Introduction

On September 24, 2007, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks marched down the main thoroughfares of Yangon, a sea of dark maroon robes creating the lasting image of what the media would deem the "Saffron Revolution," after the color commonly associated with monks' robes in the country. This was the sixth day of monastic demonstrations in downtown Yangon, the culmination of a wave of dissent that had begun with citizen protests against the removal of fuel subsidies the month before and had escalated after reports that the Burmese military had violently subdued monks demonstrating in the northern city of Pakokku earlier in September.[1] Beginning on September 18, the ranks of the monks had swelled each day and similar actions were taking place in urban areas across the country. This day they marched along with tens of thousands of lay people, although the monks had initially asked the laity not to join the demonstrations. Gradually, however, lay people did join, linking hands to create protective barriers around the monks as they marched and raising the banners of opposition groups, including the National League for Democracy (NLD) and even the long-outlawed student union.

While some monks began the march each afternoon at their home monasteries, eventually converging on Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon, growing numbers gathered at the foot of the iconic golden dome of the Shwedagon Pagoda, a mile or so north of the city center. These monks met to chant protective prayers before marching, but the significance of the location was not lost on any Burmese observers. In addition to being the most revered Buddhist site in the country (strands

[1] The 2007 demonstrations were only one of the most recent examples of monastic political activism in Myanmar. After military rule began in 1962, monks protested government attempts to expand authority over the religious order in 1965; joined students to protest the lack of government recognition of the funeral of the former secretary general of the UN, U Thant, in 1974; and joined demonstrations across the country in 1988 and 1990, even taking over the duty of maintaining public order in Mandalay after the administration essentially collapsed following protests. Monks have also been at the forefront of protests since 2012 against the recognition of the Rohingya Muslim minority, in support of controversial "religious protection laws," and on a number of other political issues.

of the Buddha's hair are allegedly buried beneath it), it has also been a focal point of political activity since the colonial period. The martyred leader of the independence movement, General Aung San, gave speeches in front of the pagoda in the 1940s and over forty years later, his daughter, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, invigorated the democracy movement of 1988 with a speech in the same location. The rhetoric and protest repertoire of the monks in 2007 perfectly mirrored the Shwedagon Pagoda's combination of religious and political symbolism. While some monks' groups had issued statements with explicitly political demands and a number of the marching monks also chanted political slogans, the primary tactic of the demonstrating monks was to recite the *mettā sutta* (Bur. *myitta thouk*), a Buddhist protective chant that radiates undiscriminating loving-kindness out to the world. This was their chosen method of political action.

Western media coverage of the events was quick to recognize the overwhelming respect that the mostly Buddhist population of Myanmar had for the monks, and reports juxtaposed the monks' assertion of moral authority against the brutal military dominance of the Burmese regime. Some news articles discussed the religious boycott that the monks had imposed on the military regime; by refusing to accept military donations the monks denied the military an opportunity to earn merit that would bring them a better rebirth in future lives (Watts 2007). Some opined that the military government would not dare attack the monks since it would risk losing whatever legitimacy it still retained (Mydans 2007). However, while most Western media reports made reference to the moral power or authority of the monks, they also misunderstood or oversimplified statements from both monks and laypeople who believed that this mass display of piety and compassion would, as a fundamentally moral action, actually be able to bring about political change by itself (see, for example, PBS 2007, Ward 2007).

Many observers also misunderstood the complexities of the monks' tactics, either referring to them as "militant monks" or expressing incredulity that supposedly "peaceful" and "detached" Buddhist renunciates could be moved to such displays of outrage (see, for example, Fox News 2007, Beech 2007). And, as has been made clear through Buddhist political activism in Myanmar since 2012, many observers mistakenly viewed the monastic demonstrations as reflecting a unified aspiration for democracy among the marching monks, without seeking to appreciate the wide range of understandings of democracy and politics among those monks or the ways in which Buddhist ideas have influenced their political thinking. What is needed in order to fully grasp the significance and meaning of the monastic demonstrations of 2007, as well as to

understand some of the challenges facing the current political transition in Myanmar, is a sense of the shared moral framework that Burmese Buddhists inhabit.

I argue that, in order to understand the political dynamics of contemporary Myanmar, it is necessary to understand the interpretations of Buddhist concepts that underlay much of modern Burmese political thought. Other scholars have convincingly demonstrated that Theravāda Buddhism is the source of much (but not all) of the conceptual framework within which most Buddhists in Myanmar think about politics (see, for example, Schober 2011, Jordt 2007, Houtman 1999, Spiro 1970, and Sarkisyanz 1965). In this book I seek to delineate the basic conceptual apparatus of a (not the) Burmese Buddhist worldview that I argue has been the primary influence on Burmese political thinking and political discourse throughout most of the twentieth century. This Theravāda-influenced moral conception of the universe (described further in the following section) provides an understanding of the political as a sphere of moral action, governed by particular rules of cause and effect. Of course, within this framework Burmese Buddhists vary as to their interpretation of particular concepts and the degree to which they see Buddhist teachings as relevant to politics. But throughout the book I assert that this framework and the Burmese Buddhist conceptions of politics it produces continue to be salient for contemporary political practice in Myanmar.

As an examination of Burmese Buddhist political thought, this book is also a work of comparative political theory. The study of non-Western religious cultures does not merely illuminate how alternate moral codes or systems of belief can influence politics; it draws our attention to how religious beliefs can generate fundamentally different conceptions of what is political. Buddhist beliefs and practices provide a moral framework that delineates the boundaries of the political and determines what constitutes political subjects and legitimate forms of political authority and participation. However, while the overarching moral framework of these beliefs has remained relatively consistent over time, the ways in which Buddhists understand and apply them are always in flux, meaning that there is no singular, unitary Burmese Buddhist perspective on politics. Buddhists in Myanmar are created *as political subjects* by this multifaceted tradition, yet they are also contesting, refining, and reformulating those boundaries of political legitimacy, authority, and participation. Furthermore, they are doing this in ways that (while they may interact with ideas from other traditions) are drawn directly from their own Buddhist tradition and using reasoning about politics that comes from the moral framework provided by Theravāda Buddhism.

Buddhism in Myanmar has provided a repertoire of "raw materials" which people have used to make sense of their political environment. In the case of the particular moral worldview that guides the analysis in this book, those raw materials include a particular conception of human nature, an understanding of the universe as governed by a law of cause and effect that works according to moral principles, a conception of human existence as being fundamentally dissatisfactory, and the acceptance of a range of methods to overcome and escape its dissatisfactory character. Within this context, Burmese political thinkers have constructed Buddhist arguments to both legitimate and criticize various forms of political authority and political ideologies. As Peter Jackson has observed, "Fundamental to the ongoing significance of Buddhist teachings, in particular, has been their interpretative plasticity, that is, their capacity to continue to be used to confer symbolic legitimation upon the exercise of political authority and the structures of political power, whether those structures have been founded upon absolute monarchical rule, military rule or upon a popularly elected government" (Jackson 2002, 157). It is the "interpretative plasticity" of Burmese Buddhist concepts that this book explores, in chapters that examine the way those concepts are deployed in arguments regarding the nature of politics, the proper ends of politics, alternative conceptions and methods of political participation, and a range of understandings of democracy.

This Introduction begins with an explanation of the way in which I understand and use the term "moral universe" and a brief consideration of "Burmese Buddhism" as a distinct category. I then situate this research in relation to political science and policy studies that have come before it, identifying problematic approaches from those perspectives and drawing on insights from anthropology, religious studies, and history to explain how I approach the interaction of religion and politics. I also explain how my research methods complemented and expanded the relatively small corpus of existing texts. There is a brief chapter overview and the Introduction ends by positioning my exploration of Burmese Buddhist political thought in relation to the emerging subfield of comparative political theory.

A "Moral Universe" of Burmese Buddhism

Most of the academic work on Theravāda Buddhism and politics refers to the role of the Theravāda cosmology in legitimating power and providing models of political organization.[2] The traditional scholarly view of this

[2] Some prominent examples include Heine-Geldern (1942), Reynolds (1972), Tambiah (1976), and Aung-Thwin (1985a). In another work, Tambiah presents cosmologies as

cosmology was of a totalizing, self-contained framework that Buddhist rulers and officials used to explain both the physical structure of the universe and the laws that governed existence. It implied a natural hierarchy in which individuals were ranked according to their actions in the past and the results of those actions in the present. Explanations of the cosmology included detailed descriptions of the many realms that existed besides the human one, including hells filled with unimaginable suffering and heavenly abodes of bliss. The cosmology also legitimized the monarchical model of political rule by characterizing humans as driven to immorality by desire and craving and in need of a powerful leader whose position was justified with reference to his presumed moral conduct in past lives.

Previous generations of scholars tended to present this legitimating cosmology as relatively static. Stanley Tambiah famously characterized the system as a "galactic polity" where power radiated out from individual monarchs, weakening with distance and overlapping at the margins where it met with other power centers (1976, 102–131). O.W. Wolters gave a similar description but designated the system as a "mandala" (1982). Both models pictured individual polities pulsating and shifting over time, but crucially assumed that the framework that indicated people's proper place within the social order generally persisted until the rupture of the colonial encounter. Anne Blackburn has called this assumption—that colonial encounters were the sole catalyst for social, political, or cultural change—the "sea-change" model (2010, 200).

Scholars have been challenging and refining the sea-change model for decades, as it applies to understandings of the Theravāda cosmology and to the religious and political thinking that took place within that cosmological framework. Charles Keyes examined transformations in practices of the Thai monkhood to show that a "totalizing" framework obscures the dynamic nature of Buddhism as a lived tradition in particular contexts (1978). Anne Blackburn (2001) demonstrated that significant social and intellectual changes took place in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka that reformulated the relationships between lay and monastic Buddhist communities and their religious texts. Similarly, Michael Charney's (2006) study of the ways in which a small group of regional literati in Myanmar helped to transform the legitimating rhetoric and symbolism of the ruling Konbaung dynasty in the second half of the eighteenth century revealed that fluctuations in the concepts underwriting political rule took place well before colonialism provoked a crisis in traditional Burmese thought.

"performative blueprints" and "designs for living," that help people to describe and understand the world but also provide prescriptions for action (1985, 4).

While the precolonial political model may not have been as inert as was once assumed, colonialism still did bring a series of challenges to the dominant social and political order, destabilizing many elements of the traditional cosmology and mirroring in some ways the "disenchantment" that Max Weber identified as part of the West's move toward rationality and modernity. Juliane Schober has explored the ways in which the "galactic polity" paradigm was transformed beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century (1995). Sometimes the changes were gradual, for example through reinterpretations of Buddhist ideas; sometimes they were more abrupt, as occurred with the fall of the Burmese monarchy in 1885. Mid-nineteenth-century political, administrative, and religious reforms, instituted in Burma by King Mindon and in Siam (Thailand) by King Mongkut, altered established relationships between the state, the monastics, and the society. This laid the groundwork for what Schober has called a "rationalized" cosmology, shorn of elements that did not accord with modern science and characterized by an increased "laicization" of Buddhism, evidenced by the proliferation of lay meditation and religious study groups, areas previously reserved for monks.

Some scholars of Buddhism in Myanmar have retained a lens that sees the cosmology as both more consistent with precolonial notions and more pervasive. Burmese historian Michael Aung-Thwin made the controversial claim that the imposition of military rule in 1962 represented for Burmese people a welcome return to the cosmological sense of order that both the British colonial administration and the democratic parliamentary government (and, by implication, contemporary democratic opposition movements) lacked (1985a). Others have been less normative but have still seen the Burmese Buddhist cosmological frame as less mutable. Anthropologist Mikael Gravers has said that "the concepts and ideals of the Buddhist cosmology are universal and everlasting, and they constitute a total model of the society and for its future development" (1999, 17). Similarly, anthropologist Ingrid Jordt has written that "The totalizing force of Buddhist cosmology ... acts as a force majeure on both the state and the civil society" (2007, 209).

I agree with Schober's contrasting view that "modern Buddhism relinquished a totalizing cosmology in which all aspects of life cohered across cultural, social, economic, scientific bodies of knowledge" (2011, 8). This statement about the disappearance of a totalizing cosmology should not, however, be taken to mean that a clear distinction can be drawn between "traditional" and "modern" Buddhism, since there has likely been a wide range of variation within both of these heuristic categories as well as the persistence of certain beliefs. I would suggest that, while beliefs

about the material structure of the universe, the necessary position of the king, and a cosmologically ordained hierarchy may have receded among much of the population of contemporary Myanmar, the Buddhist belief in the world as a place governed by particular moral rules generally remains, anchoring the notion of a "moral universe." The logic of cause and effect that supports this worldview has largely been bolstered rather than shattered by scientific innovations and, from the beginning of the twentieth century Buddhists in Myanmar and elsewhere have argued that their moral framework represents an important element that is lacking in the Western political tradition. The political interpretation of these moral rules has varied widely but this framework remains an important lens through which Buddhists in Myanmar make sense of politics.

I use the term "moral universe" to denote what I argue have been the aspects of the traditional cosmology that outlasted the fall of the Burmese monarchy, were altered through encounters with external ideologies and in response to domestic developments and innovations, and continue to be the dominant influence on Burmese Buddhist political thinking today.[3] This particular incarnation of a Theravāda-influenced worldview came into being in mid-nineteenth-century Burma as a modernist, demystified interpretation of Buddhist teachings. It has been a predominantly elite worldview, although it has spread widely throughout the population along with the popularization of practices such as *vipassanā* (Bur. *wipathana*, insight) meditation and the study of *abhidhamma* (Bur. *abidama*, advanced Buddhist philosophy of knowledge). I use this term to refer to the moral logic that underlies the Buddhist framework of cause and effect within which much Burmese Buddhist reasoning about the world takes place.[4] This is an aspect of the cosmology that has remained largely consistent from the precolonial era to contemporary Myanmar, albeit subjected to different interpretations.

We can understand this moral framework, along with its constituent parts and the logic according to which they collectively function, as a

[3] There is not necessarily a Burmese term that corresponds with my usage of "moral universe," which should not be surprising as worldviews are often taken as given and not in need of explication. The closest equivalent that evokes the idea of a cosmological system is the Pāli-derived Burmese word *setkya wala*. This term was also used by the nationalist writer Thakin Ba Thaung in his 1975 translation of the Indian author C.P. Ranasinghe's book *The Buddha's Explanation of the Universe*.

[4] Here I disagree with Schober's assertion that one of the universal elements of the Burmese Buddhist worldview is a "pervasive concern with the realms of existence and their hierarchy" (1989, 5–6). While these beliefs persist among a portion of the population and can influence people's understandings of politics, they are also increasingly rejected by many Burmese Buddhists who see themselves as continuing the efforts of their early-twentieth-century predecessors to "rationalize" Buddhist belief and practice and thus cannot be said to be "universal."

"worldview." The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has explained a worldview as "the picture [people] have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (1965, 3). As will be described more in Chapter 2, this moral universe has an ontology, one that distinguishes between a world of common perception and a perspective of ultimate reality. And, while the elements of the moral universe may not be as totalizing as precolonial cosmologies seem to have been, they do provide its adherents with an understanding of how the world works.

In labeling this worldview a "moral" universe, I want to suggest that Buddhists in Myanmar have tended to think about political action and political change as quintessentially *moral* practices, that is, as intrinsically connected to and influenced by the correct or incorrect conduct of individuals, the effects of which are manifested in what those individuals experience in the future. A Burmese monk who had traveled widely abroad and lectured to many foreign and domestic audiences put it this way: "Buddhism points unequivocally to the moral aspect of everyday life. Though Nibbana [Bur. *neikban*, enlightenment] is amoral, in the sense that final peace transcends the conflict of good and evil, the path to wisdom is definitely a moral path. This follows logically from the doctrine of kamma [Bur. *kan*, cause and effect]. Every action must produce an effect, and one's own actions produce an effect in one's own life. Thus, the kammic force which carries us inevitably onward can only be a force for good, that is, for our ultimate wisdom, if each action is a good action" (Thittila 1987, 29).

My use of the term "moral universe" does not mean that this particular framework universally describes the beliefs of Buddhists in Myanmar. The moral universe that provides the conceptual framework for my analysis in this book is one of several that could be identified as pertinent in Myanmar today and even within it there is significant variation in how its adherents interpret and use its basic concepts. The moral universe described here is the one that has provided the raw materials for the political thinking and writing that constitutes much of Myanmar's tradition of political thought from the late nineteenth century. Taking greater account of the propitiation of spirits or various esoteric practices still conducted in the country would move one into a different moral universe—still Burmese and still largely Theravāda-influenced—but less relevant for understanding the thinking of the key political figures whose ideas I examine in this book. Throughout the book, I will use the phrase "the moral universe" to refer specifically to the conceptual framework described above.

Finally, while much of the raw material of this worldview comes from Theravāda Buddhism, we should recognize the ways in which the moral

universe of this book is distinguished not only through differences of interpretation and emphasis among Buddhists in Myanmar, but also through differences in how Buddhists in Myanmar understand specific Buddhist concepts in comparison with their Theravāda neighbors in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. Myanmar's own political and religious histories have been the sources of much of this variation. Religious debates (particularly within the *sangha*, Bur. *thanga*, the community of monks) have influenced the attention that Burmese Buddhists have paid to certain subjects; at times these debates have been expanded and shaped by the political appropriation of Buddhist concepts. The relationship between religious and political authorities has also proceeded differently in Myanmar than in other countries; the relative independence and decentralization of *sangha* authority throughout much of Burmese history and the rise of a lay Buddhist ethic and practice in the last century have both posed challenges for successive political leaders. Religious and political figures in the country have been influenced by ideologies and philosophies from outside of their own tradition and have incorporated these ideas into their overall Buddhist moral framework in creative ways. Myanmar's political history (including the experience of British colonialism, civil war after independence, and decades of military rule) has also shaped the ways in which Buddhists in the country have used their religious beliefs to make sense of politics, and is the subject of the following chapter. But in further delineating the notion of a moral universe, it is also worth a closer consideration of the category of "Burmese Buddhism."

What Constitutes "Burmese Buddhism"?

It is actually rather misleading to refer to the widely varied schools of thought and religious practices that have been derived from the teachings of Siddhatha Gotama (the Buddha) as "Buddhism" (Ling 1993). Buddhist traditions have followed very different trajectories of development as they have been carried around the globe, and significant doctrinal disagreements separate many of the main schools. Buddhists in Myanmar today generally consider themselves to be part of the Theravāda tradition, which is also dominant in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka. Other major schools of Buddhism include Mahāyāna (commonly practiced in China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam), Vajrayāna (a subschool of Mahāyāna common among Tibetans), and Zen (which originated as Chán in China before spreading to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan). Of course, all of these schools have since spread beyond the boundaries of Asia to find root in countries around the world.

Buddhism is the majority religion in Myanmar, with smaller percentages of Muslims, Christians, and other groups. Official demographic data is notoriously unreliable in the country, due in no small part to the fact that Buddhism has been a primary part of the identity of the majority ethnic group (the Burmans) and, by extension, of Burmese national identity; Burmans have often been counted as Buddhists no matter what their religion and non-Burman Buddhists have also been miscategorized as Burman (Smith 1999, 30). Estimates of the Buddhist population range from 85 to 90 percent but most scholars believe that figures for non-Buddhist populations are under-reported (Jordt 2007, 175). A census was conducted in 2014 but demographic breakdowns according to religion had not yet been released as of this writing. While Theravāda Buddhism is the dominant practice, in much of the country Theravāda beliefs provide a flexible framework that has incorporated a number of traditional and animistic practices, including the worship of ancestors, natural spirits, and an officially recognized pantheon of thirty-seven *nat* spirits. Scholars of Burmese Buddhism face the challenge of appropriately describing a field of religious practice that, while containing a number of core concepts, varies widely in terms of practice in particular contexts (Brac de la Perrière 2009).

The notion of Theravāda Buddhism as a recognizable and meaningful category is also contested. The term itself is a heuristic concept used primarily by scholars and less commonly by religious practitioners themselves. The use of the category of Theravāda Buddhism to describe the religious practices of many Buddhists in the South and Southeast Asian countries mentioned above is also a political act, and a recent one at that; the term was rarely used prior to the 1950s but has been enthusiastically promulgated by certain Buddhist monks, scholars, and leaders since then (Perreira 2012). A recent edited volume provocatively entitled *How Theravāda Is Theravāda?* explores the constructed nature of the category and its essays reveal a great deal of diversity of practice and belief that is commonly ignored or oversimplified (Skilling et al 2012). I will continue to use the term Theravāda to refer to this broader frame of commonality but acknowledge that any given "Theravāda" practitioners might be divided by more than unites them.

This book also faces the challenge that has weighed on almost all of the scholarly work done on Buddhism in Myanmar. When scholars claim to be studying "Burmese Buddhism," they refer almost exclusively to the Buddhist beliefs and practices of the majority Burman ethnicity, which makes up approximately 60 to 70 percent of the population (Smith 1999).[5]

[5] The next largest groups after the Burmans are the Shan and Karen, each of which makes up less than 10 percent. Following these groups (and with much smaller proportions of the