



Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. de Silva. *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1998, 320 pages, ISBN 0-7914-3834-1, US \$19.95.

Reviewed by

Mavis L. Fenn

Assistant Professor

St. Paul's United College, Waterloo

mfenn@watarts.uwaterloo.ca

Journal of Buddhist Ethics 6 (1999):17-24

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu.

B*uddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka* is a collection of eight essays (with introductory and concluding essays) that examines how Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalism shapes the identities of non-Buddhist peoples in Sri Lanka: Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers and other Christians (p. 1).

This book is a valuable addition to the field since its primary focus is on the “Other,” that is, on minority communities and the impact that the development of Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalism has had on their self-identity. The article bibliographies are good and the writing is generally solid, informative, and thought-provoking. This book would make a valuable companion piece to any one of the volumes listed in the extensive “Selected Bibliography” that discuss Buddhist revivalism and the development of Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalism. My quibbles with the volume were minor and stylistic. The book also includes articles that discuss the specific views that fall under the rubric of fundamentalism and that address the important question of what it means to be a non-fundamentalist Buddhist in Sri Lanka.

The introductory essay by the editors sets the context for the balance of the volume by placing Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalism within the broader study of religious fundamentalism worldwide, drawing on the Fun-

damentalism Project (*Fundamentalisms Observed* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991] and *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995] edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby).

While acknowledging that Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism is not a “thing” but rather a spectrum of beliefs, the authors point out that it shares certain characteristics identified by Marty and Appleby as commonly found in religious fundamentalism cross–culturally, reliance on religion for identity being one key element.

In their reading of Buddhism, Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalists identify Buddhist Sinhalas as the people who have been charged by the Buddha himself to maintain and protect Buddhism. In addition, they identify the island of Sri Lanka as *dhammadipa*, the island (*dipa*) of the *dhamma*, the Buddhist teachings. The identity between the Sinhala people and the *dhamma*, based on a reading of the fifth century Sri Lankan “mythohistory,” the *Mahavamsa*, has contributed to the notion that Sri Lanka, destined to be the island of the *dhamma*, should be dominated by Buddhists (p. 2).

Variations on this view are prominent in political discourse in Sri Lanka. A second facet of cross–cultural fundamentalism is a concern for boundaries and a fear of pollution (p. 3). It is here that ethnicity becomes a major issue, not simply with regard to non–Sinhalas but also concerning “unrighteous Sinhalas.”

The protection of the *dhamma* thus means a focus on purity, on only the righteous having sovereignty over *dhammadipa*. The unrighteous, whether other Sinhalas, or non–Sinhala peoples, are cast as the enemy of the island and of Buddhism (p. 3).

Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism also differs in important ways from other types of religious fundamentalism. It does not exhibit a missionary zeal, nor does it require strict behavioral standards. Most important, “Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalists do not form a coherent, readily identifiable group.”

Finally (and here the authors give with one hand and take away with the other), technically speaking, Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism does not have a “sacred” text that serves as a blueprint for society. However, while the *Mahavamsa* is not a canonical text, it carries the same importance as if it were and often “serves as a cloak of authority to wrap around contemporary views in Buddhist Sri Lanka” (p. 4). Indeed, it is the

Mahavamsa that authorizes a connection between religion and the state and it is this connection to the past that informs expectations of present and future political decisions (p. 5).

This discussion of the elements of Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism sets the stage for a discussion of views concerning the “Other” minority religious and ethnic communities. Not every minority is construed in the same light at all times — near and far otherness tends to be contextual — and while all “others” are a threat to purity and order, those who are nearest in terms of neighbors, descendants, or power relationships “are more troublesome than a far Other” (p. 11). In this case, the proximate “others” are the Tamils while the “far others” are the Burghers (descendants of European colonists, mostly Christian) and Muslims. In the same way as these groups are “other” for Sinhalese–Buddhist fundamentalists, so too are Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalists for them. However, minority identities have tended to be developed in light of the growth and political strength of Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism over the past hundred years. And this is the primary focus of the book, to address “the ways and extent to which minority identities are fashioned by Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism” and “what it means to be a non–Buddhist, and a non–fundamentalist Buddhist, in contemporary Sri Lanka” (p. 10). In order to illustrate what the editors have in mind, I will outline a few of the articles from the volume that deal with the ways in which minority identities — that is, Tamils and non–Buddhist Sinhala — have been shaped by the larger “Other,” Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism.

“The Impact of Land Reforms, Rural Images and Nationalist Ideology on Plantation Tamils,” by Oddvar Hollup, focuses on the Plantation Tamils (formerly known as Indian Tamils). According to Hollup, Plantation Tamils have been denied an identity of their own due to the “essentializing” forces of the conflict between Sinhala nationalism and Tamil separatism. The Sinhalese do not distinguish between Sri Lankan Tamils and Plantation Tamils, treating them as “the monolithic Other” (p. 74). For their part, the Sri Lankan Tamils have attempted to speak for the Plantation Tamils in order to support their claim for a separate state (p. 75). Hollup’s focus, then, is slightly different from that of other essays in the volume in that he concerns himself not so much with the shaping of identity as with the denial of a separate identity.

The author provides a brief background on the Plantation Tamils, “descendants of Indian labor migrants to the plantations during the British period.” The majority live and work on the tea and rubber plantations of the central highlands and are separated by caste, occupation, dialect, and so on from the Sri Lankan Tamils who live in the northern and eastern parts of

the island. While they share some similarities in language and religious practice, and may, Hollup states, feel some sympathy for Sri Lankan Tamil grievances (as common victims of the 1983 riots, for example), they have not “identified themselves and their interests with those of the Sri Lankan Tamils.” This is in part, the author states, because the Sri Lankan Tamils have “frequently ill-treated them and exploited their labor power” (p. 77). Largely confined to the plantations because of poverty, lack of education, the threat of repatriation, and lack of citizenship (despite 1988 decision to grant stateless persons citizenship, the author notes that 318,000 Plantation Tamils are still stateless), they have been forced to remain in Sinhala-dominated low- and mid-country areas where they have become “the recognizable Other” subject to retaliation from Sinhalas responding to violent acts by the Tamil Tigers in the north (p. 79). Their identity, then, is intimately bound up with political issues of repatriation and citizenship and the struggle to improve their economic and political position (p. 79).

Like Tambiah and others, Hollup draws our attention to the role that competition in trade, access to higher education, employment, and land grants have had in the development of ethnic rivalry (p. 79). This is an important point not only for the Sri Lankan situation but for other areas of conflict as well. And, once generated, ethnic conflict becomes an important element in political and economic life, as the case of land reform demonstrates. Central to nationalist rhetoric is the vision of an ideal pre-colonial agrarian society centered around village life and the Buddhist temple. The plantation is seen (with justification) as part of the colonial structure that destroyed that social harmony and impoverished village life through the acquisition of land, deforestation, and a lack of economic benefits to the village (p. 81). Hollup argues that this Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalist ideology was a major factor in the nationalization of the plantations. “The elite had ideological reasons, backed by a moral and mythohistoric justification for supporting the image of an authentic, family-farming and rice-based Sinhala society” (p. 84). While more Sinhala villagers have become employed on estates and the management of the estates is primarily Sinhala (middle- and upper-middle-class landowning families from Colombo and Kandy) (p. 83), the reforms have not produced a redistribution of any significant amount of land to the rural poor (p. 85). Plantation Tamils, their living conditions of no interest to the new management structures (p. 83) and viewed by many rural Sinhalas as having enjoyed higher and more stable economic benefits than the peasantry through their association with the plantations (p. 81), have seen their conditions deteriorate even further with less work and diminished incomes and have been forced to move from some of the estates (pp. 83, 85). These reforms, plus the

ethnic rioting in 1977 and 1981 in many mid-country estates, Hollup states, caused many Plantation Tamils to flee farther north where they became landless laborers for absentee Tamil landlords, living in conditions far worse than those on the estates (p. 82).

Thus, Hollup concludes, their identity has been shaped on the one hand by the implementation of Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalist ideology in the economic, social, and political sphere to their detriment as the Tamil “Other,” and on the other hand by the agenda of some Sri Lankan Tamils who demand a separate state and attempt to “speak for” them but some of whom have treated Plantation Tamils as a source of cheap labor. Brought to a sense of common interests vis–a–vis these other groups, and with slowly increasing numbers of Plantation Tamils becoming citizens, they have begun to “speak for themselves.”

Hollup’s article highlights one of the central themes that run through all the essays in *Buddhist Fundamentalisms*: the fact that in Sri Lanka today ethnicity is the overriding marker of identity. It transcends religion (the major marker of identity a hundred years ago), caste, and class. This has implications for those Sinhalese who are not Buddhist.

Tessa J. Bartholomeusz’s article “Sinhala Anglicans and Buddhism in Sri Lanka: When the ‘Other’ Becomes You” explores the experience of Sinhala Anglicans who, in the face of Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism, have been “forced to show their loyalty to the nation through the revival of a shared “history” and language, rather than through religious affiliation” (p.133). The Anglican Church came to Sri Lanka during the British period of colonization and is thus a reminder of both the anti–Buddhist rhetoric of many early Christian missionaries and the experience of being colonized. While the Anglican Church began a process of indigenization fairly early on and by the late 1800s had begun to develop a Ceylonese identity, this same period saw the development of Buddhist revivalism as cultural resistance against the British (p. 136). For many Buddhists, the Anglicized were not truly Sinhala. As Bartholomeusz notes, “These Buddhists thus created a boundary — based on religion — among the local population that determined who was firmly Sinhala and who was not” (p. 139). The mark of “Otherness” was religion.

What I found most fascinating in the author’s discussion of this period was the way in which Sinhala Christians appear to have accepted the conflation of Buddhist and Sinhala as proposed by Buddhist reformers. Many customs and beliefs — such as transmigration, for example — became “national” rather than religious, national being identified with Sinhala culture. This allowed Sinhala Anglicans to minimize their religious “otherness” and present Christianity as a legitimate means of expressing

national identity. Bartholomeusz notes that the view of one Anglican author who wrote that Anglicanism could be a means by which Ceylonese “national” culture and religion could be celebrated “suggests a Christian colonization and transformation of Buddhism as national culture, or the culture of the Sinhala. It is not surprising that he thus argued that Anglicans, the majority of whom were Sinhala, could also glorify ‘traditional’ Sinhala culture” (p. 141).

According to the author, the requirement to demonstrate national loyalty in the face of their non-Buddhist religion guided the indigenization of the Anglican Church in Sri Lanka. “Under pressure to conform to the Sinhala identity that Dharmapala and his colleagues had promoted, Karava Christians proved their Sinhaleanness, and their loyalty to Ceylon, by ‘Sinhaling’ their religion” (p. 140).

The extent to which this trend has continued in Christian churches in Sri Lanka is made clear by R. L. Stirrat, who reports in “Catholic Identity and Global Forces” that since the 1980s there has been a pronounced fracture in the Sri Lankan Catholic identity — between Sinhala and Tamil Catholics (p.151) — and that during the riots of 1983 Catholics as well as Buddhists attacked Tamils regardless of their religious affiliation. In the north, Stirrat notes, the Catholic Church is closely identified with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). He summarizes the situation:

Whilst in the late nineteenth century “being Sinhala” or “being Tamil” was for many people secondary to “being Catholic” or “being Buddhist,” today the situation is reversed. Thus throughout even the most uniform Catholic areas of southern Sri Lanka, people see themselves first and foremost as Sinhala; only secondarily do they identify themselves as Catholics. So far as the war is concerned, most Sinhala Catholics are much more shocked by reported LTTE atrocities against Sinhala than they are by government military attacks on churches in the north or the deaths of Tamil Catholics. Whilst a shared religious affiliation is recognized, this does not generate any strong sense of identification with the Catholics of the north (p. 152).

Ethnicity, then, has become the major facet of identity in Sri Lanka today, in large part due to the pressure exerted by Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalism. Regardless of the actual numbers of those people who would be identified as fundamentalists — John Clifford Holt in the concluding article, “The Persistence of Political Buddhism,” senses that they are in the minority (p. 187) — to be Sinhala is to be politically empowered.

Limitations of space preclude outlining articles in the volume that address the important question of what it means to be a non-fundamental-

ist Buddhist and those that address the specific views that fall under the rubric of fundamentalism. I would refer readers to the fine articles by George Bond and Chandra R. de Silva. Nor have I been able to outline all the minority communities dealt with in the volume. Victor C. de Munck writes about Muslim identity in Sri Lanka in an article that includes discussion of reformism, Sufism, and global identity. Tessa J. Bartholomeusz's second essay in the volume is a most interesting discussion of the Burghers and "the common Burgher equation of conversion to Buddhism — going 'native' — with madness...." R. L. Stirrat's article on Catholic identity is far richer than the brief mention I have made of it above.

The articles chosen for presentation demonstrate what is, to me, the real strength of the volume. The editors have selected articles that focus on the impact that Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism has had on the "Other," specifically on how minority communities have had to develop their own sense of identity against the backdrop of a Buddhist revivalism that grew into Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism and that colors all aspects of life in Sri Lanka. There has not, to date, been much written from that perspective. Hollup's article on the Plantation Tamils provides us with information on a largely overlooked group and on the economic and political implications of Sinhala–Buddhist fundamentalism, a theme that is given more detailed discussion in Holt's concluding article, a valuable discussion on "political Buddhism" (p. 189). As the articles by Bartholomeusz and Stirrat indicate, negotiation and accommodation have been the primary means by which minorities have adapted. This theme is carried further in Pradeep Jeganathan's article "In the Shadow of Violence: 'Tamilness' and the Anthropology of Identity in Southern Sri Lanka." Jeganathan's article discusses what he calls "tactics of anticipation," practices that are produced by Tamils in anticipation of violence. A festival, formerly public, discontinued for a few years and then staged in a much downsized and non-public manner, the naming of children in a Tamil–Sinhala marriage with only Sinhala names recorded where previously two names had been recorded, are two examples given.

Holt's concluding article, "The Persistence of Political Buddhism," not only discusses the nature of "political Buddhism" but addresses the dilemma faced by many in the Sinhala–Buddhist community and "Sri Lanka's secularized liberals as well" (p.194).

How to construct an inclusive nationalist discourse which recognizes the importance of a Buddhist *historical* past yet transcends its fundamentalistic myth-and-ritual function as a blueprint for the present and future. That is, How is possible to transcend the sacred

canopy of Buddhist nationalist discourse so a new more inclusive discourse can recognize the diversity of Sri Lanka's various communities (p. 194).

Clues to a more inclusive vision may be found in movements like Sarvodaya that focus on "Buddhist values and their application to society in the development process" rather than on Buddhist identity per se, as noted in George Bond's "Conflicts of Identity and Interpretation in Buddhism: The Clash Between the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement and the Government of President Premadasa" (p. 38), or even in another return to history where, as Holt states, "For centuries. . . the genius of Sinhala-Buddhist culture was expressed through its remarkable inclusivity and assimilations. . . ." This vision, in short, is not one that would "homogenize Sri Lanka" but one that privileges "the history of an island which is not only home to the oldest continuing Buddhist civilization in the world, but which has also served as a vital crossroads for a variety of religious traditions and ethnic communities" (p. 194). Readers of this fine volume of articles will have to judge for themselves the likelihood of the discovery of such a vision in the future.