

Thai Buddhism, Thai Buddhists and the southern conflict

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Thailand's 'southern border provinces' of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat – along with four districts of neighbouring Songkhla – are the site of fiery political violence characterised by daily killings.¹ The area was historically a Malay sultanate, and was only loosely under Thai suzerainty until the early twentieth century. During the twentieth century there was periodic resistance to Bangkok's attempts to suppress local identity and to incorporate this largely Malay-speaking, Muslim-majority area into a predominantly Buddhist nation-state. This resistance proved most intense during the 1960s and 1970s, when various armed groups (notably PULO [Patani United Liberation Organization] and BRN [Barisan Revolusi Nasional]) waged war on the Thai state, primarily targeting government officials and the security forces. In the early 1980s, the Prem Tinsulanond government brokered a deal with these armed groups and proceeded to co-opt the Malay-Muslim elite. By crafting mutually beneficial governance, security and financial arrangements, the Thai state was able largely to placate local political demands.

From December 2001 onwards, however, there was growing evidence of a resurgent militant movement. A dramatic raid on an army camp in Narathiwat on 4 January 2004 clearly signaled a renewed outbreak of violent conflict. Two further major incidents in 2004 confirmed the picture: 12 coordinated attacks on security posts on 28 April 2004, which culminated in a bloody siege of the historic Kru Se mosque in Pattani, and left more than a hundred people dead; and a mass demonstration at Tak Bai, Narathiwat on 25 October 2004, where 78 unarmed protestors died, mainly from suffocation, after spending more than five hours lying in the back of army trucks. While no subsequent incident has matched the scale of the Kru Se and Tak Bai events, violence has continued with an unremitting relentlessness.

Earlier versions of the three main articles in this symposium were presented at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, 22–25 Mar. 2007. I wish to thank Justin McDaniel of the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Group of the Association for Asian Studies for chairing and sponsoring the panel, and Amporn Marddent for her participation in, and contributions to, this project. Thanks are due to Marc Askew and Michael Jerryson for their contributions to this introductory article.

1 For background analysis of the southern Thai conflict, refer to the five reports published by the International Crisis Group since 2005, at www.crisisgroup.org; Human Rights Watch, *No one is safe. Insurgent violence against civilians in Thailand's southern border provinces* (New York, Human Rights Watch Report, 19, 13 (C), Aug. 2007); Marc Askew, *Conspiracy, politics and a disorderly border: The Struggle to represent insurgency in Thailand's deep south* (Washington, DC: East West Center, 2007); ed. Duncan McCargo, *Rethinking Thailand's southern violence* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007) (a revised version of the Mar. 2006 special issue of *Critical Asian Studies*, 38, 1); and Duncan McCargo, *Tearing apart the land: Islam and legitimacy in southern Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

The southern Thai conflict has been a largely invisible war to the outside world, one that is little reported in the global media. By the end of June 2008, 3,071 people had been killed and 4,986 injured. There were 1,850 incidents in 2004, 2,297 in 2005, 1,815 in 2006, and 1,539 in the first nine months of 2007.² From 2005 onwards, deaths rarely fell below 40 per month, frequently topped 60, and occasionally exceeded 80. Most people who died were shot in ones or twos; numbers of shootings never dropped below 40 per month in the 40 months after January 2004; in seven of these months there were more than a hundred shootings. Bombs, both thrown and remotely triggered, were also commonly used by assailants; military patrols were often targeted to deadly effect, while bombs were also planted in markets, cafes, government buildings and other commercial locations. However, these explosive devices rarely caused large numbers of casualties and their impact was usually more psychological. Coordinated attacks, in which as many as 60 targets were hit simultaneously, were staged quite regularly; but again, casualties in these attacks were often quite low. Some victims of violence were beheaded after being killed. The conflict remains a murky one, since the militant groups involved have made no public statements of responsibility, and articulated no demands. The evidence available about their motivations comes mainly from anonymous leaflets, depositions made by those arrested, and a small number of informant interviews. Many of those killed have been Muslims, some of whom were targeted as *munafik* (traitors to their religion) because they either worked openly for the Thai side, or were regarded as undercover informers. Though militant leaders often come from older age-groups, most attacks are carried out by small groups of youths who quickly disappear back into their communities. Some of those who die are killed extra-judicially by the authorities, while others are victims of revenge killings of various kinds.

Much of the academic discussion and media commentary on the political violence that has afflicted Thailand's southern border provinces since January 2004 has portrayed the unrest as an example of 'Islamic militancy', part of a global trend towards Muslim extremism and terror. Drawing on a pervasive set of simplistic assertions about Thai Buddhism – assertions perpetuated by some leading scholars in the field – most commentators have broadly accepted the idea that the minority non-Muslim communities in Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla are essentially innocent victims of Islamic militancy. According to this reading, Thai Buddhism is a peace-loving and tolerant religion with a liberal and universalist outlook, a 'civic religion' that has played a central role in Thailand's gradual embrace of democratic values. The threat to Thailand's civic religion comes from a resurgent and aggressive Islam concentrated in the deep south. It is certainly true that Buddhists have suffered disproportionately from the violence. It is also true that some appallingly cruel attacks have been staged against Buddhist monks, against temples, and against those residing within temple walls. Yet the narrative of victimhood is only one element in a very complex picture. It is important to appreciate that some

2 Refer to Srisompob Jitpiromsri, *40 duan khwam runraeng: sotplaichob kanchaihetphol lae samana-ghan* [40 months of violence: Reaching the edge of rationality and reconciliation?], 4 June 2007, updated in an oral presentation for the Social Science Research Council, New York, 26 Oct. 2007. This, and other invaluable Thai-language reports on the violence, may be found at <http://www.deepsouthwatch.org> (last accessed on 6 Aug. 2008).

local Thai Buddhists are victims of violence, while also recognising that the structures of power and legitimacy that state Buddhism promotes can actually condone violence in the name of the Thai nation.

At the time of the 2000 census, the three southernmost provinces had a Buddhist population totalling just over 350,000 (Yala 127,442, Pattani 113,205 and Narathiwat 112,250), from an overall population of 1,7488,682 people. Less than 2 per cent of this population is classified in a category other than 'Buddhist' or 'Muslim' – mostly Christian. Narathiwat's population was 680,303 with an 83.5 per cent Muslim majority (the Buddhist growth rate was -2.65 , as compared with the Muslim growth rate of 1.59). Yala's population contained the largest percentage of Buddhists. It had 439,456 people with a 71 per cent Muslim majority (the Buddhist growth rate was -0.29 as opposed to the Muslim growth rate of 2.70). Pattani's population was 628,922 with an 82 per cent Muslim majority (Buddhist population growth also dropped at -1.39 , compared with the Muslim growth rate of 2.24).³ Unpacking these statistics can be tricky: 'Buddhists' in the region constitute a problematic category. The term is popularly used to cover three main groups: the Sino-Thai community, some of who have lived and traded in the region for centuries; 'local Buddhists', Theravada Buddhists who were born or grew up in the region (some of whom have deep roots there, while others migrated from other parts of Thailand as recently as the 1960s and 1970s under government-sponsored resettlement programmes, which have also included Muslims from the upper south); and Buddhist 'outsiders', who have moved to the area as adults, often as a result of bureaucratic or military assignments. For a long time, relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities were relatively harmonious and characterised by considerable reciprocity. As one abbot told Amporn Marddent, this reciprocity began to unravel following the upsurge in violence:

There were no disagreements between Buddhists and Muslims. But if there were, the head of the village, imam, *tok guru* and me were mediators whom the villagers respected to solve the problems. Now, things change because the world goes so fast. Young generations don't know me. When issues arise at this different time, it is more complicated and now our land is controlled under dictators who don't want to listen to one other.⁴

Broadly speaking, Sino-Thais are the most successfully embedded community and enjoy the best relations with Malay Muslims, while Buddhist 'outsiders' are most often a focus of resentment and distrust on the part of Muslims. This applies with particular force to Buddhist government officials from provinces in the 'upper south', especially Songkhla, Phatthalung and Nakon Si Thammarat, who are widely resented by Malay Muslims. 'Upper Southerners' are typically viewed as aggressive, patronising and colonial in their attitudes to local Muslims. Rightly or wrongly, Malay Muslims typically regard government officials from the upper south as second-rate officers, who have been sent to the deep south because they are not

3 Information from 'Population and households census 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000: Southern provinces', *National Statistical Office* (Bangkok: Prime Minister's Office, 2003).

4 Interview with an abbot before the 19 Sept. 2006 military coup, cited in Amporn Marddent, 'Buddhist perceptions of Muslims in the Thai south', paper presented at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, 22–25 Mar. 2007.

good enough to make the grade in their own provinces, or elsewhere in the country. Ironically, Malay Muslims tend to feel less resentment towards Buddhists from Bangkok or other regions of the country than towards their ‘fellow’ southerners.

Nevertheless, the sub-categories of ‘Chinese,’ ‘local’ and ‘outsider’ Buddhist are overlapping and ambiguous, especially given growing mobility both within and without the region. In *tambon* Bang Lang in the violence-prone district of Bannang Sata, Yala, for example, many Buddhist villages created in the wake of a massive dam project were populated in the 1970s by settlers from Phatthalung. Yet these outsiders struggled to fit in, and most of them eventually sold their land at very cheap prices to Buddhists from elsewhere in the southern border provinces, mainly Pattani. In another typical case, one of Marc Askew’s key informants had relocated from Nakhon Si Thammarat to Narathiwat and then to Songkhla — only to find himself still on the front-line of the conflict. Inter-marriage between different Buddhist groups further blurred the distinctions between them. Following the resurgence of violence before and after January 2004, Buddhists began increasingly to define themselves as one group — *Thai phut*, or *khon Thai* — vis-à-vis the assertive Malay-Muslim majority. This self-image was reinforced by a controversial speech by the Queen in November 2004, in which she called upon ‘all three hundred thousand Thais’ in the region to learn how to shoot.⁵

The three authors brought together in this collection offer some rather different readings of the problem. Without in any way seeking to underplay the agency of Muslim militants in much of the recent violence, these papers set out to de-romanticise reified notions of local Buddhists as essentially tolerant, passive and reactive. First, developments in the south need to be set within broader Thai traditions of murder, massacre and mayhem — traditions in which Buddhists have regularly played leading roles. Muslims have no monopoly on violence in Thailand: far from it. Second, Thai Buddhism needs to be understood much more critically, and the limits of its supposed tolerance explored. Salient here is the nationalist turn of Thai Buddhism since the death of Bhuddadhasa Bhikkhu in 1993, and the rise of the far more conservative Prayudh Payutto as the most prominent Buddhist intellectual in Thailand. Thai Buddhism is not simply a matter of private belief and religious practice; it constitutes a hard-line institutional pillar of state ideology. Finally, Buddhists in the deep south need to be clearly grounded and located within these wider Thai trends. How far is the plight that southern Buddhists face specific to the conflict conditions in the region, and how far is the south simply the front line of Buddhist fears, insecurities and hatreds, a more extreme version of tensions that are deeply embedded in wider Thai society? The three papers here all draw directly on extensive firsthand fieldwork in the region; there is no armchair theory to be found in what follows.

Thailand is a profoundly violent society. After Mongolia, it has the second highest murder rate in Asia.⁶ The Thai security forces are notoriously incompetent; often incapable of performing any proper military functions, the Thai Army is primarily

5 Refer to *The Nation*, 17 Nov. 2004.

6 In general, homicide rates are highest in developing Christian countries, and lowest in developed and Muslim-majority nations. Thailand has proportionally more murders than any Muslim-majority nation.

concerned with meddling in politics and engaging in smuggling and other business activities.⁷ Some senior police officers are themselves prominent criminals, and the police are widely mistrusted. At various junctures in recent Thai history, the security forces have murdered large numbers of unarmed civilians on a range of pretexts. These included the notorious ‘red drum’ incinerations of suspected communist sympathisers conducted by the police in Phatthalung province in 1971–72, the violent repression of the radical student movement on 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976, the brutal crackdowns on farmers’ and labour groups in the mid-1970s, the killing of anti-military demonstrators in May 1992, the extra-judicial killing of almost 3,000 supposed drug dealers in the 2003 ‘war on drugs’, and the deaths, mainly by suffocation, of 78 Malay Muslim men who were arrested at Tak Bai, Narathiwat, on 25 October 2004. The willingness of the Thai security forces – mainly composed of, and commanded almost entirely, by Buddhists – regularly to commit such murders in the name of ‘Nation, Religion and King’ gives the lie to idealistic notions that Buddhists do not kill.

Somboon Sukraman characterised the relationship between the Thai state and Buddhist order as a ‘continuous dialogue’, but this is a dialogue in which the state has the louder voice.⁸ Thai Buddhism has long served as an instrument of state power and a pillar of national legitimation. King Mongkut (Rama IV) served for decades as a monk before ascending the Thai throne, and devoted himself to ‘reform’ of the *sangha* (monastic order). Parallel reforms took place in the twentieth century, now codified in legislation: the 1902, 1941 and 1962 *sangha* acts.⁹ While the ostensible purpose of these reforms was to ensure that monks adhered more strictly to prescribed beliefs and disciplinary codes, behind this rhetoric of discipline and order was a preoccupation with political control.¹⁰ Left unchecked, monks might use their high social standing in the service of radical or even revolutionary causes, as had their counterparts in neighbouring Burma and Vietnam. The Thai state was especially suspicious of the Lao forest monastic traditions of the northeast, which they associated with recidivism and political resistance. These traditions were ruthlessly and systematically suppressed;¹¹ while leading northeastern monk Phra Phimontham was persecuted by the authorities as a leftist because of his attempts to democratise the *sangha*.¹² As a result of the persistent subordination of the Thai *sangha* to the service of the state, the monkhood became profoundly bureaucratized. Headed by a gerontocracy of narrow-minded elite monks preoccupied with defending their own interests, the *sangha* became, in the words of Suwanna Satha-Anand,

7 For a critical view of the Thai military, refer to James Ockey, ‘Thailand: The Struggle to redefine civil-military relations’, in *Coercion and governance: The Declining political role of the military in Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001): 187–208.

8 Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and politics in Thailand: A Study of socio-political change and political activism of the Thai sangha* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), p. 7.

9 These acts are discussed in detail in Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, state and society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986).

10 For a detailed discussion, refer to Peter Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1989), pp. 63–93.

11 The history of this suppression is explored in Kamala Tivavanich, *Forest recollections: Wandering monks in twentieth-century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997).

12 Refer to Jackson, 1989, pp. 94–112.

increasingly 'inactive, non-committed and uniforme'.¹³ Rather than exercising moral leadership over Thai society, monks served merely to validate the power of the royal and military elites.

Far from articulating ideas of peace and non-violence, the Thai *sangha* has regularly colluded with state violence. While monastic rules notionally barred monks from involvement in military activities, there were numerous cultural similarities between the male-dominated, residential and hierarchical worlds of the Thai temple and Thai monastic order. Prince Vajiranana, who served as prince-patriarch during the later part of King Chulalongkorn's reign, openly lamented his lack of military experience. He wrote in his autobiography, 'If I had been a soldier, even for a while, people would give me more recognition than they do.'¹⁴ As Craig Reynolds argues, there is a close affinity between the disciplinary regimes of the monk and the soldier.¹⁵ In the past, Buddhist temples were extensively used as military installations. As Mark Juergensmeyer and Michael Jerryson argue, there is a close connection between Buddhism and war in both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions.¹⁶ The affinity of the Thai *sangha* with structural violence was most clearly epitomised by the declaration of right-wing monk Kittwutho in June 1976 that 'killing communists is no sin'.¹⁷ The bloody events of 6 October 1976, when student activists were murdered by members of the security forces while staging a peaceful demonstration at Thammasat University, were precipitated by the return to Thailand of former military strongman Thanom Kittikachorn. On arriving in Bangkok, he was taken to the royal temple Wat Boworniwet, where he was ordained as a monk by the future Supreme Patriarch.¹⁸ The violent crackdown was directly triggered by this overt endorsement of Thanom by the *sangha* hierarchy. When competing forces clashed in Thailand, the Buddhist order did not serve as a voice for moderation, compromise or reason. Rather, the *sangha* could be relied upon fully to endorse and legitimate the actions of the security forces in suppressing dissent and enforcing loyalty.

During the 1980s, alternative readings of Thai Buddhism began to stress the emergence of greater diversity, arguing that Thailand was experiencing the rise of an essentially tolerant 'civic religion', one that reflected a growing civil society, larger middle class and broader political liberalisation.¹⁹ These readings rested largely on the emergence of new Buddhist movements from the 1970s, notably Suan Mok (the Surat

13 Suwanna Satha-Anand, 'Religious movements in contemporary Thailand: Buddhist struggles for modern relevance', *Asian Survey*, 30, 4 (1990): 405.

14 *Autobiography: The Life of Prince-Patriarch Vajiranana of Siam 1860-1921*, ed. and trans. Craig Reynolds (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979), p. 32.

15 Craig Reynolds, 'Power', in *Critical terms for the study of Buddhism*, Donald S. Lopez Jr (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), pp. 222-6. In advancing this argument, Reynolds draws extensively on Duncan McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the new Thai politics* (London: Hurst, 1997).

16 Refer to *Buddhist warfare*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer and Michael Jerryson (forthcoming), a collection of essays covering historical and contemporary examples drawn from China, Japan, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Tibet. The volume also reviews a range of Buddhist texts supporting the use of violence.

17 For a discussion of this episode, refer to David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political conflict in Thailand: Reform, reaction, revolution* (Cambridge MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1981), pp. 246-8.

18 For details, refer to Morell and Chai-anan, *Political conflict*, pp. 270-3.

19 For a critique, refer to Duncan McCargo, 'Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand', *Democratization*, 11, 4 (Aug. 2004): 155-70.

Thani temple and retreat founded by the great philosopher monk Buddhadasa), Santi Aoke (a puritanical, back-to-basics movement founded by charismatic former TV host Photirak), and Wat Thammakaya (a market-oriented Buddhist organisation centring around meditation techniques). Ultimately, though, all three of these movements had problematic relationships with the *sangha* hierarchy. Buddhadasa deliberately distanced himself from Bangkok and declined all royally bestowed monastic titles; but after his death, he was given a royal funeral (against his explicit wishes). Attempts were made posthumously to incorporate him into the Thai Buddhist mainstream, and so neutralise the radicalism implicit in his universalist message. Santi Asoke suffered an extended campaign of official and legal harassment in the late 1980s; Photirak and his followers were expelled from the orthodox *sangha*. A decade later, Wat Dhammakaya's leaders were accused of heresy and prosecuted over illegal land transactions. While prominent scholars of Thai Buddhism such as Donald Swearer and Charles Keyes have been among the many commentators to hail the emergence of new Buddhist movements as a progressive development, their hopes that Thai Buddhism was becoming 'denationalised' were woefully premature. The official crackdowns on Santi Asoke and Thammakaya, coupled with the posthumous incorporation of Buddhadasa into the royalist mainstream, clearly demonstrated that, in the words of Rob Stewart, 'religious freedom does not exist in Thailand'.²⁰ The Thai state had arrogated unto itself the right to decide what constitutes 'correct' Buddhism – and through other mechanisms, has sought similarly regulate both Islam and Christianity.

If Thai Buddhism is often nationalist, prescriptive, reactionary and intolerant rather than universalist, accommodating, progressive and tolerant, as it is frequently misportrayed, what are the implications for non-Buddhist minorities within Thailand? Suwanna Satha-Anand has described a troubling seminar held at Chulalongkorn University in February 2002, entitled 'Threats to Buddhism in Thailand'.²¹ Four speakers, two monks and two Buddhist laymen, spoke in alarmist terms about a conspiracy between Christians and Muslims to undermine the security and stability of Thai society. Examples of the 'threats' mentioned by the speakers included the creation of new radio stations for Muslims in Thailand, and the creation of ablution facilities for Muslims at Bangkok's Hualampong Railway Station. Another example was the proposed creation of a national committee to oversee religious affairs under the office of the prime minister — a committee which would include representatives from the Muslim and Christian communities. While all three steps could actually be viewed as evidence of a more inclusionary and mature approach to religion on the part of the Thai authorities, such liberal sentiments were rejected by the speakers, and by most of the audience. The idea of Buddhism as an integral part of the Thai nation did not operate only at the level of the state; it had been widely internalised and accepted by much of the Buddhist Thai population.

Some scholars argued that Thai Buddhism had been 'denationalised' by the rise of new Buddhist movements, and especially by the moral and intellectual leadership

20 Rob Stewart, 'Defending the faith(s): Buddhism and religious freedom in Thailand', paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, 4–8 July 1999.

21 Refer to Suwanna Satha-anand, 'Signs of the time: Cultural tolerance in Asia', *Asia-Pacific Intellectuals (API) Newsletter*, 3 (June 2002): 3–4.

of Buddhadasa, who saw Buddhism as a universalist religion rather than a handmaiden of nation-building and Thai identity. But after Buddhadasa's death in 1993, the mantle of leadership passed to the distinguished scholar-monk Prayudh Payutto. A prolific author, controversialist and polemicist, Prayudh was a much more establishment figure than Buddhadasa, and made no apology for his increasingly conservative stances. In 2002, for example, he published a book entitled, *Dangers for Buddhism in Thailand*, in which he presented a narrative of religious intolerance and aggression by Christians and Muslims, in contrast to the Thai Buddhist record of tolerance.²² In other writings, he was highly critical of universalism, arguing that only Buddhism could maintain religious freedom in Thailand, and that only Buddhism could provide the source of Thai national identity. This nationalist turn by Thailand's most senior intellectual monk was indicative of a broader trend in Thai society, one that illustrated the opposite of Prayudh's point: Thai Buddhism formed the basis for a renewed intolerance, and particularly hostile feelings towards Islam. Latent Thai Buddhist hostility towards Islam grew more striking in the post-9/11 world, especially following renewed violence in Thailand's southern border provinces after January 2004.

Duncan McCargo's article offers an overview of the world of Thai Buddhists in the southern border provinces, locating their plight within wider collective anxieties about the future of the Thai nation, the royal succession and deep-rooted national fears concerning an expansionist and assertive Muslim minority. In this sense, the south is about much more than the south: for some Buddhists in the rest of the country, the south represents an apocalyptic vision of Thailand's possible future, bisected by ethnic and religious tensions. Such a vision has been actively fostered by some conservative monks, and finds expression on popular Thai web-boards where anti-Muslim sentiments thrive. In the south itself, such fears are articulated in various ways. They are frequently articulated in anonymous leaflets full of anti-Buddhist sentiments, some of which are 'black propaganda' circulated by government officials to provoke a backlash amongst Buddhist communities. These fears have also formed a central theme of discourse by the Queen, with her 2004 call to arms directed at Buddhists in the region. Similar ideas pervade the various defence volunteer and militia groups now proliferating among Buddhist communities, some of whom talk openly about preparing for an all-out ethnic conflict in the not-too-distant future. Widespread Buddhist criticism of the 2005–06 National Reconciliation Commission reflected similar hardline sentiments in the region.

Michael Jerryson's article cuts to the chase: he argues that by militarising temples in the deep south, and by deploying soldiers there in the guise of monks, the Thai state has added a religious dimension to the existing civil conflict in the Malay-Muslim-majority region. Jerryson's argument turns on its head the standard debate about how far the southern violence is a simple insurgency, and how far it has become an Islamic *jihad*. The Thai security forces have committed the same transgression of which they accuse their adversaries: inserting religion into the

22 These writings are discussed in Suwanna Satha-Anand, 'Buddhist pluralism and religious tolerance in democratizing Thailand', in *Philosophy, democracy and education*, ed. Philip Cam (Seoul: Korean National Commission for UNESCO and The Asia-Pacific Philosophy Education Network for Democracy, APPEND Philosophy Series, vol. 4), pp. 206–13.

ongoing violence. Far from being equated with peace, Buddhist monks and temples in the region are frequently synonymous with war. There are very few permanent military bases in the area; since the renewed violence, numerous temples have been turned into *ad hoc* military and police camps, some accommodating scores of security personnel. Such appropriations emphasise the non-secular nature of the Thai state, illustrating that Buddhism is the *de facto* national religion of Thailand. This close association further alienates Malay-Muslims and fuels tensions. By going to make merit at such temples, ordinary Buddhists find themselves implicated in a political act, suggestive of support for militarisation and the suppression of the Malay-Muslim population.

Though little discussed, the appropriation of Buddhist space by the security forces in southern Thailand is highly visible and well known. By contrast, the existence of 'military monks' is what Jerryson terms a 'Buddhist secret'. Military monks are members of the armed forces who have volunteered to serve as monks in the southern border provinces. In principle, ordination as a monk is a permissible (indeed, a common) action for a serving soldier, who would normally take leave from all active military duties during the period of his ordination. Drawing on extensive fieldwork at Buddhist temples in the south, Jerryson demonstrates that many military men ordained in the area continue to bear arms, and perform security functions by protecting their fellow monks and the temples where they reside. In the locations Jerryson studied, the distinctions between soldiers and monks have broken down, along with the differences between Thai Buddhism and state security. Far from functioning as a tolerant, peace-loving religion, Buddhism has become an arm of state power. Through the militarisation of Buddhism in the south, the Thai state may be helping to bring into being the collective nightmare of a religious war.

Whereas Michael Jerryson invokes the dark and morally ambiguous inner spaces of Buddhist temples in the south, Marc Askew takes us out to some of the region's villages, exploring the zones of trust and fear experienced by local Buddhist defence volunteers who face constant risk of attack. Askew's article draws heavily on the rumours, gossip and incomplete understandings that form common currencies of communication and local knowledge in the southern conflict zone. He describes the local landscape through the colour-coded mental maps of villagers, for whom danger is indicated by perceived degrees of militant activity, reflecting suspicions of their neighbours. For Buddhist men who regularly spend their nights on guard in sandbagged bunkers, Muslims are often viewed in an undifferentiated and negative light. The violent conflict has left them alienated from their own homes and birthplace, and full of bitterness against the authorities, whom they accuse of overlooking the plight of Buddhist Thais. While Askew's informants represented themselves as peace-loving and law-abiding, in contrast with the violence favoured by insurgents, most were openly contemptuous of the discourse of 'reconciliation'; many bluntly advocated the use of summary justice and extra-judicial killings. As with Jerryson's informants, these villagers seemed to embrace a nationalist Buddhism, based on a primordial understanding of 'Thai-ness' that is grounded in ethnic and religious categories. Their identity categories evoked ideals of the value of 'tranquillity' (*sangop*) that slipped between explicit religiously grounded values and more generalised moral paradigms of a putative 'Thai-ness' that exalts peaceful co-existence. The persistent

irony – expressed clearly in the bunkered village landscape – is that this value of peace and tranquillity needs to be affirmed by armed vigilance.

Nevertheless, the picture is not a simple one. Askew then compares and contrasts the perspectives of Muslim villagers with those of their Buddhist counterparts, stressing that while Malay Muslims are often portrayed as hostile to the Thai state, many Muslims work for, or alongside, the bureaucracy or the security forces. He divides Malay Muslims into three broad categories: the victimised, the defiant and the pragmatic. Those suspected of insurgent activity or sympathy often include local leaders such as village headmen and *imam*, who are frequently mistrusted by both government officials, and their own communities. Such figures often find themselves in an almost impossible position, as they seek to pursue ‘synaptic’ roles negotiating between villagers and the state. Through a case study of a Buddhist headman whom he calls Sunthon, Askew shows that despite the climate of fear and general reification of ethnic categories, some Buddhist community leaders have been able to maintain strong ties of reciprocity with their Muslim counterparts (as well as local Muslims suspected of being militants), providing them with a degree of support and even protection. In one Buddhist community where Askew conducted fieldwork, villagers explicitly opposed the ‘aggressive Buddhist nationalism’ invoked by those pressing for Buddhism to be enshrined in the 2007 constitution as the national religion. At times, hard-line anti-Muslim sentiments were felt and expressed more strongly by outsiders – by Bangkokians, or soldiers coming in from other parts of Thailand – than by those Buddhists local to the southern border provinces.

The articles here offer more nuanced and critical understandings of recent trends in Thai Buddhism and the dilemmas facing members of the minority Buddhist communities in the deep south. We cannot claim to offer a comprehensive overview, simply to highlight a number of issues of interest and concern. These include evidence of a nationalist turn in Thai Buddhism, coupled with a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment; the existence of close affinities between the Thai security services, the *sangha* and Buddhist communities; and the challenges facing those Buddhists who seek to maintain supportive and reciprocal relations with their Muslim friends, neighbours, colleagues and trading partners. Our explorations highlight the need for further research, more critical reflection, and the questioning of long-held assumptions about how Thai Buddhism and Thai Buddhists operate in times of conflict.