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Book Review

Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?

By Jørn Borup. London & New York: Routledge, 2023, 211 pages, ISBN: 9781032593395 (hardcover), $180.00; ISBN 9781003454274 (ebook), $43.99.

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I had high hopes for this book. Borup's previous work has been influential in my own scholarly formation, particularly his article "Zen and the Art of Orientalism: Religious Studies and Genealogical Networks" (Borup 2004). In that article, Borup deftly weaves a story about encounters between Western and Asian Buddhist actors that emphasizes agency and mutual transformation. This book's tale is less artfully spun, perhaps simply because he tries to do so much more. His ambition is to be applauded, but I agree with Borup that "refraining from critical analysis is not respect" (155), and in that spirit I offer critique. His ambition leads to too many topics, quoting too many scholars, and not treating his subjects with sufficient depth or care. More of a problem is that *Decolonising the Study of Religion* lacks transparency. While this book purports to investigate "the scope and challenges of theories related to decolonisation and identity with a special focus on the study of religion and Buddhism in a contemporary and historical perspective" (5), it quickly becomes clear that Borup has other intentions. Because the book is not organized around these additional intentions or theses, a conventional review by chapter will not suffice. Instead, I will begin with the main thrust of his concerns, followed by a chapter-by-chapter exposition.

The first of Borup's central claims is unspoken but heavily implied, revealed only in the book's footnotes (more on this below). Borup calls Buddhist Americans and American Buddhist studies scholars using woke or decolonial frameworks *identitarians*, a term more commonly linked to European far-right nationalists (cf. Zúquete 2018). He identifies an experiential thread in American religion that stretches back to the Romantic era (e.g., 2, 22, 26, 28, 29), one that values subjectivity in both practice and scholarship, and suggests that decolonial and critical studies in Buddhist studies come out of this experiential mode. At one point Borup suggests that this group overlaps with Ann Gleig's GenX meditation-centric Buddhist Americans engaged in the "collective turn" (98; also see Gleig 2019). He implies that decolonial and woke trends, including those in Buddhist studies as well as in Buddhist communities, represent a new religious movement (NRM).

A deep dive into the book's footnotes reveals the scaffolding of the above claim. Borup approvingly draws on anti-woke author and linguist John McWhorter, noting blithely that "anti-racism in the US is as harmful as racism itself, being a new religious movement infantilizing black people" (34, note 45). This hidden thesis explains why Borup frequently cites American religious norms favoring the authority of personal experience, which otherwise seem quite out of place in a book that claims to discuss decolonial scholarly methods and theories. Unfortunately, rather than presenting systematic evidence from religious studies scholarship that could support the veracity of this claim, Borup instead relies on McWhorter's mass market paperback (*Woke*

Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America, McWhorter 2021) intended for non-scholars with, by all accounts, an ideology that is explicitly antagonistic to critical race theory and decolonialism—trends Borup claims to dispassionately describe in this work. Perhaps the reason Borup buries the claim that anti-racism in the US is an NRM is that giving it more visibility would reveal that his book—in contrast to his claims to value-neutrality—is motivated by an anti-woke agenda that seeks not to objectively investigate decolonial and critical race studies so much as to discredit them.

A second unstated thesis—nevertheless appearing throughout the book—is that decolonial trends in US Buddhist studies are partially the result of confessional scholars being hired in teaching positions in American universities (e.g., 53), which he further claims corrupts legitimate Buddhist studies by making religious authenticity an issue of identity. For Borup, identitarians with these confessional backgrounds seek to radically alter the university and standards of objective scholarship through an emphasis on anti-racism and decolonizing Western-derived hierarchical social structures, pursuits he argues are by nature subjectivist and rooted in essentialized identities. In this process, subjective authenticity, deriving from identity, replaces objectivity as a marker of authority on Buddhism.

Finally, Borup makes the claim that, because Europe has lower levels of religiosity than the US, European scholars (like himself) are more objective than American scholars (6). As evidence, Borup suggests that the American Academy of Religion, the US scholarly organization he aligns with these identitarians, routinely colludes with religious organizations and religious people (e.g., 55–56).

With these additional theses now in full view, we can discuss the book's chapters. The introduction and chapter one attempt to define and historicize decolonialism while introducing the ideological underpinnings of Borup's critique: the concern that emerging scholarship is a kind of "identitarian exclusivism" and "exclusivist particularism" in which "analytical thinking and neutral observation are no longer universally valued as academic" (2). Identitarians are interested in revealing instances of whitewashing and commodification (1), appropriation and white colonization (1), and "identitarian critique" (2)—what others might simply call *anti-racism* or *feminism*. For Borup, these preoccupations are leading to 1984-esque "revised standards of what can be said, taught and thought" (2). He offers no evidence of such revisions, though right-wing political backlash in academia *against* such scholarship—backlash that explicitly seeks to curtail what teachers and professors may discuss in US classrooms on matters of race—is widespread, notably in Florida, as we publish this review.

Chapter two, "Decolonisation," attempts to define the term while setting off in a dizzying array of directions. Borup writes that decolonization is "a term denoting a more general awareness and reaction to *what is perceived as* suppression and hegemonic structures framed by neoliberal globalization and social inequalities" and "a concept bound by semantic plurality and performative use" (13; italics mine). He does not explain its "semantic plurality," nor what he means by "performative use." Unfortunately, this is an ongoing problem in the book: frequently statements are made with no further explanation or supporting evidence, and complex concepts that require at least a sentence or two (if not several pages) of explanation are routinely left without comment or clarification. Copious use of scare quotes makes it clear that Borup does not subscribe to decolonial views. "Claimed to be," "perceived to be," "so-called," and other such terms signal his distancing: "Black Lives Matter, #metoo, and the movement LGBT+ are powerful examples of resistance to *perceived* inequal [*sic*] life conditions" (14; italics mine).

Borup's comments on color blindness are a good example of both his distancing maneuvers and his penchant for making unclear statements that require further explanation, creating moments of confusion for the reader. Commenting that color blindness is "*seen as* a white projection based on the legacy of colonial

power" (21; italics mine), he notes that "belief in race as an essentialised and biologically based fact might even be generated and reinforced in multicultural settings, questioning diversity as an effective way to promote equality and reduce colour blindness" (24). It is unclear to me what Borup means by reducing color blindness; if this is an ideal, it is not further explained here or elsewhere, and it surely needs to be. The remainder of the chapter dives into a host of diverse topics, often without sufficient development. Cultural appropriation, social movements rooted in identity (such as Black Lives Matter), American Romanticism and the authority of experience, subjectivism, race, and positionality are all mentioned, though none receives the sustained attention it merits. Having previously labeled responses to perceived discrimination as "identitarian critique" (2), Borup here characterizes discrimination not as an act by one person or group against another but rather as "when minority identities are feeling discriminated against" (25). The chapter argues that decolonialism and anti-racist work are dangers to academia, describing them as "throwing away institutions and traditions" (17) and—striking an alarmist tone while seemingly sounding a right-wing dog whistle—as being wielded by those with "activist agendas aiming at assessing a new identity world order based on ideals of diversity and multiculturalism" (21). Borup's usage of "new identity world order" requires further elaboration that again he does not provide, which is particularly problematic given the association of the phrase "new world order" with conspiracy theories that have roots in anti-Semitic and racist ideologies (Flores 2022). Without the necessary clarification from Borup, one is left bewildered by the implications of his statement.

Chapter three aims to examine both religion and the study of religion in the context of decolonialism. Discussing Christian colonialism, the chapter establishes that many Christian missionaries had benevolent intentions (e.g., 36, 38) and questions why Christianity is the only religion criticized in decolonial circles. The section "Critical Studies of Religion" continues to explore the Western construction of the concept of religion while seeking to demonstrate that religion is not a strictly Western category. I am open to this idea, but Borup's supporting evidence is, unfortunately, sparse. Borup decries the loss of disengaged, value-neutral studies and the ideal of objectivity (49–50), though he does allow that objective scholars may have "unacknowledged interests" that bias them; unfortunately his brief treatment of this important critique lacks depth (50). Anthropologists and others who seek not just to describe others but to *understand* them may see emic perspectives as having value, but Borup asserts that respecting human subjects in this way is a "classical 'crypto-theological' stance" (50). He introduces the idea that a central claim of critical and decolonial studies is that *only insiders* are capable of representing their own religion (e.g., 54).

Borup's lack of engagement with the subtleties of this dynamic is one of the biggest disappointments of the book. Despite all of the attention Borup gives to the ideas of insiders and outsiders, subjective and objective modes of authority, and emic and etic data, he does not engage deeply enough with the rich scholarly literature on these topics, especially in anthropology, which has long struggled with all of these issues while attending to the ethics of representation. Nor does he grapple with the reality that *all Buddhist studies scholars have biases*, and that Buddhist scholar-practitioners, when transparent about their identity, can make efforts to minimize bias just as non-Buddhist scholars can (see Mitchell 2024). Borup's treatment of insiders and outsiders is overly simplistic and begs an obvious question: If Borup thinks only outsiders can be objective, how is it that he, as an insider in religious studies, can represent other religious studies scholars impartially? Other possibilities, such as seeing these constructs (emic/etic, insider/outsider, subjective/objective) as spectrums rather than binaries, or the possibility of bracketing biases, or any one of the many other solutions discussed in the literature, could resolve this problem, if only he would take time to investigate.

The book's neglect of important theoretical and methodological issues leads to questionable conclusions, and I found my own work, which discusses ways to reduce unacknowledged authenticity claims in scholarship,

to be consistently misrepresented. For example, in suggesting that scholars define Buddhists through self-identification (Quli 2019), I was not at all arguing that emic views are more accurate or authentic, as Borup suggests I was. Rather, I was providing an alternative to the slippery slope of scholarly authenticity claims, which are inevitably tied up with issues of power (such as competition for funding or prestige, or even international political advantage; see Harrington 2017, 2020; Mitchell 2016; Ritzinger 2021), with scholars at times resorting to covert theology to maintain their authority (e.g., by labeling Buddhist groups as NRMs to delegitimize them; see Quli 2019: 164–65). For example, Buddhist American studies was, for many years, not considered appropriate Buddhist studies by many scholars, and its subjects were not considered real Buddhists (Prebish 2002: 75; Quli 2009). The way through this quagmire of authenticity is neither purely emic nor purely etic, as both levels of analysis are implicated in authenticity's construction. As McLaughlin (2020) has shown, the manner in which scholarship has claimed authority over who is authentically Buddhist has bled into certain Western Buddhist communities, where it has been used in tandem with anti-Asian rhetoric to claim that Asian and Asian American Buddhisms are not real Buddhisms (leading to Asian Americans' erasure in both scholarship and American popular media; see Payne 2016; Hsu 2016, among others). To use Buddhists' self-identification as a means of defining Buddhists allows scholars to set aside authenticity claims instead of proliferating them. In light of this, Borup's claim that self-identification is an example of corrupting subjectivist scholarship, emic overrepresentation, or even sectarianism is a red herring. Sectarian authenticity manifests in claims about *others*. Such claims are not, by definition, part of *self*-identification. This is one way in which self-identification skillfully avoids both sectarian and scholarly crypto-theological authenticity claims. Emic and etic are irrelevant to this strategy, which aims toward increased, not decreased, transparency and objectivity.

Chapter four illustrates one of Borup's most significant misunderstandings of postcolonial, critical, and decolonial approaches in Buddhist studies: that the push to open the field to those who fall outside one particular cluster of positionalities—white male textualists and philologists—is akin to seeking to exclude them. (This parallels his understanding of anti-racism work in American Buddhist communities as equivalent to white males being "demeaned" [98]). From the perspective of these approaches, the primary problem is not that scholars have been white or male, nor is it their focus on texts or philology. The problem is that their overrepresentation in Buddhist studies results in a concomitant limitation of the field. The increase in ethical concerns around representation is less connected to woke culture and insider scholarship than it is to an increase in women, people of color, and diverse methodologies in the field, especially ethnography—the last being a point Borup makes early in the book in mentioning anthropology (18), but later seems to forget. Instead, Borup sees the concern with self-reflexivity as more evidence of a kind of subjectivism in which "whiteness and Blackness are not seen as socially constructed" (75). In this view, Buddhist studies scholars, by studying racism and concerning themselves with representation, cannot help but reify and essentialize race.

Chapter five tackles "Buddhist Studies in the West," discussing the origins of Western Buddhist studies as well as its Protestant bias, the decolonial turn, and critical Buddhist studies. Rather than focusing on the ethics of representation, it instead looks at who "owns the right to represent Buddhism" (80). This results in neglecting decades of research in allied fields. That Borup chooses to focus on this question rather than representation is likely related to his portrayal of critical and decolonial scholars as mostly insiders/subjectivists/Buddhists asserting their representations of the tradition as authentic. This chapter would have been a natural place to have an in-depth discussion of Hindutva and the campaign against Wendy Doniger's and Jeff Kripal's work on Hinduism (mentioned elsewhere in passing), and to contemplate why Buddhist groups have not put similar pressure on Western Buddhist studies. If, as Borup fears, Buddhists are increasingly claiming to

"own" Buddhism and its representation, why have we not seen similar campaigns with reference to Buddhist studies? On the positive side, Borup makes a plea for integrating Charles Hallisey's (1995) application of "intercultural mimesis" into Buddhist studies by providing agency to both scholars and their subjects (89) in order to avoid making subjects into victims; this is a concern I share, but Borup's neglect of attendant power issues on his side reduces the effectiveness of his plea.

Chapter six, "Decolonizing Buddhist Studies in the West," addresses decolonialism in North American Buddhism and Buddhist studies. As mentioned, Borup has hinted that anti-racist and feminist trends in North American Buddhism and Buddhist studies is an NRM reacting to globalization. Here he makes the claim that critical studies and decolonial scholars seek to rescue authentic Asian American Buddhism from white Buddhist distortions. He presents scholars as claiming that "elements of the Buddhist teachings and practices are being exposed as skewed" (99), but only one of the cited works he provides makes any such claim: a popular, non-academic work by Ronald Purser (2019) (a business scholar) on McMindfulness (71), intended for the public at large. This is a theme running through the book: Borup states that scholars have taken certain positions, but then either provides scant evidence, or the evidence he provides, when investigated further, does not in fact support his claim. The two Buddhisms model proffered by Buddhist American studies pioneer Charles Prebish is an instructive example, as Borup claims it has been deemed "racist" (104). While indeed it has been critiqued for its shortcomings, such as centering white Buddhists and lumping together all Asian Americans into the category of cultural Buddhists, Wakoh Shannon Hickey (2010) long ago showed the inadequacy of simplistically labeling the model as racist, and the model continues to be employed in useful ways (e.g., Braun 2024; Schippert 2024). The key insight of this model, that the majority of US Buddhist converts have focused almost exclusively on meditation, has definitively and productively shaped the field of Buddhist American studies.

A similar error occurs in reference to a special focus on bad Buddhism in the *Journal of Global Buddhism* that assesses the ways in which Buddhism has been romanticized in popular media and scholarship as a paragon of peace and liberality, despite the existence of Buddhists taking part in violence and other forms of harm. Borup claims that "such exposure of bad Buddhism is meant also as a metaphorical mirror of scholarly traditions wrongly canonizing untrue and impure Buddhism" (104). However, it is clear from the editors' introduction to the special focus of the journal that this is the exact opposite of their intention, which is to challenge romantic assumptions and "limitations in both pop scholarship and academia" (Gould and McKay 2020: 143), rather than to define true or pure Buddhism: "We define this term [bad Buddhism] as Buddhist beliefs, traditions, and practices that challenge normative interpretations, unsettle, or even disgust the observer, and appear to degrade or distract from so-called 'authentic' or 'pure' Buddhism" (Gould and McKay 2020: 141). Here and elsewhere Borup seems to fundamentally misunderstand the difference between scholars revealing how the construction of a hypothetical authentic Buddhism rests on certain normative assumptions, creating blind spots in scholarship, and scholars making their own authenticity claims. The editors and contributors studying bad Buddhism clearly seek not to create new claims of what authentic or inauthentic Buddhism might be, but instead to demonstrate that observers' very notions of authenticity serve as obstacles to understanding and describing Buddhists—the primary goals of ethnographic research in Buddhist studies. Understanding in anthropological terms includes both emic and etic levels of analysis, but Borup seems to reject the inclusion of *any* emic material as insiderism. He further insists that, according to scholars who attend to issues of representation or include emic perspectives, "Buddhism is what Buddhists say and say they do and the scholar's job is to translate these representations without filtering or diluting interpretations and categorizations" (106). This extremist view is simply not advocated for in any of the examples he provides.

Chapter seven, "Modern and Colonial Buddhism in Japan," and chapter eight, "Modern and Postcolonial Buddhist and Religious Studies in Japan," are where Borup does his best work, analyzing trends in Japan as related to Japanese colonialism; Japanese racism; and postcolonial, critical, and decolonial studies in Japan. His goal is to compare Japanese and US manifestations of decolonial trends, a fruitful comparison due to these cultures sharing high levels of religiosity relative to Europe. But just as pundits at times resort to ideas like "Africans sold slaves to white people" to deflect moral arguments around white supremacy and the legacy of slavery in the West, I could not shake the sense that Borup was here using the existence of Japanese colonialism and racism to both normalize white racism and white colonialism and to deflect moral critiques arising from them. Still, Borup's analysis of Japanese religious studies and Buddhist studies is easily the most interesting part of the book.

Chapter nine, "Critical Discussion of Decolonial Critique," repeats the argument that radical identitarian activists are destroying the field, but here Borup does not hold back from some of his most pointed accusations. He claims that "some [of these scholars] would argue that translating and transferring the representations of religious experiences and narratives directly from the sources (who could be themselves) without interference of Western theories are the ideals" (155), having not presented a single scholarly example of this; "refraining from critical analysis is not respect" (155), while again not showing where this has occurred; and "only insiders are morally permitted to study and represent themselves" (175), while ignoring the discipline of anthropology and providing no evidence that anyone but himself among scholars of Buddhist studies has this absurd notion. But decolonial and critical studies scholars are not just dangerous, Borup warns, they are stupid:

> Performatively rolling the eyes when exposed to the lineage of dead white men is tempting especially for those of us with a lesser intellectual capability to criticize scholarly ancestors for their theories of Buddhism which we can now one hundred years later see were not written with the hindsight of accumulated knowledge (178).

Decolonising the Study of Religion could have taken form as a provocative and forward-thinking methodological work, pleading a detailed case for excluding emic views and rejecting an ethics derived from too-close proximity to one's subjects, but it lacks the kind of careful argumentation, deep dive into theory, and deliberate development through argumentation and supporting evidence that mark even the most mediocre works in that genre. Instead, *Decolonising the Study of Religion* comes across as reactionary. While Borup copiously cites other scholars, his engagement with their work is far too shallow—more than once he presents questionable summaries of three or more scholars' works in the span of a single, short paragraph—and, at times, wanders into misrepresentation, which has the result of profoundly diminishing the effectiveness of his argument.

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