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Burning Monk, Saigon, 1963

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In 1961, Malcolm W. Browne became AP's first full-time correspondent in Vietnam. The 30-year-old reporter joined the small American press corps just as the United States began escalating support for South Vietnam's war against the Communist-led North. Over the next two years, President John F. Kennedy, fearing a domino effect if Saigon fell to Hanoi, sent 12,000-plus military advisors and 300 helicopters to aid Ngo Dinh Diem, the South's Roman Catholic leader. Focused on the fight against Communism, American advisors either failed to see or ignored the Catholic government's oppressive treatment of the country's Buddhist majority. But reporters noticed, and when Buddhist leaders informed foreign correspondents about a big protest on 11 June 1963, several showed up to see what would happen. Only Browne brought his camera. His subsequent photos, capturing a shocking act of martyrdom, would jolt global awareness of the plight of Vietnam's Buddhists and provide American clergy with a religious image to challenge US involvement in the war.

At a busy intersection in central Saigon, Browne and his colleagues watched as 200 monks formed a human circle. A sedan pulled up and an elderly monk stepped out. He moved to the center of the circle and sat cross-legged in the street. Two younger men doused him with gasoline, and the monk dropped a lit match on his lap. Immediately he was ablaze. Browne, who had started shooting before the fire began, later recalled, "I was thinking only about the fact it was a self illuminated subject that required an exposure of about, oh say, f10 or whatever it was."¹

Using a Petri, a "cheap Japanese camera," Browne kept reloading, eventually shooting ten rolls of film. The challenge was to get them to AP's New York headquarters as soon as possible. The 9,000-mile journey began with a passenger on a commercial flight to Manila (civilian couriers, called pigeons, were common at the time). In Manila, the film was edited, printed, and transmitted via radio to San Francisco, then New York. There, editors selected an image, edited the story, and sent the package to newspapers worldwide. The entire process—from Browne's Saigon office to the morning paper, took 15 hours and 20 minutes.²

The AP photo showed Thich Quang Duc, the burning monk, in the foreground, and behind him are the sedan and witnesses. Caught in black and white, the monk's suffering and imminent death—his body is engulfed in flames—is no less shocking for its rendering in shades of gray. Although many newspapers deemed the photo too disturbing for morning readers, it appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* with the caption, "An elderly Buddhist monk, the Rev. Quang Duc, is engulfed in flames as he burns himself to



Figure 1.20 *Thich Quang Duc, A Buddhist Monk, Burns Himself to Death on a Saigon Street, 11 June 1963. AP Photo/Malcolm Browne.*

death in Saigon, Vietnam, in protest against persecution.”³ Seeing the morning papers, Kennedy was said to have cried, “Jesus Christ!”⁴ He later noted, “these were the worst press relations in the world today.”

Kennedy was distressed because Duc’s self-immolation focused public attention on Vietnam. The administration had tried to hide the extent of US involvement in the war, often providing reporters with misinformation on combatants as well as casualties. Several months earlier, when the “Buddhist crisis” began, tensions worsened between the American press corps, the Diem government, and Washington. The Diem and Kennedy administrations complained that coverage of “alleged” religious persecution undermined efforts to fight Communism as well as American support for Saigon’s leaders. Diem and his American supporters even claimed many Buddhists were Communist sympathizers. The photo of the “burning monk” raised troubling questions for leaders in the US and Vietnam: Who was persecuting Buddhists? And if the Diem government was involved, why was the US supporting it?

According to Hal Buell, a deputy photo editor when the image appeared, “That picture put Vietnam on the front page more than anything else that happened before that.”⁵

Americans in the early 1960s knew little about Vietnam and less about Buddhism. Cognoscenti on either coast may have heard of the Beats and Zen Buddhism, but the average citizen had no reason to know about an Eastern tradition with only a small American following. Newspapers typically covered Buddhism as an exotic practice of benighted Orientals and their Western acolytes.⁶ But Browne’s photo stirred curiosity among readers and reporters. Moreover, at a vexed moment for religion’s role in American society—the Supreme Court had ruled against school prayer and theologians contemplated the death

of God, while religious leaders shaped a civil rights movement and weekly church attendance remained high⁷—a dramatic spectacle against state-sanctioned religious persecution hit a nerve.

American clergy seized on the image to mount a campaign against their own government. The Ministers' Vietnam Committee placed a full-page ad in the *New York Times* protesting American involvement in Vietnam. The ad featured Browne's photo, cropped closely on Duc's body as it is consumed by flames.⁸ "WE, TOO, PROTEST" read block letters under the picture, both eliding and subsuming Buddhist opposition to religious persecution with American dissent against involvement in the war.⁹ When more of Brown's images circulated, a second photo of the burning monk, an earlier shot of the body half-consumed by flame, became the more familiar and widely-used image.

Browne's Vietnam reportage subsequently won the 1964 Pulitzer prize, and his photo of the burning monk has been hailed as one of the iconic images of the Vietnam War. It also contributed to more informed coverage of Buddhism by stoking "the media's slowly evolving appreciation for religions as collective experiences . . . and of the interplay between religious movements and the political, cultural and physical environments they inhabit."¹⁰ It was and remains a potent symbol of the entwining interests of religion and politics—and the power of a polysemous image.

Notes

- 1 <http://lightbox.time.com/2012/08/28/malcolm-browne-the-story-behind-the-burning-monk/#1> (accessed 17 January 2014).
- 2 <http://www.ap.org/explore/the-burning-monk> (accessed 17 January 2014).
- 3 Malcolm Browne, "The Burning Monk," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 June 1963.
- 4 Lisa M. Skow and George N. Dionisopoulos, "A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images: American Print Media and the 'Burning Monk,'" *Communications Quarterly* 45.4, Fall 1997: 396.
- 5 Ula Ilnytzky, "Vietnam War burning monk photographer Malcolm Browne dies," *USA Today*, 28 August 2012 <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-08-28/malcom-browne-vietnam-war-obit/57363884/1> (accessed 6 April 2014).
- 6 Nick Street, "American Press Coverage of Buddhism from the 1870s to the Present," in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and The American News Media* ed. Diane Winston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 275–88.
- 7 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166613/four-report-attending-church-last-week.aspx>. By 1963, church attendance was down from a high of 49 percent in the mid to late 1950s but it was still stronger than it would subsequently be (accessed 1 March 2014).
- 8 Ministers' Vietnam Committee ad, *New York Times*, 15 September 1963.
- 9 Michelle Murray Yang, "Still Burning: Self-Immolation as a Photographic Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, published online 16 February 2011 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00335630.2010.536565> (accessed 1 March 2014).
- 10 Street, "American Press Coverage": 276.