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Article Review

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Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. Charles Keyes. *The Review of Faith and International Affairs,* 14(4): 42-52. 2016.

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Charles Keyes is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Washington. In this article, Keyes points out that religions in Southeast Asia, especially Theravada Buddhism in this case, must not be studied as purely canonical doctrines, but also as traditional practices that have been shaped by socio-political contexts. Historically and presently, it is found that Buddhists in Theravada countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand are involved with wars and conflicts even though their religious ideology promotes peace and non-violence. Interestingly, as observed by Keyes, such conflicts always arise in the regions where Buddhists are the majority while Muslims or Christians

are the minority. In addition, the conflicts have been motivated not only by religious radicalism but also nationalism.

In Sri Lanka, Dharmapala is an excellent case to begin with. Dharmapala was known as a modern Buddhist who helped revive Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka in the colonial era. His religious role was undoubtedly developed through interactions with western cultures, for example, Henry Olcott and many Christian missionaries. However, he also became an icon of modern Sinhalese nationalism. This then meant that the good Sinhalese must be Buddhist who is able to dedicate his life to propagate Buddhism.

In the early nineteen century, the story of king Duthagamini in the 2nd century BCE was used by Dharmapala as the justification for a religious war against the non-Buddhist, Tamils. In 2005, an organization of monks called the National Buddhist Front pressed President Kumaratunga to continue the war and even ban non-Buddhist NGOs from Sri Lanka. Nowadays, though physical conflicts based on race and religion are rarely found, Islamophobia among Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists continues.

The situation of Buddhist movements in Myanmar is similar to Sri Lanka. The religious legitimacy of Burmese leaders since independent in 1948 has been based on the model of the Buddhist ruler (dhammaraja). Of course, the concept of a Buddhist king never disappears. Instead, it transforms into the new government, including the military junta (see more details in Swearer, 2010). U Nu and Ne Win emphasized their public relationships with Buddhist sacred rites. Moreover, their political ideology was based on Buddhist Socialism. In order to satisfy various groups of minorities, the government initiated the Buddhist council in 1950 and declared Buddhism

the state religion in 1961. At this stage, Theravada Buddhism was employed for the purpose of national solidarity.

Similarly to the Bodhu Bala Sena (BBS) group in Sri Lanka, Ashin Wirathu, the leader of the 969 Movement in Myanmar supported the government to expel Rohingya Muslims from their Buddhist land that finally caused many thousands die. One of reasons is to protect Buddhism which is going to be destroyed by the growing numbers of Muslims. However, it should not be assumed that relationships between Burmese monks and the government are always positive. The suppression of the 1988 uprising and the so-called "saffron revolution" of 2007 are examples that monks protested the military government.

The history of the Khmer kings and kingdom was imitated from the Hindu-Buddhist model. Buddhism was also employed to form nationalism against the French. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge overwhelmed Cambodia and eliminated the Buddhist sangha. However, for the sake of state building, the next governments began to restore Buddhism as the Khmer national identity (see more details in Hansen, 2007). Buddhism was declared the state religion in 1989 while various monks, who supported the government's policy, were approved by the prime minister to take high ranking positions.

Thailand is another Buddhist country in which the vital role of the monarchy is still witnessed. Though Buddhism is not the state religion as found in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Cambodia, the king of Thailand must be Buddhist, according to the constitution. Being a Thai citizen is always identified with being Buddhist. For example, in order to solve the conflict in Southern Thailand, monks and the military advocate Buddhist nationalism. The figure of Muslim

terrorists is created as the destroyer of Buddhism and regional separatists. Buddhism therefore takes part and changes the nature of this conflict (See more details in Jerryson, 2011).

According to Keyes, religion is developed within the local contexts. It is therefore natural to find that religion and nationalism co-exist. At the same time, it also brings about conflicts in the name of religion or nation. This article confirms that modernity in those countries is always associated with a Theravada tradition that is reinterpreted to serve the state's policy. Notably, religious awareness in the global age, for example Islamophobia caused by the events of 9/11 and the discourse of Buddhist protectors, can spread across borders. It seems that those Theravada countries have been sharing religious people, materials, information, and ideas through both physical transportation and cyber links.

Besides calling Buddhists to return to their humanist doctrine, compassion for example, Keyes' paper persuades scholars in religious studies, transnationalism, mobilities, migration, and mass media to reexamine Theravada Buddhism as a transnational religion through sociological and anthropological perspectives.

References

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