



Author's response

Response to Natalie Fisk Quli's Review of *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?*

Jørn Borup 
Aarhus University

I thank Natalie Quli for her very detailed review and critique of my book *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?* (Quli 2024, henceforth simply “Quli”). I feel obliged to give a response to clarify some issues and important theoretical points relevant to the book's intentions and the study of Buddhism and religion more broadly.

Quli finds that the book “leads to too many topics, quoting too many scholars” (Quli, 202) and yet engages too little with scholarship on these topics (Quli, 204). In addition to a multitude of errors, Quli sees red herrings, misunderstandings, copious scare quotes, and unclear statements. Most noteworthy, perhaps, is Quli's suspicion that the book is based upon a “hidden thesis” and “unspoken claims” and that its intention is a foil for propagating such “other intentions.” According to Quli, the evidence for this reading is to be found in 1) the book's footnotes, 2) its use of terminology with alleged roots in racism and anti-Semitism (Quli, 204), and 3) an “alarmist tone while seemingly sounding a right-wing dog whistle” (ibid.). It will not be possible here to respond to all of Quli's criticisms. However, by addressing a few of her suspicions, I hope to offer potential readers a different perspective on the book.

Much of my previous research has been inspired by post-colonial theory, critically investigating power relations and Western categories within the study of religion and Buddhism, as Quli herself acknowledges. Thus I intended in the book an open-minded and critical discussion of how to navigate decolonial challenges to the study of Buddhism and religion.

I see and discuss the scholarly pursuit of decolonisation as a highly complex and heterogeneous field (Borup 2023, 13–14; henceforward simply “Borup”). Referencing influential scholars in various disciplines, I take “the decolonial turn” to be characterised by: 1) deconstruction of colonial relics of Eurocentrism and “whiteness” still prevalent in academia, including institutional structures of racism, hegemonic identitarianism, and Eurocentric knowledge production based in, for instance, objectivism, rationality, secular knowledge, individualism, universalism, emic/etic-distinctions, Cartesian dualism, and cultural appropriation; 2) reconstruction (i.e., a new understanding of the university structure and its *raison d'être*, based on racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, or religious identity, diversity and inclusion of “theories from below” such as indigenous and post-secular knowledge based on subjective lived experiences, and culturally repositioned perspectives mainly drawn from critical race studies); and 3) activism aimed at structural changes in the university and in society through, for instance, affirmative action, participatory action research, and political or religious engagement, some of which may be inspired by social movements (Borup, 29), including a



Buddhism growing out of the parallelism: suffering/racism, diagnosis/white supremacy, way/decolonialism, path/anti-racist action.

Acknowledging the variety of decolonial discourses, I do (contrary to Quli, 203) refer to thinkers “requiring radical changes” (Borup quoting Gopal 2021: 13) in a general process of decolonising academia (examples in Borup, 18–20). If realised, these processes would have a totalising effect of transformation from individual mind to institution, hence my use of a “new identity world order,” a play on a phrase with—I hope—associations limited neither to conspiracy theories nor anti-Semitism, *pace* Quli. For what it’s worth, I am vehemently opposed to cancelling academic scholarship, whether calls come from right or left wing sources (Borup, 176–177).

I suggest that identity has become a focal element in decolonialism, both within and beyond academia. Inspired by the works of historian Frederick Cooper and sociologist Roger Brubaker, I see identity (and identification) as a “category of practice” alongside “identitarian theorizing” (their terminology) relevant to the decolonial ideal of subjectivism (Cooper and Brubaker 2005). Rather than understanding the adjective “identitarian” in reference to European far-right nationalism (as Quli notes others do), I use the concept descriptively as an analytical concept with which to understand different actors and groups for whom identity is a marker of belonging and practice. This includes contexts discussing white, Western, right-wing identity-based ideas as well as post-modern and global Buddhist identities. Some of these identity-based (or “identitarian”) frames of orientation are based on what Brubaker calls “epistemological insiderism,” namely “the belief that identity qualifies or disqualifies one from writing with legitimacy and authority about a particular topic” (Brubaker 2017).

Identity is, I believe, important to understand as an object of analysis and as a new decolonial gaze. While the postcolonial turn focused on unequal power relations with cultural biases (i.e., “Western”), the decolonial turn focuses more on race as one particular identitarian aspect (i.e., “white”) and on intersecting identity categories, with a *stronger* emphasis on a subjective and activist agenda. I find that race and racialisation are presented by some as defining features in both Buddhism (Borup, 72–76) and contemporary Buddhist studies (Borup, 98–109), as well as in theoretical and methodological approaches such as the “two Buddhisms” model, revealing previous “neo-colonial appropriation of Buddhism” (Borup, 67–72) and white particularism (Borup, 102). I thus point to the transformative process in which “universal Buddhism” (often represented by whites/Westerners) in a postmodern/identitarian setting has been exposed as a carrier of a privileged and *particularised* Buddhism. This is iconised by the changing status of H. S. Olcott and scholarly calls for resistance toward “white supremacy and European universalism,” in what I term a “post-global study of Buddhism” (Borup, 98ff) with focus on post-secular studies of identities and positionalities beyond “whiteness.”

Throughout the book, I analyse and discuss the decolonial turn as a new scholarly field. I propose that it is particularly challenging to the academic study of religion especially in the field’s “identity as non-confessional *Religionswissenschaft* with its origin in the matrix of enlightenment, modernity, and colonialism” (see Borup, 168–169, note 18). My pages 40–49 discuss such constructions and negotiations of concepts (e.g., religion, secular, world religion, etc.), whereas pages 155–160 argue for the relevance of using those concepts in non-Western contexts.

In its various forms, the study of religion has aimed to take religion seriously while also striving to interpret (and even explain, rather than merely translate and understand) religion(s). I find decolonially reducing the curators and map-makers to mainly carriers of white privilege problematic (Borup, 178). The decolonial challenges I see are paralleled by a “relevance imperative ‘from above’ ” (Borup, 2) where the societal values of the humanities have repeatedly been questioned (by politicians, for instance), where “analytical thinking

and ‘neutral’ observation are no longer universally valued as academic competences” (ibid.). The latter sentence is thus *not* (as Quli reads it on Quli, 203) a characterisation of decolonial scholarship itself, but of any “relevance imperative from above,” namely the “global trend of an instrumentalisation of education and of research structures ... to perform in neo-liberal societies” (Borup, 2). The point is that these twin challenges—coming from different sources—threaten the quest for “irrelevant” attempts at value neutral observation and explanation, ideal qualities for the traditional study of religion.

I do engage in what I call soft decolonisation. This “aims to bracket and relativise Western modernity and white man’s regime as [a] particular perspective and transitory phase to be undressed and changed” (Borup, 29), inviting other intellectual traditions as *tools* of analysis, rather than just *objects* of analysis (Borup, 175). I am simultaneously critical of what I called “hard decolonisation,” which aims at “changing the whole system” and “the necessity of being and identifying as [a member of any human category] overruling criteria for ‘objective’ truth claims, finding only insiders to be morally equipped and perceptually capable of gaining knowledge” of that category (Borup, 54).

I recognize that “no scholarship is entirely neutral” (Borup, 5), and I appreciate the exposure of Western-centric and Protestant underpinnings and formations of the concepts of “religious” and “secular” (Borup, 40–49). I am, however, reluctant to equate secular or attempted neutral scholarship with maintaining white privilege and patriarchal white supremacy sometimes associated with “European universalism.” I am also reluctant to embrace the idea that it is a trope to overcome. I am not advocating for prescriptive norms for Buddhist scholars or anthropologists, nor am I speaking against the idea that a religious person can also be a good scholar. The assertion that I find Buddhist or decolonial scholars dangerous or stupid (Quli, 207) is based on Quli’s own reading. The metaphor with the elephant (Borup, 172 ff.) actually attempts to illustrate the reduced epistemological vision of the scholar of religion (as necessarily partially “blind”). Yet I do critique the idea of morally normative, confessional, and politically activist scholarship with its potential of subjectivist ideological solipsism (Borup, 178), and its possible implications of exclusivism in the study of religion.

This is why my book is critical of what I call “hard decolonisation” with its reinforcing (strategic) essentialism, epistemological insiderism, *ad hominem* arguments, and non-dialogical, exclusivistic, racialised hermeneutics (exemplified on Borup, 153–154, with nationalistic discourses, cases from Hindu and Islamic studies, and hints to social media discussions, including among Buddhist scholars). If such cases turn out to be non-representative, strawmen, or “extremist views” (Quli, 206) with no reference to identity-based scholarship as discussed in the book, I would be pleased. By contrast, I adhere to a softer version of decolonial critique that open-mindedly engages in inclusive dialogue aiming at “pluriversalising” approaches to the study of religion with inclusion of so-called non-Western (“non-white”) knowledge (Borup, 158, 160, 178).

The book thinks through these issues via critical inquiry including “ethno-hermeneutics” (Borup, 158) and the understanding of race and identity, racialisation, and intersectionalisation (Borup, 174); and via the concepts of analogy and genealogy (Borup, 154–166). By analogy, I mean that both particularised and universalised representations of what we call religion in general and Buddhism in particular can be meaningfully explored through modelling, theories, and concepts. This, I suggest, also opens the possibility of universalising non-Western/Christian concepts (e.g., dharma) in other contexts, while at the same time preserving the values and meaningfulness of other concepts and theories, even if constructed in Western or white contexts. By genealogy, I mean that the historically/culturally constituted contexts of such models can be continuously scrutinised, including their Western/“white” situatedness (as well as the situatedness of their non-Western/“non-white” counterparts).

As scholars, we intend our concepts to found a dynamic understanding of religion (including Buddhism) in the transcultural, circulating, interconnectedness of people, ideas, and practices that comprises the empirical world and the global religious history we strive to understand. Rather than being an attempt to “normalize white racism and white colonialism” (Quli, 207), the book’s chapters on (the study of) religion and Buddhism in Japan exemplify such transnational understanding in a comparative perspective, beyond cultural or racial divisions. Given increasing fragmentation, perhaps the book “could even be envisioned as an imperative for insisting on the limits of epistemic and cultural incommensurability” (Borup, 179). In our struggle to make sense of the world, plural voices need an interface so that they are heard. My book was a modest attempt to facilitate this interface.

References

- Borup. 2023. *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?* London & New York: Routledge.
- Brubaker, Rogers. 2017. “The Uproar Over ‘Transracialism’.” *The New York Times*, 18 May: 1–4.
- Cooper, Frederick and Rogers Brubaker. 2005. “Identity.” In *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, edited by Frederick Cooper, 59–90. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Gopal, Priyamvada 2021. “On Decolonisation and the University.” *Textual Practice* 35 (6): 873–899.
- Quli, Natalie. 2024. Review of Borup, *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?* *Journal of Global Buddhism* 25 (2): 202–208. <https://doi.org/10.26034/lu.jgb.2024.4794>.