

Book Review

Jørn Borup,

Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?

London & New York: Routledge, 2023, 220 pages

ISBN:9781032593395, \$180.00 (hardcover) | ISBN:9781003454274,

\$43.99 (ebook),

Nobuya DAKE

(Part-time Lecturer,
Ryukoku University)

Jørn Borup's *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?* is a provocative and timely monograph that tackles the complex intersection of decolonization and identity politics in religious studies. This work offers a critical examination of the decolonial turn in academia, with a particular focus on its implications for the study of religion and Buddhism.

Borup begins by situating the decolonial movement within its historical context. He traces the legacy of European colonialism, which for two centuries “dominated the world politically, economically and culturally.” This domination, Borup argues, was not merely political and economic, but also epistemological, shaping how knowledge itself was produced and validated. The author then delves into the concept of decolonization, distinguishing it from postcolonialism. He defines decolonization as “responses to colonial effects and restoration through new epistemologies and practices,” emphasizing that it views colonialism as an ongoing process rather than a concluded historical period.

One of the book's strengths is its nuanced exploration of the “decolonial turn” in academia. Borup describes this as “a move within ethnic, area, and cultural studies that recognizes the colonial nature of Western thought and scholarly inquiry and attempts to transcend it.” He critically examines how this turn challenges traditional academic ideals, particularly the notion of objective scholarship.

A significant portion of the book is devoted to the role of identity in decolonial thought. Borup argues that “decolonial thought requires positionality to be expressed openly and engaged performatively.” He provides a thoughtful analysis of how concepts of race, gender, and religion intersect with decolonial critiques, noting how “race has regained its essentialist status” in recent discourse. Borup outlines three key aspects of decolonization in academia: deconstruction, reconstruction, and activism. This framework provides a useful lens through which to understand the diverse efforts at decolonizing knowledge production.

The author's expertise in religious studies shines through in his discussion of how decolonial critiques particularly challenge this field. He argues that religious studies, especially non-confessional Religionswissenschaft, faces unique challenges due to its

“origin in the matrix of Enlightenment, modernity, and colonialism.” This section provides valuable insights for scholars grappling with these issues in their own work.

While Borup acknowledges the importance of decolonial critiques, he also offers a balanced perspective, warning against the risks of “identitarian exclusivism and subjectivism.” He advocates for “alternative approaches based on analogies, genealogies, and transculturality,” suggesting a middle path that acknowledges colonial legacies without entirely rejecting Western academic traditions. This book organizes nine chapters related to the decolonization of Buddhism.

Chapter one examines how decolonization and identity politics are reshaping the academic study of religion, with a specific focus on Buddhist studies in both Western and Japanese contexts. It analyzes cultural appropriation critiques and the concept of “white Buddhism” while exploring how colonial legacies have shaped religious scholarship. The author acknowledges the value of decolonial perspectives while cautioning against extreme identity-based approaches that could fragment academic discourse. The book compares Western and Japanese Buddhist studies traditions to provide a broader perspective on these issues. It advocates for maintaining scholarly rigor while incorporating diverse viewpoints and new critical approaches to religious studies.

Chapter two introduces how Western colonialism evolved from the 15th century, transforming Europe from a marginal position to a global dominator through political, economic, and cultural means. The chapter explores how colonialism was legitimized through narratives of Western exceptionalism and civilizational progress, while actually operating through force and exploitation. It examines how this colonial legacy persists beyond formal independence through structural inequalities and cultural dominance. The text discusses the emergence of decolonization movements aimed at dismantling these persistent colonial structures, both in material terms (economic redistribution) and epistemological terms (challenging Western knowledge systems). The chapter concludes by analyzing how decolonial critique has entered academia, particularly through identity politics and calls for institutional reform of universities seen as perpetuating colonial power structures.

Chapter three analyzes Christianity’s historical role in colonialism, beginning with Pope Francis’s 2022 apology to indigenous peoples in Canada. It explores how Christianity served as both an instrument and active agent of colonization through concepts like the “Doctrine of Christian Discovery” and missionary work. The chapter analyzes how Western academic study of religion emerged from this colonial context, with figures like Friedrich Max Müller exemplifying how religious scholarship was often directly tied to colonial administration. The text discusses how this colonial legacy continues to influence religious studies through Protestant biases, Western-centric methodologies, and assumptions about objectivity. Finally, it examines various contemporary responses to this colonial heritage, including attempts to “decolonize” religious studies through new methodologies and perspectives that acknowledge colonialism’s ongoing influence.

Chapter four discusses how Buddhism has been appropriated in Western contexts, starting with Henry Steel Olcott’s colonial-era attempts to “reform” Buddhism through a

Western lens in Sri Lanka. It discusses how Theosophy served as an early channel for Buddhism's introduction to the West, though this process involved problematic racial and colonial dynamics. The text analyzes modern forms of Buddhist appropriation, including the commercialization of concepts like "Zen" and mindfulness, and debates over cultural authenticity. Contemporary criticism, especially in America, focuses on "white Buddhism" and its privileging of individualistic practice over traditional communal aspects. The chapter concludes by examining emerging decolonial approaches to Buddhism, including efforts to create more inclusive spaces and recognize diverse Buddhist identities.

Chapter five investigates the evolution of Buddhist studies in the West, starting with how Buddhism was first studied academically in Europe through Eugène Burnouf's groundbreaking 1844 work which established the modern Western understanding of Buddhism. Early Western Buddhist scholarship was influenced by Protestant Christian frameworks and colonial power dynamics, leading to a focus on texts and doctrine while often dismissing ritual practices and lived religion. The 1990s saw a "postcolonial turn" in Buddhist studies that critically examined the field's colonial and Protestant biases, leading to new approaches that emphasized studying Buddhism as practiced rather than just as documented in texts. The concept of "intercultural mimesis" showed how Buddhist knowledge was shaped through complex exchanges between Western scholars and Asian Buddhists, rather than just being a one-way colonial imposition. Modern Buddhist studies has evolved to embrace heterogeneity and multiple approaches, including anthropological perspectives on lived religion, while continuing to grapple with questions of representation and authority in studying Buddhism.

Chapter six considers decolonial approaches to Buddhist studies, which emerged as a critique of Western scholarship's colonial legacy and issues of representation, particularly focusing on how Buddhism has been studied through white, male, Western perspectives. It discusses the shift from "global Buddhism" to "post-global Buddhism," where scholars increasingly challenge universalist interpretations and emphasize particular identities and experiences, especially in North American Buddhist studies. The chapter analyzes how the "Two Buddhisms" model (contrasting Asian/immigrant vs. Western/convert Buddhism) has been criticized for reinforcing racial hierarchies and privileging white, Western interpretations of Buddhism. A key debate emerges between traditional academic objectivist approaches and newer subjective, experience-based methods that emphasize the scholar-practitioner perspective and identity-based knowledge production. The chapter highlights how decolonial Buddhist studies, particularly in North America, has moved toward incorporating intersectional perspectives and activist approaches, challenging traditional academic hierarchies while advocating for more diverse and inclusive scholarship.

Chapter seven presents how Japan, during the Meiji period (1868-1912), negotiated Buddhist modernization through interactions with Western concepts, particularly in establishing "shūkyō" as the Japanese term for "religion" and adapting Buddhism to modern frameworks. Early modernizers like Henry Steel Olcott and Japanese Buddhist reformers worked to present Buddhism as a rational, scientific religion compatible with modern thought, while maintaining its distinct Japanese character. Under the concept of

“New Buddhism,” Japanese reformers sought to modernize Buddhism by emphasizing rational and philosophical aspects while criticizing “old Buddhism” as superstitious, leading to significant changes in how Buddhism was practiced and understood. Japan developed its own form of “export Buddhism,” both through missionaries sent to Japanese immigrant communities abroad and through figures like D.T. Suzuki who interpreted Zen Buddhism for Western audiences. The chapter also examines Japan’s role as a colonial power, showing how Japanese Buddhism was used as a tool of colonial control in Korea and other territories, creating a complex dynamic where Japan was both colonized (by Western influences) and colonizer (in Asia). The chapter incorporates reviewer Dake’s research findings to support its broader argument about how Japanese Buddhism navigated between Western influences and its own traditions during the modernization period, highlighting the complex dynamics of cultural and religious exchange. As a reviewer, I am grateful to be placed in this context.

Chapter eight delves into the development of religious and Buddhist studies in Japan, exploring how Japanese scholars both adopted and resisted Western academic approaches while maintaining their own intellectual traditions. It analyzes how post-colonial critique entered Japanese academia in the 1980s-90s, particularly focusing on scholars who questioned Western-centric approaches to studying religion. The text discusses the concept of “reverse Orientalism,” exemplified by figures like D.T. Suzuki, who positioned Japanese Buddhism as both universal and uniquely Japanese. The study explores how Japanese religious scholarship has evolved to address contemporary issues while maintaining traditional approaches, particularly in Buddhist studies. Finally, it examines the complexities of “decolonizing” Japanese religious studies, given Japan’s unique position as both influenced by Western colonialism and being a colonial power itself.

Chapter nine offers an analysis of decolonial critiques in Buddhist and religious studies. While acknowledging the value of challenging Eurocentric approaches to studying Buddhism and religion, the author identifies problems with identity-based decolonial perspectives that may replace one form of essentialism with another. The traditional representation of “Buddha as a blue-eyed, rational Victorian gentleman” has been rightfully criticized, but the author argues that the epistemological stance of “I am, therefore I know” is problematic. The author advocates for understanding religion through “transcultural circulation” rather than identity-based segregation, recognizing how religions develop through complex interactions and hybridization instead of as pure, separate traditions. The chapter warns against replacing Western ethnocentrism with equally problematic identity-based essentialism that prevents comparative understanding of religious phenomena.

In conclusion, the author uses Buddhist metaphors of elephants and pointing at the moon to explore tensions between direct experience and mediated knowledge in religious studies. It discusses how colonialism, Western academic frameworks, and identity politics have shaped Buddhist studies historically. The text advocates for a balanced approach to decolonization - acknowledging colonial legacies and power structures in academia while avoiding extreme positions that would reject all Western scholarly

methods. It suggests incorporating more diverse perspectives and knowledge systems while maintaining rigorous academic standards. The author argues for retaining useful analytical models and comparative approaches rather than abandoning them entirely in favor of purely localized or identity-based scholarship. The goal is to enrich rather than fragment the field. A key theme is navigating between universalist claims of objective knowledge and particularist emphasis on situated perspectives, seeking ways to acknowledge both scholarly distance and engaged understanding. The conclusion emphasizes that decolonial critique should enhance rather than dismantle academic religious and Buddhist studies, aiming for greater inclusivity and self-reflection while preserving valuable scholarly tools and insights.

The book's title question - "Who Owns Buddhism?" - serves as a thought-provoking thread throughout the work. Borup uses this question to illustrate the complexities of cultural ownership, representation, and the politics of knowledge production in religious studies. Borup's writing is clear and engaging, making complex theoretical concepts accessible without oversimplifying them. He draws on a wide range of sources, from classic postcolonial theorists to contemporary decolonial scholars, providing a comprehensive overview of the field. However, some readers might find that the book raises more questions than it answers. Borup is more interested in exploring the nuances and contradictions of decolonial thought than in providing definitive solutions. While this approach reflects the complexity of the subject matter, those seeking clear-cut guidelines for decolonizing their own research may be left wanting more.

"Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?" is an important contribution to ongoing debates about knowledge production, cultural representation, and the legacy of colonialism in academia. It offers a thoughtful and balanced examination of decolonial critiques while also highlighting their limitations. This book is essential reading for scholars of religion, particularly those working in Buddhist studies, especially *Kindai Bukkyo Gaku* 近代仏教学 as well as anyone interested in the broader implications of the decolonial turn in academia. Borup's work challenges us to think critically about our own positionality and the frameworks we use to understand and study religion, without losing sight of the value of rigorous, scholarly inquiry.