

Review Article

Buddhism and the Legitimacy of Violence

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MAHINDA DEEGALLE (ed.), *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism). London and New York: Routledge, 2006. XV, 277 pages, £ 75.00. ISBN 0-415-35920-1.

Religious conflicts that seem to spread across the world with ever increasing speed have given rise to the seemingly strange question of how religions can help to prevent or to resolve these conflicts. This constitutes an obvious paradox: on the one hand, religion is thought to be responsible for causing or at least triggering conflicts, on the other, it is normatively called upon to mediate and deescalate precisely these conflicts. Religiously motivated violence is then called an aberration or a deviation from the pure doctrine: people have not understood their religion properly, it is claimed, mostly by outsiders.

This is particularly true for Buddhism which has been portrayed as the religion of non-violence *par excellence*, again often by non-Buddhist and Western observers. It has been judged by this standard since the late 19th century, with added emphasis in the 20th, when the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi rose from religious and political leaders respectively to the status of pop icons. That the factual evidence often pointed to the contrary did not bother many people. That Buddhist dynasties have been violent goes nowadays without saying among the experts, the debate rages over the question whether violence constitutes a betrayal of Buddhism: did they live a 'false' Buddhism? This has been postulated all along, from Tambiah's controversial study *Buddhism Betrayed*¹ through John Holt² who deplored the deviation from the tolerant faith of yesteryear right up to Seneviratne's *Work*

¹ Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992.

² Holt, John Clifford, Jacob N. Kinnard and Jonathan S. Walters (eds.), *Constituting Communities: Theravada Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, New York: State University of New York Press 2003.

of *Kings*,³ who scathingly denounces not so much a betrayal of Buddhism, but monks who betray what he sees as their true calling. This normative view has been challenged in recent years from several sides, without, however, dealing with, let alone solving, the basic problems of the dispute. The concept of the just war is debated controversially in all ethical and religious systems, though more so in Buddhism because of the unstated assumption that it should be non-violent. Tessa Bartholomeusz⁴ has questioned this assumption by looking at the Buddhist canon and elaborated a Buddhist just war ideology that appears to concede the right to violence mostly, but not exclusively, in self-defence. Other studies have proceeded not from a normative 'what-Buddhism-should-be', but from a lived Buddhist practice and discussed the question of violence from that angle. Holt follows this path in his latest study,⁵ as does Ananda Abeysekere,⁶ even though on over 200 pages he does not do much more than state the well-known fact that religion and its interpretation are contested internally by many political factions and instrumentalised by competing interests in daily life. What is important to mention here, is, that the *ahimsa* demanded in both Buddhism and Hinduism is that of not harming or destroying life gratuitously for consumption or for sport. This is analytically something different from harming or killing in assumed or real self-defence or in defence of *dharma*.

Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka looks at the intermingling of Buddhism and politics. On the face of it and according to the introduction, it holds Buddhism to the normative standards of non-violence discussed above. The individual articles, however, convey a very different picture. This volume arose from a conference in Bath in spring 2002⁷. It contains some of the papers presented there plus a number of articles specially commissioned for the publication.

This is not an easy volume to review. The reviewer participated in the conference as a discussant, so is familiar with some, but not with most of the

³ Seneviratne, H. L., *The Work of Kings. The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999.

⁴ Bartholomeusz, Tessa J., *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon 2002; Bartholomeusz, Tessa J. and Chandra R. de Silva (eds.), *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1998.

⁵ Holt, John Clifford, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu. Religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press 2004.

⁶ Abeysekere, Ananda. *Colors of the Robe. Religion, Identity, and Difference*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 2002.

⁷ See Rösler, Jakob, Buddhismus und Konflikt in Sri Lanka, *Internationales Asienforum* 33, 3–4 (2002): 406–414.

articles included here. Reviewing problems start with the Introduction, because definitions both of terms employed and a description of methodology are virtually non-existent. Terms are thrown into the discussion at random, obviously more for the sound effects than for content. Within the context of ‘violence’, ‘extremists, terrorists, or government soldiers’ are lumped together without explanation (p. 4), while on p. 8 ‘subconscious ethnic prejudices and animosity towards each other that are ethnically and religiously different’... are introduced. With regard to content, it is natural that bias enters the most scrupulously ‘objective’ academic treatise, but surely it does not have to be as blatant as here where the blame for the conflict is put squarely on the shoulders of ‘LTTE’ or ‘Tamil terrorists’ who irritate a nation that is in its majority Sinhala Buddhist. Incidentally, this sets the tone for the whole volume: there is only one (!) article by a Tamil author (Alvappillai Veluppillai) whose plea to regard the problem not in terms of merciful concessions by an indulgent majority to an unreasonably fractious minority, but in terms of legitimate rights of the Tamils, remains unacknowledged to this day. This is a fundamental problem of the compilation: even those authors (and there are quite a number of them) who concede that the treatment of the Tamils has been atrocious and must be rectified and that the Tamils must be given a say in their own destiny, seem to be unable to envisage a scenario where the Tamils do precisely this: take decisions about their future and the kind of state they want to live in instead of the Sri Lankan government, viz. the Sinhalese, doing it for them: Tamils are, first, always guilty of destroying unity, and in the second place, supporters of terrorism and terrorists, a fact that apparently justifies denying them justice.

There seems to exist, furthermore, a sort of tacit collusion between several authors (e.g. Gombrich, Smith) in this volume who argue similarly that the Sinhalese have a right to be frightened of the Tamils because of frequent South Indian invasions in former centuries. Now, what this fact has to do with the Tamils living in the north of the country who do not really affiliate with the Indian Tamils (as Richard Gombrich e.g. admits) and how this constitutes a justification for denying them citizens’ and other rights and having them driven from their homes and killed, escapes this reviewer. Maybe the government should then also persecute the Dutch and Portuguese Burghers for the deeds of the Portuguese and Dutch centuries ago?

To this reviewer, it is a mystery where Mahinda Deegalle, the editor, found the information on p. 11 that V. Prabhakaran is a Catholic. The quotation in fn. 21 (p. 21) from an unpublished manuscript does not bear out the assumption on p. 13 that Roman Catholicism ‘...ha[s] contributed to the ethnic conflict...’. The author of this unpublished paper whom the reviewer met in person has to be taken *cum grano salis*. The fact that many members of the Tamil Eelam resistance movement are Karaiyar, a substantial number

of whom are Catholics and that priests have protested against human rights violations does not make the movement one influenced by Roman Catholicism. In any case the theme of the Catholic or Christian conspiracy is another one that looms large in the volume. And then there is the third, and indeed, the crucial one, viz. the relationship between Buddhism and violence. It is noteworthy – and salutary – that nearly all authors question the popular normative connection between Buddhism and non-violence, albeit from very different angles.

Richard Gombrich discusses the imagined and actual political influence of the *sangha* in an article with the enigmatic title ‘Is the Sri Lankan war a Buddhist fundamentalism?’. He discounts it as negligible. The alleged necessary consent of the *sangha* to any political measure, he says, is a bogey wheeled out by the government whenever it does not want to implement measures and laws that might concede anything to the Tamils (or anybody else for that matter). While there is a certain plausibility to this argument, it seems also to be informed by complaints from the *sangha* (an argument put forward by Seneviratne,⁸ too) that the government uses the monks as their ‘poodles’: pushing them forward in order to gain votes and win over the electorate but not really heeding them, even corrupting them with material gifts. Whatever the actual influence of the *sangha* may be, there cannot be any doubt that currently demands put forward by a sizeable faction among them to deny the Tamils even devolution and to pursue a military solution to the conflict are heeded by the government all too rigorously. But maybe that just shows that the *sangha* is firmly part of the mainstream. Why the author singles out Tamil opportunists who used the riots 1983 to get rid of unwanted tenants and generally make hay while the sun shines is incomprehensible to this reviewer: does this in any way justify Sinhala violence? Quislings and opportunists who profit from the misery of their own group do not possess an ethnic monopoly.

The articles by Mahinda Palihawadana and S.P. Premasiri dealing with Buddhist doctrine regarding conflict and violence are academically sound and clearly set out the Buddhist philosophy of the interrelated emergence and illusion of self. Premasiri discusses the rejection of violence on doctrinal grounds. His reasoning is clear and convincing, but his conclusions do not furnish any really new insights: The question of violence in Buddhism has been debated ever since Bartholomeusz’ definitive study on just war concepts in Buddhism.⁹ It is, furthermore, doubtful, whether all will really be solved if we only realise the illusion of self, nation and ethnicity. Not

⁸ Seneviratne, op. cit., p. 202.

⁹ Bartholomeusz, op. cit.

even the Buddhist Sinhalese seem to be aware of the consequences of these illusions let alone deal with them. Premasiri, while arguing that Buddhism abhors violence and recommends turning the other cheek, actually seems to acknowledge this fact when he then admits that war is an undeniable fact of life and that violence in self-defence should be allowed even in Buddhism. The contradiction that Buddhists, especially monks, emphasise the peacefulness and non-violence of their religion and then go on to justify violence in the name of religion was already remarked upon by Bartholomeusz.¹⁰

Maybe it is not so much a contradiction, but a specific understanding of *ahimsa* as outlined above. This, in any case, seems to be the argument of Premasiri as well as of some other authors here. The former e.g. claims that true Buddhists do not engage in war unless compelled by circumstances and even then do not revel in unnecessary and gratuitous acts of cruelty. Peter Schalk discusses the etymology and meaning of *Dhammadipa* arguing that the present received translation 'island of *dhamma*' is grammatically and morphologically wrong. As a *bahuvrihi* compound it should be rendered either as 'having the *dhamma* as a light' or as 'island that has the *dhamma*', but he questions the meaning *dipa* = island on principle (both island and light are possible in Pali, whereas in Sanskrit, they would be clearly distinguished). Schalk doubts, moreover, that a return to either doctrinal prescriptions or etymological differentiations can help in solving the current conflict.

John Holt both summarises and expands on his earlier study *The Buddhist Visnu*. His piece is rich in material and information on Hindu influences on Buddhist practices and their acceptance and/or rejection by both laity and *sangha*. Like Gananath Obeyesekere in this volume he argues for the integration of the Tamil Other via religion while at the same time syncretising Hindu traits. This postulate is both remarkable and laudable, but does not really lend itself as a solution to the conflict that is fueled by factors other than religion as well. Interesting (though perhaps not unsurprising) is his finding that the most rigid claim for the right of the *sangha* to advise the king and the latter's duty to defend religion always arises in times of crisis when the country was e.g. invaded by Indian powers or during colonial conquest.

Obeyesekere argues in a similar vein for the integration of the Other into Sinhala society by means of Buddhism, albeit partly on the former's own terms. His article should primarily be read for its detailed discussion of the place and status of the Veddahs in Sri Lankan society. He describes them as an intermediate group, even as a kind of bridging link between Sinhalese

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 112–130 and passim.

and Tamils. The Veddahs, he says, have achieved a Sinhalisation the Tamils have not. He further argues that in Sri Lanka, Buddhist identity preceded the Sinhalese, and integration thus occurred on the basis of religion. He seems here to follow and modify R.A.L.H. Gunawardene's earlier argument about the emergence of Sinhala ethnicity, but whether the claim is true or not, it helps in no way to solve the current problems, on the contrary: the Murugan-worshipping Veddahs look suspiciously like Dravidians who lost their identity through assimilation to the Buddhist majority. This is precisely what the Tamils are most afraid of.

Obeyesekere deplors the violence visited on the Tamils and pleads for a peaceful solution. Likewise, the articles by R.A.L.H. Gunawardana and Chandra R. de Silva make a worthy and honest plea to treat the Tamils as citizens of the country and integrate them, to better educate monks in order to give them a broader view of the world and to do missionary work among the Tamils. This is all well-meant, well-argued, and quite sincere, but implicitly still follows the above-mentioned postulate of a Sinhala-Buddhist *Leitkultur* that the Tamils are so scared of. To be sure, there are no calls here for force or coercion, attempts at peaceful assimilation are demanded and considered the only way. Whether a solution lies in conversion which is also demanded by some others in this volume, may be doubted. Coercion or no coercion, the loss of identity would be the same.

Moreover, for all three scholars the LTTE is a *bête noire* whose ideas and demands cannot be taken seriously but have to be rejected with hands thrown up in horror and who have to be isolated from the wider Tamil society. For example, Obeyesekere denounces the attacks by the LTTE on the Dalada Maligawa temple without delving into the background of these attacks: the Dalada Maligawa is an explicit symbol of *political* power, as Holt demonstrates very clearly in the book here under review. In the face of these attacks all he can do is emphasise the peaceful character of the Sinhalese who have not retaliated against these atrocities with riots like in 1983. No, they don't need to: the army is doing their dirty work for them.

De Silva claims that the UN and the International Community have rejected separatism as though that constitutes a hallmark of approval for anything. While factually wrong – in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans they have indeed endorsed secession – this argument implies that there is no alternative: submit to majority coercion, resistance is futile.

The article by Bardwell Smith reads more like an opinion piece written on the hop and lacking stringency rather than a well thought out article when he deals with Tamil demands and perceptions. Why, e.g. does he place Tamils in one category together with Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims?

Tamil is not a religious term! Why he considers separatism a ‘virus’ remains unexplained. Where he got the information that the militant Tamils and not the militant Sinhalese ill-treat the plantation Tamils is a similar mystery. And if he quotes K.M. de Silva’s denial that the Kingdom of Jaffna ever exerted any real power beyond the Jaffna peninsula (p. 175),¹¹ he should also read earlier publications of the same author and where this sounds rather different.¹²

George Bond’s article on the meditation activities of Sarvodaya is another opinion piece and should be read as such. It is doubtful, however, whether the honourable activity of mass meditation can bring peace or a solution of the conflict. Until now, it has not seemed to be able to do so.

The article by Ananda Wickremeratne on historiography is simply annoying. Faulty metaphor, misplaced quotations, and misspelt French not an argument doth make. His argument – as far as one is recognisable – is banal and breathtaking at the same time: in a sweeping stroke he dismisses practically every scholar of repute from and on Sri Lanka over the last forty years as corrupted by Western ideology and perceptions, orientalism and accuses the authors of Sri Lankan ancestry of having been brought up entirely outside the country, thus not knowing what is what. Apart from the fact that this claim is plainly untrue it probably applies to the author – who lives in the USA – more than to any of the scholars disparaged by him. This claim, however, serves to undergird his accusation that it is Western-corrupted authors who present the fairy tale of Sri Lankan myths before a gaping public in order then to bust these wholly fictitious stories! It is not at all clear what Wickremeratne is aiming at here: is he attacking his colleagues for constructing or for deconstructing myths? And why should either of this be damnable: are these myths non-existent, should they not be deconstructed, or does he consider them as historical facts?

He then turns to the few scholars he considers acceptable because they do not see Buddhism and violence as a problem! There is a nugget of sense here when he attacks the normative (often Western, albeit eagerly accepted by Buddhists themselves) perception of peaceful Buddhism we discussed above. He then argues that the question why Buddhism or Buddhists are violent is as nonsensical as the relationship between violence and Islam or Christianity. Here, however, comes the catch: the author wants to reject the blame foisted on violent Buddhists implicitly carried in these perceptions with the correct statement that in spite of Christian doctrine, Christians,

¹¹ The source here is given as Gunasekara 1900: 29 which seems to be a misprint.

¹² de Silva, K.M., *A History of Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Oxford University Press 1981; *History of Ceylon*, vol. 3, Peradeniya: University of Ceylon Press 1973.

especially Christian rulers, were often violent. But he then goes on to state that this violence was never seen as a problem or even discussed in Christendom. Not only is this patently untrue, the argument also seems to aim at justifying violence as a mode of political behaviour. It is of course problematic and justly rejected if a people are held to a purported doctrine of peacefulness discovered not by them but by their colonial masters in the manner of: we tell you what your real religion is, why do you not follow it? But it is quite a different matter to derive from this a justification and celebration of war and violence as the ‘father of all things’. The author describes violence as a sort of liberating stroke cutting through liberal and leftist prattle and getting things done. Are we supposed to see the proof of this theory in Iraq and Sri Lanka at present? Indeed, he further states that ‘the historian is [...] aware that political settlements imposed by negotiation, ... are pregnant with the seeds of its [sic] future dissolution’ (p. 133). This reviewer, a historian herself, would like to put it on record that she is aware of no such thing. The author has not even the good sense to acknowledge that he is borrowing from Edward Luttwak’s article a few years ago ‘Give war a chance’¹³ whose argument is, however, more differentiated and much more subtle. He is not even consistent in his praise of violence: on the one hand he deplores that in the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 Delhi succumbed to ‘Tamilnadu terrorism’, a few paragraphs later he emphasises Sirima Bandaranaike’s insistence that her government acted with considerable restraint during the JVP rebellion of 1971, because she was Buddhist! This statement may be read with astonishment by many who are familiar with the events of 1971. Is violence then ‘cool’ or is it not? Whether ignoring violence is salutary or not is debatable, what is certainly not correct is to state approvingly that Armenia, Babi Yar, Mai Lai and other places of atrocity are nearly forgotten nowadays and nobody is interested in them anymore. This is not the case.

In short, the author implicitly justifies the violence of the Sri Lankan state against the Tamils with the argument that other nations and governments committed violence against their and other peoples with impunity. Further he denies that there is a Sinhala-Buddhist ideology behind these acts of violence (the right of Buddhists to act violently apparently notwithstanding) – something he tries to prove with a rambling discussion of Sinhalese Christians and their strong adherence to ethnic instead of religious roots – and that the riots from 1958 onwards were first, unconnected and second, not anti-Tamil. In fact, flying in the face of all evidence to the contrary he argues that monks never ever played a political or advisory role

¹³ Luttwak, Edward N., Give War a Chance, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1999. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/1999/4.html>

to the kings, demanding in nearly the same breath that a Buddhist political front be formed. To argue that Buddhism did not play a political role when it is well-known e.g. that the leaders of the independence struggle had to reconvert to Buddhism in order to succeed is indeed remarkable!

If violence is so salutary one wonders why he then condemns the violence of the LTTE so fiercely. The crowning glory of his argument is his insidious acknowledgment of the justice of the Tamil position when he says that the Sinhalese Buddhists are waiting for their own Prabhakaran to fight for *their* rights. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

In his article, Asanga Tilakaratne reviews Seneviratne's above-mentioned *Work of Kings* and Bartholomeusz/de Silva's volume on Buddhist fundamentalism, dwelling especially on the views of these studies on the true vocation of monks and on the relationship between Buddhism and violence. Whether one monk, who straddles the categories employed by Seneviratne, and who accepts Buddhist titles of honour from a nasty regime that instrumentalises Buddhism for suppressing its own people, invalidates a whole line of argument may be doubted. Tilakaratne is right when he says that corruption of the clergy does not mean and is not limited to chauvinistic monks. Indeed, it impartially transcends all lines and frontiers of ideology and affiliation! Like Wickremeratne, Tilakaratne endeavours to justify the use of violence by Buddhists and in Buddhism, but without employing the former's obfuscation. He highlights the fact that from very early, monks and disciples of the Buddha followed alternative paths, that of renunciation and that of action: While Mahakassapa was the model of the ascetic monk, Ananda demanded the teaching of the *dhamma* to others and for this purpose was ready to forego immediate nirvana. Both attitudes are considered honourable. Description and argument here cannot be faulted, but the author then jumps to another level of argument altogether: on the basis of the foregoing distinction he claims a duty to defend Buddhism by armed force in the case of threat, citing the disappearance of Buddhism in India as an example for what happens if this is not done. There are several faulty turns in this reasoning: would the extinction of Buddhism in India (whether this happened by force or not) have been prevented if force had been employed? Hinduism survived, sometimes by violent, but more often by passive resistance. One should not forget that the extinction of Buddhism in India was the way to the – non-violent – conversion of a larger part of Southeast Asia. The crucial question here is, however, what is supposed to be saved or preserved by armed force: the doctrine or something altogether different? The author states that it is the ability to live the doctrine in peace and security that is saved, but he still mixes up two activities: that of the missionary who travels abroad teaching and maintaining the *dhamma*, and that of spreading and/or maintaining public adherence to a religious system

by the sword. How one can be substituted for the other is a difficult question indeed. Besides, if religion is intended to be maintained and/or spread forcefully, it would exactly fulfil the meaning of ‘unethical conversion’, an activity allegedly undertaken by Christian groups in Sri Lanka at the moment and considered so dangerous that draft laws have been introduced to counter-vail the danger. What, moreover, would the Tamils call the efforts at conversion of their own low castes which is propagated by the author as a means to solve the problem and for which, according to him, not enough has been done by the *sangha*? One has to grant Tilakaratne that at least he states things and opinions as they are; the naiveté of some other authors in the volume is staggering in comparison.

The last article by Mahinda Deegalle is interesting because it is extremely rich in material and is the first in-depth discussion of the foundation, functioning and programme of the Jathika Helu Urumaya, the first party in Sri Lanka whose founders and members are practically all monks and which won nine seats in the last elections. To furnish a description of this party alone merits praise. Whether it is a good thing, however, as the author assumes, that religion represented in the form of monks as MPs has now so openly entered politics, is another question. Deegalle describes the internal squabbles and subsequent splits of the JHU and its predecessors in some detail and particularly discusses the impact of the sudden death of the Ven. Gangodavila Soma in 2003. At the time, conspiracy theories about foul play were bandied about which the author does not completely refute. In fact, he sees this death as a catalyst for the emergence of the JHU. The party comes across as an organisation that aims at privileging the Sinhalese first and Buddhism second above all else. Deegalle seems to consider political engagement as a legitimate and traditional task of monks (thereby contradicting Wickremeratne); intervening in times of crisis and danger to the religion has always been considered a monk’s duty. Except that the JHU is not very much bothered about religion, all the more about ethnicity and ethnic power as this reviewer had occasion to find out. Apart from the fact that the aims of the party appear rather narrow even for a non-secular state (which Sri Lanka is not), only in the last sentence does the author seem to become aware that such a course might not be exactly conducive to a peaceful solution of the current conflict.

Many of the articles in this volume and the arguments put forward appear problematic. Some show grave errors of fact or reasoning. Yet for anybody trying to gauge the ‘Sinhala mindset’, whether of a radical or a liberal bent, this publication is invaluable.

Regarding the Sinhala Buddhists there seems to exist a palpable and probably genuine fear of their not being able to live and practice their religion according to their intentions unless defended and secured by force,

primarily against the Tamils. It would be illuminating to follow up on these results and investigate where this fear comes from. Further, it would be worth examining whether factors inherent in and indigenous to the doctrine and philosophy of the religion may be responsible for this or whether it is in reality political intentions and factors that led to these developments.