

Is Rohingya crisis changing the West's view of Buddhism?

Unlike Hollywood portrayals of peaceful monks, some in Myanmar are spurring violence against Muslims in the name of Buddhist nationalism.

by [Harry Bruinius](#) in the [November 8, 2017](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) For many Americans, the image of Buddhism is that of monks wearing saffron-colored robes, meditating peacefully on windswept mountains, revering all forms of life while seeking higher states of enlightenment.

In the context of such clichés, it has been jarring for many to see very different images coming out of Myanmar. Buddhist monks have been at the forefront of the violent repression of the Rohingya Muslim minority, which the United Nations has characterized as ethnic cleansing.

More than 500,000 Rohingya people have left Myanmar for neighboring Bangladesh since late August as violence has escalated and many villages have been cut off from food supplies. Often spurred on by Buddhist monks, mobs and government forces have reportedly burned hundreds of Rohingya villages in Myanmar's Rakhine state, slaughtering many of their Muslim inhabitants.

When it comes to religious extremism, observers say, Buddhism has often escaped the scrutiny faced by Muslim militants, Christian fundamentalists, and Hindu nationalists.

"There is a romantic . . . vision of Buddhism as pacifist," said Scott Davis, professor of religious studies at the University of Richmond in Virginia. However, "in almost 2,500 years of development in South and East Asia, the urge to protect the community and disseminate the teachings has been tied to the use of military force."

Hollywood celebrities have taken up Buddhist practices and supported the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader. Films such as *Seven Years in Tibet*, which

starred Brad Pitt as an Austrian mountain climber who became friends with the Dalai Lama, often emphasize such romanticized views, said Daniel Stevenson, professor of religious studies and historian of Buddhism at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

“There’s a scene in which the Tibetan monks are plowing the ground and moving rocks, careful to remove the worms underneath and not cause any harm to them,” Stevenson said. “It’s this archetypal image of the life-loving Buddhist monk, careful and meticulous not to harm any creature.”

In the United States, these ideas about Buddhism have a long history. Henry Steel Olcott, a Civil War veteran who converted to Buddhism, once proclaimed, “As far as we know, [Buddhism] has not caused the spilling of a drop of blood.”

In his 1881 “Buddhist Catechism,” he described the practices he embraced as “a religion of noble tolerance, of universal brotherhood, of righteousness and justice,” without a taint of “selfishness, sectarianism, or intolerance.”

The first of Buddhism’s Five Precepts is indeed a commitment to undertake training to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.

“The project of awakening, or liberating oneself from the daily forms of suffering and committing oneself to refrain from killing, is a major part of Buddhist teachings and a facet of the lives of some Buddhists,” said Joshua Schapiro, senior lecturer at Fordham University and a scholar of Buddhist intellectual history. “But that does not stop Buddhists at large from being human beings and living in a society.”

Romanticizing the religion can have deeper consequences, too, observers say.

“Just imagine, for a minute, if it were Jews or Christians, or else the ‘peaceful Buddhists,’ who were the subjects of Muslim persecutions,” wrote Hamid Dabashi, professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature at Columbia University, in an op-ed for Al-Jazeera. “Compare the amount of airtime given to murderous Muslims of ISIL as opposed to the scarcity of news about the murderous Buddhists of Myanmar. Something in the liberal fabric of Euro-American imagination is cancerously callous. It does not see Muslims as complete human beings.”

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka, too, have fomented violence against Hindu Tamils in recent years, citing scriptures to assert their primacy as “sons of the soil.” In Thailand, Buddhist monks in the 1970s offered religious justification for the

mass killings of communists.

The violent images coming out of Myanmar also seem to run counter to Buddhist monks' work for democratic change. In 2007, many helped lead what is now known as the Saffron Revolution, a movement of mostly nonviolent protests against Myanmar's long-standing military dictatorship.

Nearly a decade later, their efforts helped Aung San Suu Kyi, the dissident who spent years under house arrest and who won the Nobel Prize in 1991, to become the country's first democratically elected leader in 2016. Now state counsellor, she shares power with the Myanmar military. Human rights and other global leaders have criticized the Nobel laureate, who has appeared to downplay, if not justify, the violence against the Rohingya.

For decades, the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, who make up about 4 percent of the population, have been viewed as outsiders.

Practicing a mystical Sufi form of Islam, many Rohingya trace their origins to waves of immigration dating as far back as the 15th century. Others arrived in the 19th and early 20th centuries and were part of the colonial bureaucracy in Rakhine when the state was under the jurisdiction of British India.

This history has placed the Rohingya in the crosshairs of lingering anticolonial resentments. And many of the same politically active monks behind the push for democracy have embraced a strident nationalism. Proclaiming that their religious traditions and culture are under siege, they often cite Islamic conquests from centuries past in Indonesia, Malaysia, and other regions.

In 1982, the Rohingya were officially denied citizenship. During the 2014 census, most were identified as "Bengali"—unofficial resident aliens denied status, effectively stateless. The UN has called the Muslim minority population in Myanmar "the most persecuted minority in the world."

Some Burmese monks have resisted prejudices against the nation's Muslim minority. Doug Carnine, professor emeritus of educational psychology at the University of Oregon and a lay Buddhist minister, cautioned against characterizing all of them "based on the behavior of a fringe element."

He and his wife, also a Buddhist minister, taught English to the monks at Thone Htat, a school in Myanmar.

“The male monks, children and adults, eat only what is given when they do their alms rounds, so sharing is deeply embedded in the culture,” Carnine said. “Some radical anti-Muslim Buddhist sects do not believe in sharing with Muslims, but other Buddhist groups do feed poor Muslims at the end of Ramadan.”

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