TEMENOS
Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion
Temenos Vol. 61 No. 1 (2025), 125–8
DOI: 10.33356/temenos.161039

Book Review

Jørn Borup: *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?* Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy. London: Routledge, 2023, 211 pp.

Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism? is a monograph by Danish religion and Japanese studies scholar Jørn Borup. It applies a decolonial frame to religious and Buddhist studies, presenting Japanese Buddhism as a case example. The book consists of nine thematic chapters. Borup sets out to investigate the scope and challenges of theories related to decolonization, focusing on the study of religion and Buddhism. Throughout the text Borup engages in a critical and multifaceted enquiry into both coloniality and the decolonial critique itself.

The first and second chapters present a historical overview of the post- and decolonial critiques and their relationship with postmodernism, post-globalism, and identity politics. A key decolonial model involves deconstruction, reconstruction, and activism (p. 29). Deconstruction consists of the identification of colonial relics of 'whiteness' and Eurocentrism in society and academia. These include racism and power structures, which even encompass features of knowledge such as objectivism and rationality. Reconstruction consists of re-envisioning society and academia through the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) of different groups of people and modes of knowledge such as indigenous and post-secular knowledge (i.e. subjective lived experience). Finally, activism consists of implementing these changes through diversity training, participatory research, and political engagement, for example.

The third and fourth chapters deal with the decolonial critique of the studies of religion and Buddhism respectively. Borup introduces Western-centric and Protestant biases in the concepts of religion and Buddhism, as well as their study. Religion can be considered a Western identity marker serving colonization (p. 50) and the expectation that scholars of religion surpass the representations of the studied people to reflect European exceptionalism (p. 45). The critique has led some scholars to de-centre academic knowledge production by engaging religious stakeholders, for example (p. 54).

Theosophists appropriated Buddhism into Protestant Buddhism. They envisioned it as a gateway between the spiritual East and rational West (p. 61). This created a legacy of Western men 'whitesplaining' (or should one also say 'mansplaining'?) Buddhism to Buddhists, commonly depicting it as a scientific religion (p. 63) and the Buddha as a Victorian gentleman (p. 65). The decolonial critique of Buddhism spans the association of American Buddhism with white privilege to

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

the use of Buddhist elements such as Buddha statues, meditation, and mindfulness outside their original religious context (pp. 70–72). Efforts to decolonize Buddhism have included DEI practices to increase the representation of people of colour, including Asian Americans (p. 75).

Chapters five and six discuss Buddhist studies. The 1990s saw the emergence of critical Buddhist studies examining the textualizing, translation, and appropriation of Buddhism in academia (p. 89). This included a critique of Western scholars' position of supremacy as more qualified curators of Buddhism than Buddhist monks and Asian scholars. The critique held that Western scholars had participated in Protestant and textualized bias during the Western appropriation of Buddhism, with a pejorative relationship with rituals, magic, and miracles present in lived religion (pp. 86–87).

Lacking a unified theory, decolonial Buddhist studies focus on critiquing the 'de-ethnified, de-culturalized, and de-territorialised universality' characterizing modern and global Buddhism (p. 97). Critical studies advocate a re-culturalized differentiation going beyond the white, Western, and male Buddhist hegemony (p. 98). There has also been a critique of both classifying Buddhism using the Western concept of 'religion' and secularizing it as a 'non-religion', typical of Western-convert Buddhism and considered cultural appropriation. Moreover, identity politics has received increasing attention, including concerning ethnocentric Buddhism, scholarly positionality (male white privilege), and scholarly classifications such as the American 'two Buddhisms' (Asian immigrants versus Western converts). The decolonial critique has created division within the scholarly community concerning how to take Buddhism seriously and negotiate the authority to represent Buddhism (p. 108).

In chapter seven Borup turns to the case of Japanese Buddhism. He begins by describing the shaping of the modern religion of 'Buddhism' (*bukkyō*) through internal developments in Japan influenced by Western science and philosophy after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Members of the New Buddhism (*shin bukkyō*) movement in the Meiji period promoted a depiction of Buddhism as scientific, rational, and philosophical in efforts to overcome Christianity (p. 118). D. T. Suzuki was a notable popularizer of a rationalized and spiritualized version of Japanese Zen Buddhism in the West under the guise of 'exotic Japaneseness' (p. 121). Buddhist institutions and priests also collaborated in legitimizing Japanese colonialism and ethnonationalism in the 1920s and 1930s. This included missionary work in occupied Korea and the oppression of Korean Buddhism.

In chapter eight Borup discusses Buddhist studies in Japan. During modernization Japanese universities adopted European-style Indian studies based on the methods of Western Buddhology, supplement-

ing sectarian Mahāyāna with Pali and Sanskrit studies. Buddhist historical studies were also developed, featuring evolutionary notions placing Japanese Buddhism at the pinnacle, reflecting the strategic use of Buddhism in religious identity politics (p. 132). Japanese Buddhism and its study illustrate that rather than being restricted to Western hegemony, coloniality and decolonization in society and scholarship are highly complex and transnational topics.

In the final, ninth, chapter and conclusions Borup critically discusses the decolonial critique. Epistemological innocence in the study of religion and Buddhism has been lost since the post- and decolonial turns, warranting serious engagement with these perspectives. The concept and study of religion involves power relations, and researchers are necessarily culturally situated. Borup holds that this calls for openminded and reflexive research. He advocates a middle path, consisting of using analytical models to understand religion as a pragmatic phenomenon seeking to avoid both overgeneralization and particular exclusivism.

While Borup welcomes engagement with the decolonial critique to 'pluriversalize' research, he is critical of 'hard decolonization' seeking revolution (pp. 177–178). Who is privileged, and who should be given representation, is a matter of debate. The fixation on identity tropes is further challenged by their fluid and hybrid nature and the different value placed on performative identity politics in different cultures (p. 145). Moreover, if taken to the extreme, the appraisal of subjective lived insider experience can lead to hermeneutic exclusivism ('tyranny of authenticity'; p. 154) and radical cultural particularism, permitting Western religious scholars only to study the West and global modernity.

The approach may also lead to the neglect of critical enquiry into the interests and interpretations of 'insiders'. Buddhist studies has questioned the indigenous authenticity of 'cosmopolitan natives' and native scholars appropriating Western concepts and theories, including essentialized stereotypes of white Orientalists (p. 154). Borup argues that since scholars only have access to narratives of experience and must always interpret them through a theoretical frame, particular and identitarian exclusivism is unjustified. Rather, there should be room in religious studies for multiple worlds and modernities (p. 174).

Finally, Borup calls for 'continued critical discussions, including critical studies of critical studies' (pp. 177–178). This is a good characterization of the entire work. Decolonization is a highly complex and emotionally laden topic. Borup does a commendable job in averting the pitfalls of the simplistic extremist positions common in public discussion. Engaging with the topic's complexities can facilitate a conceptual change in readers. However, the reader's ability to engage with the text is compromised by the unnec-

essarily abstruse language, superfluous text, and long paragraphs. The text could have benefited from thorough copyediting for simplicity and clarity, which could have broadened the target audience. Nevertheless, the book introduces an extremely pertinent discussion that all scholars of religion should consider profoundly.

Johannes Cairns
University of Turku

Johannes Cairns is Collegium Researcher and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Biology and the Turku Collegium of Science, Medicine and Technology, University of Turku, and a scholar of Buddhism and ecology, University of Helsinki. Email: johannes.cairns@utu.fi