Theravada Buddhism has provided a religious, social, political and cultural foundation for most of the countries of mainland Southeast Asia and across the Bay of Bengal in Sri Lanka. Historically these countries have had close religious ties; the Theravada tradition was transplanted to Southeast Asia from Sri Lanka and there have been occasional movements of doctrinal rejuvenation between the regions. Recently, intra-Theravada connections have decreased, with only occasional educational ties (although emerging anti-Muslim movements in several Theravada countries are increasingly in communication with one another). The last prominent pan-Theravada moment was probably the convening of the Sixth Buddhist Council in Burma by U Nu from 1954-56.

Recent scholarship has also asked the question “How Theravada is Theravada?”, drawing attention to the fact that, despite a common core textual tradition of the Pali scriptures and commentaries and broadly similar doctrinal tenets, there are deep variations in practice and belief among those identified as Theravada Buddhists, even deep variations within countries. While there has been some comparative scholarship on these traditions of practice in different locations, the field of Theravada Buddhist political thought remains relatively unexplored.

Contemporary movements within Theravada societies reflect both this common heritage and the range of interpretations of central concepts. Buddhist nationalist groups in Myanmar and Sri Lanka appear to draw on similar logic regarding the need to protect the Buddhist community, a logic that is rooted more in tradition and identity than in text or doctrine. On the other hand, the Thai movements of Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke begin from a common tradition but come to radically different conclusions.
about the role of Buddhism in society and the relationship of Buddhist ideas to life in the modern world, the former embracing a consumer ethic and the latter criticising it in favour of a radical simplification. Yet even these movements’ divergences can be captured more broadly in what some scholars have referred to as the “laïcisation” of Buddhism that has been evident across the Theravada world over the last 150 years.

The rise of such a diverse range of movements compels more scholarly attention not only to the relationship between Buddhism and the state, but to the ways in which Buddhists interpret and use the moral concepts and frameworks from their religious tradition(s) to understand and navigate the realm of the political. What are the purposes of a political community? Where does political authority come from and what is its nature? Thinking particularly about pressing contemporary issues, what is the proper place of Buddhism in Buddhist majority states that claim to be (politically) secular? How do various interpretations of Buddhism inform different perspectives on religious tolerance and pluralism? What is the nature of the relationship between monks and the political realm (or more generally, the worldly realm) and how should it be discussed and regulated today? What do different Buddhist conceptions of human nature suggest regarding the expansion of political participation? (Are humans fundamentally morally flawed and in need of guidance or potentially perfectable in a way that democratic political processes could effectively bring out?) What are some of the Buddhist interpretations of democracy that can both assist in our understanding of contemporary politics in these countries yet also potentially contribute to broadening the global conversation on democratic values and practices?

This research will thematically compare strands of Buddhist political thought in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, drawing on a small number of key primary sources from each country as well as secondary research. Dr Walton will build on previously conducted work in Myanmar as well as interviews with scholars, monks, writers and activists in each country to develop a broadly comparative picture of the history of Buddhist political thought in these countries as well as contemporary areas of interest, both collectively and in each national context.

This research is supported by a grant from the John Fell Fund at the University of Oxford. The research for this project will form the basis for a book on comparative Theravada political thought to be published with Hurst Publishers in 2016. The project will also include the translation of a small number of key primary source documents of Buddhist political thought in each country into English for inclusion in the study and for the future creation of a sourcebook of readings in Theravada Buddhist political thought that could be used by instructors.

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Dr Walton has also written book chapters on monastic political engagement, disaster relief practices in Myanmar, Buddhist theories of animal rights and radical environmental politics. In addition to his academic writing, he occasionally publishes commentary on religion and politics in Myanmar in the news media, most recently in Asia Times Online, East Asia Forum and ISLAMiCommentary, addressing Burmese Buddhist nationalism and the current wave of anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar. His monograph on this subject (co-authored with Susan Hayward) was published in the East-West Center’s Policy Studies Series in 2014.