Christian Evangelical Activity and the Reemergence of Militant Buddhism: Concerns for Internal Security

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Introduction

One could argue with a great deal of accuracy that the present political moment in Sri Lanka is one of the most crucial in terms of its very long history of religious accommodation, tolerance and syncretism. This does not mean that at previous moment in the long historical tradition of Sri Lanka, religion has not been an issue of contention or division. Such moments have arisen at particular moments and diminished once the effective causes for the situation diminished. By comparison, what is emerging today is unlikely to diminish as easily given the very different historical and socio-economic conditions informed by mega trends such as globalization within which these manifestations have arisen and will continue. At a very basic level, this paper attempts to address the nature of operation of the collective Christian evangelical project in Sri Lanka, and the ways in which other religious traditions, particularly components of organized Buddhism have reacted to these activities. It is both in the activities of evangelical Christianity and the reactions of the more established religions such as Buddhism that the concerns for internal security and political stability of the country
may be located. On the other hand, this overall situation needs to be contextualized within the very specific context of Sri Lanka’s present socio-political reality which has over the last two decades been informed by political and economic instability stemming from inter-ethnic conflict involving the Sinhala and Tamil communities and the resultant military fallouts. That is, the emerging situation has the potential to further polarize a situation that has already been polarized on ethno-political lines by adding to it an additional scenario based on religious intolerance and militancy.

To address these issues, the paper would first trace very briefly, some important indicators of the ways in which Sri Lanka has dealt with religious plurality in the past. Secondly, it will place in context some significant historical moments that caused the general sense of tolerance offered by the country’s religious tradition to rupture, consequences of which continued to be felt since long. Thirdly, it will try to establish some of the parameters with which the present Christian evangelical enterprise operates in Sri Lanka. Fourthly, outline and place in context some of the reactions to these activities. Finally, the paper will offer some suggestions as to how one might be able to stem these trends or control them before reaching an explosive end.

I would also like to place in context one important factor that impacts upon this analysis. That is, one of the significant problems with Sri Lankan scholarship on the politics of religion is its absence of critical analyses of contemporary trends in religious competition and an overemphasis on the study of conventional Buddhism, particularly its ritual manifestations.¹ In this context, this significant absence would be one of the points of departure in this paper.
Historical Background of Religious Dynamics in Sri Lanka

Effectively, and over a very long period of time Sri Lanka has been a multi-ethnic and multi religious society, in so far as these concepts are defined and used today in academic discourse. As part of its historical tradition, Sri Lanka also saw the evolution of a tolerant multi-religious society which was most clearly manifested in the way its two oldest religious traditions, Buddhism and Hinduism interacted with other faiths in times of peace. They offered the best traditions of syncretism and tolerance that continued to exist even late into European colonial expansion. But the advent of Christianity did change the parameters of inter-religious competition and dynamics to a very significant and long lasting extent. Even so, over time, the more conventional Christian denominations learnt how to interact with the country's older religions reasonably successfully. But again this changed or started to change over the last fifteen years or so with the advent of a very strong and consistent streak of evangelical Christianity, with its sources of funding and inspiration in Western Europe, North America and East Asia, particularly South Korea. Since much of the present analysis will be based on work in Buddhist majority southern Sri Lanka and the Buddhist reactions to recent Christian evangelical expansion, the brief historical overview presented here will also focus on institutionalized Buddhism's interactions with other religious traditions.

On the one hand, in terms of philosophical tradition and orientation, Buddhism was open to ideas in the sense that it encouraged individuals to explore ideas and accept what they deemed useful to them. This position was naturally open to all ideas that were religious as well as not religious, and is most clearly outlined in the Buddha's words in Kalama Sutta. The question posed to the Buddha by the Kalamas, in fact, had a direct relevance to freedom of
inquiry and the freedom of conscience or what we might call religion today. The question was posed in a context of conflicting and competitive religious discourse in the time of the Buddha as outlined below:

There are some monks and Brahmins venerable sir, who visit Kesaputta. They explain and expound only their doctrines, the doctrines of others they despise, revile and pull to pieces - Venerable sir, there is doubt, there is uncertainty in us concerning them, “which of these reverend monks and Brahmins spoke the truth and which falsehood (Soma 1981: 5, Perera 1995: 16-17).²

What was happening in the city of Kesaputta was an over-abundance of religious activity by numerous proponents of different belief systems, and in that conflicting and competitive environment, the Kalamas were unsure as to what they should accept or embrace as the ‘truth.’ The Buddha’s answer to this question outlined below forms the parameters of Buddhism’s philosophical and doctrinal position on freedom of inquiry and thought, and in this sense is perhaps the most open position on these issues presented by any religious tradition:

It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; not upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, “the monk is our teacher.” Kalamas when you yourself know: These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill, abandon them (Soma 1981: 5-6, Perera 1995: 16-17).³

Kalama Sutta is not the only text which places in context Buddhism’s attitude towards inquiry even though it is the best known. The Canki Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya also places in contexts the pitfalls of clinging to theories
based on traditions or ancient texts without subjecting them to rational analysis on the basis of empirical evidence (Harris 1995: 23). In Canki Sutta, the Buddha’s observations were as follows:

Moreover, Bharadvaja, even though something may be thoroughly believed in, it may be empty, void, false; on the other hand, something not thoroughly believed in may be in fact truth, not otherwise --- Preserving a truth, Bharadvaja is not enough for an intelligent man to inevitably come to the conclusion: “this alone is the truth, all else is falsehood” (Majjhima Nikaya 11/ 164ff, Quoted in Harris 1995: 23).

As Harris points out, in the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha has even stressed that “the perspectives and teachings attributed to himself, the Sangha or an elder monk should not be accepted uncritically (Anguttara Nikaya IV, XVIII/180, quoted in Harris 1995: 23). What the philosophical and epistemological positions contained in the Kalama Sutta, Canki Sutta and the Anguttara Nikaya outlined above do is to acknowledge the existence of multiple truth claims, the dismantling of the notion of a single truth claim and allow for individual agency to decide what to accept, be that a religious tradition or any other kind of thought, when the individual is satisfied with its utility and applicability. The Buddha’s words in these examples were not a mere philosophical position lost in Buddhist discourse. It was also part of the ideal of law-making in terms of Buddhist kingship. It was perhaps ideal Buddhist Emperor Ashoka who most clearly articulated the value of religious tolerance on the basis of Buddhist ethics and made it the law within his empire. This is profoundly articulated in his major rock edict number fourteen in the following words:
Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this -- that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one’s own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one’s own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one’s own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought “Let me glorify my own religion,” only harms his own religion. Therefore, contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions. Those who are content with their own religion should be told this: Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. --- (Perera 2002).

Clearly, what Ashoka was attempting as a ruler was to institute a regime of religious tolerance within his domain, which in the final analysis is not unlike what many contemporary states also might want to achieve. However, there is a crucial difference in the attempt of Ashoka and the attempts of many contemporary states that attempt to establish religious tolerance. Ashoka was attempting to promote all religions within his domain whereas many contemporary states would ideally like to keep away from religion by declaring themselves to be ‘secular’ but generally guaranteeing equality of rights in religion to their citizens. Nevertheless, the ideals promoted in Kalama Sutta and other such texts and the declaration of Ashoka quoted above from his Major Rock Edict Number Fourteen are important to the Sri Lankan context because they indicate the philosophical, moral and kingship traditions that Sri
Lanka also inherited not only in terms of religious tolerance but also in the more general terms of justice and righteous rule. As such, except in situations of internal contradictions brought about by external aggression and invasion, Sri Lankan history also offers a number of lessons about religious tolerance that would be useful to re-visit in the kind of historical context that we are currently in.

According to Sri Lanka's chronicle histories, Buddhism, as an institution and religious tradition, underwent significant deprivations in the context of South Indian invasions, and the most virulent among these phases is the invasion and rule of Kalinga Maga in the 12th century who undertook a program to destroy Buddhism during his reign.

Yet, despite such institutionalized collective memories, what we see from much more later records, particularly since the European colonization of the island is the kind of tolerance espoused by Ashoka even in the context of excessive and increasingly aggressive Christian missionary enterprise in the early and latter periods of European expansionism. Portuguese rule marked one of the most aggressive periods of Christian (Catholic) missionary activities in the Maritime Provinces under their rule, which saw a serious dismantling of Buddhism as a system of belief and institutional structure in these areas. During the same period, when Muslims were persecuted by the Portuguese in these areas, they fled to the Kandyan kingdom where the king not only gave them sanctuary but also the freedom of religion (Perera 2002). Similarly, when Catholics were being persecuted by the Dutch who took over the maritime provinces from the Portuguese, the Kingdom of Kandy again offered them religious freedom and sanctuary (Perera 2002).

Robert Knox, one of the earliest Europeans to live in Sri Lanka for over two decades, writing in 1681 observed that the King of Kandy never tried to force Christians "to comply with the country's Idolatry" and that the king and people showed respect and honor towards "Christians as Christians" (Knox 1681: 83, quoted in Harris 1995: 24).
There is ample evidence from the Kandyan period and in the first few decades of colonial rule where the Buddhist monastic system accommodated non-Buddhists within its organizational structures. For instance, as documented by historian L.S. Dewaraja, all the tenants in the village of Rambukandana belonging to the Ridi Vihara Buddhist Monastery were Muslims. They were supplying transport services to the vihara, and in return the Muslim priest was supported by a farm specifically identified for that purpose by the Buddhist landlord of the area. As Dewaraja observes, “there were thus Muslim tenants performing without reluctance service to a Buddhist monastery, and that monastery freely supporting a priest for its Muslim tenants” (Dewaraja 1988). The Colonial British government’s Service Tenure Commission of 1870 was moved to observe that this was an exemplary case of religious tolerance (Dewaraja 1988) even though this was also the period in which protestant missionary activity was specifically targeting Buddhism.

Despite the negative experience of Buddhists at the hands of the Portuguese and later the Dutch, the attitude of lay Buddhists as well as monks towards Christian Protestant missionaries who came to Sri Lanka after the country fell to the British in 1815 appears to have been motivated and fashioned on the basis of the Buddhist epistemological and philosophical positions regarding the freedom of inquiry and conscience outlined earlier. In the Sinhala areas of southern Sri Lanka, the protestant missionaries who became strongest were the Baptists, Wesleyan Methodists and the Anglicans of the Church Missionary Society (Harris 1995: 10). Harris points to two crucial considerations that need to be taken into account when attempting to understand the missionary dynamics of this period (1995: 10). These are the Evangelical Revival, particularly in England, and the attitude of the empire or the imperial officials towards their activities (Harris 1995: 10). A significant belief of the evangelical revival of this
period and of those who belonged to the Evangelical Alliance formed in 1846 was that "all who were outside Christianity were being led to eternal death by false religion" (Harris 1995: 11). Moreover, the Protestant missionaries operating in Sri Lankan in the early periods of British colonialism was completely convinced of this position (Harris 1995: 11), and their aggressive actions were based upon this conviction. As a consequence, even before the protestant missionaries arrived in Sri Lanka, they were convinced that Buddhism was a religion of "darkness, bereft of all the Christian religion held dear" (Harris 1995: 13).

Harris summarizes this situation in the following words: "part of their evangelism therefore, included a condemnation of Buddhism for in terms of what it did not possess - a loving Creator God, forgiveness of sin and a Saviour - and a presentation of what it did in terms of nihilism and irrationalism" (Harris 1995: 18).

Nevertheless, despite the negative experiences under the Portuguese and the Dutch and the reactionary and regressive predispositions towards Buddhism entertained by most Protestant missionaries, the Buddhist polity in the initial stages seems to have dealt with the protestant evangelical project in a manner consistent with what was outlined earlier as Buddhist positions on the matter. As such, these early Protestants found large numbers of eager Buddhists willing to listen to their preaching (Harris 1995: 13-27). Moreover, missionary records from this period also indicate that the Buddhist monks were very willing to talk and were not aggressively disposed towards missionary activities (Harris 1995: 14). Robert Hardy, a Methodist missionary writing as late as in 1865, noted that Buddhist monks considered "Jesus Christ a good man, as Buddha was a good man; and if Buddha was only regarded as the best, what should hinder the formation of a compact between the two system ---" (Harris 1995: 14). In a sense, this was indicative of the openness institutionalized Buddhism showed towards other systems of belief as well
as its established potential for syncretism. In the context of the missionaries' own pre-disposition towards Buddhism, such positions mystified the missionaries (Harris 1995: 15). On the other hand, the euphoria over seeing eager and large crowds in the initial periods and the accommodating nature of monks also led to frustration as such attitudes did not necessarily indicate a willingness to convert. Writing in 1816, Benjamin Clough lamented in the following words:

We preach to the people, we warn them, we persuade them, we argue with them, we do everything in our power, at least we think we do, and they will apparently pay the utmost attention, and yet idolatrous part of them remains the same (Harris 1995: 15).

In the context of Buddhist accommodation as well as what appeared to be lack of interest at the same time, the missionary strategy towards those who did convert was to insist that their "commitment to Christianity must logically entail rejection of Buddhism" (Harris 1995: 18). "No Compromise" with Buddhism became the foundation upon which church activities were based (Harris 1995: 18). In this situation what Buddhists, particularly the monks realized was that despite the accommodation and tolerance they showed towards the missionaries, the missionaries themselves would do everything in their power "to condemn Buddhism and that they would have no feeling of respect for Buddhist temples, Buddhist festivals or the orange robe of the monk" (Harris 1995: 20). Moreover, they found that rational discussions in dialogs with missionaries were not possible (Harris 1995: 20). It is on the basis of this realization, that the epistemological, philosophical and local historical traditions of religious accommodation and tolerance was not understood or reciprocated by Christian missionaries that the foundations for the Buddhist response were based. At first, it was in the form of public
appeals and appeals to the colonial government to restore some kind of order in the country’s religious domain. Such an appeal in 1815 was ignored by the colonial government, and was later rebuked when the monks persisted (Harris 1995: 24). In 1826, however, the colonial government issued a circular to the missionaries condemning material “casting scoffs and offensive reflections on the Buddhist religion” (Harris 1995: 24). It further warned that the circulation of such material would not be tolerated (Harris 1995: 24). Yet, records indicate that missionaries hardly took and notice of this and the government itself was not interested in curbing down on missionary excesses (Harris 1995: 21-25). Given this situation which showed no indications of improvement, and over time, and particularly by the latter part of the 19th century, with the advent of the Buddhist Revival, this response became as well organized and as aggressive as the missionary enterprise, and in that process Buddhist revivalist borrowed many institutional structures and practices from the missionaries. These included the press, the school, public debate etc. Even though the Buddhist reaction in the form of an organized Buddhist Revival emanating from middle class urban elements in southern Sri Lanka was most visible, in the latter parts of the 19th century, missionary records themselves indicate that forms of Buddhist resistance could be seen even in specific events in 1819, 1826, 1830 and 1833 (Harris 1995: 25). Harris has aptly described this shift of Buddhist attitude in the following words:

From an attitude of tolerance and welcome and from a wish for religious co-existence, even for mutually beneficial dialogue on issues of philosophical interest, a spirit of retaliation developed against those who openly declared they wished to destroy Buddhism. It was a move from inclusiveness to exclusiveness, from tolerance to defensive action, from dialogue to polemic, from a shrinking from controversy to an embracing of it. Yet, it must be noted that to those who were courteous and respectful to
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Buddhism, courtesy and respect was returned”. (Harris 1995: 26)

Since this change occurred which is fairly well-documented in the anthropological literature on the Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka, the manner in which Buddhists looked at other religions, particularly in times of stress has changed. In fact, Harris has also argued that the Buddhist encounters with missionaries in the first decades of the 19th century represented a change “in the very philosophy of religion among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, a change in the way they see Buddhism in relation to other thought systems” (Harris 1995: 26). She has further pointed out the significance of the fact that the new Buddhist strategy to deal with Christianity included aggression, and that “its roots do not lie within Buddhism” but instead can be located “in the paradigm of conflict forced on Buddhism by Christianity” (Harris 1995: 27). Effectively this state of affairs continued well into the 20th century. It was also in the latter parts of the 19th century that one could see the kind of religiously motivated violence which were hitherto not known in Sri Lanka. Such situations emerged under conditions that have been identified by scholars as ‘violations of sacred space’ (Perera 2002). Essentially, this meant that through building programs linked to different religions or the mere passing of religious processions in close proximity to an enclave identified as the space of another religion, the opportunities for conflict had increased. This happened, because in the context of the relative dismantling of the traditional religious tolerance during the colonial period and the resultant competition between religions, people did not merely perceive as their religious space the physical extent of a temple, church or mosque but adjacent areas as well. It was under these kinds of circumstances that the Catholic Church built amidst the ancient Buddhist ruins of Anuradhapura was burnt down in 1904. Similarly, the
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1883 Kotahena Riots between Christians and Buddhists and the 1915 violence between Muslims and Sinhalas that began in Gampola occurred under conditions of violating sacred space (Perera 2002).

However, in the context of better organized and more aggressive Buddhist responses to missionary activities and more importantly, due to the growing Buddhist political power as Independence neared, the Catholic as well as Protestant denominations learnt how to interact with organized Buddhism without necessarily leading to conflict. In a sense, one could argue that this was the result of being pragmatic on the part of the Christian establishment, which by then had become adequately localized enough not to consider themselves mere extensions of the colonial project, and also because certain clear lessons were learnt from history. On the other hand, in the 1960s, in the context of the government take-over of the majority of Christian denominational schools and the resultant rise of passions, a number of mainstream Protestant and Catholic denominations set up organizational structures with the specific aim of fostering better relations with other religions, primarily with Buddhism as well as to study such religions and their philosophies in non antagonistic circumstances. In general, these institutions came to be known as ‘dialogue centers’.

The main reason for outlining above the history of Sri Lanka’s religious dynamics and competitions is to make an important point prior to looking at the contemporary situation. That is, while the Buddhist polity may not remember each event and incident that dismantled the religious tolerance that was part of their tradition, and might not know the exact trajectories through which sections of organized Buddhism acquired its political militancy despite the fact that these histories are well document in scholarly discourse, the fear and habitations brought about by the 19th century missionary encounter is
part of a potent collective memory. As such, in general socialization and polemical tracts motivated by specific local incidents at different times, this memory is maintained. Part of that memory is also the perceived heroism of late 19th century Buddhist revivalists. This memory then is a sensitive one, and needs to be dealt with cautiously in times of political and economic stress that has anything to do with religion. As mentioned earlier, this is something that traditional Christian groups have by now learnt to do reasonably well as part of a historical learning process as well as due to necessity. Yet, one can pose the question whether the new Christian evangelical groups operating extensively in Sri Lanka over the last fifteen to twenty years have brought such historical lessons into their strategies. It is in this context writing in 1995, that Elizabeth Harris made the following observation:

Now, in the 1990s, the growth of new evangelistic thrusts coupled with economic imperialism is reactivating history. Polemic rather than rational argument is again being used between Buddhists and Christians. Posters and pamphlets are at war with each other. The press is being used to fuel fears” (1995: 29).

It is in the context of the warning and concern articulated by Harris that one needs to place in context the contemporary religious dynamics in Sri Lanka, and their potential impact on political stability of the country and its internal security.

The New Evangelical Enterprise and its Impact on the Sri Lankan Religious Domain

As a prelude to this discussion, it would be useful to understand the legal and constitutional frameworks within which religious dynamics in Sri Lanka at present operate, because it is precisely these parameters that Buddhist
activists have in recent times attempted to change as a response to perceived as well as real evangelical expansion. The 1948 Constitution of Ceylon that was in force when Sri Lanka gained Independence makes no specific references to the Buddhist religion or any other religion. In section 29 (2) it does however, stipulates that the law-making power of Parliament to ensure peace, order and good government within the Island shall not:

(a) prohibit or restrict the free exercise of any religion; or
(b) make persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions are not made liable; or
(c) confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions; or
(d) alter the constitution of any religious body except with the consent of the governing authority of that body. Provided that, in any case where a religious body is incorporated by law, no such alteration shall be made except at the request of the governing authority that body. (The Constitution of Ceylon 1948: 22, quoted in Perera 1998).

Clearly, the 1948 constitution does not provide room for preferential treatment for any religion, while allowing space for religious mobility since no specific restrictions are placed upon conversions (Perera 1998). However, by the time the 1972 and 1978 constitutions are enforced, this general scenario had changed considerably indicating the enormous social and political power of Buddhist that had become a reality in the post independence political scenario. In so far as rights of religion are concerned, there is no substantive difference between the 1972 and the 1978 constitutions (Perera 1998). Both give preeminence to Buddhism while guaranteeing the rights of other religions as well. The 1978 Constitution of the Democratic Socialist
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Republic of Sri Lanka, in Chapter 2, Article 9 stipulates that:

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 the Buddha sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14 (1) (e) (Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1978: 5, quoted in Perera 1998).

Article 10 (Chapter 3) referred to above states that:

Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice (Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1978: 6, quoted in Perera 1998).

Similarly, Article 14 (e) (Chapter 3) of the 1978 constitution stipulates that every citizen is entitled to:

the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching (Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1978: 6, quoted in Perera 1998).

The clearest change that occurred by the time the 1978 constitution came into force was the foremost position given to Buddhism. Nevertheless, in real terms articles 10 and 14 (e) of the same constitution give a broad range of freedoms for religious mobility. So even though in practical terms the special position enjoyed by Buddhism makes very little difference, what is important is the fact that the state was bound by the constitution to foster and protect Buddhism while it is not bound to extend the same privileges to other
religions (Perera 1998). At the same time, Articles 10 and
14 (e) also give the rights to convert, engage in one's religious practices publicly and privately, inclusive of teaching. This clearly includes the right to engage in overt evangelical action. Thus, it is clear that up to now, the 1978 Sri Lankan constitution, which is still valid, guarantees the freedom of religious mobility. Therefore, in legal terms, evangelical groups face no hurdles in carrying out their activities (Perera 1998). It is precisely this set of freedoms that Buddhists activists are now trying to curb by introducing a new act in Parliament, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

The exact number of evangelical groups currently operating in the country is difficult to assess since there is no central registration system mandated by the government, and also due to the absence of an umbrella organization under which all these groups are organized (Perera 1988). More precisely, while umbrella organizations such as the Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka do exist, they do not represent the entire spectrum of evangelical activity in the country. Some of these groups have been in operation in Sri Lanka since the 1970s, and more so since the 1980s while others such as the Assembly of God has been active in the country for fifty years (Perera 1998). Nevertheless, since the mid 1980s and early 1990s, their collective and individual activities have become more visible and in some cases more aggressive (Perera 1998). The institutional framework of the collective evangelical movement in Sri Lanka consists of churches, para-church organizations, literature outlets, and other agencies concentrating on education, health, and rural development (Perera 1998). In 1998, the figure of 300 to 350 church and para-church groups was presented as being operative in Sri Lanka by some sources within the evangelical movement itself, as well as members of mainstream. Protestant churches, even though many admitted, exact numbers were unavailable (Perera 1998). In any event, the number of
churches or related structures does not constitute an accurate assessment of strength in terms of adherents. For instance, churches, planted in some locations, attract only small congregations as they were established on the basis of an overall evangelical strategy of expansion, rather than on the basis of existing number of followers in a particular locality (Perera 1998). However, in a psychological and political sense, it is important to the collective evangelical movement as indicative of their growth in numbers and power. On the other hand, that same visibility is also one reason that has helped mobilize some of the opposition against evangelism. Thus, numbers are important when placing such considerations in context, but not in assessing strength (Perera 1998).

So far, Sinhala Buddhists are the most vocal in complaining that some of their co-religionists are being 'corrupted,' 'tempted,' and consequently, converted by Christians (Perera 1998). Criticisms by many Buddhist opponents have generally preferred to focus on the monetary and perceivably unethical aspects of evangelical activities and conversions. Thus, in 1993, the then President of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, during the 74th annual meeting of the Congress observed:

> We are aware that certain Christian sects receive massive sums of money from America and other foreign countries to be spent lavishly in remote villages comprising of only poor Buddhists in a bid to convert them to their faith by so called faith healing, exploiting their meager economic conditions, assisting in their marriages, helping them to secure employment (Island, 20 May 1993, quoted in Janakaratne 1994: 100; Perera 1998).

Similarly, another Buddhist critic observed:

> Some Christian organizations engaged in missionary activities in our country --- take undue advantage of the poverty of the people in propagating their religion (Island,
It is also in a similar state of frustration, that one Catholic cleric described evangelical Christianity as a manifestation of 'pathological messiahnism' (Perera 1998). The official newspapers of the Catholic Church have often carried articles critical of new evangelists whom they identify as fundamentalists (Perera 1998). It was in this spirit that a news report titled "Let us defeat fundamentalists" was published in the Ganartha Pradeepaya of October 24th 1993 issue. In it, two Catholic clerics stressed the need for the Catholic community take leadership in defeating fundamentalists and protect themselves from their influences. Here evangelical groups were also described as 'mushrooming' 'fundamentalist' groups, which are a threat to the Catholic faith (Ganartha Pradeepaya, 24, Oct 1993, quoted in Perera 1998). Being the largest of the mainstream Christian groups in the country, the Catholics are particularly concerned about recent trends which indicate that large numbers of Catholics have been attracted to evangelical groups (Perera 1998). In one of the very few studies dealing with the issue of evangelical activity in Sri Lanka, and perhaps the only study which focuses on the attraction of Catholics to evangelical Christianity, Janakaratna quotes a Bishop who is concerned that "in Colombo North alone, about 4000 Catholics are said to have deserted the Church" (Janakaratne 1994: 30, quoted in Perera 1998). So tensions arising out of evangelical activities are felt by both Buddhist and the mainstream Christian/ Catholic groups. The point of emphasis here is the criticisms levelled against these activities; whether they emanate from Buddhist or established Christian/Catholic denominations generally have the same structural features. For instance, most such criticisms are formulated as conspiracy theories. In terms of such theories, the foreign funding sources, fears of
destabilizing the country, cultural incompatibility of new groups and so on have become prominent features. It is important to note that despite the suspicions entertained by Buddhists of the Catholic Church’s position on conversions and evangelical activities, the Catholic criticisms of evangelical groups are much the same. The people and organizations of the Catholic hierarchy has socially constructed as their enemies are also the same as the perceived enemies of Buddhists. The confusion on the part of Buddhists mostly comes from the lingering elements of historical memory, which is already referred to (Perera 1998). In this context, there has been for some time quite ample space for a violent rupture to emerge.

Irrespective of the fact whether target groups are Buddhists, Catholics, or Hindus, conversion is the primary mechanism through which most evangelical groups based in Sri Lanka operate. To all evangelical groups, the increase in the number of adherents is an important issue. The critics consider the conversions themselves ‘unethical conversions,’ ‘induced conversions’ and ‘forced conversions’ (Perera 1998). In so far as public statements are concerned, such critics include both Buddhist and Catholic personalities and organizations. Many of them believe that new converts are won over by evangelical groups by offering them financial and other economic incentives (Perera 1995, 1998). The perceived and often real availability of funds for the use of evangelical groups from their mother organizations is one important source of tension in so far as opposition to evangelism is concerned. As one Sri Lankan Christian writer has observed in a recent essay:

Sri Lankan Christians are being viewed as vultures nurtured on foreign funds and driven to hunt for the poor mortal souls of the gullible and poverty stricken non-Christian. The pressure against the church is gradually building, even though the arguments are not always reasonable the church is not totally without blame (Morgan 1997: 4, quoted in Perera 1998).
The perceptions referred to above, more specifically symbolize the attitudes of opponents of evangelical activity of recent groups than the activities of the established Christian denominations. Some of the reasons for such perceptions are located in the evangelical movement's intense interest to grow rapidly and to show results of their activity in terms of both large-scale conversions and institutional build-up (Perera 1998). The same writer who expressed the ideas presented earlier on, further notes “one such cause for contention is our ambition for big things immediately” (Morgan 1997: 4, quoted in Perera 1998). The reference here is to the problem of rapid expansion and the issue of problematic visibility:

Sometimes our pursuit of large gatherings and fellowships can end up being counter productive. The quantitative has the tendency to suppress and supersede the qualitative. The end result is that we can end up with churches that are visibly growing from the outside. But hollow within (Morgan 1997: 4, quoted in Perera 1998).

Nevertheless, compared to this kind of self-reflections or evaluations, very few evangelical activists seem to have come to terms with the consequences of rapid expansion, visibility and the possibility of conflict formation (Perera 1998). Supporters of rapid expansion would argue, “God has not given us a spirit of fear. As the times are short, we must proclaim the good news to the lost without fear or favour” (Morgan 1997: 4, quoted in Perera 1998). Interestingly, however, the vociferous demands by Buddhist lobbies that the government take legal action against conversions (defined as unethical etc) have not been entertained by any Sri Lankan government until 2004 when a private members bill was tabled in Parliament for debate which also had a great degree of support from Buddhist
groups going by the public interventions made in the Sinhala and English language press. It has also brought in as much opposition, mostly from Christian groups, which included traditional Catholic and Protestant groups.

One of the underlying patterns of operation of the collective evangelical movement in Sri Lanka has been expansion or increase in numbers of both adherents and institutions. The former activity is initiated primarily through conversion while the latter is implemented through what is called 'church planting.' This literally means the establishment of churches in areas with no Christian presence (Perera 1998). Such areas in the evangelical vocabulary are referred to as 'unreached areas.' In real terms however, 'unreached' does not mean merely areas where there are no Christians, but also areas where numbers of existing Christians and institutions can be increased (Perera 1998). But what is also clear is that in this scheme of things Catholics and members of mainstream Protestant groups are hardly considered Christians by many of the new evangelists. Hence, their insistence that they too need to go through a conversion to their brand of the 'truth' (Perera 1998). Much of the funds for the new evangelical movement in Sri Lanka come from Western Europe, the U.S, and to a significant extent also from South Korea. The amount of funds raised locally is insignificant (Perera 1998). Generally, the sources of funding also point to the countries where the main parent bodies or affiliated agencies of most locally based evangelical organizations are located. On the other hand, many churches and affiliated groups receive funds and aid in the form of literature and foreign evangelists from agencies that have no local institutional presence (Perera 1998). This happens as a result of the excellent network the collective evangelical movement has access to. The relatively large availability of funds has ensured that these groups have vast resources for their operations. To a certain extent the parent bodies of the evangelical
organizations that operate in Sri Lanka also operate in other parts of South Asia. These regional and international networks of contact play an important role in sharing the experiences of the collective international evangelical movement, which greatly aid in planning future activities (Perera 1998).

Despite what critics may say, large sources of funds, and aggressiveness alone cannot explain the successes of the new evangelists in Sri Lanka as such explanations would be too simplistic and reductionist (Perera 1998). On the other hand, as already indicated elsewhere, it is also important to note that there is no reliable statistical information to indicate the exact number of new evangelical groups and their followers. Thus, there is a problem in gauging the exact nature of their expansion in any absolute sense (Perera 1998). In this context, their success or perceived success is gauged at the popular level on the basis of their relentless activity and visibility (Perera 1995, 1998). Moreover, much of the reality surrounding the operation of these groups are lost in both the secrecy of the groups themselves, and the rhetoric and phobia of the challengers (Perera 1998). Thus, this general suspicion entertained by evangelist groups tends to create an aura of secrecy around them, which in the long run feeds into the suspicions the general population have towards them (Perera 1998).

What I want to stress at this point is that the kind of reductionist explanations outlined above are sociologically inadequate to explain the general success of evangelical groups in Sri Lanka. There are much more complex and sociologically significant dynamics involved here. I would suggest that there are important social and political conditions in Sri Lanka, which have created a space for evangelical groups to operate and succeed. These conditions have to be located in the present role of conventional religions, the consequences of contemporary
socio-political climate in the country, and the general conditions which have resulted from urbanization and overall development, which have not been adequately addressed by existing religions (Perera 1998).

Field interviews in the districts of Colombo, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Puttalum in 1994, 1997 and 1998 have indicated that many of those who have joined new evangelical groups (both former Buddhists and Catholics) complain that the main reason for them to abandon either Buddhism or Catholicism was due to the disinterest the Catholic and Buddhist establishments had shown towards their existential dilemmas (Perera 1995, Perera 1998). Less extensive interviews conducted in Colombo in 2003 and in 2004 suggest that these reasons have remained consistent over time. Many, but by no means all, Buddhists who are attracted to these groups come from socially or emotionally depressed backgrounds, and for persons from such backgrounds, the benefits or emotional help from Buddhist institutions have been inadequate, or more accurately non-existent (Perera 1998). By contrast, many of the new evangelical groups are organized like extended counseling or self-help groups. In the same sense, many of the new evangelical churches have smaller congregations, which allow for more personal interaction between members of the congregation as well as with immediate leaders such as local pastors. No such system exists in the Buddhist establishment despite the vast network of temples and monks (Perera 1998). Though Buddhist temples, which in many Sinhala villages were closely linked to the village through various religious and ritual activities, their monks were traditionally expected to be somewhat aloof from the matters of the world, and concentrate on achieving goals such as Nirvana, which is the ultimate state of bliss according to Buddhist belief when all suffering come to an end (Perera 1995). In other words, temples as local organizations and the Buddhist ecclesiastical order as an overall institution, despite its vast resources are very slow
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in innovation in tune with changing socio-political situation in the country (Perera 1998). For instance, despite the ongoing war and the large scale displacement of people in the combat zones and in border areas, the Buddhist institutional organization collectively have no programs to assist refugees, provide shelter for children, or to provide rehabilitation services. Generally, the great majority of individual temples also do not have such programs (Perera 1998). But certain temples in affected areas provide some help out of sheer need, where the monks themselves are affected by the same kind of problems, and are aware of the conditions (Perera 1998). As opposed to this situation, both well established Christian churches as well as many new evangelical groups have been active at village and town level in helping some of the victims of political violence cope with their grief, as well as with problems arising out of more mundane but pressing problems of routine life (Perera 1998).

But evangelical groups were not merely active addressing the issues faced by people affected by war. In fact, they were much more active in areas of the country where war was not a daily reminder as is the case in the north and east. In the rest of the country, they were active among socially and economically backward sections of society in both rural and urban sectors. In these areas, they were not dealing with situations arising out of extraordinary situations such as war, but mundane issues which nevertheless were issues of great concern for the people who had to face them. Some of the issues evangelical groups are particularly interested in, include the following: general poverty, lack of access to education, problems of hunger and nutrition, sanitation and health (Perera 1998). It is however, in these kinds of situations that one often hears more of aggressive proselytizing. On many instances, there seem to be an unwritten understanding which suggests that continued support or better support would be offered only to those people who joined the new movements.
in a formal manner. This was particularly the case when it came to offering economic incentives such as money to buy land, fertilizer, seeds, free education for children and food (Perera 1995, Perera 1998). It appears that in these kinds of situations people often convert out of call for or necessity rather than out of conviction or faith. In such situations, the decision to convert is a rational economic decision than a matter of spiritual salvation (Perera 1998).

Looking at the landscape of religious competition of the last decade or so, it is abundantly clear that the somewhat insensitive activities of some evangelical groups have incensed local populations which have sometimes resulted in violence. But more often than not, such violence has been a reaction to processes already set in motion by evangelical groups. By contrast, as mentioned earlier, traditional Christianities as part of their historical interaction with Buddhism and Hinduism and their socio-political evolution have learnt what is possible and what is not in the local context (Perera 2004). Quite simply, they have to a large extent understood the bases of inter-religious co-existence, something that evangelical groups need to learn. Let me give two clear examples from different periods of time to illustrate this point. The town of Mihintale has deep religious and cultural significance to local Buddhists as it is believed to be the site where Buddhism was first introduced to the island. In the mid 1990s, at a government sponsored exhibition in Mihintale to mark the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, an evangelical group known as the Evangelical Library had organized to distribute bibles and bible tracts to those who came to the exhibition (Perera 1995, 2004). Earlier in 1993, the same group had written to local Christian leaders complaining that they were not giving them adequate help to "reach the 4000 Buddhist monks in the vicinity" who were ripe for conversion in their assessment. The appeals by established churches to abandon the project, which would have created an explosive situation, was not heeded (Perera 1995, 2004).
Only the cancellation of the exhibition by the government for other reasons halted the project. While in my mind, the distribution of religious literature is not an issue, if it is done without any sensitivity towards possible consequences that marks a very dangerous situation. It is in this light that the planned activity outlined above has to be identified as an irresponsible and aggressive activity that clearly shows the non-learning of lessons from history.

More recently in 2003, another evangelical group in one of its newsletters circulated to followers referred to its period of fasting and prayer. It also suggested that during this period, a well-known Buddhist leader passed away. The only Buddhist leader who died at the time was the much revered Ven. Madihe Pannasihe Thera. While for me, this was a mere reporting of two unrelated facts, some Christian leaders have told me that there was a more sinister insinuation here. That is, Rev. Pannasihe passed away due to the power of fasting and prayer of this group (Perera 2004). If so, then one has to wonder whether this kind of remote control killing through prayer and other divine means is part of the agenda of this and similar groups? Again, despite belief, this is a highly naïve and dangerous assertion, which if it had leaked to the public might have resulted in the kind of violence that was evident in the context of the death and funeral of the well known and popular monk Rev. Soma (Perera 2004).

What this increased presence, activity, operational aggression, inability to learn from the distant and recent history and the clear absence of visionary leadership within the collective evangelical project has meant is that evangelical groups as a whole has become more visible, open to criticisms of traditional Christians, Buddhists as well as Hindus, and, therefore, more vulnerable as a target of attack. In fact, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) provides the following figures of attacks against its workers and institutions that
have been reported by this umbrella body during the period 1987 to 2004:

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NCEASL notes that according to its estimates, about 60% of incidents that occur are not reported (2003, 2004). Irrespective of the accuracy of these reports, what is clear is that incidents have generally increased after 1991. What generally happens is that certain local or national incidents trigger off events that sometimes go beyond mere local domains. NCEASL claims that 80 incidents of the 91 reported for 2003 took place after WJM Lokubandara, the Minister of Buddha Sasana in the previous UNP government announced the government's intention to introduce anti-conversion laws (2004: 7) under pressure from insistent Buddhist pressure groups. Consequences of history however, ensure that no such legislation was enacted under the UNP government. However, the most vocal and insistent demands for legislation against conversion which has now become a national issue emanated from this period (2003), and therefore it is pertinent to look at its dynamics in some detail. In recent times, the largest destruction of evangelical infrastructure has been reported from 2003. The immediate reason for this most recent phase of 'religious' violence has been the conspiracy theories that were circulating
consequent to the sudden death of the popular Buddhist telemonk Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera (Perera 2004). Despite the fact that the monk died due to natural causes as indicated in the autopsy reports, many people believed that he was killed as a result of a Christian conspiracy. The reason for that belief was because Rev. Soma was one of the most articulate and consistent public opponents of evangelical expansionism in recent times. This was a consistent theme in his public sermons as well as addresses to the public through national television, radio and print media. The problem with conspiracy theories is that they evolve and sustain themselves in a space where rationality has no real existence (Perera 2004). So many followers of Rev. Soma genuinely believed that he was killed in a conspiracy hatched by Christians within the specific political context in which the monk operated and the fiery and explosive funeral orations given at the monk's funeral by monks such as Venerable Ellawala Medhananda Thera did not help in cooling down passions that were already dangerously close to boiling point. In fact, many supporters initially wanted to cremate the monk on Christmas day much to the consternation of Christians, and that demand was not realized only due to the government's sensible refusal to grant permission. At the funereal, a number of orators demanded state intervention to stop what was called 'unethical' conversions, a call that had great acceptance among the thousands of people who attended the funeral ceremony as well as among many ordinary Buddhists who watched the event live via television (Perera 2003).

Much of anti-evangelical violence of 2003 emerged from the moment marked by Rev. Soma's death and the conspiracy theories it initiated, while it also galvanized Buddhist activist to consistently demand for legislative action to curb conversations. In fact, the monk's death created an emotionally charged backdrop that seemed to legitimate the demand at the level of popular discourse. Soon after the funeral, on 30th December 2003, riding on a
wave of popular Buddhist sentiment, the *Jathika Sanga Sammelanaya* launched a fast unto death in front of the Buddha Sasana Ministry demanding that the government bring in laws to prohibit 'unethical' conversions. Responding to these demands as well as the spate of violence against Christian infrastructure, the Buddha Sasana Minister, W. J. M. Lokubandra promised that he would present a cabinet proposal soon to enable the enactment of necessary legislation to stop 'unethical' conversions (Perera 2003). The Minister of Hindu Cultural Affairs of the same regime, T. E. Maheswaran has also been voicing similar sentiments in a very vocal fashion for some time in the specific context where Hindus in the North East and the estate sector have also been attracted to a number of evangelical groups operating in those parts of the island (Perera 2003).

However, it has to be clearly noted that what happened in terms of the violence against evangelical infrastructure, the protest by Buddhist monks and the Buddha Sasana Minister's agreement to bring in legislation to address the issue of 'unethical' conversions is not a sudden development. It is merely the culmination of a popular unhappiness that has been around for a very long time, most visibly among Buddhists that had not been addressed.

In the midst of the most recent controversy regarding conversions in the backdrop of the funeral of Rev. Soma, the Catholic Church publicly distanced itself from the practice of conversions. It was, perhaps, in this context that the attackers of Christian infrastructure in most cases specifically targeted new evangelical prayer halls and other such buildings rather than directing their anger at Christianity in general (Perera 2003). According to press reports, the Auxiliary Bishop of Colombo Rt. Rev. Dr. Marius Peiris has noted that the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Sri Lanka would discuss the proposed anti-conversion Bill when it is ready, and make its position clear after a close study of its clauses. So, it appears that the
Catholic Church is not opposed to the idea of such legislation in principle. However, in comparison, Rev. Noel Fernando, the President of the Methodist Church, which is a constituent member of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (consisting of traditional Protestant denominations in the country), had some reservations. According to him, the introduction of such a bill might be counter-productive because it might be interpreted in different ways thereby restricting individuals' religious freedom (Perera 2003). However, the promised legislation did not come to Parliament due to the sudden dissolution of Parliament by President Chandrika Kumaratunge. Nevertheless, the issue had become politically so important that it did not go away with the change of government. In fact, two important things took place as a consequence. In the snap election that was called after the dissolution of Parliament, 10 Buddhist monks campaigning on a platform of Buddhist rights and anti-conversion rhetoric were elected as MPs on the basis of a mostly urban vote. Second, one of them brought in a bill prohibiting conversion as a private members bill for debate in Parliament, which again created much controversy in the religious domain in Sri Lanka. Now, instead of demands and promises of legislation, there was a draft for debate. In addition, the new government also has indicated that they have their own draft which has hitherto not been tabled in Parliament. At the moment, the controversy is about the constitutionality of the present draft bill titled 'Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion' presented by Rev Omalpe Sobhitha on 21st July 2004 (Parliament of Sri Lanka 2004a).

**Institutionalizing Religious Intolerance: 'Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion'**

The presentation of the 'Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion' Bill in Parliament marks a clear watershed in the religious politics in Sri Lanka. Thus far, politics of religion whether acrimonious or not, have mostly
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been limited to the realms of private politics, rhetoric or even public discourse and violence. Yet, such politics had not support or recourse from the law. It is precisely these parameters that are now being attempted to change, and marks a clear shift in the tactics of Buddhists activists. If enacted, it will also make politics of religion move on to a realm where compromise might not be possible; where acrimony would be the state of the game. The basic position of the bill is articulated in its second clause as follows:

No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religion to another by use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person aid and abet in any such conversion (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2004a: 1).

Clause 3 (a) and (b) stipulates that anyone who has converted must inform the area’s Divisional Secretary within a stipulated period of time while those who have facilitated in such a conversion must do the same (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2004a: 1-2). Clause 4 (a) stipulates that those who become guilty of the offenses stipulated in the bill (in Clause 2) are liable to imprisonment of a period not exceeding five years and fine not exceeding one hundred and fifty thousand rupees (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2004a: 2). It further stipulates if the offense is committed with regard to a minor, a woman or person referred to in the schedule provided at the end of the bill, the punishment will be for a term not exceeding seven years and also liable to a fine not exceeding rupees five hundred thousand (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2004a: 2). Clause five provides for the manner in which proceedings before a magistrate might be instituted:
(a) by the Divisional Secretary of the area or an officer authorized by him;

(b) by a police in terms of Section 136 of the Code of Criminal Procedure Act, No. 15 of 1979, upon a complaint made to Police by a person aggrieved by the offence or in the case of a Minor, by his or her father or mother or a lawful Guardian or any other interested person who has reasons to believe that the provisions of the act has been violated, acting in the public interest;

(c) by a person aggrieved by the offence;

(d) by an Attorney-at-Law;

(e) by any person authorized by the Minister.

In terms of the above, what the bill provides for is the possibility for any interested individual to initiate legal proceedings against anyone deemed to be in violation of the bill. This has been one of the most contentious aspects of the bill because it is possible to initiate veritable witch-hunts on the basis of this provision. One of the basic problems with the bill is its very inclusive nature and the vagueness of definitions, which makes it relatively easy for an individual to be found guilty under its provisions. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the bill has drawn the criticism of many Christian groups.

As pointed out earlier, when the previous regime in 2003 promised to introduce legislation, the Catholic hierarchy, reserved the right to comment on the proposals when they were made public while the Methodist Church (one of many Protestant groups) stated that such legislation would place serious restrictions on people’s freedom of religion. In 2004, when a proposed bill was actually presented to parliament, there was no divergence of opinion within the traditional Protestant/Catholic hierarchy. They were unanimous that the proposed legislation would place serious negative impacts on the country’s inter-religious
Christian Evangelical Activity and the Reemergence of Militant Buddhism: Concerns for Internal Security

relations. In a statement, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) stated that the proposed bill as well as the government's own draft bill titled 'Protection of Religious Freedom', if enacted would "blatantly violate fundamental human rights" (Daily Mirror, 17th August 2004). Commenting on both bills, the CBCSL noted that both bills are unconstitutional and violated international norms and covenants (Daily Mirror, 17th August 2004). While acknowledging the need to find a solution to the issue of 'unethical conversions' the CMCSL strongly supported the setting up of an Inter-religious Body comprising of different religious leaders as suggested by the Report of the Buddhist Commission as possible mechanism for addressing the issues regarding conversions and other issues leading to tensions (Daily Mirror, 17th August 2004). Similarly, the National Christian Council, comprising the traditional protestant denominations have also publicly stated that it would be compelled to challenge the validity of the proposed bill in the Supreme Court (The Island, 30th July 2004). The NCC have observed in its statement that the proposed bill violated people's freedom of choice and religion and that it might "pave the way for serious abuse by any interested party which could affect any religious community or its leaders or undermine religious harmony leading to an atmosphere of intimidation and fear" (The Island, 30th July 2004). At the same time, the NCC also very clearly marked its opposition to "any unethical/ improper means of conversions" because "such methods do not conform to the actual ethics and spirit of the Gospel and is a contradiction to the core spirituality of all religions" (The Island, 30th July 2004). On the other hand, the public statements of evangelical umbrella organizations on this issue have been very similar to those of conventional Christian/Catholic denomination. The National Christian Evangelical Association stated that its membership "unequivocally condemn any fraudulent activity or allurement in the form of material benefits, or any undue
pressure being exerted to any person for supposed religious conversion” (*The Sunday Island*, 18th January 2004). This was a direct reference to a particular kind of terminology in popular usage and the proposed bill which refer to ‘unethical conversions.’ The Alliance have also noted that the proposed bill, already presented in the Parliament as well as the government draft bill will “enforce limitations on the freedom of religion on all religious groups, and legitimize harassment of minority religious groups” (*Daily Mirror*, 30th July 2004).

In a sense, one could argue that the attempted introduction of legislation to curb conversions, which is fundamentally a Buddhist project has polarized relations between Buddhists and the many Christianities in the country while also helping at an operational level for traditional and more recent evangelical groups to cooperate in opposing the bill as well as in rethinking their overall strategies. Compared to the concerns outlined in the statements of the Christian groups that have thus far been published, Buddhist public statements simply waive these fears away. A number of Buddhist organizations, responding to the criticisms and concerns of Christian organizations have observed that the proposed bill presented in the parliament does not infringe on any religious freedoms (*Sunday Observer*, 8th August 2004). Their position has been that the bill is merely attempting to curb ‘coercive’ means of effecting changes in people’s religion, and that such provisions are already found in other international and regional conventions’ (*Sunday Observer*, 8th August 2004). The position of many of these responses has been that the proposed legislation is essential to avoid “the complete breakdown of religious harmony” and that it would ensure that the legitimate rights of minority religions are not jeopardized (*Sunday Observer*, 8th August 2004). On the other hand, many Buddhist organizations and individuals have perceived the negative reaction of the traditional Christian denominations as a mere
misunderstanding of the objectives of the proposed bill (Sunday Observer, 8th August 2004, Sunday Times, 1st August 2004).

This situation of confrontation has meant that many individuals, organizations and groups filed petitions in the Supreme Court challenging the constitutionality of the bill or sections within it. However, those opposed to the bill were not only Christian groups. For instance, the President of the All Ceylon Hindu Congress also filed a petition in the Supreme Court protesting against the preamble of the proposed bill, which according to the petitioner was “seeking to portray Buddhism as the foremost religion” (Sunday Times, 1st August 2004). The preamble was quite unusual as it had opted to use mythological constructions of Buddhism’s introduction and presence in Sri Lanka as the basis for the bill rather than adhering to historical factors or proceeding in the context of equal religious rights guaranteed to all people. In a sense, this was a rhetorical position, as this petition did not oppose the main objectives of the bill (Sunday Times, 1st August 2004), which perhaps suited the position of many Hindus and Hindu organizations, which were also opposed to the idea, and politics of Christian evangelical action. Similarly, the Muslim Theological Council was also disturbed about some provisions of the bill such as the sections providing legal action against people who converted and “not so much against the fundamental missionaries” (Sunday Times, 1st August 2004). The council’s position is that it was “concerned about illegal conversions,” but if the bill became law it “could have serious implications on human rights” (Sunday Times, 1st August 2004).

In the context of confrontation and legal challenges to the bill, the Sri Lanka Supreme Court presented a determination, which was presented to Parliament on
August 17th 2004. It made the following major recommendation:

In view of our findings that clause 3 and clause 4 (b) of the bill violate Article 10 of the Constitution, the bill in its present form has to be passed by no less than 2/3rd of the whole number of members (including those not present) and approved by the people at a referendum in terms of Article 83 (a) of the Constitution.

If clauses 3 and 4 (b) are deleted, the bill will not be inconsistent with Article 10 of the Constitution.10

Basically, this meant that the Supreme Court, in practical terms, made it impossible for the bill to be transformed into law in its present form, but allowed for its passage on the grounds that its most draconian and problematic sections are either deleted or reformulated. In addition, the Supreme Court made a number of specific recommendations, which also attempted to make the proposed bill more consistent with the Constitution. However, the bottom line is that it is entirely possible that in the near future the bill would be passed, and if so would become law. If that is the case, then the country’s inter-religious dynamics would have entered a truly new phase where there would be a legislative basis for the confrontations to be entrenched and sustained.

Concluding Thoughts

Let me very briefly summarize what I have attempted to achieve thus far, and proceed to conclude this paper. In Part One, I outlined the epistemological and philosophical contexts within which Buddhism formally dealt with other systems of belief or ideas and the parameters within which these notions and religious dynamics in Sri Lanka changed
from what it was with the advent of European colonialism. In Part Two, I reviewed the development of evangelical Christianity in Sri Lanka in a context where the lessons from the previous period were not heeded to, and the constitutional conditions within which this growth was possible. In a sense, this was a situation where history repeated itself. In Part Three, I have outlined the latest phase of this confrontation which has essentially been focused on the attempted introduction of legislation to curb what has been deemed 'unethical conversions.' Its supporters, who are mostly Buddhists, have seen this legislation as a perceived tool to combat the expansion of evangelical Christianity. With this action, the dynamics of inter-religious confrontations have entered a new phase.

What the latest situation means is that the Buddhist reaction has become formulated within the realm of legal action. This means that the confrontational dimension of inter-religious dynamics in the country has become an issue of law and its perceived unfairness. Within this dimension, if the situation goes on to the extent of becoming law in actuality, it will lead to the creation of a moral community out of the collective of Christianities linked together by the strength of the perceived unfairness of the legislative action sustained by the mindset of a persecuted community. This is a situation that has not existed thus far despite the preeminence given to Buddhism in Sri Lankan constitutions from 1972 onwards. Unfortunately, this comes at a time when Sri Lanka has yet to come to terms with its inter-ethnic conflict which has effectively divided the country into two systems of governance, one controlled by the Sri Lankan government, and the other controlled by the rebel group, LTTE. In other words, the conflict potential in Sri Lanka has been widened at a time it can ill-afford such polarizations. Yet, neither the supporters of the legislation nor the government seems willing to compromise on the introduction of legislation. On the other hand, thus far the country's religious leaders have
shown no willingness or skill to deal with the emerging situation while the leadership of the collective evangelical movement has also not shown the visionary capability of learning from the country's own past. In the midst of this new confrontation, Buddhists have also missed an important point. That is, the real sociopolitical spaces that have been created in the country which have allowed many successes for the collective evangelical movement will not go away merely due to legislation. Legislation will merely hide the real issues in the controversy that has already emerged. When these issues are placed in context what we see is the fact that Sri Lanka has yet again entered the kind of situation it has entered many times before without any real sense of how best to face it. That is entering a crisis without a plan. In the final analysis, what this means is the adding of yet another dimension of stress to the already strained internal security situation of the country, placing more difficulties in the process of democratic governance.

Endnotes

1. In addition to a number of papers, the only well-known work of scholarship that looks at religious transformations within Buddhism in the context of evolving social and cultural changes is Gananath Obeyesekere's & Richard Gombrich's *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton University Press, 1988). H.L Seneviratne's recent text, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (University of Chicago Press, 1999) provides a useful and critical historical description of different phases of Buddhist revivalism and militancy. The only preliminary text that attempts to place in context the more recent religious dynamics involving Christian evangelism is my own limited study *New Evangelical Movements and Conflict in South Asia: Sri Lanka and Nepal in Perspective* (Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 1998).

2. Emphasis added.

3. Emphasis added.
4. Emphasis added. The terms 'Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi' was a form in which Ashoka was referred to in many rock edicts.

5. Much of the discussion of the pre 2004 period in this section is a summary of Chapter 3 of my study New Evangelical Movements and Conflict in South Asia: Sri Lanka and Nepal in Perspective (Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 1998).


7. The Divisional Secretary is the main government functionary within the administrative area under his control.

8. The categories of persons included in the schedule at the end of the bill are quite exhaustive and extremely inclusive, which effectively leave very few people out. The list includes following categories of people: 1. Those people classified as samurdy beneficiaries, 2. Prison inmates, 3. Inmates of rehabilitation centers, 4. Inmates of detention centers, 5. Physically or mentally handicapped, 6. Employees of an organization, 7. Members of the armed forces or police, 8. Students, 9. Inmates of hospitals and or places of healing, 10. Inmates of refugee camps, 11. Any other category as may be prescribed by the minister by regulations (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2004a: 4). In category one, 'samurdy beneficiaries' means those who receive funds from the government's poverty alleviation program.

9. The objectionable part of the preamble reads as follows: "WHEREAS, Buddhism being the foremost religion professed by and practiced by the majority of people in Sri Lanka, due to the introduction by great Thathagatha, the Sambuddha in the 8th Month after he had attained Buddhahood on his visit to Mahiyangana in Sri Lanka and due to the complete realisation after the arrival of Arahath Mahinda Thero in the 3rd Century B.E." (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 31st May 2004).

10. Article 10 of the Sri Lankan Constitution which assures all citizens freedom of thought, conscience and religion takes the following position: "Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of his choice" (Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978).
11. For an analysis of the reasons for the expansion of the evangelical movement, see Chapter 3 of my study *New Evangelical Movements and Conflict in South Asia: Sri Lanka and Nepal in Perspective* (Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 1998).

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