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THE DIALECTIC OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN SRI LANKA

DONALD E. SMITH

In this article I propose to sketch in broad strokes the political role of Buddhism in the twenty-seven years since independence. The subject is a fascinating one which has attracted a substantial amount of research over the past decade, and this literature makes the inclusion of extensive factual detail in this essay unnecessary.¹ It is therefore possible to devote primary attention to the development of a scheme of interpretation.

The comparative study of religion and politics in developing areas points up some seeming paradoxes. On one hand, it is clear that a multifaceted process of secularization of the polity has been taking place since the early nineteenth century. On the other hand, religion has been a powerful factor in the emergence of mass politics, in some cases attacking directly the secular values and assumptions associated with the concept of a modern polity.² How do these apparently opposing processes relate to each other?

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The process of secularization in relation to the political system is itself a complex phenomenon, and it is possible to distinguish analytically at least four major aspects of the process:

1. *Polity-separation secularization* refers to the institutional separation of polity and religion and the denial of the religious identity of the polity. This aspect of secularization involves government's rejection of its traditional role as promoter and defender of the faith, and the rejection of religious ideas as the basis of its legitimacy.

1. See particularly: Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1 (Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1966); the chapters on Ceylon by D. E. Smith, A. Jeyaratnam Wilson and C. D. S. Siriwardane in Donald E. Smith, ed. *South Asian Politics and Religion*, (Princeton University Press, 1966); Gananath Obeyesekere, "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon", and S. U. Kodikara, "Communalism and Political Modernisation in Ceylon", both in *Modern Ceylon Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1970.
2. These two themes are considered in the context of South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Latin America in D. E. Smith, ed., *Religion and Political Modernization* (Yale University Press, 1974).

2. *Polity-expansion secularization* involves the expansion of the political system into areas of society formerly regulated by religion. The polity thus extends its jurisdiction into areas of education, law, economic activity, etc., which were subject to religious norms and structures in the traditional system.

3. *Political-culture secularization* refers to the transformation of values associated with the polity; secular notions of political community, the legitimacy of the polity, and the meaning of politics replace traditional religious notions in the thinking of many people.

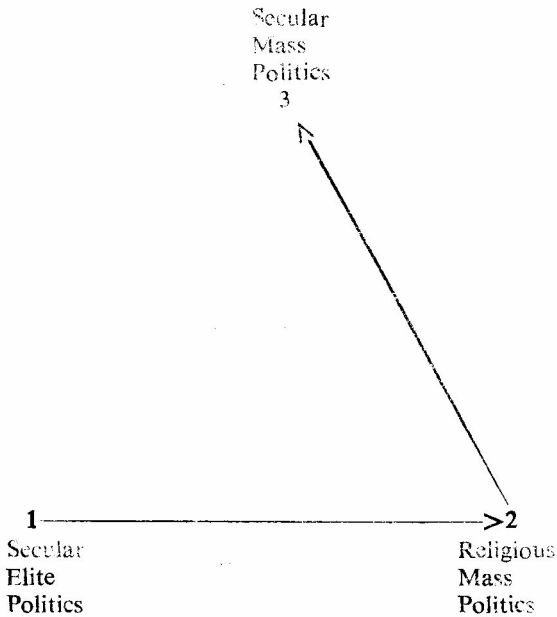
4. *Political-process secularization* is the decline in political saliency and influence of religious leaders, religious interest groups, religious political parties, and religious issues; and also the weakening of religious identity and ideology of the actors as a consequence of participation in the political process. For example, the waning influence of religious political parties and/or their increasingly secular orientation would both be manifestations of political-process secularization.³

Much could be said about the interrelationships among these four aspects of secularization, but we cannot pursue the point here except to note that the first two (polity-separation and polity-expansion secularization) are largely initiated and implemented by modernizing governmental elites, foreign or native, while the latter two aspects (political-culture and political-process secularization) are related to numerous factors not readily subject to governmental policy and control.

The importance of religion in the politics of developing societies is related to its centrality in the traditional culture of the masses. Stated in its simplest terms, in the traditional setup, religion is a mass phenomenon, politics is not; but the use of religious symbols can make politics meaningful to the masses, it can be the vehicle of mass politicization. Once mass political participation becomes an established pattern, the religious factor tends to decline. Politics generates its own values and offers its own rewards, which are likely to be political, social, and economic; the "crutch" of religion becomes unnecessary to the maintenance of the political process in which the masses are now involved, although isolated religious issues may become politically relevant from time to time.

The notion of dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—posits a dynamic, causative relationship between phases which occur in sequence. I propose it here only as a useful way of viewing this twenty-seven-year span of independent Ceylon's political history. To my mind, the growth of mass political participation must be reckoned one of the most significant changes in Ceylon since 1948, and the notion of dialectic is useful in explaining the relationship of religion to this process. The dialectic proceeds from Secular Elite Politics to Religious Mass Politics to Secular Mass Politics.

3. These four definitions, and a fifth not relevant to the case of Sri Lanka, are found in *ibid.*, p. 8.



It is hardly necessary to add that, although there are some notable turning-points, this is a general interpretive scheme and no precise dates mark the end of one phase and the beginning of another. Let us now proceed to fill in some of the historical data.

SECULARIZATION UNDER BRITISH RULE

The secularizing impact of British rule on Ceylon was so profound, and sustained over such a long period, that it required considerable effort for the Buddhist layman in 1948 even to imagine how different life had been in the traditional Sinhalese kingdoms of the past. The richness and antiquity of the Buddhist tradition was there, preserved in the *Mahavamsa* and in the architecture and sculpture of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, but it was no longer regarded as politically relevant.

Prince Vijaya, grandson of a lion and a princess, landed in Lanka on the precise day the Lord Buddha passed away, but not before he had designated it the chosen place where his religion would be established, entrusting it to the protection of the king of the gods. The fusion of Buddhism and Sinhalese national identity was in evidence as early as the second century B.C. when King Dutthagamani fought to liberate the northern part of the island from Hindu Tamil invaders: his battle cry: "Not for kingdom, but for Buddhism". Coronation rituals and the possession of certain relics conferred legitimacy on Sinhalese rulers, and they in turn ceremonially offered the whole kingdom to the sacred tooth relic. The chief function of the king was to protect and promote the faith; he was chief patron of the Sangha as well as responsible for overseeing its discipline. The traditional religio-political system, which had survived innumerable political upheavals previously, came to an end in 1815.

The British government pledged in the Kandyan Convention to continue royal protection of Buddhism, even while continuing its official connection with the Church of England. But the overwhelming fact is that the traditional system, in which religion had played a major legitimizing and integrating role in the state, had come to an end. The bureaucratic colonial structure which the British erected was secular in its organization, purposes, and spirit, and had no *essential* connection to either Buddhism or Christianity. Vestiges remained, but the process of *polity separation secularization* had clearly begun.

Polity-expansion secularization proceeded with the extension of secular legal codes and courts, and legislation with far-reaching effects on the social structure, such as the abolition of *rajakariya*. Of critical importance was the great expansion of governmental responsibility in the area of education, as government schools and state-aided missionary schools with their essentially western curriculum displaced the monastery schools in which Buddhist monks had instructed the young in the Dhamma and the skills of literacy throughout Sinhalese history.

SECULAR ELITE POLITICS

As it developed, the most prestigious sector of this system of western education utilized English as the exclusive medium of instruction and prepared students for admission to university either in Ceylon or England, after which they made their way into government service or the professions. Some came from families of landed wealth but most from humbler social circumstances, from Sinhalese Buddhist and Hindu Tamil and other communities, but the English-educated elite which evolved was remarkably homogeneous in terms of its values, for the common cultural imprint of England was deep.⁴ The Christians, a minority of 9 per cent, contributed a substantial number of leading families to the elite, and Christian dominance in education as well as the religious association of the rulers and of western culture, combined to create the high prestige of Christianity in Ceylon.

The English-educated elite of Sinhalese background in particular became increasingly cut off from the culture of the masses. English was literally the mother tongue of several generations of certain Sinhalese families, and while they might have remained nominal Buddhists this was a vestige which bore little relationship to their highly Anglicized lifestyle.

As we have noted, British rule produced fundamental changes in Ceylonese society in terms of polity-separation and polity expansion secularization. Its English educational system produced impressive results also in terms of *political-culture secularization* as the secular values of British liberalism and parliamentary democracy were absorbed by the elite. The process was very incomplete, however, for it never went beyond the urban westernized elite to produce a transformation of values among the rural masses. By and large, traditional religious and caste values remained supreme in the village.

4. On the impact of western education, see Michael M. Ames, "Westernization or Modernization: the Case of Sinhalese Buddhism", *Social Compass*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1973.

Politics was a monopoly of the English educated class, and their posture vis-a-vis the British government was a moderate one.⁵ Law degrees from England, participation in an expanding economy in Ceylon, and faith in the progress of parliamentary institutions were among the factors which inclined the elite toward a conservative brand of politics. Ceylonese nationalism was a very mild affair, without the mass mobilization, non-violent and violent conflict, and massive arrests which shook India over a period of three decades. Remarkably, even the institution of universal suffrage in 1931 did not make Ceylonese politics less a monopoly of the elite. For the most part the politicians dealt not with the masses, but with the local notables (landlords, caste and village leaders, etc.) who could deliver blocs of votes in exchange for patronage.

Independence dawned in 1948, the Union Jack was hauled down and the Lion Flag was raised to the stirring roll of drums. But the era of Secular Elite Politics went on without marked change, and would continue as long as all players observed the cardinal rule of the game, namely, that nothing be done to make participants out of spectators.

RELIGIOUS MASS POLITICS

The more sensitive intellectuals of the western educated elite were troubled by their image if not identity as brown Englishman. In an age of nationalism, of renascent Asia, it was uncomfortable to claim one's place in the sun as the class most like the displaced foreign rulers in all the former British Empire. But undoubtedly, had the new governmental elite succeeded in maintaining a high degree of cohesion (a most difficult assignment in any political system), the dramatic changes would have been postponed for some years. As it turned out, the frustrated aspirations of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike led to his departure from D. S. Senanayake's cabinet and the founding of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

The political genius of Bandaranaike lay in his systematic rejection of the westernized cultural image over a period of years, in religion, language, and dress, and in the creation of a political program based on the supremacy of a Sinhalese Buddhist national identity. In short, he embraced the cultural symbols of the majority of the population; he appealed *directly* to the rural masses. He promised to make Sinhalese the sole official language, and to restore Buddhism to its "rightful place" in state and society. It was a populist appeal sacralized by reference to a glorious Buddhist past.

Bandaranaike's overwhelming victory in 1956 might perhaps have happened if the conflict involved only the westernized elite and the Sinhalese Buddhist masses. But the situation was immeasurably complicated by majority-minority conflicts and communal grievances provided much of the emotional power of Bandaranaike's movement.⁶ For various reasons, the Ceylon Tamils and the Christians had both

5. See Marshall R. Singer, *The Emerging Elite*, (M.I.T. Press, 1964); and Tissa Fernando, "Elite Politics in the New States: The Case of Post-Independence Sri Lanka", *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1973.

6. See Robert N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon* (Duke University Press, 1967).

done far better in the educational and economic competition than their numbers would have predicted. The All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress, in its famous report, *The Betrayal of Buddhism*, interpreted these facts as part of a sustained conspiracy on the part of British imperialism to relegate Buddhism and the Buddhist community to a markedly inferior position. Thus a post-independence Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism identified several enemies: a westernized elite, religious and linguistic minorities, and British imperialism.

The organized role of the *bhikkhus* (Buddhist monks) was another dramatic innovation in Ceylon politics. Though still endowed with high social prestige and accorded the greatest deference by individual laymen, the *sangha* had witnessed the steady erosion under foreign rule of its once impressive prerogatives of societal regulation and political influence. This traditional religious elite had every reason to overthrow a system which had made it increasingly irrelevant, although the monks' political activism was clearly contrary to Vinaya requirements of monastic discipline. Bandaranaike's clerical allies, the United Monks Front led by Rev. M. Buddharakkhita, waged a vigorous and effective campaign on his behalf. Buddharakkhita by virtue of his position as chief priest of the Kelaniya Temple, had access to considerable wealth, some of which he diverted to the political campaign. As vice president of the SLFP he was a member of Bandaranaike's inner circle, and he saw himself as the power behind the throne. He and his colleagues in the United Monks Front leadership did in fact wield great power after the 1956 victory, constituting a kind of supra-cabinet. The political monks proved to be the most aggressive advocates of Sinhala Only, opposed the search for compromises with the Tamils, and were a factor of some importance in the bloody Sinhalese-Tamil clashes of 1958. Bandaranaike and Buddharakkhita became locked in a personal feud and power struggle behind the scenes. Bandaranaike was killed by a monk in 1959, and Buddharakkhita was convicted as the arch-conspirator of the assassination plot.

Communal issues continued to be important in the first administration of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, particularly in the nationalization of the aided schools in 1961, which ended Christian dominance in the field of education. An important symbolic act was the replacement of an Anglican Christian, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, by a staunch Buddhist, William Gopallawa, as Governor General of Ceylon in 1962. By 1964 most of the grievances of the Sinhalese Buddhists had been attended to, and minority domination of certain departments of the civil and military services had come to an end.

Mrs. Bandaranaike's formation of a coalition government with the Marxist LSSP in 1964, however, alienated the more conservative Buddhists, monks and laymen alike. Monks played an important part in the 1965 elections, predominantly on behalf of the UNP which won a plurality. The new government, formed with the support of the Federal Party, pledged itself to the restoration of communal harmony, and a Tamil occupied a cabinet post for the first time since 1956.

SECULAR MASS POLITICS

The UNP had learned a lot since 1956, and it was anxious to establish its fundamental Sinhalese Buddhist identity. Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake therefore pledged to restore Buddhism to its ancient glory and strengthen the Sangha. One specific measure which was enacted substituted the Buddhist sabbath days for Sundays as public holidays.

The government focussed primary attention on the economic problems which had been mounting over the previous decade, and made creditable progress in dealing with several of them. As the 1970 elections approached, however, it appeared that the relative improvement in the economy only served to underline the plight of the growing ranks of the educated unemployed. The adoption of Sinhalese and Tamil as media of instruction and the great expansion of university education after 1956, designed to create equality of opportunity and aid the disadvantaged majority, had produced far more graduates than the economy could absorb.

Mrs. Bandaranaike and the SLFP moved steadily leftward in response to these growing economic problems. Allied with the LSSP and the Communist Party she won a decisive victory in 1970 and formed a leftist government with a Marxist minister of Finance. The 1971 insurrection, which shook the government and the people of the island as no other event since independence, was led by young Marxists who had already decided that the leftists in power were opportunists and moving too slowly, and that the solution to Ceylon's economic problems lay in violent revolution.

The Ceylonese electorate today is largely literate and highly politicized; an amazing 80 percent of qualified voters participate in elections. The gravitation of politics toward economic issues, which has meant a significant swing leftward, also means the emergence of Secular Mass Politics in Sri Lanka. The Constitution finally adopted in 1972 declares: "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism...." It is ironic that this symbolic victory of Buddhism came fifteen years after its real political victory, and at a time when religion is clearly being pushed into the background by economics.

We have earlier in this article provided illustrations of polity-separation, polity-expansion, and political-culture secularization in the history of Sri Lanka. It is only to this latest period right up to the present that we can apply the fourth category: *political-process secularization*, the decline in political saliency and influence of religious leaders, religious interest groups, religious political parties, and religious issues; and also the weakening of religious identity and ideology of the actors as a consequence of participation in the political process.

It would be foolish to attempt any long-range predictions, but a major resurgence of political Buddhism in Sri Lanka seems unlikely in the near future for the following reasons:

1. The Sinhalese Buddhist majority is now in firm control of most areas of social, economic and political life. It was the anomaly of this community's minority-like status in various respects which generated much of the emotional commitment to its most important symbolic system, Buddhism.

2. Buddha statues have sprung up in many public places, the symbolic enthronement of Buddhism has been achieved in the Constitution, and no important new goals have been articulated by influential Buddhist leaders. Buddhism, unlike Islam contains no ideology of a comprehensive sacral society such as still inspires a Quaddafi in Libya. A movement of religio-political resurgence cannot prosper or even survive without clear objectives.

3. As argued above, the centrality of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka has made a deep impression at all levels of society. The country's economic problems are likely to be prolonged, and an increasingly literate and politicized electorate may well come to regard all religious issues in politics as so many red herrings. The frustrations generated by growing economic ills may lead to an increase in inter-group conflict, but even when this takes the form of communal conflict it is unlikely that Buddhism per se will play the important role in politics it once did.