

Tricycle Talks

“Entangled Empires and Reimagined Religious Worlds”

Episode #89 with Alex Kaloyanides

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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. In July 1813, a young American couple from Boston arrived in the Buddhist kingdom of Burma to preach the gospel. Although Burmese Buddhists largely resisted Christian evangelism, members of minority religious communities embraced Baptist teachings and practices, reimagining both Buddhism and Christianity in the process. In her new book, *Baptizing Burma: Religious Change in the Last Buddhist Kingdom*, religious studies scholar Alex Kaloyanides explores this history of power and conversion through the lens of sacred objects. Previously *Tricycle's* managing editor, Kaloyanides now serves as an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

In today's episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Alex to discuss the religious material culture of 19th-century Burma, what we miss when we study religions solely through their texts, and how her research has shaped how she thinks about religious conflict today.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Alex Kaloyanides, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Alex also once worked as *Tricycle's* managing editor way back when. Hi, Alex. It's good to see you.

Alex Kaloyanides: It's so good to see you, James. Thanks for having me.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's a pleasure. So Alex, we're here to talk about your new book, *Baptizing Burma: Religious Change in the Last Buddhist Kingdom*. So to start, you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?



Alex Kaloyanides: Sure. The book is a religious history of 19th-century Burma, the Southeast Asian country that we now call Myanmar, and it is a story of the religious change that was happening not just among the mainstream Buddhists. It was the last Buddhist kingdom that was eventually toppled by the British. But it was also a time of increased Christian evangelism because of an American mission that started there in 1813. So the book explores different forms of religious change that happened because of these different things that were going on in the country. And thinking about coming to talk to you, I was thinking a lot of what inspired this book started at Tricycle, where I was really interested in American encounters with Buddhism and the history behind that. And so when I got to go to graduate school to study American religious history and Asian religions, I was trying to think of some kind of project I could do that would please both of my sets of advisors, and I found this story of these really young Americans in their 20s who accidentally end up in Burma and try to establish this Baptist mission there. They're the first Americans living in a Buddhist country, meeting Buddhist monks, going to Buddhist pagodas, learning local languages. And so I became really interested in this particular story of this mission and the larger changes that were happening in the country at the time.

James Shaheen: Did you learn Burmese?

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, I started with Pali and Sanskrit. That's what I was doing in graduate school. And there were some Pali texts that were from the 19th century that got me into the story of Burmese religions. And then when I started learning more about this history, they hired some guys to come and help me learn some Burmese at Yale as a tutor, and then I got to do some Burmese language training when I was in Burma as well. So I was lucky to do that.

James Shaheen: So you mentioned the American Baptist evangelists who first came to Burma. What was the religious landscape like when they arrived? And can you give us some background on the missionaries themselves?



Alex Kaloyanides: Sure. So this was in the Konbaung dynasty. It was the last dynasty, the last Buddhist kingdom. It started in 1752, and then it went all the way until 1885 when they were toppled by the British Raj. This was a Theravada Buddhist kingdom. There was a lot of support for Buddhist institutions. There were these infamous reformations that were quite dramatic where the king would step in and reform the monastery. But overwhelmingly, the country was a Theravada Buddhist country. When these Baptists arrived—they actually left the United States as Congregationalists, they were at sea, they left Boston, and it took them four months to get over to Asia. Over the course of their travels, they converted to Baptist Christianity. And so by the time they arrived, they were Baptists. They were very committed. It was this young couple, Ann and Adoniram Judson, who ended up being these founding missionaries.

This is 1813, so this is the early republic. There were people still alive who had fought in the Revolutionary War. It was a Calvinist form of Protestant Christianity, so these missionaries probably never even saw pictures of Jesus when they left due to the concern about the problems of trying to depict Jesus or the saints. So they leave this rather austere world of the early republic, the Northeast, and they end up in Burma, and it's this land with these towering pagodas covered in gold, lots of monastics, pagodas that were filled with families coming and doing devotional work. And so they were shocked. Before they even landed ashore, they were writing these letters home and in their diaries about how overwhelmed they were by the religious life. And at first they thought this was just a sort of generic heathendom. They had learned some things about Buddhism, but they didn't know much. And so they just thought this was a dark land where Christianity needed to spread, and so they had a lot to learn when they showed up.

James Shaheen: So you mentioned that the Burmese Buddhists largely resisted Baptist evangelism in the beginning, whereas minority communities tended to embrace it. That's where they had more luck. They didn't have the success that they imagined but among marginalized



populations, they did have some success. Can you say more about this dynamic of why Christianity resonated more with the minority religious groups?

Alex Kaloyanides: The Baptists were really interested at first in mainstream Burmese culture. They learned Burmese and they learned Pali and they met the monks, but they had very little success. I suggest in the book that the Buddhist identity of the mainstream culture probably became even more pronounced over this period. But there were these minority communities, especially the communities known as the Karen, the Kachin, and the Chin, who became quickly very interested in Baptist Christianity. And they converted in large numbers. Even today, Burma, which is largely Buddhist still, the second largest religion is Baptist Christianity because of this history. And so the minority groups were interested for a variety of reasons.

Scholarship on this beforehand, colonial-era scholarship, was like, “Oh, these people were uneducated and superstitious, so they just sort of bought the stories the missionaries were telling them.” And then later historians, postcolonial historians, looked at the material reasons why minority marginalized communities would want to learn English or associate with white foreigners and so on. But I found problems with both of these angles, mostly because the Karen community that I actually met and reading the archival materials, these people were really taken with Christianity in a way that was not just a strategic way to gain socioeconomic power or something. They were interested in alternative ideas about salvation, a God who had the power to forgive sins rather than having to endure the consequences of your actions, the way they interpreted karma. They were really interested in the figure of Jesus, and they were taken with the Bible itself as this object. There were these stories in these communities about a lost book that would soon be returned to them because many of them did not have a written language at the time when the Baptists arrived. So they had a whole range of reasons to be really interested in Baptist Christianity.



James Shaheen: So this notion that they were simply trying to leverage this conversion to gain power, or that they were simply illiterate, that may be part of the picture. But it's much more interesting when we think of whether it was true religious conversion, is that right?

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, it's a question of what does it really mean. For the Baptists, it was a true heart conversion that they were interested in. They would put these people through the long period of really trying to show they were sincere. There are a lot of debates about what conversion really was. And it's true that these people, their economic situations changed, and then when the British started coming, access to English language and Western disciplines and social networks did have a material effect on their lives. But I don't think that's the whole story. People all over the country, including the Americans who had arrived, were rethinking their world and salvation and other worlds and everything.

James Shaheen: Right. We'll talk a little bit more about the book later. But I just want to make clear that your research tells you that this notion of a lost book was really a 19th-century idea. This did not trace back into the depths of Karen history or anything.

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, it's hard. All our records date to after the Baptists arrived, and one thing I did was I collected as many histories as I could and tried to think about the oral histories that might have preceded it. But as you see this story being told and retold, even today, it's still told, you can see the marks of this engagement with the Baptists. So I think that part of the story was this community reinterpreting their own relationship to Christian conversion and the changing religious landscape in Burma.

James Shaheen: You also discuss the ways that American Baptist Christianity was transformed by its encounters with Buddhism. We normally think they bring Christianity, and it's this sort of static thing that stops and doesn't continue to change, but it was transformed by encounters with



Buddhism and other Burmese religious traditions. So can you tell us more about this transformation, which is surprising, because it's not the typical narrative.

Alex Kaloyanides: I think for the missionaries, they were rethinking a lot of things. And so by living in this new landscape and having to translate all of these ideas of the Gospels, of Jesus, of salvation, and translating them into local languages, they rethought them, and they were affected by the Buddhist traditions and other traditions they encountered but largely Buddhism. In Buddhism, the missionaries encountered these Buddhist leaders who had a lot of great responses to their arguments. The Buddhists said, "Listen, we've got this ethical system that is wonderful, that you can admire, and we have this really rich history of understanding these very historical figures" and so on. And so the Baptists themselves had to reinterpret and retranslate and reunderstand their own Christianity. They didn't just go for a little while the way sometimes we think of missionaries today. They lived there. They left their family, they said goodbye to their parents, "I'll never see you again," and they lived there. Even Adoniram Judson, for example, when he started teaching, he wore Buddhist robes. It's hard to find a lot of evidence, but from some of the evidence, I found he would wear maroon robes and embody a kind of Buddhist monk to give Christian teachings. And so the whole culture around them really shaped the way that they were describing Christianity and understanding their own relationship to it, and then later on their converts really changed the way Baptist Christianity looked. Nowadays, you will go to Christian spaces, and there are a lot of things that will maybe remind you of Buddhist spaces, like the way their artwork is displayed or so on. And so the cultural setting, I think, had a big impact on these Americans.

James Shaheen: That's interesting. I just want to quote you from the book. You write "This book shows that Burma was not a simple country of unified Buddhists defending themselves against a monolithic Western enemy but rather a place of entangled empires and reimagined religious



worlds." So can you talk to us a little bit about this statement? What do you mean by reimagined religious worlds?

Alex Kaloyanides: The way people often will describe it when they want to give a sort of simple history is that there was Burmese Buddhism, and it was so strong and had been there for so long, and then the British come and they have to fight off the British, and the triumph of Buddhism in the face of encroaching Western empire, and then you've got these busybody missionaries on the fringes. But actually the missionaries, through their schools that became really influential and through other activities, became a part of this culture, and you have not just the British Empire that we're all so familiar with, but also the Burmese themselves were a large empire with its own history of expansion and religious domination. And then the Americans, of course, as America becomes stronger and stronger over the course of the 19th century, it has its own form of imperialism. And so as this is all happening, there are new ways of thinking about the world. For example, the missionaries were some of the first people to bring globes or telescopes into the country. And so you'd have these itinerant preachers trotting around with their globes, and you'd have these monks or these queens who would want to say, "Oh, let me look through that telescope." Their cosmology beforehand had been Mount Meru in the center of a flat world. So getting this opportunity to debate the Christians, even if they had no interest in conversion, that kind of religious debate and thinking about what Christianity was, how Buddhism was distinct, and why this was important in terms of the independence of the kingdom, and then for others too, these marginalized communities who've never even had a script before the Baptists come up. Now, they're learning to read things in their local languages, looking at maps with parts of the world written in these languages, and so it was this place where the worlds both mundane and supermundane were being reimagined.

James Shaheen: So you've discussed books, telescopes, globes, all of these material objects, so let's talk about that. Throughout the book, you explore these dynamics of power through the



study of religious material culture. So can you say more about what it means to study religion through the lens of material culture, as opposed to texts?

Alex Kaloyanides: There still are a lot of texts that I had to read, and I was doing a lot of work in archives here in the United States, and in Burma, Myanmar, and then also eventually in England. And even though I was reading so many texts and thinking about these abstract ideas, there were all these objects that became really important. Like you said before, the Bible and the story of the lost book, the object of the Bible. When the Baptists first introduced the printing press, in 1816, you've got all these pamphlets. There are these manuscripts, these beautiful Burmese manuscripts known as the Kammavaca, these Buddhist manuscripts that are then being circulated, and all of these objects. So every time I was trying to do an investigation of these stories, all these objects became important. The pagoda itself, this famous Burmese Buddhist structure, was in almost every report I found of these missionaries early on. So these objects were kind of pressing at me.

When I was finally able to do some fieldwork with Baptists in Burma, I found all these really strange portraits of Jesus and these early missionaries. And so I realized that the way to tell this story was actually through these objects, because in a lot of ways, the official chronicles from the kingdom do not address the Christians. They don't address either the Americans or the converting communities. They kind of leave that story out. And similarly, the Baptist writings back home were sometimes dismissive of Buddhist theories. But when you look at the objects themselves, you see how entangled these communities were and how they were reasserting different kinds of identities. So it became an object study. You'll laugh because originally, I wanted to call the book *Objects of Conversion, Relics of Resistance*. I know you're an expert cover line writer. They said it's too long. But it really is, like you said, a material culture study.

James Shaheen: You write that the material dimensions of religion can often be overlooked. As you know, our educations are pretty text oriented. So what are we missing when we think about



Buddhism only through written texts? You discovered yourself that the story was incomplete. What do we miss when we overlook what you're referring to as material culture?

Alex Kaloyanides: Well, the first thing we miss is the way that so many parts of society who are not literate have engaged with the Buddhist tradition. Texts for so long have been the possessions of a very small elite minority, monastics and so on. And so there is a way that if we focus too much on texts, canonical texts, commentaries, scriptures, we start to think that we are seeing a bigger picture than we really are because they were really the production of a very educated people with a lot of royal resources, and so I think the material culture turn in the academy really was first as a way of how can we talk about what other people have done. And that's I think its biggest contribution. But then I also think it's reminding us that we are these embodied people. Even though we're looking at each other through a screen and so on, it's like we are these embodied people. You and I have been on retreat together. Those things are not just about the text of a dharma talk, but the whole experience of those spaces. So to try to understand what Buddhism was like at different times or what Christianity was like for people in different times and places, it's really telling to focus on some of the different sensory experiences of those traditions.

James Shaheen: So you also emphasize how material objects can help us better understand the religious lives of members of marginalized communities who did not leave behind many written records, let alone a book. What have you learned from the objects that these communities did leave behind?

Alex Kaloyanides: Well, they left different things behind, of course. We have textiles, different objects, and we even have records of what they did with foreign objects. For example, all of these print pamphlets that the Baptists would circulate. And some of them people would treat very preciously, and some of them they would cut up into earrings, so you would have these



communities where people would turn them into kind of amulets. There's a story I tell in the book where this Karen community has a special box all wrapped up, and the Baptists show up and they say, "Oh, we're so glad you're here. Can you read this object for us? It's in English," and so they say, "OK," and they carefully unwrap this object, and inside, it's just this business card, or a *Book of Common Prayer*. They have these kinds of stories where they turned out to be what the Americans considered more mundane objects but were actually quite powerful for the communities that came to possess them.

James Shaheen: I love the earring story and the business cards wrapped up in all of this cloth that shows itself to be an address in London.

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, exactly.

James Shaheen: So you write that these objects often bumped up against the familiar stories that have been told about the religious history of Burma. So what are some of the things that surprised you about the objects you came across? And how did they resist easy or familiar narratives?

Alex Kaloyanides: Well, the first actual physical object that I found was this Buddhist manuscript. It's a Pali language manuscript called the *Kammavaca*, and it comes from the Pali canon, but it's excerpts for monastic rituals. And the first one that I found was in the Brown University library that was donated by a missionary. But then I started to find more and more copies at the Yale University Art Gallery and the American Baptist Historical Society, more and more copies. It's this beautiful lacquered manuscript, sometimes made with gold or pearl, silver, beautiful manuscript. What I began to notice about this manuscript was not just that it was carefully preserving ancient scriptures and ritual formulas, but it had all these illustrations on them. And some of the oldest ones had these beautiful designs, flora and fauna, geometry, really



interesting designs. But later on, especially toward the end of the 19th century, the same manuscript used for the same rituals that they've been trying to do the same way for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, the manuscript itself changed. Not the text. But in the margins, all of a sudden, you have these spirit creatures who emerge carrying weapons. They've got swords and so on. They become a kind of belligerent presence in these manuscripts. So then I realized something's happening with these objects beyond just ordination rituals, that there was a way that these objects were seen as conscripted into Burmese war efforts to defend themselves against the British, and a way that they were imbued with a certain kind of power to defend a Burmese independence. And so if you just look at the texts themselves and not the material qualities or the artwork or the surrounding stuff that happens in the margins of these texts, sometimes we miss the power they had and the reason they were produced in such a way or ended up circulating outside of the country.

James Shaheen: So you write that both Theravada Buddhism and Baptist Christianity place special import on holy objects, as worldly materials "can mediate a relationship with a central figure who is absent from this world." So can you walk us through the role of religious media in each of these traditions?

Alex Kaloyanides: This history is also the first time that Baptist Christianity and Theravada Buddhism came together in one place. I was thinking about what is distinctive about both of those traditions. As your listeners will know, Theravada is distinctive from Mahayana in the sense that you have this understanding that these are things that really happened: the Buddha really lived, and he really did become unbound through nirvana and no longer exists in this world, unlike Mahayana, where there are these other ways where the Buddha can still act in this world, and people can engage with him. Think of the famous Mahayana text, the *Lotus Sutra*, where the argument is that the Buddha is still able to do things for devotees and they can interact. Theravada does not have that same history. And so in the absence of the Buddha, what do



followers do? And so of course, we have relics, which are said to have some of the power, and we have these sort of special objects, pagodas and so on, texts, that have some of the Buddha's power, *anubhava*, the power of the Buddha. And so objects themselves become this key place for people to experience the Buddha, still, even after his parinirvana. In Baptist Christianity, because of this Calvinist argument that even picturing heaven was a kind of sin because we were so flawed as humans, we can't imagine it, and so this real turn away from religious objects also has this challenge. But of course, there's always been the Bible itself, the Eucharist, and so on, the Holy Spirit, and so I was thinking about how these particular communities with these complicated relationships to the absence. There's no Jesus to interact with anymore here on Earth. There's no Buddha anymore here on Earth. Objects themselves become these really powerful figures that both help people point to the teachings of the Buddha, but then they themselves are also powerful in and of themselves. They can help transform the people who are devoted to them.

James Shaheen: Yeah, for instance, in Theravada, relics are imbued with a certain power or special meaning. I hadn't really thought about that in Theravada, that yes, the Buddha is absent, and likewise, in especially Protestant Christianity, Christ is not present, or he's present, but in a very different way. He's not physically present. So you lay out four types of sacred objects in Theravada Buddhism that are believed to hold special meaning and power. Can you say more about these objects and the powers they hold?

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, there are these four objects. These are the things that are considered things that could have the Buddha's power called *anubhava* in Pali: monuments with bodily relics, so things that would have, say, a Buddha's tooth inside of it, pagodas. Then there are monuments that contain items of use, so a begging bowl, for example. Then there are monuments that are built over sacred texts, or simply the texts themselves. That's one category. And then the



fourth one are monuments with consecrated objects like Buddha images. These are special objects that can still contain the Buddha's power even in the absence of the Buddha himself.

James Shaheen: So what does that mean, containing the Buddha's power? The power to help move us toward liberation? Is that typically the power, or is it other kinds of power?

Alex Kaloyanides: It's been interpreted in the material that I've looked at both as a power to remind someone of the Buddha's teachings, to recommit them to a certain path. But then actually there's also a less rational or methodical way, not that it's irrational, but that there's this overwhelming special power in those places, where someone can get closer to understanding the Buddha's teachings than they would in other kinds of places and other kinds of settings. So there's really these extraordinary circumstances. In this presence of the Buddha's power, one can progress toward enlightenment and have a kind of connection there that would be transformative in a way that other objects do not have the power to do.

James Shaheen: And so those places can also be power places in terms of practice. A certain momentum and history of practice might propel a person forward on the path. Is that right?

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah. And there's also ways that scholars of ritual and sacred space would also argue that there's something about being in community there, being with other people, that sort of collective effervescence that comes together in those particular spaces that doesn't happen in other places. There's something sacred there that is able to move people in new directions.

James Shaheen: So after the introduction, you devote the following chapters to each of the four sacred objects that the missionaries brought, using them as a way to understand the changing religious landscape of 19th-century Burma. So first, you turn to books. Can you tell us a little bit



more, you've talked about it some, about how books functioned as sacred objects for Baptists, Buddhists, and the minority Karen community?

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, the missionaries, when they would write home sometimes or when they would write something official, they would say, "Oh, we've really introduced the teachings of the Gospel. People are really feeling God's presence," and so they'd be really interested in that part of it. But as I looked through the archives, a lot of times people were asking for Bibles or pamphlets just to actually hold the object themselves, whether or not they were actually interested in the teachings inside of it. So I started to realize that the objects themselves were really interesting, and books especially. Books were the first things often that the missionaries would bring. If they had an audience with the king, for example, like Adoniram Judson was able to do, he tried to figure out, "What was the thing I should bring to this king to ask permission to proselytize?" And he decided upon a Bible. But he ended up wrapping the Bible in this cloth and gold so that it would look like a Burmese book. There was a way that books, because of Burmese book culture, because of the long Buddhist tradition of valuing texts, especially those related to the Pali canon, that there was a way that Christian book culture was able to make sense in a place. Even for people who could not read, they wanted these objects as they saw them as powerful, important objects. So that's why I start with books.

James Shaheen: Interesting, because it's not necessarily a physical book itself but the legend or myths surrounding the book, both with the Karen legend of the lost book that you mentioned and the Baptist fantasies of a Sanskrit Bible that move people, just this idea of a book that is nowhere to be found. Can you say more about the mythical and legendary dimensions of these books and the power they held in constructing a romantic notion of the past?

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, so we talked a little bit about the Karen and their legend of the lost book, the idea that they once had language and written language and this esteemed tradition, and



then it was lost somehow, and then it would eventually be brought back. They had this story, and then when the Baptists came, the story became reinterpreted to mean that the Baptists themselves were the people meant to return this book to the Karen. There was also a story circulating. Even before the Americans leave for Burma, there's a story circulating through the British press. There was this missionary, Claudius Buchanan, who published this pamphlet called "Star in the East" that was very popular. In it, he told of how Sanskrit manuscripts, which were being studied by British colonists and scholars in Europe, were starting to reveal the story of Christ, that you could find in these texts tales of a virgin woman who gave birth to a son of a god and so on. And so there was this fantasy that rather than introducing Christianity anew—I mean, Christianity had been in India for a very long time, but still, rather than introducing it anew, that it was already there, that the people were primed, that God's light had already shown in these corners of the world. I didn't even hear about this Claudius Buchanan text until reading writings by missionaries like Adoniram Judson, who were so moved by it that then and there, they leave their training in Andover, Massachusetts and decide that they want to go and be a missionary because they get so excited by these ideas. So I was trying to think of what was exciting about the Sanskrit texts and the ways that they might tell interesting histories and what was it about the sort of stories of Bibles and so on and about these new printed objects, about the power of the printing press. What was it about these particular objects that really excited people beyond the sort of messages that they carried?

James Shaheen: Yeah, so you also discuss the ritual surrounding books and how these rituals have often been excluded from the study of Buddhism as a way to construct a "rationalist, and therefore ritual-free, core of Buddhism." What can we learn from the practices surrounding the books? Because it's true, we so often ignore, eliminate, or rationalize away ritual.

Alex Kaloyanides: That part of the book I'm engaging with some work by Charles Hallisey and others who have really wanted us to pay way more attention to ritual because a lot of texts, even



Pali, for example, is such a language that is chanted by a lot of people who don't even really know Pali very well. It's a liturgical language. So they're using these books as special objects rather than as things that they sit and read quietly in a corner like a Protestant American Bible. And so paying attention to the power these books have had. For example, that Kammavaca text I was talking about. Why was this text circulated? And why was it spread out through the kingdom and moved internationally? What was the importance of certain kinds of rituals for communities beyond really preserving the words of the Buddha?

James Shaheen: Yeah, so why was the Kammavaca so important?

Alex Kaloyanides: First of all, it's used in the most important monastic ritual, ordination or the establishment of a monastery, so that's important. But you don't need a fancy gold-plated text to do that necessarily. So what is it to make it this really beautiful object? And what kind of power does it give it? It gives it a certain kind of status, a donor paying more money for a fancier version of these ritual scripts perhaps enjoys an elevated social status and so on. But there was also a sense that the object itself brought a certain kind of power to the space, and as I was saying before, they start to be painted with these sword-bearing spirits, and so I can't say for sure, but I had to ask whether they were understood as actually being able to do some work in terms of protecting the kingdom against Western imperialism, Christian evangelism, and so on. There's a quote I found from Erik Braun's study of Ledi Sayadaw. Ledi Sayadaw talks about the spirits that are in the air. There's this idea that when you would use one of these manuscripts, you want one that has these spirits painted on them, and so really attention to a lot of these spirits too, which we find come more and more when we pay attention to ritual, which sometimes we leave out when we're just paying attention to texts and ideas.

James Shaheen: You mentioned that the spirits started to appear in the margins of the Kammavaca. So why would they appear in the 19th century as the colonialists are arriving?



Alex Kaloyanides: I kind of put this theory out there. We would need some more evidence. But I looked at lots of these manuscripts and all sorts of archives. I think that basically what happened was in the mid-19th century, the penultimate Burmese king, King Mindon, was a big Buddhist reformer, a revivalist, and he established this new royal center in Mandalay. Part of what he was trying to do is unify a kingdom with threatened borders and internal diversity, with different communities, especially some of these large minority communities who were converting to Christianity. One way was by almost mass-producing these ritual texts and adding to them a certain kind of military power. It was a way to strengthen Burmese Buddhism and really make a case for the kingdom to remain independent. He was a successful reformer. Eventually, the kingdom fell. But there was a moment where there was a sense that maybe they could do it. Maybe they could maintain this kingdom in spite of this huge, massive British empire.

James Shaheen: So then these books also functioned as political objects.

Alex Kaloyanides: I think so, yes. And of course, the Bible itself is a political object.

James Shaheen: Right, absolutely. You also examine objects associated with education as a way of understanding the complex visions of new religious worlds, and you write that Christian education became popular in part because of the world-conjuring devices it used: telescopes, globes, maps, magic lanterns, all sorts of things. Can you say more about these objects and how Burmese communities engaged with them? I just like the idea of never having seen a telescope or a map before, and here, all of a sudden, in the same way that missionaries were impressed when they saw these new objects, so the Burmese were equally impressed. How did it change them?

Alex Kaloyanides: That's exactly it. I first started learning about these objects, really, when I was trying to think about the schools themselves. So the Baptists really failed to convert anyone



in the mainstream Buddhists, the Bamar community, but their schools were very successful. So I was thinking about what it was that sent people to the schools. And of course, like we talked about, there were the material reasons, jobs and so on. But there was also this fascination with these particular objects. And I found these accounts from different people, monastic tutors or workers in Yangon, who were really interested in looking through these telescopes. And it wasn't just globes. There are these things called chrainotropes, these solar models of the universe. They were fascinating, and they would gather large crowds. And sometimes people would carry them, and then they'd write back to their missionary boards and say, "Oh, I just bring this object because it attracts crowds. But don't worry, that's not all I do. It's not just like a magic show. I teach them everything about the Gospel." But what we could tell from these things is that people really wanted to see these globes. They wanted to look through these telescopes. And I think there was this real curiosity of exploring different worlds, reimagining the one we're in and the possibilities of what else might be out there.

James Shaheen: I find this whole thing so fascinating, and Adoniram Judson in particular at such a young age deciding to turn his life over to this and confronting this new world and also bringing to it something new. So in addition to promoting modern science, these schools also promoted an idea of religious identity as an individual choice. Yet Burmese communities often challenge this notion, and you demonstrate the ways that religious identity was often quite fluid. Can you say more about what this project has taught you about the fluidity of religious identity?

Alex Kaloyanides: Your readers, of course, have thought about this whole history of world religions and how it's really not until the 19th century that we even have something we call Buddhism that's in a list with Christianity and so on. And so the idea that there are these distinct traditions and that people should identify as one or even could convert from one to the other was particular to a certain kind of Western history of Christianity. Missionaries, when they get to Burma and they figure out that this is a form of Buddhism and not just a vague heathenism, they



start learning more and more about Buddhism. They start to promote the idea of converting to Christianity, and they're trying to figure out how to do it. The ideal was that there's just going to be some itinerant preacher who preaches the gospel so convincingly people convert right away.

That did not work. And so they start needing schools. What happens when they start needing schools is they start needing women and they start needing teachers. Often, it was the missionary women who ran the schools and who were really involved with children and education and local families. They often said the women were even better speakers of local languages. And they would come and they would explore these families and they would realize that for them, their Buddhist identity was this thing that was connected to their families, to their rituals, to ancestors, and so on. And so when you are asking someone to convert, you're asking them to not only give up a certain kind of affiliation with a local pagoda but a connection to your whole family and also to this whole idea of all this merit that you've stored, all the actions you've done, this idea that you've been storing merit for future lives. This was this big systematic thing that wasn't something that was just an individual choice the way that we have the idea of this rugged American individualism and that people are just going to pick the religion that fits them the best. This was a very foreign idea for the people that they encountered in Burma.

James Shaheen: So it wasn't just a matter of private belief or choice the way we typically think about it. So has this influenced how you think about contemporary religious identity? Did you do a lot of thinking about how we relate to religion?

Alex Kaloyanides: To be honest, modern politics makes you think so much about a certain kind of how identity formation can be really based in certain kinds of commitments to community, that it's not just this individual choice that you're making in a reasoned way. And so that identity formation is so caught up in all of these larger issues of other forms of identity, of community, of class, of race, of gender, and so on. And so, if anything, it has probably worked the other way.



Thinking about religion now and how important it is for different kinds of political agendas and communities and so on made me question what was happening in this 19th-century setting.

James Shaheen: I mean, it would have been impossible if there was this conversion for Christianity itself, or Baptist Christianity in this case, not to transform because otherwise they would have left everything behind. It was more or less incorporated to a preexisting identity as in the case of the Karen.

Alex Kaloyanides: Exactly. Yeah, it's going to change. I tell the story later in the book about this woman, Marilla Ingalls. She's really interesting. She was one of the sole female missionaries. But there was a tree on this property that was seen as the abode of these spirits called nats, and she ends up inheriting this property, and she turns this tree into a Christian shrine, where she puts up Biblical verses and so on. But that looks very different than what we're seeing happening in Christian communities in Wisconsin, where she was from, in the 1870s. So the landscape itself is naturally going to change, what forms of Baptist Christianity that are going to emerge.

James Shaheen: And they got to keep their tree.

Alex Kaloyanides: Exactly.

James Shaheen: So I'm also curious how your study of material culture has changed how you think about religious conflict, both in 19th-century Burma and in the world today. That may be too big a question to ask, but there you are.

Alex Kaloyanides: No, it's a great question. I've been thinking a lot. Actually, I'm doing some new research on natural resources. I started studying the history of the teak industry in Burma, tropical hardwood, and the way that that same king, King Mindon, claimed it was a kind of



Buddhist wood to maintain a monopoly over the industry. The British likewise agreed and said, "OK, you do have this natural right because of your Buddhist tradition to this wood" and ended up going into negotiations over some rifles. But anyway, I became really interested in natural resources themselves and the way they have shaped different kinds of Buddhist cultures and traditions. I'm working on this thing with the British Museum right now, this new exhibit that's opening in the fall called "Myanmar and the World." I wrote a chapter for their exhibition book on natural resources, where I started to learn new things about rubies and gold and amber and opium because Myanmar is this land of extraordinary natural resources. I've been really curious, and I don't know what I'm going to do with it, but curious about what these particular resources, these gems, these trees, these minerals have done to shape the particular character.

We think of Buddhism in Burma as the golden land because of these golden pagodas. So what is it about these resources? And then there's also the political history: what has the exploitation of natural resources done to enrich Buddha's kingdoms, and so on. So that's where I see this kind of stuff going, because I think there's a lot to do with objects. It's more fun. And you know, I was a very bookish person before I worked at Tricycle. Studying Buddhism in college and then coming to Tricycle and working with these beautiful artists and designers and just thinking about this other part of the world of really wonderful objects has kept me interested in looking beyond just the texts and the ideas that had originally drawn me to the study of Asian religions.

James Shaheen: I just have to say I love the book, and I love all of these things that are coming out of it. Most of the book focuses on 19th-century Burma, but in the final chapter, you describe your travels in contemporary Myanmar as Baptist communities celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Judsons' arrival in Burma, which I find incredible. So can you tell us about your travels and what you learned from contemporary Baptists in Myanmar?



Alex Kaloyanides: Wow, you guys are really doing your homework. So yes, the book is largely 19th century. But in the last chapter, I jumped to the 21st century because when I was doing my research for the book, I had been to Burma once before as an undergraduate when I was studying, I was studying in the Burmese monastery in Bodhgaya, and I got a chance to do independent study in Burma. So I've been there once before. I was always interested in Burma after that. But then when I started doing this research and getting into the archives, it happened to coincide with the 200th anniversary of this mission, 2013. So I got some funding to be able to actually join this Baptist tour group. It was a classic tour group. It was on a big bus with some people who've never even left their states, nevermind the country, from the US who are traveling. And then there are a lot of people within Baptist communities within Myanmar who were doing these things to celebrate. And it was such a pleasure. I had never really spent much time personally with Baptist communities. I've mostly been reading about them in history, in archives, and so on. So getting to spend all this time with these various Baptist communities and travel the country and visit these important sites. So there's the site of where they established the mission. There's a site where Adoniram Judson is incarcerated. There's a site where Ann Judson, his first wife, dies at a young age and then her daughter, Maria, who dies at two, so all of these really heartwrenching stories.

I got this time to go there, and I was going there to do archival research too and do other work. I didn't really mean to turn it into a chapter. But on this tour, I started finding things that just really struck me, which included these portraits of Jesus and the Judsons, these really striking, colorful portraits, very much like a Warner Solomon Jesus. And then you had the Judsons in this old-timey Edwardian dress. My research has shown they didn't dress like that there. They were basically brunettes, but one picture even had them as blondes. And so there's this idea of wanting to see the Judsons, really emphasizing their foreignness, their kind of old-timey historic nature. And so that chapter emerged just from the visual culture. As we were doing this, we're driving around on this bus, we're passing these monumental Buddha statues, we're passing all of this very large Buddhist monumentality, culture, and so on. And so I wanted

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to think about what it was for these Baptists in Burma today who are largely in these minority groups, what it was to associate with this international image of Christianity, this particular connection with America, with a very white, Anglo-Saxon version of Christianity. And so that's how that chapter emerged.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think you'll remember that there's a Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square.

Alex Kaloyanides: Yeah, that's right. I went to some kind of Freud event there once.

James Shaheen: I wonder what the Judsons would think about what goes on in that church now. Tricycle had one of its anniversary celebrations in Judson church. I like to think it came full circle when we Buddhist missionaries occupied their church and had a celebration. Anything else, Alex?

Alex Kaloyanides: No, no, I covered everything. I'm so grateful to talk about all this stuff. It's really fun.

James Shaheen: It's so good to see you again. We miss you in the office. It's been a lot of years, and it's so wonderful to see how your career has developed. So Alex, thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Baptizing Burma*, available now. So thanks again, Alex.

Alex Kaloyanides: Thank you.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Alex Kaloyanides. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what

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