

## Article

# Sacred Places and Sustainable Development

Anna Halafoff \* and Matthew Clarke

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Burwood 3125, Australia;  
matthew.clarke@deakin.edu.au

\* Correspondence: anna.halafoff@deakin.edu.au

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**Abstract:** Religious beliefs are not only profound, some of them are also pervasive, persistent and persuasive. It follows that the cultural and religious experiences of communities often play a central role in determining their worldviews and the ways in which they understand their own circumstances. These worldviews, it follows, can thereby assist in providing narratives for community development in places that have particular meaning to these communities and individuals within them, and thereby enhance the long-term success of such initiatives. One often-overlooked aspect in research up until recently is the role that these often sacred places can play in sustainable development. This paper undertakes a study of development spaces situated in sacred places, in this case of a women's Buddhist monastery on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand, devoted to gender equity. It begins with an overview of research pertaining to religion and development, religion in contemporary societies, and sacred places, and concludes with an analysis of the case study data that recognizes the need to consider the significance of sacred places, and narratives attached to them, in sustainable community development.

**Keywords:** religion; sacred places; development; gender equality; Sustainable Development Goals; Buddhism; *bhikkhuni*; Thailand

## 1. Introduction

The international community's commitment to poverty eradication and lasting development was clearly expressed through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, and more recently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on the success of the MDGs, but also mindful of their weaknesses, namely narrowly defining poverty, continuing to mask inequality through use of global averages, failing to be ambitious enough, excluding vulnerable sub-populations, and not considering qualitative data sufficiently (see [Feeny and Clarke 2009](#)), the remit of the SDGs was widened. The 17 SDGs now focus on addressing poverty, hunger, healthcare, well-being, education, gender equality, water and sanitation, energy, work, economic growth, industry, innovation, infrastructure, inequalities, sustainability, responsible consumption and production, climate change, life below water and on land, peace, justice, strong institutions and partnerships to attain these goals ([United Nations 2015](#)). This shift in emphasis from the MDGs to the SDGs, across all nations, and on the need to form partnerships between civil society, the private sector and governments is highly significant.

This more holistic approach to development focuses on the entire world, including human and more than human life, and recognizes the interconnected nature of all aspects of development, notably the economic, social and environmental dimensions. However, what is not explicitly stated in the SDGs is the centrality of people's values and worldviews as motivational forces for personal and collective development. This exclusion is most likely due to the secular orientation of the United Nations and the field of development more generally, yet it is an area experts working in

the field of religion and development are increasingly acknowledging (Marshall and Keough 2004; Clarke 2011, 2013; Tomalin 2013, 2015; Clarke and Halafoff 2017).

This worldviews' dimension, however, may or may not have religious and/or spiritual underpinnings. For example, secular humanism, socialism, rationalism and/or atheism are examples of nonreligious frameworks. At the same time, around 85 percent of the world's population professes, and are thereby guided by, religious and/or spiritual belief, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, traditional and folk religions (Pew Research Centre 2012). Religious beliefs are not only profound, they are also pervasive, persistent and persuasive. Consequently, religion and spirituality are very much a part of the global social fabric and need to be routinely considered in sustainable development strategies, given that they provide frameworks to many on how to live a good life and benefit others (Clarke and Halafoff 2017).

This approach to development seeks to better understand what motivates people to act for the common good and their capacity to make a positive contribution to sustainable development. There is a long history within Catholic social teaching, for example, in which it is argued that development 'cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each person and of the whole person' (Popularum Progressio PP, p. 14). More recently, Pope Benedict XVI stated in Caritas in Veritate (CV, p. 76), that 'the question of development is closely bound with our understanding of the human soul'. Such an understanding of development that looks beyond material spheres defines development as 'the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human' (p. 20). This involves escaping from destitution, eliminating social evils, increasing knowledge, attaining culture, developing greater respect for the dignity of others, having a spirit of poverty, cooperation for the common good, and having a will for peace. The approach allows the integration of personal, community, national and international development.

This approach must of course also acknowledge religions' capacity in not only peacebuilding but also in creating and sustaining cultures of direct and structural violence, and the need to combat this in partnership with religious peacebuilders (Halafoff and Conley-Tyler 2005). Faith-based organizations have long played a critical role in development and peacebuilding strategies, and in addressing direct and structural violence, and the importance of partnering with them began to be highlighted by the World Faiths Development Dialogue in the 1990s. Since then, there has been a significant amount of interest in and research on religion and development. This has occurred at a time where there has been a gradual recognition of the need to take religion more seriously, in statecraft, conflict transformation, and to counter social and environmental risks, such as terrorism and climate change (see Marshall and Keough 2004; Deneulin and Bano 2009; ter Haar 2011; Clarke 2011, 2013; Tomalin 2013, 2015; Fountain et al. 2015).

Concepts of personal and societal development, including commitments to charity, welfare, environmental stewardship, and social justice are core tenets of the world's major religions, and newer religious movements also. At their best, these religious teachings, often based around narratives of prophet's, saint's and teacher's exemplary lives, serve as frameworks of how to live in harmony with others and the natural world. Given many religions' emphases on transcending self-centeredness and helping others, particularly those in need, religious groups have long-held commitments to alleviating poverty and sickness, and also with providing shelter and education within and beyond their communities. They also have well-established networks providing these needs at local grass-roots levels, as well as charismatic leaders, and both can assist in mobilizing sustainable development assistance where and when it is most needed (Sampson 1997; Clarke 2011, 2013; Tomalin 2013, 2015). For example, Tomalin (2015, pp. 184, 186) notes how in India, Vedic and Hindu teachings have long-emphasized the importance of 'charity and community service.' She also cites the Ramakrishna Mission, founded at the turn of the 20th Century by Swami Vivekananda, as an example of a Hindu welfare organization built on a commitment to 'social service' as a '*sadhana*', namely 'a religious path'. This organization continues to this day to engage in extensive development programs and

disaster relief, inspired by Hindu narratives and the exemplary lives of the Indian saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and his disciple Swami Vivekananda.

However, earlier models of development that were centered on Western capitalist modernization and influenced by theories of secularization, either ignored religion by dismissing it as a private concern, or saw it as an impediment linked to perceived bottlenecks of traditional systems of kinship and feudal ties that were seen to limit economic growth (Clarke 2011). While capitalism delivered economic growth, it created economic inequalities and environmental risks that led to a backlash against ‘dependency theory’. This led to widespread change in development practice and theory focused more on participation and ownership by local communities. It also led to the introduction of new frameworks of development that focus on substantially more than economic growth. It is now widely acknowledged that successful community development outcomes are largely dependent on communities identifying their own needs, designing appropriate interventions to address them, and implementing, managing and evaluating their own development programs. This can be achieved in partnership with civil-based organizations (CBOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national governments, external multilateral agencies, and international financial institutions (Stiglitz 1999; Ife 2013; Clarke et al. 2014).

It follows that the cultural and religious experiences of communities often play a central role in determining their worldviews and the ways in which they understand their own circumstances. These worldviews can also assist in providing narratives for community development, which may take place in sacred spaces that have particular significance in these communities, and thereby enhance the long-term success of initiatives. Despite this pattern, tensions persist between multilateral agencies, CBOs and NGOs who have legitimate concerns regarding religious evangelization, religious authority and traditional religious beliefs which allocate a lower status to women and LGBTI individuals, and can thereby impede the Sustainable Development Goals. While these concerns should not be ignored, it is important that they do not overshadow the positive contributions religious organizations, narratives, and sacred places can also make to sustainable development, and the role of religious peacebuilders in addressing this structural violence (Halafoff and Conley-Tyler 2005; Clarke 2013).

One often-overlooked aspect in this research up until recently is the role that sacred places play in sustainable development. We set out to investigate this dimension, undertaking a study of sacred places as development spaces in the Asia-Pacific region in 2015 (Clarke and Halafoff 2017). This paper draws on findings of one of our case studies, a women’s Buddhist monastery on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand. We researched each site, community and/or organization employing a mixed methods approach including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. We begin this paper with a brief overview of sociology of religion, geography and religious studies research and theories, relevant to the study of sacred places in contemporary societies. We then present a discussion of our case study data which recognizes the need to consider the significance of sacred places, and narratives attached to them, in sustainable community development, and in this case advancing gender equality in global Buddhism.

## 2. Religion in Contemporary Societies

Processes of secularization, and secularization theory, led to a devaluing of the importance of religion in public life by many Western scholars, state actors and global organizations, including the United Nations, for much of the 20th century (Beckford 1990; Casanova 1994; Taylor 2009). However, there is no doubt that the public presence of religion increased at the turn of the 21st Century, largely as a result of processes of globalization, including global media, and of the rise of religious and spiritual social movements, some peaceful and some violent, resisting the spread of Western modernization and capitalism (Casanova 1994; Halafoff 2013).

This has led researchers, state actors, and the media to pay an increasing amount of attention to religion. Globalization and mediatization have led not only to a rise in religiously and nonreligiously diverse societies, but also to a growing awareness of this diversity and visibility of religion

(Bouma 2006; Hedges and Halafoff 2015). They have also accelerated change and fears exponentially, with some people celebrating these developments, and others strongly resisting them. This clash between cosmopolitans (who value diversity, advance equal rights for all, and recognize the interconnectedness of all life) and anti-cosmopolitans (who are threatened by diversity, and who have a tribal mentality of protecting their own rights, privileges and spaces over others) is evident throughout the world in a hardening of attitudes against migrants and refugees, and rising racism, sexism and attacks on LGBTIQ individuals and communities (Beck 2006; Bouma 2006; Halafoff 2013; Bouma and Halafoff 2017). Religious identity is one of the strongest markers of these in-groups and out-groups, with religious beliefs and exclusivity often providing underlying justifications for hatred and inferiority/superiority claims, which have absolutely no rational or scientific basis (Halafoff and Conley-Tyler 2005).

While this rise of bigotry and structural violence is undoubtedly highly disturbing, it has also created new spaces and opportunities to challenge them. As stated above, religions have long provided answers to navigate life's big questions and on how to improve one's self, help others and create a better world (McGuire 1997; Clarke 2011; Tomalin 2013). Moreover, the role of religion in creating and promoting direct and structural violence, has led to an increased critique of religion in the public sphere, and at the same time has led to the formation of multifaith and multi-actor peacebuilding networks, responding to global risks such as poverty, terrorism and climate change, and the need for sustainable development. Notable recent examples include the World Bank's World Faiths Development Dialogue, the UN's Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, and the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith (Marshall and Keough 2004; Kettell 2013; Halafoff 2013).

Moreover, contemporary sociological studies of religion are also revealing that people's identities and worldviews are increasingly individualized, hybrid and fluid, and that at the same time people still belong to 'spiritual tribes' and communities of like minded people, with similar or different worldviews and rituals, committed to similar causes. People's expressions of these worldviews, their everyday, lived, embodied experiences, can take more personal and inner forms, such as prayer, gardening or meditation, or collective actions for environmental or social justice (Ammerman 2007, 2013; McGuire 2008). While they are certainly becoming more individualized, particularly in the global North, both personal and public worldview expressions are relational, between humans and also the more than human world, with natural lifeforms/nature and/or so-called supernatural lifeforms of gods, angels and spirits (Halafoff 2017). This interest in embodiment and materiality, and interconnections with human and non-human life, has led scholars of religion to increasingly examine sacred places and therapeutic landscapes, particularly in the field of religion and geography.

### 3. The 'Poetics and Politics' of Sacred Places

Early Greek geographers' world maps and diagrams reflected a 'spatial order' shaped by what we now recognize as religious principles (Kong 1990, p. 356). By the 16th Century geographers began mapping Christianity's global spatial advance, and at the same time locating places referred to in The Bible to further illustrate the power of Christianity (Kong 1990 citing Isaac 1965). In the 19th century geographers explored how religions were affected by the places in which they originated, and how this determined what was sacred and also various views of the afterlife. However, Max Weber played a significant role in inverting these environmentally deterministic models, focusing instead on religion's impact on society and economics, which later led geographers to examine religion's influence on the environment (Kong 1990). Kong (1990, p. 358) explains that contemporary studies of religion and geography focus more now on 'reciprocity in the network of relations' between religion, environment and society.

Research on geography and religion explores the spatial growth, decline, and distribution of religious groups over time, the creation of sacred structures and monuments, the popularity of religious pilgrimages, and the impact that these developments have had on the environment. It also examines the changing symbolic meanings of places, and how this religious symbolism can be used for political

ends. It investigates contestation over these places and their meanings, between different religious and nonreligious groups and power relations between them. It is also concerned with religious identity construction, particularly of women and youth, and with diasporic religious identities and their transnational networks and ties. The role religion plays in shaping attitudes to nature and more than human life, and in creating and ameliorating social inequality and environmental crises are also of significant interest to geographers (Kong 1990, 2001, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Kong (1990, 2010) has noted that research on religion in geography has too often focused on institutional religion and reflected a Western Christian bias. In 2001, she called for the need to investigate more sites 'beyond the "officially sacred"' churches, temples, and mosques (Kong 2001, p. 226). By 2010, she reported that there had certainly been an increase of research on everyday religious places and places, including homes and media spaces<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, Chidester and Linenthal (1995, pp. 5–6) have explored both 'substantial' and 'situational' definitions of the sacred, and likened them to what they called 'the poetics and the politics of sacred space'. They explained that substantial definitions of the sacred describe the 'essential character' of the sacred as 'an uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance', focusing on the 'experiential, imaginative, and poetic dynamics of sacred space' (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, p. 32). Situational definitions, by contrast locate the sacred in the social, arguing that 'nothing is inherently sacred' and that the sacred is 'an empty signifier' (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, pp. 5–6). They further explained:

As a situational term, therefore, the sacred is nothing more nor less than a notional supplement to the ongoing cultural work of sacralizing space, time, persons, and social relations. Situational, relational, and frequently, if not inherently, contested, the sacred is a by-product of this work of sacralization. (p. 6)

Ritual, as an 'embodied spacial practice' plays a central role in sacralization (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, pp. 9–10) where 'ordinary' places may be 'ritually set apart to become extraordinary' (Lane 2002, p. 25). Moreover, the politics of sacred space ensues through conquests and ownership of places, and also through a 'politics of exclusion' where sanctity is maintained not just through ritualized practices but through keeping some people out (van der Leeuw 1938 cited in Chidester and Linenthal 1995, pp. 7–8). As Chidester and Linenthal (1995, p. 15) stated, 'a sacred space is not merely discovered, or founded, or constructed; it is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests.' They noted that:

Sacred places are arenas in which power relations can be reinforced, in which relations between insiders and outsiders, rulers and subjects, elders and juniors, males and females, and so on, can be adjudicated. But those power relations are always resisted. (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, p. 16)

Sacred places, therefore, have 'the potential of being as disruptive' as they are 'integrative' (Lane 2002, p. 48). Examples of theories of spaces of resistance are Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Edward Soja (1996) notions of 'third space'. Bhabha likened cultural hybridity to third space explaining that 'it displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom' creating 'a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Bhabha 1990, p. 211). Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012, pp. 3, 5) explain how digital 'third places' or 'third spaces' 'describe something alternative to other, prior, or dominant domains' and how 'the digital might support the creation or maintenance of physical third spaces, most commonly in relation to the project of enhancing civic engagement' (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012, pp. 6–8).

<sup>1</sup> See Kong (1990, 2001, 2010) for more details and examples of these studies.

<sup>2</sup> See Kong (2010) for more details and examples of these studies.



Interestingly, Gerard van der Leeuw (1938, pp. 395–96) (cited and quoted in Chidester and Linenthal 1995, p. 9) positioned modern people as ‘political exiles from the sacred’ and unable to realize the ‘unitary power’ that was readily experienced in pre-modern societies. Belden C. Lane (2002) has more recently echoed these sentiments, explaining how indigenous and pagan cultures believe that the earth and the cosmos are inherently sacred places and that, drawing on Mircea Eliade, Judeo-Christian frameworks disrupted these worldviews, separating God from nature. In so-called post-modern, post-secular societies, there has been an observable trend of people seeking to reconnect with nature to counter the pressures of ultramodern life (Halafoff 2017).

Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2009, p. 265) have observed ‘an ecology of religion’ examining how everyday sacred places ‘through decor, aesthetics, and landscaping, can inculcate tranquility, inner peace, religiosity, and spirituality’. Moreover, their research indicates that:

When mixed with sacredness, everyday activities, such as tending to the garden, cleaning the pond, raking leaves, pruning bushes, and even taking a leisurely walk along a meandering garden path can be psychologically calming and reflective. (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2009, p. 265)

Health geographical studies on ‘therapeutic landscapes’ have also investigated shrines and sacred places with reputations for healing, and also more formal health care settings and ‘everyday geographies of care’ (Gesler 2005, pp. 295–96; Williams 2007, p. 10). And there is an emerging literature on the rising popularity of yoga communities and retreat centres (Conradson 2007; Hoyez 2007; Jain 2014; Halafoff 2017).

Lane (2002) also emphasized the importance of narratives in establishing and examining sacred places, alongside situational approaches. Lane (2002, p. x) stated ‘that the role of the storyteller is essential in grasping the power that place exerts on the religious imagination’ as ‘[w]e never exhaust the mystery of a devotional site by simply unraveling the cultural threads from which it is woven . . . The religious perspective of those who perceive a place as sacred is certainly a constitutive part of their seeing’.

However, ‘[i]dentifying the sacred character of a place’, wrote Lane (2002, p. 3) ‘involves much more than gathering the random accounts of its individual spiritual encounters, significant as these may be.’ It also involves examining ‘a whole history of cultural tensions and conflicting claims, even ecological shifts in the terrain itself’ as sacred places ‘generate political polarities’ as does ‘the practice of any authentic spirituality’ (p. 4). Lane (2002, p. 4) added that a sacred place ‘is necessarily more than a construction of the human imagination’, and noted that,

. . . sacred places also participate in the entire array of sensory exchanges that play across the land, reaching far beyond the impact of human influence alone. The motion of wind through the limbs of a juniper tree in a red rock canyon, the long-tailed magpie that leaves seeds of a distant wildflower in its droppings beside a small arroyo, the shifting of rock in a fissure caused by water erosion—these, too, are a part of the dynamic reciprocity that makes up the ambient character of any desert monastery or roadside shrine. (Lane 2002, p. 4)

The ‘stories most people tell of their own experiences of place as “sacred”’ recounted Lane (2002, p. 41), ‘almost inevitably honor the participation of the whole environment.’ This led him to argue that a more complete ‘multidimensional understanding’ of the ‘diverse character’ and ‘functions’ of particular places’ was needed (pp. 44–45).

Kong (2001) also stressed the importance of examining interconnections between politics and poetics, the situational and the substantial, private and public, religious and secular, when examining sacred places and spaces. As Michel Foucault (quoted in Rabinow 1984, p. 252) famously stated: ‘Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power.’ He also declared:

I think it is somewhat arbitrary to try to dissociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves. If they are separated, they become impossible to understand. Each can only be understood through the other. (Foucault quoted in [Rabinow 1984](#), p. 246)

Foucault (quoted in [Rabinow 1984](#), p. 254) concluded that what was interesting ‘is always interconnection’, between people, power and places, as Kong has also noted.

#### 4. Sacred Places as Development Spaces

Our case study of the sacred places of Songdhammakalyani Monastery and their role in promoting gender equality, one of the key SDGs, is presented briefly below followed by a concluding discussion in light of the literature and theories reviewed above.

##### *Songdhammakalyani Monastery*

Gender inequality remains a persistent issue within global Buddhism, as Buddhist archetypes of enlightenment are predominantly male and gender disparities persist in Buddhist societies linked to cultural and religious beliefs which allocate a lower status to women ([Tsomo 2009](#); [Tomalin et al. 2015](#)). *Bhikkhuni* ordination, the highest level of ordination for Buddhist women, is a controversial topic internationally, given that it is not recognized in some Buddhist traditions, including in Thailand. Ongoing debates about this date back to the time of the Buddha, and his early resistance to ordaining women for various reasons, including their safety ([Gross 1993](#); [Dhammananda 2007](#); [Tsomo 2009](#); [Tomalin et al. 2015](#)). Buddha did however eventually agree to ordain his stepmother Maha Pajapati and other women, given that he firmly believed that they were able to reach enlightenment. Indeed, Maha Pajapati, and Buddha’s wife Yasodhara, were two of 13 female *Arahat Theris*, *bhikkhunis*—fully ordained nuns—who were praised by Buddha for their foremost powers during his lifetime. All were highly accomplished practitioners and continue to serve as role models to Buddhist women ([Dhammananda 2012](#)).

Currently Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women, and other Buddhist women’s organizations and networks including Songdhammakalyani Monastery (SDMK) are leading the way in campaigning for greater acceptance of full ordination, providing educational opportunities, and improved standards of living for Buddhist nuns and women, particularly in economically poorer societies ([Sakyadhita n.d. n.d.](#); [Fenn and Koppedrayer 2008](#), p. 55).

Lamai Kabilsingh, SDMK’s founder, was born in Rajburi, approximately 100 km west of Bangkok in 1908. She was one of five daughters raised alone by her mother. Lamai worked and studied hard to become a schoolteacher, and had a life-long interest in literature, writing and journalism ([Dhammananda 2014](#)). She married a man who was a politician from a wealthy family, changed her name to Voramai, and had two daughters.

Voramai became a highly committed Buddhist practitioner, after a health crisis in her 40s ([Dhammananda 2014](#)). She was ordained as a nun in 1956, but couldn’t receive full *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand at that time. Voramai formed a nun’s community and many young women joined her. She bought land 50 km outside of Bangkok and began building SDMK’s Uposatha Meditation Hall, and a residential building. Voramai taught the nun’s to be self-sufficient, by also founding a stone factory where they made soapstone utensils and other handicrafts. She became widely known as a healer following in the footsteps of her first master ([Dhammananda 2014](#)).

When her daughter, Chatsumarn, was completing her academic studies in Canada, she learned that it was possible to be ordained as a *bhikkhuni* in Taiwan. Chatsumarn and her mother travelled to Taipei in 1971, where Voramai’s *bhikkhuni* ordination was conferred. She was given the name *Bhikkhuni Ta Tao*, and became widely known as a teacher and healer ([Dhammananda 2014](#)). Chatsumarn, became a well-known scholar and expert on Thai *bhikkhunis* and was one of the founders of Sakyadhita. She took *samaneri* (novice) precepts in Sri Lanka in 2001 and received the name Dhammananda. She received full *bhikkhuni* ordination in Sri Lanka in February 2003, the same

year that Bhikkhuni Ta Tao passed away, and became the Abbess of SDKM. The Bhikkhuni Monastery has continued to grow as women of diverse ages and backgrounds are drawn to Ven. Dhammananda's teachings (Dhammananda 2014).

Ven. Dhammananda is one of the leading scholars of gender and Buddhism internationally. She has recounted how the Buddha is said to have refused his stepmother Maha Prajapati's request for ordination before Ananda, one of the Buddha's disciples, intervened on her behalf. Ananda asked whether Buddha had refused their requests on the basis that women couldn't reach enlightenment. The Buddha then replied unequivocally that women could become enlightened and consequently finally agreed to ordain Maha Pajapati and other women (Dhammananda 2007). Ven. Dhammananda (2007, p. 18) exclaimed that '[i]t was purely because of this equal spiritual ability that the Buddha allowed women to join the Sangha' and that '[t]his acceptance can and should be taken as a golden phrase for uplifting Buddhist women.' She also explained how the Buddha stated that *bhikkhus* (monks), *bhikkhunis*, lay men and lay women—the Fourfold Buddhists—must 'respect the Buddha, the *Dhamma* [teachings of the Buddha], the *Sangha* [monastic community], *Sikkha* (monastic code) and *Samadhi* (meditation or practice)' in order for Buddhism to prosper in future. So therefore, the 'establishment of *bhikkhuni* Sangha is a sign of a prosperous [Buddhist] community' and should therefore be encouraged, not resisted (p. 25).

Currently the SDKM includes a three-story main temple Uposatha Hall on one side beside a large golden Buddha statue, and a kindergarten, organic garden and another three-story temple building, the Yasodhara Vihara on the other. It also has a three-story accommodation block of rooms for visitors, a library, Ven. Dhammananda's, the *bhikkhuni*'s and nun's quarters, and a Medicine Buddha temple at the rear of the property. All of the buildings are housed within a beautiful temple garden, complete with a Bodhi tree, descended from the tree under which Buddha reached enlightenment in India.

According to Ven. Dhammananda (2014, p. 67), '[t]he idea of building a temple for *bhikkhunis* had been with [her mother] since the beginning.' In an interview with one of the author's, Anna Halafoff, Ven. Dhammananda explained how traditional rituals were performed for the Uposatha Hall 'to become a sacred ground'. She recounted that when her mother first acquired the land for her temple and monastery it had to be six Rai (a Thai acre that is roughly a half of an English acre), according to Thai Buddhist custom. Bhikkhuni Ta Tao performed a consecration ceremony in which the whole piece of land was offered to the Buddha, and further rituals at the site of the Uposatha Hall, that would allow it to become a place where full ordination ceremonies could be performed. Ven. Dhammananda stated that this ceremony would not be valid if it were carried out in other parts of the monastery. She also recalled how the third floor of the Hall was also considered to be particularly sacred as:

... one time veritable Grandma said [that] as she was in meditation, she ... [could no longer] see the roof. But [that] on each column, there were devas, all of them in meditating position ... so she [said while] ... you don't see anything, [usually] you have to know that the devas, the Angels, use this space to come and meditate. So you have to pay respect to the place. So, that [is] the most sacred place in this whole monastery.

Ven. Dhammananda (2012) also described how the third floor of the Yasodhara Vihara [Temple], named after Buddha's wife and esteemed teacher, is the second most sacred space in the Monastery as it houses large golden statues of the 13 Arahats, including inscriptions of their names and their abilities, with a statue of Buddha's stepmother Maha Pajapati, the first woman to be ordained by the Buddha, in the central highest place. The other 12 Arahats are Khema Arahata Theri, Uppalavanna Arahata Theri, Patācālā Arahata Theri, Dhammādinna Arahata Theri, Nanda Arahata Theri, Sona Arahata Theri, Sakula Arahata Theri, Kundaḷakesī Arahata Theri, Bhaddā Kappilānī Arahata Theri, Kisa Gotamī Arahata Theri, Singalāmata Arahata Theri and Yasodhara Arahata Theri herself. Most of the 13 *bhikkhunis* came from wealthy backgrounds, but many also experienced hardships and tragedies in their lives before being ordained, renouncing their possessions, and studying and practicing the Dhamma. All became highly accomplished practitioners and now serve as role models to new



generations of aspiring bhikkhunis. Their statues also now look over and protect the Monastery and the bhikkhunis, nuns, volunteers and guests who reside and visit there. Ven. Dhammananda also stated in her interview, ‘this is the very first temple in the whole country that has, that created this space for women.’

The Yasodhara Vihara is the newest building in the SDMK complex. One of the novice nuns, Shirley, when interviewed explained how Ven. Dhammananda and the 13 Arahat Theris were her role models.

... with the chanting, the evening chanting, there is one ... chant ... it’s all about them [the Theris] ... Especially living human being like Dhammananda ... I really admire her for the things that she do ... it’s very important that we get someone to lead us. But those 13 Theris are ... also good cause it actually inspires you that we should follow Buddha’s way and be like them ... That’s why they are up there.

A new three-story guest residence was also recently built at SDMK, enabling bhikkhunis and nuns from all around the world, including India, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand, to stay and deepen their study during the *vassa* rains retreat and at other times. Ven. Dhammananda described this as her primary ‘outreach’, development activity. The SDMK bhikkhunis and nuns follow the Buddha’s and the Bodhisattva’s way of life, which focuses on personal practice and helping others. They also conduct a weekly alms round in the surrounding neighborhood, and community outreach to a nearby juvenile detention center and a women’s prison.

Both Shirley and another resident senior SDMK nun interviewed for this study, Ven. Dhammaranna, both stated that the Monastery’s library, where their Dhamma classes are conducted, was their favorite place showing a deep appreciation for their teachings and their Abbess. The Bodhi tree garden beside the library, which has bamboo and frangipanis growing within it, is also considered one of the Monastery’s most sacred sites, as Voramai planted the first Bodhi seed at SDMK, descended from the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India.

Ven. [Dhammananda \(2007, p. 8\)](#) believes a natural setting is conducive to good practice and recounted how Buddha had advised Maha Pajapati that both Sanghas should ‘follow dhamma to be separated (from society)’ and ‘which leads to quietude’. Indeed, Buddha lived much of his life ‘close to nature’ and instructed his followers to have deep respect for all life, as evidenced by the first precept ‘not to kill’ ([Kabilsingh 1998, p. 2](#)). The SDKM community is thereby committed to sustainable practices of organic gardening, composting and recycling. They also grow seeds that are GMO free, linked to the Thai royal seed project. Ven. Dhammananda has stated that ‘so-called development’, which has focused too much on physical and material needs, was the source of today’s environmental crisis and that ‘a happy society’ should focus on both physical and spiritual development ([Kabilsingh 1998, p. 3](#)).

The Thai bhikkhunis by acquiring and consecrating the land, building the Uposatha Hall, residences, library, and the Yasodhara Vihara, are challenging the dominant patriarchal structures of Thai Buddhism. These ‘third spaces’ enable social action, by drawing upon traditional and modern Buddhist and feminist narratives centered on overcoming suffering and improving women’s opportunities for practice and recognition ([Tomalin et al. 2015](#)). The 13 Arahat Theris, Bhikkhuni Ta Tao, and Ven. Dhammananda serve as role models for the nuns and bhikkhunis. The places within SDKM, including its online presence through its website, bring their narratives to life, interconnected with the local area and the broader international Buddhist women’s social movement, which in turn enables the bhikkhuni’s and nun’s development activities locally and globally.

## 5. Conclusions

The bhikkhuni and nuns of Songdhammakalyani Monastery are addressing the Sustainable Development Goals by helping to alleviate hunger, advancing gender equity, and promoting wellbeing and sustainable development respectively. They are doing so inspired by sacred Buddhist narratives and role models, embedded in local communities and sacred places including in everyday, lived

moments. While some religious places can certainly enforce and preserve dominant power structures, SDKM's sacred places disrupt and challenge them by resisting forces perpetuating structural violence, in this case gender inequality. Thai bhikkhunis acquired and consecrated the land, oversaw the building of an Uposatha Hall, residences, a library, a garden, a Medicine Buddha Temple, and a Yasodhara Vihara, including the statues of the thirteen Arahats. In so doing they have created 'third spaces,' which are enabling social activism and counterpublics, both offline and online, by drawing upon traditional and modern narratives and technologies (Tomalin et al. 2015).

Consequently, we argue, based on this and our other case studies, that religious and/or spiritual frameworks for understanding the human condition, and the world we live in, inform the construction of sacred places in natural and urban settings and as a result the development activities that take place within and around them. Thereby, it is crucial for those working in the field of religion and development to pay closer attention to the importance of sacred places and narratives when designing, conducting and participating in development activities in partnership with local actors, given their context specificity.

Finally, we contend that at a time when people are increasingly questioning dominant power structures, and seeking more equitable and sustainable ways of living, it is vital for all societies to draw on their existing and emerging wisdom traditions, be they religious, spiritual and/or nonreligious worldviews, alongside human and non-human rights-based frameworks, to address the SDGs. By doing so, development practitioners and scholars can work in partnership with community leaders in local contexts, including sacred places, cognizant of their significance to local people when designing, conducting and evaluating their programs. This should in turn maximize the success of such initiatives.

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