*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 52(1), pp 2–6 March 2021.*
 doi:10.1017/S0022463421000096

# Introduction: Towards an analysis of Buddhist secular grammars

Ruth Streicher

Secularism seems out of scholarly fashion, but differently so regarding different parts of the world. Much of Western political theory now talks of the failure of secularism to deliver the promised emancipatory success of modernity, and has turned to the notion of the 'postsecular' instead — amongst a wide variety of meanings, the term can describe the emergence of new forms of religiosity under secular conditions, or engender a normative call to redeploy Judaeo-Christian values to rescue the Enlightenment project.[1] By contrast, secularism is hardly ever used with reference to Buddhist Southeast Asia, where recent political developments appear to confirm the premise that the secular age has not yet arrived. Thus the increasingly violent persecution of Muslim minorities, particularly the 2017 Rohingya genocide, has sparked scholarly debate about 'Buddhist nationalism'[2] and called into question the political orders founded on 'Buddhist constitutionalism'.[3] Implicitly, this dichotomous treatment of the postsecular West and the presecular rest reproduces ideas of secularism as a political ideology of separation between the church and the state, secularisation as the historical process of religion's privatisation and eventual decline, and, in some ways, the exceptional nature of Judaeo-Christian precepts in shaping secular philosophical values that guarantee religious freedom and tolerance.[4]

The articles in this special section of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* follow a distinct line of inquiry that departs from a contrasting set of assumptions about secularism and religion, based on a school of thought that some have called 'critical secular studies'.[5] Authors in this strand of scholarship do not regard the religious and

1 Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on post-secular society', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, 4 (2008): 17–29.
2 Niklas Foxeus, 'The Buddha was a devoted nationalist: Buddhist nationalism, *ressentiment*, and defending Buddhism in Myanmar', *Religion* 49, 4 (2019): 661–90; Mikael Gravers, 'Anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious violence and globalized imaginaries of endangered identities', *Contemporary Buddhism* 16, 1 (2015): 1–27; Benjamin Schonthal and Matthew J. Walton, 'The (new) Buddhist nationalisms? Symmetries and specificities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar', *Contemporary Buddhism* 17, 1 (2016): 81–115.
3 Benjamin Schonthal, 'Securing the sasana through law: Buddhist constitutionalism and Buddhist-interest litigation in Sri Lanka', *Modern Asian Studies* 50, 6 (2016): 1966–2008; Benjamin Schonthal, 'Making the Muslim Other in Myanmar and Sri Lanka', in *Islam and the state in Myanmar: Muslim–Buddhist relations and the politics of belonging*, ed. Melissa Crouch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 234–57.
4 José Casanova, 'The secular and secularisms', *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 76, 4 (2009): 1049–66. See also, Rosi Braidotti et al., 'Introductory notes', in *Transformations of religion and the public sphere: Postsecular publics*, ed. Rosi Braidotti, B. Blagaard, T. Graauw, E. Midden and T. de Graauw (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1–14.
5 Schirin Amir-Moazami, 'Konfiguration des Säkularen. Einblicke in die kritische Säkularismusforschung',

the secular as fixed categories, but investigate them as discursive formations that undergird modern state sovereignty.[6] Accordingly, a key characteristic of secular state governance is less the separation from, than the power to manage, and perhaps even produce, 'religion'.[7] Christianity features in this body of works not as a normative framework attesting Europe's secular success; instead, authors investigate how implicit Christian underpinnings of seemingly neutral mechanisms of secular governance continue to produce exclusions and inequalities.[8] Perhaps most importantly for Southeast Asian Studies, critical secular scholars have demonstrated the postcolonial genealogies of secular formations by outlining how European colonialism and imperialism operated through categorising 'religion', differentiating 'religious communities' and defining 'religious minorities'.[9]

From *this* perspective, an investigation of secular power in the Theravada Buddhist context of Southeast Asia is long overdue, and not only in light of ongoing attempts to foster religious divides. While investigations of the secular genealogies of 'religion' in the Buddhist context of Japan have featured prominently,[10] and the large number of studies of (post)colonial secularism in South Asia — particularly India — can fill library shelves,[11] Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia have largely fallen under the radar of critical secular studies.[12] This set of articles, originally put together

9 May 2017, Trafo: Blog for Transregional Research; https://trafo.hypotheses.org/6654 (last accessed 30 Jan. 2021).

6 Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning secularism: Islam, sovereignty, and the rule of law in modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

7 Talal Asad, *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

8 Ruth Mas, 'The red thread of Christianity', *ReOrient: The Journal of Critical Muslim Studies* 1, 1 (2015): 51–60; Gil Anidjar, 'The idea of an anthropology of Christianity', *Interventions* 11, 3 (2009): 367–93.

9 Saba Mahmood, *Religious difference in a secular age: A minority report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). A second line of inquiry important for the field is critical studies of religious freedom, which often intersects with the construction of religious minorities. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood and Peter G. Danchin, *Politics of religious freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond religious freedom: The new global politics of religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Benjamin L. Berger, *Law's religion: Religious difference and the claims of constitutionalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

10 For example, Joseph Ananda Josephson, *The invention of religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Hans Martin Krämer, *Shimaji mokurai and the reconception of religion and the secular in modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015); Jolyon Baraka Thomas, *Faking liberties: Religious freedom in American-occupied Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

11 For example, Julia Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, empire, and secularism in modern South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Humeira Iqtidar, 'Colonial secularism and Islamism in North India: A relationship of creativity', in *Religion and the political imagination*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Garetz Stedman Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 235–53; Nandini Chatterjee, *The making of Indian secularism: Empire, law and Christianity, 1830–1960* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Peter van der Veer, *Imperial encounters: Religion and modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); C.S. Adcock, *The limits of tolerance: Indian secularism and the politics of religious freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst, *Indian Muslim minorities and the 1857 rebellion: Religion, rebels and jihad* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

12 For the most prominent exception regarding Myanmar, see Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The impermanence of religion in colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014). A short overview article on Thailand has recently been published: Thomas Larsson, 'Secularisation, secularism, and the Thai state', in *Routledge handbook of contemporary Thailand*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun (London:

as a panel at the Association of Asian Studies Conference in 2016, represents a first, and necessarily partial (for example, only covering Thailand and Myanmar), attempt at exploring the largely unchartered territory of Buddhist secular formations in Southeast Asia. It emerged out of an extended conversation, before, during and after the conference with Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and in response to Anne Hansen's comments on the panel. We are deeply grateful to both.

To be clear, neither the idea of Buddhism as a bounded 'world religion' nor the identification of its different strands, including Theravada, are indigenous concepts, but themselves products of a secular formation of knowledge about 'religion' that emerged through a long history of colonial encounters.[13] Already in the late sixteenth century, Spanish Christian friars travelling to Siam (Thailand) in the wake of the Iberian exploration identified Buddhism as a single religion connecting various traditions of East and Southeast Asia, and one deemed very similar to Christianity,[14] a trope readily replicated with the emergence of religious and Buddhist studies at the end of the nineteenth century.[15] The division between the northern (Mahayana) and southern (Hinayana) school of Buddhism was widely deployed in nineteenth-century scholarship and Oriental travel accounts,[16] and used by King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) of Siam to claim a common heritage of faraway Buddhist sites like the well-known Javanese temple of Borobudur.[17] However, the replacement of 'Hinayana' with 'Theravada' was not popularised until the mid-twentieth century; Theravada Buddhism is now mostly distinguished from Mahayana through its tradition of Pali textual practices, conceived of as the words of the Buddha, which proliferated particularly in what is today Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.[18]

Routledge, 2019), pp. 278–90. Iselin Frydelund has offered critical work on the politics of religious freedom in contemporary Myanmar, and Ben Schonthal on the constitutionalisation of religion in Sri Lanka. See Iselin Frydenlund, 'The birth of Buddhist politics of religious freedom in Myanmar', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 4, 1 (2018): 107–21; Benjamin Schonthal, 'Constitutionalizing religion: The pyrrhic success of religious rights in postcolonial Sri Lanka', *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, 3 (2014): 470–90. A second panel entitled 'Theravada Buddhist experiences of secularism in South and Southeast Asia', at the American Academy of Religion conference in 2018 also explored these issues.

13 I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point. See also Thomas Borchert, 'Introduction. Theravada Buddhism in colonial contexts', in *Theravada Buddhism in colonial contexts*, ed. T. Borchert (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–17.

14 Eva M. Pascal, 'Buddhist monks and Christian friars: Religious and cultural exchange in the making of Buddhism', *Studies in World Christianity* 22, 1 (2016): 5–21.

15 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions: Or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); Donald S. Lopez, 'Introduction', in *Curators of the Buddha: The study of Buddhism under colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 1–29; Philip C. Almond, *The British discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

16 For instance, Adolf Bastian, known as the 'founder' of ethnography in Germany, refers to the Hinayana school of Buddhism in his travel account of Siam: Adolf Bastian, *Reisen in Siam im Jahre 1867* (Jena: Hermann Constenoble, 1867).

17 Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff, 'Exchange and the protection of Java's antiquities: A transnational approach to the problem of heritage in colonial Java', *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, 4 (2013): 1–24.

18 Peter Skilling, ed., *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist identities* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2012); Todd LeRoy Perreira, 'Whence Theravāda? The modern genealogy of an ancient term', in ibid., pp. 443–571.

This complex genealogy notwithstanding, we refer to Theravada in these articles to highlight the sometimes overlapping, sometimes diverging histories of secular formations that emerged in the context of a shared religious tradition based on transregional networks that rapidly intensified under (semi-)colonialism. Talal Asad's notion of a conceptual grammar provides a useful theoretical bracket in this endeavour: in Asad's reading of Wittgenstein, the grammar of a concept is always embedded and embodied in a distinct form of life, 'expressing and guiding different ways of inhabiting the world'.[19] Since certain religious traditions are shaped by specific conceptual grammars, it is impossible to reduce 'the concept of 'religion' […] to a universal essence of beliefs and practices', and instead crucial to ask 'how, by whom, and for what purpose a definition is required'.[20] In this perspective, the universalisation and abstraction of 'religion', globalised since the end of the eighteenth century,[21] can be seen as a consequence of the imperial project of European modernity and its secular governance techniques. What remains to be investigated for much of Buddhist Southeast Asia is how the introduction of such secular conceptual grammars contributed to undoing traditional ways of life while also creating new forms of inhabiting modernity — how the Buddhist tradition was reformulated in grammatical terms that enabled specific forms of modern rule based on former Buddhist empires.

One commonality that characterises both the modern Thai and Burmese context is the important role of Buddhist concepts undergirding what is deemed secular. In fact, as Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière shows, the very word for the secular used in official Burmese language — *lawki hsan de* — contains the Burmese translation of the Buddhist concept of *lokiya* (*lawki*), and thus strongly resonates with Buddhist ideas of an alternative religious path rather than describing a non-religious sphere.[22] Likewise, one of the ironies that Michael Edwards outlines is that the notion of 'religion' in contemporary Myanmar remains so overdetermined by secular ideas of Buddhism that Christian Pentecostalist evangelists choose to offer otherworldly relief through ideas of 'belief'. I suggest in my article that one of the historical preconditions for this powerful continuity of Buddhist conceptual grammars is their secular reformulation in the nineteenth century: the Siamese elite was key in promoting ideas of Buddhism as scientific, humanist and philosophical, thus securing the power of the Buddhist king in the emerging nation-state. Alicia Turner in her article traces the material dimension of the secular grammars implemented by colonial city designers of Rangoon, and argues that the Thayettaw monastic complex offered a space where boundaries of difference could be blurred. Close attention to the 'definitional dissonances' (Edwards) emerging from ongoing negotiations of conceptual grammars of Buddhism and the secular characterises all the articles in this special section. Our

19 Talal Asad, 'Thinking about religion through Wittgenstein', paper given at the Makerere Institute of Social Research, May 2020, https://misr.mak.ac.ug/file-download/download/public/1082 (accessed 3 June 2020), p. 29.

20 Ibid.

21 Sebastian Conrad, 'Religion in der globalen Welt', in *1750–1870. Wege zur modernen Welt*, ed. Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel (München: C.H. Beck, 2016), pp. 559–626.

22 Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, '"Don't say it is religion!" *versus* "Don't make it look like politics!": The vicissitudes of secularity in transitional Burma', paper given at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference, Seattle, 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463421000096 Published online by Cambridge University Press

aim is not to define new authoritative ways of reading Buddhism in the Theravada world, but rather to invite readers to take a fresh look at historical and contemporary practices of defining and contesting authoritative notions of 'religion' and 'politics' in Southeast Asia.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463421000096 Published online by Cambridge University Press