

## BUDDHIST NATIONALISM AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho  
(ngier@uidaho.edu)

A Norwegian brokered cease fire in Sri Lanka has collapsed and violence is once again raging on this beautiful island, once described as the pearl earring of India. An estimated 80,000 people have lost their lives in this long 23-year-old conflict.

In addition to military battles between the Tamil Tigers and government forces, there have been other ethnic and religious clashes. Contrary to the traditional image of their religion, militant Buddhists have also attacked Muslims and Christians.

One monk has called for a holy war against the Tamils and has written songs for soldiers going into battle. One urges them not to return home until their weapons are "smeared with blood," and it also promises that they will attain Nirvana by defending their Buddhist homeland.

During 2003-04, 165 Sri Lankan Christian churches were attacked, resulting in the complete destruction of some, the stoning of parsonages, the smashing of statues, and the burning the Bibles and hymnals. This year Buddhist nationalists are urging Christians to cancel Christmas celebrations, and militants regularly attempt to close down Christians services. On September 14, a church in the town of Mannar was torched and burned to the ground.

Sri Lanka has the largest percentage of Christians in South Asia, and 25 percent of those are Tamils. The father of Tamil nationalism was not a Hindu but a Malaysian Christian. Christians say that one reason they are being targeted is that they are accused of being Tamil sympathizers. The other reason is that Protestant Christian missionaries have had considerable success in recent years, which has led to Buddhist charges of unethical conversions. One website claims that Evangelicals and Pentecostals have increased from 50,000 to 240,000 since 1980.

Taking a page out of the book of Hindu fundamentalists, who have passed anti-conversion law in six Indian states, Buddhist legislators have drafted a similar bill that would outlaw the conversion, “by the use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means,” of a person from one religion to another. Happily, the legislation failed to pass.

Some Buddhist extremists have spread rumors that Christians had assassinated the Buddhist monk who initiated the bill, even though an autopsy showed that he had died of a heart attack. Sri Lankan police have been criticized for being slow in making arrests and for dismissing the attackers as mere drunks, but some observers suspect that they are encouraged by radical elements of a socialist party that has supported a strong nationalist platform for decades.

Over the centuries effective rituals were developed to reconcile the presence of non-Buddhists in what some Buddhists perceive to be the cosmic center of the Dharma. These premodern systems of integrating the “other” have now been supplanted by a modern concept of a Buddhist nation state that is exclusionary rather than inclusionary.

In 1908 Dharmapala, the father of Sri Lankan religious nationalism, declared that “Buddhism was completely identified with the racial individuality of the people.” As scholar Peter Schalk states: “This is probably one of the most conflict creating public statements made in the 20th century. . . . He stated explicitly that Sri Lanka belongs to the Buddhist Sinhalese and for the Tamils there is South India.”

Buddhist Scripture does not use *arya* as a racial term; rather, it is an honorific for all those who embrace the Dharma. Literally, it means “the noble ones.” Like the Body of Christ, there are no distinctions within the body of the Buddha. Both Buddhist and Christian nationalists distort their religious texts to promote their own racial and ethnic agendas.

It is unfortunate that American evangelical Christians spread the myth of the Aryan Sinhalese. One of their websites states that the Buddhist portion of the

island's population (72 percent) is Sinhala and Aryan, unwittingly implying that the Sri Lankan Christians, Muslims, and Hindus are inferior.

Nationalist claims to ethnic and religious purity have never been borne out by the facts. Sri Lanka's founding myth involves the intermingling of native peoples with Hindu immigrants from North and South India. Historically, Buddhism did not arrive in Sri Lanka until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE.

It is a fact that Buddhist frequently kings fended off military invasions from South India, but just as often they formed alliances with Hindu rulers and traders from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Most Buddhist kings welcomed South Indians with open arms, giving them lands and titles, just as South Indians welcomed Jews and Christians to their Southwest Malabar coast. It was the Dutch who destroyed the Jewish cities and the Portuguese who forced the Indian Christians to convert to Roman Catholicism.

The supreme irony is that the Tamil kings of Sri Lanka (1739-1815) did the most to restore the Sinhalese Buddhist priesthood and promote Buddhist art and architecture. When the British took over in 1815 and favored Christian missionaries, Buddhism went into an 80 year decline.

The flag of Sri Lankan contains two stripes, green embracing the Muslims and orange integrating the Hindus, thus validating their Sinhalese identity in the Country of the Lion (=Sinhala). Buddhist nationalists have removed these colored strips from their flag, so the sword in the lion's hand must now appear much more menacing to Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, the Hindus comprising 12 percent of the population with Muslims and Christians claiming 8 percent each.

The Tamil Tigers are just as much to blame for their many atrocities, but I believe that terrorists, whatever their nationality or religion, are made not born. For decades Tamil moderates proposed a reasonable federal solution as they pleaded for social, economic, and linguistic inclusion with some autonomy.

Until the 1970s a great majority of Tamils would not have supported a separate state, just as most Indian Muslims did not support Partition. Tragically, Muslim and Hindu extremists won out in 1948, but let us hope that the Sri Lankans can avoid the catastrophic dislocation that ravaged India.

Fortunately, the Tamil Tigers do not embrace the Hindu fundamentalism that many Indians do. Their grievances are primarily economic and linguistic not religious. The first step to peace for Sri Lankans is to acknowledge the fact that for over 2,200 years their beautiful island has been, is now, and must always be a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.