lynchpin out of his reports. I can only speculate what might have gone through his mind—questioning what possible harm it could do to neglect this fact for his colonial superiors, who lived in their secular rationalist world and knew such tattoos to be superstitious nonsense. Any such harm of omission would have to be weighed against the great potential benefit for his informants in their Buddhist world, struggling to deal with the material implications of colonial power. Perhaps this was his tiny contribution to the anti-colonial potential of the study of religion. The bullets flying in Scott and his informants' world were as real as they are for my student. The choice of how to respond and respect knowledge that has the potential to resist colonialism, even when we as scholars deny its efficacy, is an opportunity to practice the work of being self-critical.

The work of being critical of our discipline, and of religion as a human and colonial product, is the necessary task of the scholar of religions, one quietly embedded in all of our decisions as we research, as we write and as we teach. We are implicated in larger imperial projects. If the study of religions has an anti-colonial potential, I would argue that it lies in J. Z. Smith's insistence that the work of self-criticism, like that I aspire toward for my students and for my research, is our primary task as scholars. The practice of being critical of our own categories,

[4] Anyway, the armies that tattooed insurgents are fighting these days are all Buddhists themselves, likely with their own tattoos.

[5] He is perhaps best known as the author of J. G. Scott *The Burman, His Life and Notions* (1963). Much of this ethnographic work appeared in government reports such as: J. G Scott & Hardiman, J. P. (1900). He is also the subject of a semi-popular account of colonial interaction and ethnography in A. Marshall, (2002). While we may today critique his role in the colonial project of anthropology at the time he was seen as particularly sympathetic to those he studied.

including 'religion,' our own assumptions and our own worldviews, not only allows us to see the harmful potential in the work we do, but open us up to its anti-colonial potential.

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