Beyond Theological Essentialism and Ethnic Reductionism: A Review Essay about Religion and the Peace Process in Sri Lanka

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I review the extant research literature about the role of religious leaders and organizations in the peace process in Sri Lanka. I conclude that we know very little about most of the religious communities in the country. In fact, I have not been able to identify any serious research about the religious leaders or organizations in the Hindu, Muslim or Christian communities. Some research has been carried out on the role of Buddhist leaders and organizations. However, I believe that a large part of this academic literature may be classified as either theological essentialism or ethnic reductionism. Theological essentialism takes religious doctrine as its point of departure, whereas ethnic reductionism sees religion as a static aspect of ethnic identity. In my view, both of these approaches have shortcomings. I propose that future research focus less on religion as doctrine and religion as a constituent of ethnic identity, and more on religious organizations in a transnational context, and religious leaders and their ways of exercising authority. I suggest some

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areas where more research would be valuable, particularly on matters related to the minority religions and their ambitions in a transnational context.

Key words: Buddhism, Religion, Politics, War, Peace.

I. Introduction

My aim in this article is to review the extant research literature about the role played by religious leaders and organizations in the peace process in Sri Lanka. The increasingly important role of religion in political processes, including ethnic conflicts, has led to new research in recent years (Haynes 1998). Several books and articles have been published exploring the roles of religion in violent conflicts and its potential for peace building and reconciliation (Haar and Busuttil 2005; Gort, Jansen and Vroom 2002). Scholars are talking about a de-privatization of religion or a de-secularization of society. Indeed, the public role of religion in Sri Lanka seems to be growing rapidly.[1] This review paper of the academic literature is intended to provide a point of departure for future research. My plan was to solicit assistance from local academic contacts in finding and assessing research in local languages; this literature would be inaccessible to a Western audience. However, when I started to make an inventory of the extant academic books and articles, it turned out that very little serious research had been carried out on the issue of religious leaders and organizations in the peace process. In fact, nothing of significance has been written on the issue in the local

languages of Sinhalese or Tamil. Moreover, no research has been done on the role of Christian, Hindu or Muslim leaders or organizations. Thus, most of the literature reviewed here is research about Buddhism published in English.

My conclusion is that the research may be divided in two. On the one hand, there is a literature about Buddhism and peace work produced by scholars in the humanities, such as classical Buddhist studies and theology. This literature almost invariably takes Buddhist doctrine as its point of departure building arguments about the political role of Buddhism in Sri Lanka from the basic tenets of Buddhist teaching. On the other hand, there is a more substantial body of research literature produced by social scientists, in particular political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists. This literature is concerned with the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and it treats Buddhism as one aspect of the ethnic fabric of the Sinhalese majority in the country. In my view, both of these approaches have serious shortcomings. The literature that takes Buddhist doctrine as its point of departure makes the mistake of *essentialzing* religion to theological doctrine and makes grand statements about the potential, or lack of potential, in Buddhism for contributing to the peace process. Therefore, I call this strand of scholarship *theological essentialism*. The research literature within social science that analyses the ethnic conflict has inherited the social scientific blind spot for religion. Scholars in ethnic studies often *reduce* religion to matters of ethnic identity. Thus, I call this strand of scholarship *ethnic reductionism*.

It is my view that we need an approach to religion that puts less emphasis both on religious doctrine and on religion as an aspect of ethnic identity. We need to carry out research that puts more emphasis on religious organization, religious structures of authority and the role of religious organizations and religious leaders in political processes. In particular, we need to study the way that Sri Lankan religious leaders and organizations work in times of conflict, how they have reacted to peace-initiatives, whether and how their reactions have influenced their respective constituencies, and how the work of these organizations has implications for political processes in the country. Towards the end of this article, I intend to give a few suggestions

about what kinds of research that needs to be encouraged and funded in order to get a better understanding of the role of religion in the peace process in Sri Lanka and how such research might be conceptualized.

II. Theological essentialism

When I use the term *theological essentialism* here, I mean a particular approach to the study of the relationship between religion and conflict in Sri Lanka. This approach takes religious doctrine as its starting point and develops arguments about the roles, or potential roles, of religion in the conflict from these doctrines. In practice, the notion of theological essentialism is applicable here only to academic studies of Sinhalese Buddhism because, as mentioned above, there has been done little or no academic work on the other religious traditions and their roles in the peace process. The typical book or article within the paradigm that I call theological essentialism would take one or several relevant concepts or notions from the Theravada Buddhist tradition as its point of departure. Relevant concepts would typically include peace, war, morality, friendship, political authority, kingship, violence and non-violence. The place to look for these concepts would often be canonical or post-canonical Buddhist literature in Pali.

In order to illustrate this approach to the subject matter, we may start by looking at a conference on Buddhism and conflict in Sri Lanka held at Bath Spa Univ. College in June 2002. (I will refer to this as the Bath conference.) This conference was organized by The Buddhist Federation of Norway and The United Kingdom Association for Buddhist Studies. The Bath conference concentrated explicitly on the textual resources in the Theravada Buddhist tradition and on the potential of Buddhism for creating peace and reconciliation. The conference was organized under four headings 1) Material from the Pali Canon relevant to an analysis of the place of armed conflict, human rights, and conflict resolution 2) The Pali chronicles and the way they have been used by parties to the conflict 3) The roots of the Sinhalese-Tamil

conflict 4) Voices, perspectives, fears, aspirations that feed into the conflict. Looking at the individual papers given at the conference, one finds that most of the papers take the basic approach of the textual scholar and historian. Moreover, most of the papers are written from an explicitly activist agenda, and from the insider's view of the religious tradition. Dr Mahinda Deegalle, one of the organizers of the conference, gave a paper about Theravada attitudes towards violence looking at canonical Pali texts and what they have to say about violence. Dr Deegalle concludes that the causes of the conflict in Sri Lanka are economic rather than religious, but he adds that the role of the Buddhist in this context will be to explore ways to bring peace to all religious and ethnic communities in the country (Deegalle 2003). The paper of Bhikkhu Professor Dhammavihari is a an excellent example of a local scholar wrestling with his own religious tradition in order re-interpret the Buddhist textual tradition and question its use in a nationalist agenda. Dhammavihari attacks what he sees as a "criminal" and misguided modern translation and interpretation of the Mahavamsa, the great historical chronicle that has become perhaps the most important historical source for Sinhalese nationalist ideas. He points to passages in the Mahavamsa about King Dutugemenu going to war against the Tamils. Facing the threat to the religion and his own rule, the king carries with him the royal scepter (*kunta*) with the relics (*dhatu*) of the Buddha. In our own times, faulty translations have given rise to the idea that the word kunta really meant spear and thus to the great nationalist symbol of the ancient king going to war with the holy relics attached to a deadly weapon. In the words of Dhammavihari: "This, we are compelled to call a grave error of very serious consequences. This has enabled later writers in Sri Lankan history to give the national and religious consciousness of the day an unfortunately malicious slant" (Dhammavihari 2003). The historical accounts of Buddhist texts are one important focus of the Bath Conference papers－another is ethics. In a paper about the place for a righteous war in Buddhism, Professor P. D. Premasiri, a well-known expert on Buddhist ethics, looks at the canonical texts of Theravada Buddhism asking whether they contain normative principles that may be invoked in favor of a righteous war for the

protection of the faith. Premasiri's conclusion is that the idea of a just war (*dharma yuddha*) is absent from the Buddhist tradition and that war is always an evil, according to Buddhist teachings (Premasiri 2003). Summing up this brief review of the papers given at the Bath Conference, we may conclude that a majority of the papers were concerned with Buddhism as a textual tradition looking at the innate resources for building peace in the teachings of Buddhism. The credibility of the Bath Conference stemmed from the fact that it was organized as a meeting point between Sri Lankan and Western scholars and that the conference contained a considerable element of activism. By this I mean that the aim of the papers was not purely academic but they sought to contribute to the discussion about how to use Buddhism to promote peace. This approach might be very valuable, but in my opinion it requires a clear representation of local scholars and activists, as was the case in Bath. To put it differently, it is my view that insiders to the tradition must lead the way in the critique or discussion of the relevance of Buddhist doctrine to the conflict and its possible resolution. If the legitimacy provided by activism from inside the tradition is lacking, one easily ends up with a variant of theological essentialism that is valueless, in my view.

One recent work that shows the pitfalls of theological essentialism from an outsider's perspective is an article by Eva K. Neumaier, Professor of Religious Studies at the Univ. of Alberta, which was a contribution to an edited volume about religion and peace building edited by Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith (Neumaier 2004). Neumaier's chapter starts out by giving a short introduction to the fundamental history of Buddhism in India and its most basic precepts. This introduction is necessary, according to the author, in order to discuss the "innate obstacles towards peace building" in Buddhism as well as "the potentials the Buddhist teachings provide for building peace" (2004, 69). Neumaier believes that Buddhism contains basic tenets that "seem to cripple Buddhist attempts at addressing sociopolitical issues" (2004, 74). These precepts include the idea that the monk should not relate to issues of this world, that the sangha is aloof and that all social problems are the results of karma and should therefore be addressed within the realm of individual

responsibility. Neumaier argues that this individualizing and psychologizing tendency is reflected in the very concept of peace that dominates in Buddhist thought. Here she refers specifically to the word *shanti*, which carries a concept of peace that is about the inner tranquility and balance rather than about a state of non-aggression and cooperation between groups of people. In other words, Neumaier argues that the Buddhist concept of peace (*shanti*) corresponds to a very low degree with the concept of peace used by modern writers in the English language. Thus, Neumaier asserts, it is fair to ask whether Buddhists and modern peace builders even speak about the same thing when they talk about peace? Neumaier concludes that the incongruity in fact represents an innate obstacle to peace building in Buddhism. Buddhists have traditionally understood "peace" to mean a mental quality to be cultivated through meditation rather than social and ethical responsibility and this prevented Buddhist from looking for resources in their own tradition for building peace between groups of people (Neumaier 2004, 74-75). Another major obstacle to peace in the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition, according the Neumaier, is the trend to adopt a mytho-historical narrative−most importantly that contained in the Mahavamsa−as the script of national identity that leads to a fundamentalist reading of Buddhist culture and history (2004, 75). Neumaier sums up the missed opportunities: "Much of Buddhist history is a history of missed opportunities to build peace. Buddhists are like people who hold in their hands the tools to their liberation from imprisonment but who have forgotten how to use them" (Neumaier 2004, 86) She goes on to say that the much to the shame of Buddhist societies they did nothing to improve the status of women and that Buddhist literature is rife with gynophobic statements (2004, 86). She also asserts that beggars and disabled people are bad, according to Buddhist thought, because bad karma caused them to be born in their present state. Buddhists also display a complete lack of concern for the environment, according to Neumaier (2004, 88-89). Neumaier's article is a bad and glaringly arrogant piece of work and may stand as an example of theological essentialism at its worst.

    A better attempt to identify innate qualities in Buddhism enabling peace

building is advanced by Perry Schmidt-Leukel, professor of systematic theology and Religious Studies in Glasgow and Director for the Centre for Inter-faith Studies. His chapter "War and Peace in Buddhism" was published in 1989 in a book about war and peace in the world religions. The point made by Schmidt-Leukel is that behind the numerous examples of Buddhist religion both contributing to motivation for aggression and peace there is a real and important tension in the Buddhist tradition between radical Buddhist pacifism and a flexible Buddhist realpolitik (Schmidt-Leuke 1989, 36). Like Neumaier, however, Schmidt-Leukel also starts out by giving the basic doctrinal foundations of the Buddhist understanding of war and peace. After going through some important textual passages relating to the issue of war and peace, Schmidt-Leukel goes on to discuss radical pacifism and realpolitik, in which a certain measure of violence is sometimes inevitable and necessary to bring about some higher good. This is most often about the violence needed to maintain and protect a just political order.

Another strand of academic writing linking Buddhism to armed conflict, and to politics in general, is the investigation of the relationship, or potential relationship, between human rights and Buddhism. Again, this is a body of literature where scholars tend markedly towards what I call doctrinal essentialism. Thus, in a paper on Buddhism and human rights in Thailand, Suwanna Satha-Anand takes the Buddhist teaching as found in canonical texts as the point of departure. The author discusses the traditional Buddhist compartmentalization of truth into two different levels: ultimate truth and conventional truth (Sattha-Anand 2005). The author relates the story about the Buddha's initial dismissal of an order of nuns and claims that this story has legitimated the refusal of the Thai religious establishment to allow for a Buddhist order of nuns in the country. However, according to the author, the Buddha chose the ultimate truth of women's equality rather than the conventional truth about women's inferiority and this should be an example for modern Thais in their discussion about establishing an order of nuns. This approach is typical of the academic writing that situates itself between research and activism. A number of scholar-activists work with the goal of contributing

to the formation or adjustment of doctrine, especially ethical and political doctrine, that harmonizes traditional ideas of gender, social justice, human rights to the ideals of the modern world, in particular to the central human rights documents of the UN. That this type of academic or semi-academic literature should take doctrine as its point of departure is not surprising as its explicit aim is to change doctrine. But the usefulness of this literature for research is limited.

At the Bath conference, one of the explicit goals of the conference was to draw both Buddhist monks and Sri Lankan scholars into an intellectual exchange with Western scholars. Dhammavihari was criticized for his approach to the subject by one of the greatest names in 20th century German scholarship on Buddhism, Professor Heinz Bechert. Bechert believed that it gave no sense to discuss the historicity of episodes in the Mahavamsa. On the contrary, Buddhists need to stop treating the chronicles as historical works altogether. In the words of Bechert: "For the Buddhists, it is necessary to return to the values as taught by the Buddha himself and found in the ancient canonical texts, and not in the later works like the chronicles and the commentaries or sub-commentaries" (Bechert 2003). In other words, Bechert is typical of a Western academic approach to Buddhism that sees the pure teachings of the Buddha as the real Buddhism, while later developments as aberrations. Not only western scholars espouse this idea. On 30 September 2002 the Venerable Professor Wimalaratana of the Univ. of Colombo gave a talk at the Univ. of Oslo with the title "Buddhism and Peace in Sri Lanka." The talk was wholly devoted to a discussion of the political and ethical thinking of the Buddha as these can be reconstructed through a reading of Pali texts. Leaving aside the question of textual transmission, I asked Professor Wimalaratana why he had chosen not to mention the present conflict and potential or actual roles of Buddhism and Buddhis tmonks in the civil war. He answered that it was logically impossible to discuss the role of Buddhism and monks in the contemporary political situation because Buddhism proper is in fact the original teaching of the Buddha.

In my opinion, rather few of the academic writing that looks for innate

doctrinal qualities in Buddhism and then moves on to see how Buddhist doctrines and worldview limits or enables peace building initiatives in the real world are helpful to somebody who wants to understand the roles, or potential roles, of Buddhist leaders and organizations on the peace process. This is a problem that is rather typical of philologists starting out by explaining theology and ethical precepts and then moving on to the sociological and political realities of present conflicts and wars. The exceptions, however, are the cases where scholars take on the task of transforming the religious tradition from within in order to bring out the doctrinal resources they perceive as potential tools in processes of peace building or reconciliation. However, in such cases, as in the context of the Bath conference, the approach should rather be described as a constructive theology of peace rather than theological essentialism.

III. Ethnic reductionism

Religion is often an aspect of ethnicity. The importance of religion to ethnicity varies greatly from group to group and it can change considerably over time in any particular group because the defining feature of ethnicity is first of all the self-perception of the members of the group. In the words of Jonathan Fox: "Thus, religion is an aspect of ethnicity with its importance varying over time and place" (1999, 294). In much of the academic literature about the role of religion in the peace process in Sri Lanka religion is seen first of all as a fairly stable aspect of a larger ethnic identity. This is true in particular in the writing on the Sinhalese ethnic identity, which is often assumed to be very closely linked to the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. Too often the element of religious identity in the formation of ethnic identity, and its possible effects on attitudes to the peace process, is left unexplored by scholars.

In the literature within the ethnic studies tradition, or within social science in general, there is a clear tendency to perceive religious forces on the

Sinhalese side as strongly biased against federalism and devolution based on a religio-nationalist ideology that sees the unity and integrity of the state as a non-negotiable. The LTTE on their side does not see the war in Sri Lanka as an ethnic conflict at all but see it as a national struggle for a homeland comparable to national struggles in other parts of the world. In this picture, religion has first of all a complicating role in the peace process because religious feelings are seen to motivate a hard line against treating the LTTE as an equal partner in peace talks. Jayadeva Uyangoda has pointed out that for a peace process to succeed beyond a limited ceasefire it needs to involve a number of the different sections of the hostile communities, not only the elites that are actually involved in the negotiations. Moreover, one has to take into account the fact that a protracted conflict will necessarily produce groups that have a vested interest in keeping the conflict going. Among these 'spoilers' of the peace process, as he calls, them he lists JVP and the Sinhala Urumaya adding that the process has better chances of success "when indirect actors in the conflict, like the JVP or the Buddhist clerical leadership in Sri Lanka," are also stakeholders in the conflict resolution process (Uyangoda, in Uyangoda and Perera 2003, 8). Uyangoda recognizes the importance of bringing religious leaders into the conflict resolution work but he leaves the issue without following questions about the possible role of the Buddhist clerical leadership.

Kumar Rupesinghe argued along the same lines when he wrote a comment to the peace process in July 2002 outlining two different future scenarios, one positive, and the other negative. Rupesinghe also stated that it was now crucial to bring in all the stakeholders in a framework where peace is the only option and spoilers are reduced to a minimum. The positive scenario implies, among many other things, that civil society both in the north and in the south are engaged in the process. "Bridge building exercises, all night candle light vigils, mass meditation and inter-religious worship, and large scale visits of people from the South to the North take place" (Rupesinghe, in Uyangoda and Perera, 38).

In 1999, president of the World Peace Foundation Robert I. Rotberg

edited a book called *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation* with contributions from Sri Lankan and American scholars. Several of the Sri Lankan scholars writing in this volume are attached to the ICES (International Centre for Ethnic Studies) and the main foci of the chapters are the background to the ethnic conflict, the constitutional and legal issues surrounding devolution of political power, and the possible economic dividends of a successful peace process. In a chapter about devolution and the quest for peace, the respected lawyer and peace activist Neelan Tiruchelvam discusses constitutional reforms as a way towards peace (Tiruchelvam 1999). Tiruchelvam was the director of the ICES until he was murdered in 1999 and constitutional reform was a main subject of his academic work. In a chapter in the same volume about the risks of devolution, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake argues that the war in Sri Lanka after 1983 has generated a momentum and logic that exceeds its initial causes as the armed conflict has generated hidden economies and new identities. War, according to Rajasingham-Senanayake, ethnicizes and polarizes hybrid identities (1999, 58). Rajasingham-Senanayake argues that many, if not most, of the anthropologists and political scientists writing on the conflict assume that the violence follows a linear progression from ethnic tension to armed conflict. She believes that one ought to look for "the dialectical production of identity through violence" (1999, 58). Rajasingham-Senanayake offers a fresh look at the concept of ethnic conflict by insisting that we need to understand the cultural dimensions of armed conflict and, in particular, how conflict can transform identities. She also warns that the discussions about how to resolve the conflict has been too focused on legal and constitutional matters, most importantly the issue of devolution of power. Devolution could solidify new and polarized ethnic identities and become the blueprint for more war, Rajasingham-Senanayake argues (1999, 66). Devolution on the basis of current ethnic demographics alone would reproduce the logic of ethnic nationalists. To avoid this, one needs to pay attention to the rights and needs of the localized minorities. It is not very helpful to talk about majorities and minorities on a national level, Rajasingham-Senanayake asserts; devolution should entail the return of

displaced persons and it must guarantee security to Sinhalese and Muslims in Jaffna as well as to Tamils in the south in order to preserver mixed settlements (1999, 68). Rajasingham-Senanayake's approach to the question of ethnicity in the Sri Lanka conflict clearly shows that there is ample room within the ICES for a critical look at concepts used by anthropologists and political scientists. She reveals influence from postmodern theory in her thinking about hybridity and references to postmodern writers like Gilles Deleuze. Still, I think it is fair to say that the majority of social scientists working on the Sri Lanka conflict within the theoretical framework of ethnic studies use a rather static concept of ethnicity that leaves little room for exploring the possible roles of religion beyond its diffuse contribution to formation of collective identities.

The doyen of ethnic studies in Sri Lanka is K. M. de Silva, director of the prestigious ICES with offices in Kandy and Colombo. Many of the publications of the ICES deal with the causes, management and possible resolution of ethnic conflict. Given the high prestige of the ICES, it might be of interest to look briefly at the approach taken by ICES scholars to the conflict and the peace process in Sri Lanka in order to understand their ideas about the possible role of religion. In his 1986 volume *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi-Ethnic Societie: Sri Lanka 1880-1985* K. M. De Silva gives a substantial overview of the history of ethnic conflict in the country starting with the religious revivalism among Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims from the late 19th century and ending up in the troubled period after the riots and anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983. *Managing Ethnic Tension* is a detailed work of political history but does not demonstrate much interest in theoretical questions about the categories used by both social scientists and by Sri Lankans to describe their identities and belonging. Thus, De Silva ends up by concluding that "[e]thnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils is a twentieth century manifestation of an age-old rivalry between two peoples" (1986, 362) and he writes that "one needs to keep in mind the historical dimension of the rivalries, a palimpsest with layer upon layer of troubled historical memories where the events of several centuries ago assume the immediacy of the

previous weekend,..." (1986, 362). Nevertheless, it is clear that De Silva perceives language as by far the most important constituent of ethnicity in the Sri Lankan case. He writes that "while language is the essence of ethnic identity, the religious differences have so far been within the Sinhalese community, and the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils is not a clash of religions so much as one between two versions of linguistic nationalism..." (1986, 376). Religion certainly plays a role in De Silva's reading of Sri Lankan history in this early book, but there is no critical treatment of the possible relationship between religion and ethnicity, and there is no discussion of other aspects of religion, such as organizational structures and individual authority.

One feature that makes De Silva's work on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka interesting is his keen eye for comparison with other cases of ethnic conflict. This comparative outlook is present in the 1986 *Managing Ethnic Tension* but it is more pronounced in the book *Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma*, edited by De Silva and three other scholars in 1988. This volume contains 13 chapters about ethnic conflicts (De Silva et al. 1988). In this book one meets very different approaches to the issue. In two chapters written by Padmasiri De Silva and P. D. Premasiri respectively, one meets the approach of the Buddhist scholars educated in the tradition of philology and Buddhist philosophy. P. D. Premasiri, as mentioned above, is an expert in classical Pali Buddhism and he has written extensively on ethics in early Buddhism. In his chapter in *Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies* Premasiri analyses ancient Pali sources and offers an account of how the Buddha might have conceived of the problem of minorities. He concludes that discrimination against social groups on the grounds of ethnicity, caste and religion does not accord with Buddhism and, still, there are a number of cases where Buddhist polities have fallen short of the high moral principles entailed in the teachings of the Buddha (Premasiri 1988, 56). This kind of approach could be read as an exploration of tradition from the inside and Premasiri's approach might contribute to a discussion about social ethics in the Buddhist society of Sri Lanka. At the same time, this kind of textual analysis is very

different from the main thrust of the chapters of the volume written by social scientists and in his introduction to the book, K. M. De Silva explains that the volume takes an interdisciplinary approach where policy issues are the main focus. At the same time, the volume asks to what extent Buddhist values of non-violence impinge upon the ethnic crises of the societies in question (1). In this respect, *Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies* attempts to bring together both of the main approaches to the issue I identify in this article: theological essentialism and ethnic reductionism. However, there is no attempt to integrate the approaches and there is no discussion of the possible different roles that the different disciplines might play in the larger debate about conflict resolution in Buddhist societies.

In his 1998 book *Reaping the Whirlwind* De Silva offers a more sustained and integrated monographic presentation, setting out in detail his views on the causes, the history and the possible solution of the conflict. In 2000, K. M. De Silva edited the book *Conflict and Violence in South Asia－ Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka* as a result of two conferences in 1996 and 1997 organized by the ICES. In this volume the comparative net is cast even wider as the eight chapters of the book treat eight different violent conflicts in post-independence South Asia. The focus of the chapters is the clash between the successor states of the British empire struggles to maintain integrity in the face of organized resistance from groups and movements linked to language, culture and religion. Only two of the chapters deal with Sri Lanka; one is De Silva's own chapter dealing with the background and history of Tamil separatism.

We may take a brief look at the production of one of the other key scholars attached to the ICES, Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, who has devoted most of her research to constitutional affairs. Coomaraswamy is interested in the role of Buddhism in the creation and later development of The Constitution of Sri Lanka. In particular, she has discussed how the 1972 Constitution "enshrined the Buddhist faith as a state religion" by giving the state a duty to protect and foster that religion (1984, 25). The 1972 Constitution was a culmination of the ideological ideas of Bandaranaike in that

it gave Buddhism an "elevated position within the polity", R. Coomaraswamy observes elsewhere (1997, 22-23). It also gave Sinhalese the status of the one official language of the state. The 1972 Constitution had lasting effect on several aspects of public life in Sri Lanka but in cultural and symbolic terms it was the real break with the imperial power and the colonial past and was seen as a victory for Sinhalese nationalism. The Constitution had an adverse effect on the relation between the two major ethnic groups in the country. The assertion of Sinhalese culture, language and religion in the 1972 Constitution was part of the background for the Tamil minority's growing demand for regional autonomy. In exploring the role of constitutional reforms in Sri Lankan society, Coomaraswamy touches several issues with some bearing on the relationship between religion and the ethnic conflict. However, like most of the scholars working on questions of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, religion is certainly not Coomaraswamy's main subject except when it enters judicial matters, like religious rights and freedoms.

One core research question raised by the ICES concerns the political setup of the Sri Lankan state and these questions are framed with concepts from mainstream political science. For instance Professor K. M. de Silva and other key figures at the ICES have often addressed the issue of devolution of power to a second tier of government, which has always been one of the thorniest questions in the peace process in Sri Lanka. The idea has been to change Sri Lanka into a federation as a way to solve the ethnic conflict in the country. One of the questions in this debate has been what regional unit to adopt as the most appropriate unit of devolution: province or district. Federalism has had many advocates among the political scientists of the country because there is a widespread belief that a federal structure would be more efficient in accommodating ethnic diversity and that federalism would undermine the case for an independent Tamil state in north and parts of the east. Many also argue that federalism provides a wider arena for conflict resolution than a unitary system because regional governments are better at representing minority opinions and may negotiate with the central government on behalf of minorities. On the other hand, federalism could make ethnic

fissures even deeper and it could make separatist claims even stronger, K. M. de Silva warns (1999).

IV. Alternative approaches

So far, I have described what I see as two dominant academic approaches to the role of religion in the conflict and in the peace process in Sri Lanka. However, there are other approaches to the issue that do not fit into these two categories. In this section of the article, I intend to look at some academic books and articles that offer alternative methodological and theoretical perspectives. Some interesting academic work about the role of religion in peace work in Sri Lanka has been produced by scholars conducting qualitative research on Buddhist monks and their involvement in politics. A recent example is Mahinda Deegalle's study of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) that ran for the parliamentary elections in April 2004 (Deegalle 2004). Deegalle's article starts with a brief historical background to the issue of Buddhist monks running for elections in national or local politics in Sri Lanka going back to the year 1943, when the Ven. Jinananda ran for the Colombo Municipal Council. However, although there is a precedent for monks engaging in such political activities, Deegalle asserts that the year 2004, with the success of the monastic political party JHU, is the watershed in the history of Theravada Buddhist world (2). Deegalle goes on to present the history and the ideology of the JHU.   The JHU is committed to safeguarding the sovereignty and integrity of the country resisting all talk of devolution of power to stop the ethnic conflict. Moreover, they are committed to endorse Sinhalese as the national language and Sinhalese as the national culture and to protect and propagate Buddhism as the national religion of Sri Lanka. Deegalle then moves on to a discussion of the case of the important monk-politician Ven. Soma, who died in 2003. Soma was a famous *dhamma* preacher and television preacher, who spoke about the relevance of Buddhism for contemporary issues, like the ethnic conflict. When Soma died, it was soon perceived as the result

of a conspiracy by some sections of the Sangha and the JHU has continued to use Soma's memory in their campaigns (Deegalle 2004, 8-10). Deegalle analyses several reasons why the monks of the JHU decided to run for election in 2004. They saw the death of Soma as the result of an attempt to undermine Buddhism, they perceived a growing threat from unethical conversions, i.e. evangelical Christian movements converting Buddhists and Hindus to Christianity by offering material gain. They also wanted to have a say in the politics of the peace process, where they feared that weak and corrupt politicians might sell out on issues of national integrity. While the JHU wants decentralization in the sense of greater autonomy of the villages, they object to devolution of power along federalist lines. On the whole, the JHU wants *dharmarajya*, a righteous and religious polity or state that takes proper care of the Buddhist heritage of the country. Dr. Deegalle's article on JHU is one of the few studies so far to deal directly with the involvement of Buddhist monks in politics in the context of the peace process. Deegalle's approach in this work is very different from his engagement with the political concepts of canonical texts, as discussed earlier in this article. In my view, Deegalle stands out as a methodologically pragmatic observer of the role of religion in the peace process and one of his main strengths is that he is able to move back and forth between the perspective of the insider, as a monk, and of the outsider, as a scholar working in a Western tradition of religious studies.

An outsider's view of the role of Buddhist monks in the peace-process is offered by Iselin Frydenlund in a recently published study (2005). Frydenlund's main research questions concerned what arguments Buddhist monks had advanced against a federal solution to the conflict and to the peace process; who were the most important actors in the peace process; and what roles Buddhist monks had as opponents or supporters of the peace process. Frydenlund starts out with a chapter about the organizational structure of the Buddhist Sangha concluding that Buddhist monks have multiple identities as members of local temples, nikayas, and to different political, cultural or social organizations. In chapter 2, Frydenlund discusses the religious and ethnic

makeup of Sri Lankan society and goes into the history and ideology of Buddhist nationalism. She also looks at how modern politicians and political parties have treated the issue of Buddhism and its relationship to the state and to the other religions of the country. She also gives attention to important rituals in which the relationship between religion and politics is expressed. In chapter 3, Frydenlund discusses the new and unprecedented role of monks in politics, and, particularly, in party politics. In April 2004, nine monks entered parliament after the great success of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a party created to contribute to the establishment of a dharma raja, a righteous rule after classical Buddhist model. The JHU is to a large extent a protest party, she observes, and the peace process is one of its objects of resentment (Frydenlund 2005, 14). In chapter 4, Frydenlund goes into the core issues of her research, i.e. the relationship of the Sangha to peace process. She observes that "[l]ittle systematic research has been carried out on the Sangha's relationship to previous peace talks" (2005, 18). However, given the lack of organizational or ideological unity in the Sangha in general, one should expect to find a plurality of views on the matter. Still, Frydenlund finds that the most vocal representatives of the Sangha have been those opposed to the peace talks. Frydenlund takes a glance at the role of the Sangha in some previous peace talks observing that although monks have often been in opposition to such talks due to their fear of selling out to LTTE demands for a separate state or federalism, there did in fact appear voices from within the Sangha supporting devolution of power from the 1980s (Frydenlund 2005, 18-19). The representative reaction among monks to the Norwegian-facilitated peace process has been one of opposition and suspicion. A majority of monks believe that a peace process giving in to demands from the LTTE would lead to a betrayal of Buddhism and the Sinhalese. At the same time, Norwayis generally seen as being pro-LTTE and anti-Buddhist and the Norwegian facilitators have been subjected to massive criticism from members of the Sangha. At the same time, Frydenlund looks at monastic voices in favor of the peace process discussing the work of people like the Venerable Madampagama Assaji, who represents the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation

(IRPF). He is a well-known monk who is engaged in peace-work across ethnic borders and he is an ardent supporter of the peace process. As observed by Tessa Bartholomeusz, monks may use religious arguments both to support and to oppose the peace process. Frydenlund, however, is surprised by the lack of religious arguments in the discussion with monks who support the peace process (2005, 30). Frydenlund had expected more arguments from indigenous Buddhist concepts like non-violence but she found that most monks would give purely political arguments in support the peace process (2005, 30). Frydenlund's research paper is one of the few studies engaging directly with the question of the relationship of the Sangha to the peace process. Her results and conclusions are interesting for a broader understanding of the role of religious leaders and organizations in the peace process in Sri Lanka. In Frydenlunds words: "The views of the head monks, or mahanayakas, play a significant role in the shaping of public opinion in Buddhist Sri Lanka. Therefore, their reactions to and public statements regarding the peace process are important" (25). Frydenlund is probably right on this point, but it would be interesting to know more about exactly how the views and opinions of different sections of the Sangha influences people in general. What is the real impact of the opinion of monks on people's attitudes to the peace process?

While Deegalle's and Frydenlund's recent work focuses on the Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders in the context of the peace process, a slightly older volume by Tessa Bartholomeusz and Chandra De Silva looks at the interaction of the different ethnic groups and the transformation of ethnic identity as the result of such interaction (Bartholomeusz and de Silva 1998). While the essays in this volume do not address the role of religion in the peace process directly, they are valuable to any student of the conflict and potential avenues of peace building because they discuss how ethnic and religious identities changes under the influence of other groups. The essays also discuss how global forces shape the different religious identities as well.

Tessa Bartoholomeusz article *In Defense of Dharma*, which was published in *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics* (1999) was based on interviews of Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Tessa Bartholomeusz observed that the same stories

and legends could be used by Buddhists both to support and oppose the war against the Tamil separatists. This fact seemed to indicate that the Buddhists of Sri Lanka follow an ethical particularism rather than an ethical system of absolutes. Perhaps the widely differing views on the war, all based on a Buddhist worldview, show that the search for a consistent Buddhist ethics is futile? Later, Bartholomeusz expanded her study of the moral reasoning of Buddhists in the conflict in Sri Lanka and this resulted in the first monograph studying the ethics of war in Buddhism compared to ethical reasoning about war in the European ethical tradition of just war (Bartholomeusz 2002).

A far more direct and explicit critique of essentialist ideas about the nature of Buddhism and its relationship to violent conflicts is contained in the work of Ananda Abeysekara. Abeysekara has attempted to come to terms with the problems resulting from what he sees as the essentializing concepts of Buddhism, politics and violence. In his book Colors of the Robe (2004) his main argument is that ideas about what can and cannot count as Buddhism varies over time and he goes in to various local Sri Lankan debates to demonstrate how the perception of the boundaries of Buddhism changes with historical and political circumstances (2002). Abeysekara looks at how important politicians, like Premadasa, forged strong alliances with Buddhist monks in order to shape the nations' view about the relationship between people and religion, between Buddhism and nation. He also insists that our concepts of politics and violence are less stable than we like to assume and that they are indeed redefined in the context of native debates in the country (2001).

One research question that has guided some studies of the conflict in Sri Lanka concerns the relationship of religious authority to political authority. Modernization theory assumes that the political and the religious are two differentiated systems of symbols and power, but this assumption has been under attack from many angles over the last couple of decades. In fact, much of the new literature about the role of religion in conflicts has demolished the classical ideas about secularization and functional differentiation. From the repeated references to religion made by a number of politicians, as well as the

political engagement of religious leaders in Sri Lanka, it is clear that the there is considerable spill-over between the two sphere. What are the consequences for the peace process? Indeed, how should one conceptualize this relationship? In a chapter about ethnicity and religion in the conflict, David Little challenges the generally accepted idea that the war is not about religion by pointing to the fundamental importance of religion as an aspect of ethnic identity and he goes on to suggest that the Sinhalese, including the Buddhist clergy, must find ways to overcome the "incomprehensibility" of pluralism (1999: 54). Little wrestles with the thorny questions about the relationship between ethnicity and religion, and the role of religion in the conflict in Sri Lanka. In his book *Sri Lanka‒the invention of enmity* he asserts that religion certainly does have something to do with the conflict. In particular, the conflict is about competing and mutually exclusive ideas about legitimate rule and these ideas are rooted in conflicting theories of authority (Little 1994, 107). David Little stresses the distinction between religion as being a *target* of intolerance and a *warrant* for intolerance. He also asserts that those who claim that religion has nothing to do with the conflict are *partly* right because religion has not often been a target of intolerance. When religion has been targeted it is probably because religious places or persons have been symbols of the opponent. On the other hand, it is also partly incorrect to say that the conflict is not about religion because religion gives a warrant for intolerance, both for Buddhists and Hindus (Little 1994, 104). Mark Juergensmeyer has also pointed to the importance of understanding competing notions of authority as one aspect of the conflict in Sri Lanka. In Juergensmeyer's academic outlook, one of the issues on Sri Lanka is the clash between a traditional political identities and Western ideas of secular nationalism, which is often seen as a vestige of cultural colonialism (Juergensmeyer 1990). Clearly, the role of some monks has been to deny the legitimacy and rightful authority of a state that ignores the special status of Buddhism.

What unites the academic approaches discussed in this section is their direct engagement with religious organizations and leaders and their attempt to understand to what extent and how they have had a role in the peace process

in Sri Lanka, or in the wider debates about the premises for peace and reconciliation. Thus, theses studies implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, reject the approach of theological essentialism and ethnic reductionism. Instead of discussing concepts from the textual traditions, and instead or subsuming religion under ethnic identity, they engage directly with religious structures through fieldwork and qualitative research, and they point out the direction in which I believe future research should be heading.

V. Suggestions for future research

At this point, I would like to make some suggestions for future research. In the most general terms, I would propose that research on the role of religion in the peace process in Sri Lanka focus more on religious leaders and organizations and less on religion as theological or ethical doctrine, or as a ethnic marker. One important but neglected issue regarding the organizational aspects of world religions is transnationality. Transnational issues have become more important in the conflict in Sri Lanka over the past few years. Islamist terrorism against the West has produced a dramatic change in the global operational environment for transnational networks of guerrilla organizations fighting local wars against states. There is less tolerance of separatist struggles using terrorist tactics and it is clear that the global environment for the LTTE has changed, too. Thus, one of the important questions during the Norwegian-facilitated peace process in 2002 was the problem of the status of the LTTE and its demand for de-proscription, which was resisted by several groups in Sri Lanka. Keeping in mind the important issue of transnationalism, I propose the following areas for further research.

Firstly, I believe more research needs to be carried out on the situation of the Muslims in Sri Lanka and the role of Muslim leaders and organizations in the peace process. The human rights-situation of the Sri Lankan Muslims has long been a "submerged issue," in the words Jehan Perera (2005, 178). There has been a tendency to see the war in Sri Lanka as a conflict between

the state and the LTTE ignoring a number of other groups. Tamil nationalists using language as the primary ethnic identity marker have subsumed the Muslims of the eastern province under the concept of Tamil speaking people. The Muslims have objected strongly to being treated as part of the Tamil side in the conflict and they see themselves struggling to maintain political rights under pressure from the LTTE. Reconciliation and conflict-management between the LTTE and the Muslims is a crucial aspect of the total peace process seen from the Eastern Province. As Jayadeva Uyangoda has pointed out, the bottom-line is that Sri Lanka in fact "has a tripartite ethnic conflict which requires a tripartite settlement" (Uyangoda, in Uyangoda and Perera, 109). In times when Islam gets plenty of bad publicity in the media and in academic and policy writing, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the reactions of the Muslims in Sri Lanka to the conflict. Again, the limited literature on the situation of the Muslims in the conflict and in the peace process demonstrates the lack of sensitivity to religious issues and a tendency to see religion as simply an aspect of ethnic identity. In the future, research should be initiated to understand the issues that are crucial for a renewed peace process in the Muslim-dominated areas of the country. It would be valuable to know something about the self-perception of Sri Lankan Muslims, and whether, and in what ways, this self-perception has changed in recent years in the context of the peace process but also in reaction to global forces affecting religious groups in various regions. Of course, one of these global forces is the general the resurgence of political Islam and the economic and ideological role played by core countries in the Islamic world, like Saudi-Arabia. Everybody interested in Sri Lanka knows that the ties between the Sri Lanka Muslims and the Middle East are strong, as are the ties between other communities and the Middle East due to labor-migration. However, from my own communication with scholars in Sri Lanka and in the West there seems to be no clear idea about the actual or potential influence of Middle Eastern political Islam on the Sri Lankan Muslims. Again, this points to a lack in our understanding of the transnational aspects of the both the conflict and the peace process. As part of the global forces potentially

affecting the situation of Muslims in Sri Lanka one must also include the general tendency to make religion, and Islam in particular, into a security issue. In the words of Lausten and Wæver "[o]ver the last couple of decades religion has been securitized more and more and this process has accelerated enormously after 9/11" (Lausten and Wæver 2003, 160). It would be interesting to see whether this has affected Sri Lankan Muslims and their relationship to other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. As part of academic research on the situation of the Muslims in Sri Lanka, effort should also be made to extend academic networks of cooperation to scholars working at academic institutions in the Muslim-dominated areas of the island.

Secondly, there are several important questions related to the role of the Catholic Church in the conflict and in the peace process. The Catholic Church is the world's largest multi-national religious organization and in the wake of the Second Vatican Council of 1965, the Church has confronted new questions concerning human rights, conflict and peace. A well-known manifestation of the new political consciousness of Catholic leaders was their roles in the context of political instability and military coups in Latin-American countries in the 1960s and 70s (Levine 1990). However, while the role of Catholic leaders has been important in several peace processes over the last decades, we know far too little about the role of the Catholic Church in the conflict in Sri Lanka. Catholic bishops in the country have often raised their voices urging the parties to find a peaceful settlement to the war. At the same time, there are ardent supporters of the LTTE among Tamil Catholic clergy living in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Has the conflict produced a cleavage along ethnic-linguistic lines within the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka? What is the relationship between the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka and Rome on matters of peace initiatives and conflict-resolution? Research on the role of the Catholic Church in the search for peace in Sri Lanka might also be extended to the other Christian communities and their local and international organizations and networks.

Thirdly, and again linked to the question of transnationality, is the issue of ecumenical initiatives. From time to time the media reports on peace

initiatives crossing religious and ethnic boundaries in Sri Lanka. Representatives of the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (IRPF) has organized inter-faith functions in the north of the country visiting ruined religious buildings belonging to different communities (Frydenlund 2005, 29). However, little is known about the potential for ecumenical initiatives as part of the peace process. An important case of ecumenical work in peace processes was the involvement of the Christian Churches in Eastern European countries in the peace-movement of the 1980s. It has been argued that the Churches in Eastern Europe played a crucial role in instigating and protecting peace movements in countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany. These countries were unique because they all had significant minorities – or, in the case of East Germany, a majority–of Protestant Christians, and, as a consequence, they had a potential for creating trans-national networks linking peace activists to the West (Welling Hall). The same trans-national links were available to the Catholic Church in Poland, whereas the Orthodox Churches clearly lacked trans-national resources to provide protection and inspiration for local peace movements. The role of the churches in the peace movements in Eastern Europe has become an example of how the transnational networks of world religions might be deployed in significant track-two diplomatic efforts. Buddhism, too, is a global religion. From personal communication with Korean monks, I know of serious peace-initiatives, based on cross-border contacts between religious leaders and monasteries, between North- and South Korea. The Sri Lankan Sangha has always had links with the religious establishment of many other countries in Asia, although the importance and strength of these links have varied with time. K. M. De Silva notes that there was a strong foreign influence on the Sri Lankan Sangha in the 1930s, especially from Burmese monks educated in India and carrying Marxist ideas, and these political Burmese monks became role models for politically active monks in Sri Lanka (De Silva 1998, 81). On the other hand, it is a sad consequence of conflict that some members of the religious leadership of Sri Lanka seems to have become more insular and less oriented towards Buddhism as a global religion. It would be interesting to explore the potential of the global Buddhist

organizational network in ecumenical work as a way towards peace in Sri Lanka.

VI. Conclusion

My conclusion to this review of the research literature about the role of religion in the peace process in Sri Lanka is that most of the research displays either the tendency to essentialize religion to theological doctrines or to reduce religion to an aspect of ethnic identity. If one wishes to understand the theoretical underpinnings to these approaches to the role of religion in politics, one should look into the very concept of religion and explore different notions of religion in modern Sri Lanka and in postcolonial South Asia at large. For instance, there can be no doubt that the tendency to equate religion with theology owes a great deal to the what has been labeled *Protestantism*, the concept of religion introduced to Sri Lanka by the British colonial power (Brekke 2002). This discussion, however, falls outside the scope of this article. My point here is that both of these approaches to religion, explored in the two first sections of this article, have shortcomings if we want to understand the actual or potential roles of religion in the peace process in Sri Lanka. In the third section, I have identified and discussed some research articles and books taking an approach that is different from the two main theoretical strands pointing out a possible direction for future research on other religious communities in the country. Finally, I have suggested some areas where more research is needed and I have maintained that the transnational organizational ties and the globalized context of the local religious communities should be a major issue in at least some of the future research.

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