




Book Review

The Robe and the Sword: How Buddhist Extremism Is Shaping Modern Asia

By Sonia Faleiro. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2025. ISBN 9781967190003 (paperback), \$18.00.

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SONIA Faleiro's *The Robe and the Sword* arrives at a moment when scholars of Buddhism can no longer treat violence, nationalism, and political power as marginal to the study of Buddhist traditions. While not an academic monograph in the conventional sense, the book makes an indispensable contribution to the field by documenting, with granular detail and narrative force, how Buddhist institutions, symbols, and clerical authority are mobilized within projects of exclusion, domination, and state violence across Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. Faleiro's central claim—that contemporary Buddhist extremism is not an aberration but the outcome of historical entanglements between religion and power—emerges gradually through reportage rather than formal argumentation. What the book offers scholars is not a new theory of Buddhism and violence, but something of arguably more enduring value: an archive of lived realities, voices, and institutional practices that demand theoretical engagement. As Faleiro herself reflects in the Epilogue, what she initially perceived as deviation revealed itself as “something older and more familiar: The collusion of faith and power. The weaponization of religion. Not a betrayal of history, but its echo” (135).

Part one examines Sri Lanka as a paradigmatic case of Buddhist nationalism rooted in mythic history, colonial trauma, and modern political opportunism. Faleiro's analysis draws sustained attention to the island's *Mahāvamsa* Buddhist chronicle tradition, not as a static historical chronicle but as a living political text. She traces how narratives of chosenness—Sri Lanka as the *Dhammadīpa*, or island of Dhamma, consecrated by the Buddha himself—are mobilized to construct what Gehan Gunatilleke terms the “Sinhala-Buddhist entitlement complex” (49). Faleiro's discussion of the Sinhalese King Dutthagamani's war against the Tamil ruler Elara is particularly instructive for scholars. She recounts how monks reassure Dutthagamani that he has killed not tens of thousands of enemies but only “one and a half human beings” (49), because non-Buddhists are seemingly not fully human. This episode exemplifies a doctrinal elasticity that allows violence to be reframed as moral necessity. For scholars of Buddhist ethics, this material underscores the inadequacy of treating *ahimsā* as an unqualified absolute in examining lived Buddhist traditions.

Importantly, Faleiro does not reduce contemporary violence to ancient texts. She situates Buddhist nationalism within colonial restructuring, noting how British favoritism toward Tamil laborers exacerbated postcolonial resentments. This historical layering challenges simplistic narratives that attribute extremism solely to modern populism. The figure of Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, leader of the Bodu Bala Sena or BBS, functions in Faleiro's



account as an embodiment of monastic impunity. She documents how Gnanasara repeatedly violated the Vinaya monastic code—through threats, incitement, and criminal behavior—without consequence, protected by the symbolic inviolability of saffron robes. For scholars, this raises a crucial institutional question: How does monastic discipline function (or fail) under conditions of nationalist capture? The Vinaya prescribes disrobing for acts such as encouraging killing, yet Faleiro shows how political patronage renders such rules unenforceable. Such material invites further research into how Vinaya authority is negotiated when monasteries become political actors.

Faleiro further reconstructs the 2018 Digana anti-Muslim riots with devastating precision. The contradiction between rhetoric and reality is stark. While Gnanasara publicly insists, “We must protect our culture.... But we never use violence” (63), his speeches repeatedly function as mobilizing signals. The chilling exhortation—allegedly from a local monk, “[t]he sword at home is no longer for cutting jackfruit—sharpen it and go” (58), illustrates how metaphor becomes instruction. Faleiro’s reporting on Digana documents not only the destruction—of over three hundred homes, two hundred shops, twenty mosques, and the death of Abdul Basith—but also the systematic failure of the state. Amnesty International’s conclusion that “the state failed in its duty to protect the Muslim minority” (59) reinforces the book’s central theme: Buddhist extremism operates in symbiosis with political power, not against it.

For scholars of Sinhalese Buddhism, Faleiro’s narratives offer here an opportunity to recalibrate research agendas toward the lived interfaces between text, institution, and political practice. Her treatment of the *Mahāvamsa* as a living political text suggests the need for closer ethnographic and discourse-analytic work on how chronicles, sermons, and ritual performances reactivate mythic idioms in contemporary nationalist rhetoric. Likewise, her documentation of the selective enforcement of the Vinaya under conditions of political patronage invites renewed institutional studies of monastic governance, including how disciplinary authority is negotiated within networks linking temples, parties, and security forces. Rather than isolating doctrinal ethics from social realities, scholars might draw from Faleiro’s archive to examine how concepts such as *ahimsā* and practices such as merit-making are reinterpreted in moments of communal anxiety. In doing so, scholarship could move beyond normative debates about “true” Buddhism and instead analyze how authority, charisma, and state power reshape Buddhist moral vocabularies in postcolonial Sri Lanka.

Part two shifts to Myanmar, where Faleiro undertakes a critical re-reading of the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Often celebrated as an instance of Buddhist moral resistance, the uprising is presented here as a turning point that restored monks’ political authority—but did not guarantee its ethical direction. Faleiro documents how monks chanting the *Metta Sutta*—“Let no one ever deceive another” (87-88)—were violently repressed, reinforcing their moral legitimacy. Yet this seeming legitimacy later became available for nationalist mobilization. The implication for scholars is significant: moral capital accumulated through resistance can be redeployed for exclusionary projects.

Faleiro’s portrait of Ashin Wirathu is among the book’s most unsettling contributions. She traces his transformation from a respected intellectual monk into the architect of mass hatred and fearmongering. The clandestine pamphlet *In Fear of Our Race Disappearing*, composed by an unknown author and discovered by Wirathu in 1997, becomes the ideological seed for a movement that frames Muslims as existential threats. Wirathu’s rhetoric—likening Muslims to fire, promising to ensure they “have nothing to eat” and “nowhere to live” (83)—is not presented as spontaneous extremism but as carefully cultivated affect. Faleiro’s emphasis on the social psychology of belonging—“at least they were not *kalar* [a racial slur originally directed towards Indians]” (81)—adds an important dimension often absent from structural analyses of genocide. She further shows how Wirathu’s movement evolved into Ma Ba Tha, a professionally organized institution with media arms, legal advocacy, and social services. This challenges scholarly tendencies to frame Buddhist extremism as

merely populist or charismatic. Instead, Ma Ba Tha functioned as a parallel civil society, stepping in “where the state had failed” (98). The passage of race and religion laws restricting interfaith marriage and conversion also demonstrates how Buddhist nationalism translates into legislative violence. This material thus underscores the need to study Buddhist extremism not only as discourse but as governance.

Faleiro’s account of the Rohingya crisis is also unflinching. Survivor testimonies—women raped, children murdered, villages burned—are paired with institutional analysis. The role of Facebook in amplifying hate speech is particularly salient. Amnesty International’s conclusion that Meta “substantially contributed” (103) to the atrocities situates violence within global technological systems. Equally significant is Faleiro’s treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi. Her statement to a BBC journalist that “Global Muslim power...is very great” (100) exemplifies what Faleiro identifies as moral abdication. For those accustomed to framing Suu Kyi as a symbol of Buddhist nonviolence, this material demands serious reconsideration of that assumption.

Part three examines Thailand, where Buddhist extremism manifests less through overt violence than through institutional capture by monarchy, capital, and authoritarianism. Faleiro analyzes Wat Phra Dhammakaya as a form of Buddhist prosperity theology. The claim that donations buy wealth in this life—poverty as “stingy karma” (123)—represents a radical reinterpretation of merit-making. For researchers of Buddhism, Dhammakaya raises critical questions about neoliberal Buddhism. QR-coded donation boxes, ATMs, and honorific rewards suggest a commodification of merit that aligns seamlessly with consumer capitalism. In contrast, the Santi Asoke movement represents ascetic rebellion. Faleiro portrays it as rejecting consumerism, royal patronage, and monastic luxury. This portrayal avoids romanticization: Santi Asoke is politically engaged, confrontational, and often marginalized. The movement’s insistence that protest is a “religious duty” (127) complicates scholarly binaries between “engaged Buddhism” and extremism. Here, engagement is neither nationalist nor quietist, but oppositional to both state and market.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of Part three for Buddhist studies is Faleiro’s sustained engagement with gender. Examining Dhammananda Bhikkhuni’s ordination in 2003—despite a 1928 ban on female ordination—exposes the patriarchal structure of Thai Buddhism. Dhammananda’s observation that Buddhism “supports patriarchy” (131) even if it is not doctrinally patriarchal offers a nuanced analytical frame for scholars. Her lack of legal recognition—“they don’t [even] call me Bhikkhuni” (132)—highlights how institutional exclusion perhaps operates through bureaucracy even when it acts in tension with doctrine. Read against the Pali Canon’s record that the Buddha ordained women and affirmed their capacity for awakening, the Thai Sangha’s continued refusal to recognize female ordination highlights not simply a disregard of canonical precedent, but a more complex tension between scriptural sources, historical developments—such as the disappearance of recognized *bhikkhuni* lineages—longstanding institutional interpretations, and the roles available to women (including *mae chi*) within Thai Buddhist practice today. In this light, the tension is also not merely administrative but hermeneutical: it raises the question of how selectively invoked textual authority is deployed to stabilise male monastic control even where the canonical archive itself complicates such exclusion.

Faleiro further situates Thai Buddhism within a sacred trinity that forecloses dissent. The king’s assumption of control over the Sangha Council in 2018 grants him authority over more than 41,000 temples and 200,000 monks. This structural subordination of the monastic institutions explains both their silence and their corruption. The imprisonment of Saharat Sukhamla under *lèse-majesté* laws for questioning royal virtue demonstrates the cost of ethical speech. Thailand thus emerges as a case where Buddhism is not violently extremist and yet deeply constrained by authoritarian sacrality.

While *The Robe and the Sword* is an undoubtedly sharp work of reportage, its journalistic, narrative-driven form naturally shapes how it functions in scholarly contexts. First, rather than foregrounding sustained doctrinal or

textual analysis, Faleiro centers lived religious experience and the perspectives of her interlocutors. As a result, her account offers limited insight into how the contemporary Buddhists she studies engage with, interpret, or mobilize textual traditions in their ethical reasoning, leaving those dimensions largely implicit. Readers interested in the role of texts in shaping debates on violence, kingship, and karmic responsibility may therefore find this aspect less developed. Second, Faleiro's focus on outstanding charismatic figures—Gnanasara, Wirathu, Dhammachayo—can risk underplaying everyday monastic complicity, though this is partially mitigated by her attention to silence, institutional inertia, and lay participation. Finally, the book's principal strength—its narrative immediacy—also circumscribes its generalizability: comparative insights are suggested rather than systematized. This, however, may be seen not as a flaw but as an invitation to further inquiry, encouraging scholars to build on Faleiro's insights by pursuing more systematic, comparative, and textually attentive lines of analysis.

The Robe and the Sword should therefore be read by scholars of Buddhism not as a theoretical intervention but as a kind of “field archive” of urgent relevance. It documents how Buddhist institutions operate under conditions of nationalism, capitalism, patriarchy, and authoritarianism, and it forces scholars to confront uncomfortable realities often bracketed by normative assumptions about Buddhist nonviolence. As Faleiro concludes through a *jātaka* parable of sacrificial leadership, the question is no longer how religion becomes a weapon, but “whether its original values can endure” (139). Faleiro's varied narratives supply precisely the kinds of contemporary cases—monastic speech, ritual authority, institutional silence, and lay-clerical entanglements—that scholars need to address in order to rethink how canonical ideals, ethical discourse, and historical memory are translated, distorted, or resisted in lived Buddhist contexts today.