
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN DYNAMICS IN SRI LANKA

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Part -I

There are two major objectives in this paper. Firstly, I will discuss why people join and remain in evangelical Christian groups. Secondly, I will assess the impact of the evangelical Christian movement on the Sri Lankan society.

Evangelical Christianity

Evangical Christianity emerged as a reform movement within the Protestant denominations in the 18th Century in America and England (Soper 1994:37). The three characteristic features of the evangelical belief are: the emphasis on the sacrificial nature of Christ's death, the foremost place accorded to the Bible as the infallible word of God, and the integration of religious convictions and social conduct (Soper 1994: 38). Evangelical Christianity also strongly emphasizes spreading the faith and conversion of 'sinners' to the faith of Christ. Words such as charismatic as well as Pentecostal have also been used to identify these groups (Ammerman 1994). Moreover, groups of the above kind are also referred to as fundamentalist in the popular as well as in the academic discourse (Perera 1998: 3).

Many of the evangelical groups active in Sri Lanka as well as in other parts of Asia have their roots in the Protestant fundamentalist movement in America (Perera 1998:4). The protestant fundamentalist movement emerged in North America in the 1920s as a conservative reaction against the liberal tendencies that were manifest in Protestant denominations and the American school system at the time (Ammerman 1994:14). After an initial set back, the so-called fundamentalists have made a forceful reappearance in the U.S public life beginning in the 1970s. Establishing missions internationally has been one sustained area of engagement of the fundamentalist movement in America from its inception (Ammerman 1994: 14).

Evangelical Christianity in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a multi-religious society. About 70 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8

percent Christian and 7 percent is Muslim. Most members of the majority Sinhala community are Theravada Buddhists. The majority of the Hindus are considered Saivites. The overwhelming majority of the Muslim community tends to be Sunni with a small minority of Shi'a. The majority of the Christians are Roman Catholics while there is a significant presence of protestant denominations in the country.

The institutional setup of the evangelical movement in Sri Lanka consists of churches, para church organizations, literature distribution outlets and agencies concerned with social welfare (Perera 1998: 49). There are no reliable sources to get an idea about the exact number of evangelical groups operating in the country and their membership. Some researchers estimate 300 to 350 such churches and para church groups (Perera 1998: 52). The general perception is that their numbers are on the increase. It is since mid 1980s and early 1990s that the activities of evangelical groups have become more visible and aggressive (Perera 1998: 49). But some of these groups currently operating in Sri Lanka such as the Jehovah's Witness or the Assemblies of God have been working in the island for a long time. Funding for evangelical groups operating in South Asia, including Sri Lanka, mainly comes from countries such as, the USA, England, Australia, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Japan and South Korea (Perera 1998: 22).

Some of these groups operating in Sri Lanka tend to project a very American image. From the building structures to the attire of the pastors and the kind of English used by them all is unmistakably American. Moreover, these churches get down evangelists from USA on a regular basis for talks. A good example for this type of church is the People's Church in Narahenpita, Colombo. The above local church is a good example to substantiate the thesis of Americanization of the collective evangelical movement, proposed by certain researchers (Ammerman: 1994 and Brouwer et al: 1996). Contrary to the above type, there are also groups who self-consciously project a more 'traditional' image. The pastors of the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission in Nugegoda wear the traditional costume of the Sinhalese/Tamils during the

service. Moreover, their congregation is segregated on the basis of sex and is made to sit on mats during the service.

However, what is common to all kinds of groups in the evangelical movement is their sense of urgency to expand in terms of numbers. Many of them would faithfully interpret this as converting 'sinners' to the faith of Christ. This zeal for proselytizing is what distinguishes them from mainline churches.

Poverty and its Impact

Sri Lanka is a country with a high level of poverty. Successive government policies since independence have miserably failed in addressing the issue of poverty. The free market policies since late 1970s have exacerbated the situation.

One major criticism of the villagers in Thanamalvila and other informants was the lack of interest shown by the Buddhist monks in matters relating to the welfare of the village or their lives. The Buddhist monks were seen as uncaring. Moreover, they were perceived as an economic burden on their already unbearable lives. Against this background of grinding poverty and misery, the activities of evangelical groups are seen with hope. Social welfare is one area in which these groups are very actively involved. They deal with issues such as poverty and malnutrition, education and vocational training, child abuse, disability, and health and counseling.

Thanamalvila is a socially and economically marginal area located in the Monaragala District. More than 50% of the families in Thanamalvila are *Samurdhi* welfare recipients. In other words, a large majority of inhabitants of Thanamalvila are living in poverty.

Against such a backdrop, it is not a surprise that Thanamalvila has attracted the attention of evangelical Christian groups. Over the last couple of years many evangelical Christian churches have come up in the area. Within a period of one year, nine such churches appeared. Against these figures, there are only twelve Buddhist temples in this area.

In areas where evangelical groups have been active, they have been directly involved in the welfare of the villages. Angunukolavawe is one such village in the Thanamalvila Divisional Secretariat where they were active. Apart from holding medical camps and providing educational facilities in this village, the church provided living allowances for

senior students until they sat for the GCE Advanced Level examination. Moreover, the church provided an allowance for the infirm. It also provided material assistance for the poorest of the poor. I came across villagers in Thanamalvila who openly said that they would change their religion if they receive anything that would improve their miserable living conditions.

Collapse of the Pastoral Ministry

I was informed by a Christian belonging to a main line church that the main reason for the desertion of the mainline churches and increasing membership in evangelical groups is due to the collapse of the pastoral ministry. According to him, the pastors in the mainline churches are entangled in bureaucratic duties and they have neglected the well being of their congregations. On the other hand, the evangelical groups are at their best in performing the duties of pastoral ministry. Activists of these evangelical groups are aware of this situation. A pastor of a very recently established evangelical church told me that the mainline religious institutions "do not go out of their way to look into the needs of their members." On the contrary, evangelical groups reach out to people with an urgency, which distinguishes this particular strand of Christianity from others.

Dayawathi is a sixty-two year old who has earlier been a Buddhist. She is a resident of a village called Kitulkote in Thanamalvila. She has been suffering from a cancer and had been bed ridden for sometime. In her miserable plight, neither the village Buddhist monk nor her kinfolk extended concern or support towards her. She was conveniently forgotten. Amidst much obstacles and protests, she was approached by the pastor and the sisters of a newly established evangelical church in the area. They came to her house on a regular basis and prayed for her. This gave her much emotional comfort and hope in life. They also looked after her by providing material support. Now she is a member of this particular church. Still the pastor and the sisters come to her house regularly and pray for her and look after her material needs.

Raju is a former Hindu from Modera, who joined an evangelical group about five years back. He became a member of this group by participating in one of its healing crusades. What drove him to participate in this rally were his health problems such as, constant stomachaches and bouts of possession, for which he found no comfort from any specialist, including his traditional religious specialists. He claims he was healed in that particular healing crusade and ever since he has been with this particular group.

Jenny is from an upper middle class background in Colombo. She was falling apart due to marital problems. Her marriage was heading for a divorce. The church she belonged to seemed far removed and unconcerned about her crisis. Then she got the opportunity to participate in a deliverance rally organized by a particular evangelical church. In this rally, she came across caring pastors and members of a congregation who took a genuine interest in her problem. The church made a direct intervention on her behalf. The intervention was so successful that it led the couple to marry for the second time in this particular church. She and her husband remain devout members of this evangelical church to date.

A Sense of Community

A sense of community is what is lacking in mainline religious institutions. They are large, impersonal and superficial. According to one convert of an evangelical group, in her old church, the members of the congregation hardly knew each other or cared about each other's problems. On the contrary, most evangelical churches maintain small congregations in order to be more responsive to the needs of their members. Usually, the pastor knows each member on a personal basis. In one particular evangelical church based in Colombo, the young members of the congregation met each other on a daily basis in the evening to discuss their problems and pray for each other. In most of these churches, during the regular service, through a system of chits, the members of the congregation pray for the problems of fellow members, thus creating a very communal atmosphere. According to Ajith, a convert to an evangelical church, "there is genuine brotherhood here (meaning, the church). We get together, pray together for our problems and help each other out."

For most members of these groups, the church is not a once a week affair. The church has a deep impact on their day-to-day lives. Small groups of the congregation may hold prayer meetings at each other's houses regularly or individual members of the congregation might read a section of the Bible everyday and try to interpret the 'correct' message. It is an intense form of religiosity. One main criticism of recent converts against traditional churches is that they do not teach the Bible properly. Nelum says, "the old church did not give me a sense of hope in my life. It was just a Sunday affair. After one Sunday, you forget everything until the next Sunday." The vibrant and very emotional form of worship

found in many evangelical churches may be an expression of this mindset of their members.

The Failure of the Traditional Religious Institutions

The so-called success of the evangelical Christian movement has to be viewed against the relative failure of the traditional religious institutions to be more responsive to the needs and expectations of the contemporary society. Evangelical groups expand by getting directly involved in the problems of day-to-day life at grass roots level. The following prayer of a pastor attached to an evangelical church in Colombo captures the 'this-worldly' bent of the evangelical Christian movement. "I pray to Jesus, help these people solve their problems, the loans they cannot payback, family problems, health problems like cholesterol, diabetics, heart conditions. Heal in Jesus' name...help find life partners for the young people."

As Perera correctly says, many Buddhists who have joined these evangelical groups come from socially and emotionally depressed backgrounds (1998). The Buddhist institutional set up has not made any substantial intervention in addressing the concerns of these sections of the Buddhist laity. The chief incumbent of the Malwatta Chapter, Venerable Thibbotuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala has been very critical of the former lay custodian of the Temple of the Tooth, which has in its possession enormous sums of wealth, for being only highly vocal against evangelical activities but not taking a genuine interest in the welfare of the poverty stricken lay Buddhists and monks who reside in impoverished temples (*Ravaya*, 2005 June 12). Unlike the Buddhist institutional setup, the mainline churches have traditionally been involved in social welfare programs to a certain extent (i.e. counseling for marital, drug and violence/trauma related problems and education). Yet their social intervention seems to be inadequate.

Under such circumstances, conversions have to be seen as a reaction against the long-term neglect of the marginal and vulnerable sections of the society and their longing for a better life. There have been some progressive measures - measures that would address the concerns of their estranged congregations - adopted by the established religious institutions in reaction to the activities of the evangelical movement. Unfortunately, we are also witnessing a violent backlash.

Part -II

Aggressive Evangelism

Conversion is the *modus operandi* of most evangelical groups functioning in Sri Lanka and there is intense competition among these groups to expand their flock. There are claims and counter claims as to the 'true church' among these groups. Even though some of the interviewed activists claimed that they are not interested in getting people to join their particular church, but only in spreading the good news, most of these evangelical activists make a persistent effort to expand the flock of their particular church. The primary objective of their healing crusades, deliverance rallies, house-to-house visits, literature distribution and social welfare work, is the expansion of their membership. Some of these groups go to the extent of even providing transport facilities for the public to attend events organized by their churches with the above intention.

From their perspective, all these are done with a noble intention, 'to save lost souls.' One characteristic feature of the evangelical Christian project is the sense of urgency with which it executes its mission. As Perera correctly observed, it is in this sense of urgency for rapid expansion one may locate the aggression of evangelism (1998: 79). Some members of the collective evangelical project tend to think that, "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 favor" (Perera 1998).

According to a Christian affiliated to a mainline church, most evangelical groups are "intolerant of others' views, lack humility, and are arrogant and invasive." Usually, many of these groups would not allow plurality. If one member of a family is converted to one of these churches, he or she may attempt to convert the rest of the family members and individuals who come under the sphere of his/her influence to that particular church. I know of a woman who attends regular gatherings of a particular evangelical group. So far she has not been baptized and hence not a full member of the group. She is advised by the group not to attend her church and not to send her children to the Sunday school of that church. Members of this group visit her house and take care of the religious education of her children. She is also pressurized to bring her husband as well as their servant, who belong to mainline churches, to the sessions of the group. She is also warned that after baptism, she may not attend any church other than the church of this particular group.

Certain individuals and groups have come to perceive aggressive and insensitive evangelical activity as a sign of one's faith and devotion to the mission. A charismatic pastor of an evangelical group uttered in a healing crusade in the late 1990s that their objective is to *subjugate* the entire island to the command of god. In an interview I recently had with a pastor of a newly established evangelical church, the pastor equated the future Buddha Maithree with the second coming of Jesus and advised Buddhists to worship Jesus because of this 'fact.' Perera discusses an evangelical group that was planning to distribute Bibles and Bible tracts during the celebrations in Mihintale that mark the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka (1998:115). Mihintale is a sacred Buddhist site, the place where many Buddhists believe the discourse of Buddha was preached for the first time in Sri Lanka. Moreover, this very same evangelical group was attempting to convert the Buddhist monks in the area (Perera 1998: 115). This kind of aggressive and insensitive missionary activity on the part of certain evangelical groups in a multi-religious society with a volatile historical memory of colonial missionary aggression tends to invite trouble. Maybe the arrogance and insensitivity exhibited by some of these groups has to be understood against the background of vast amounts of resources and the powerful international political backing the collective evangelical movement has access to.

The Conservative Backlash

Anti-Christian violence in Sri Lanka started all of a sudden from about mid 1980s. This does not deny the fact that there have been isolated incidents of Buddhist vs Christian violence in the past. But the recent campaign of violence seems to be organized, sustained and ideologically fuelled. Anti-Christian violence consists of such acts as, forced closure of churches, demolition and desecration of churches and religious symbols, arson, intimidation, threats, and physical attacks. According to the statistics of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), violence against church workers and institutions significantly increased from early 1990s (Perera 2004: 17). On most occasions, attacks have targeted small, defenseless and isolated groups. As in India, attacks against Christians increase when extremist forces perceive that they have the backing of the state (Puniyani 2003:167,168). According to the NCEASL, 80 incidents out of 91 reported for the year 2003 took place after the Minister of Buddha Sasana announced the government's plans to introduce anti-conversion laws due to the pressure of extremist forces (Perera 2004: 17). There have also been instances where violence against evangelical groups have been committed in

predominantly Tamil Hindu and Roman Catholic areas by Hindus as well as by Catholic mobs, sometimes led by sections of the Catholic clergy. The attack on the Heavenly Harvest Church in Kaluvenkerni in the East by Hindu mobs in 2003 and the attack in 2002 on Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Kadol Kale, Negambo, by mobs led by certain Catholic priests of the area, are two cases in point.

An Ideology of Exclusion

Attacks against Christian activists and institutions do not take place in an ideological vacuum. The central theme of the ideology that is responsible for creating religious tensions is the assertion that Sri Lanka belongs to Sinhala Buddhists. They are thought to be the true inheritors of the soil. All other ethnic and religious minorities are considered outsiders. If the minority communities wish to live in Sri Lanka, they have to either assimilate to the Sinhala Buddhist culture or accept its hegemony and live at its mercy. Another prominent theme of this ideology is that the Sinhala Buddhist cultural identity is under siege by the agents of western imperialism like the ethnic minorities (especially, the Tamil political society), the church (especially, evangelical Christian groups), civil society organizations concerned with human rights and democracy, Marxists, etc. It concludes that the Sinhala Buddhist culture has to be defended by any means necessary, including violence (i.e. righteous war). I have discussed this ideology in great detail in another essay (Nanayakkara 2004). The aggressive and insensitive missionary work of some evangelical groups has also contributed to nourish this line of thinking in certain quarters of the Sinhala society.

The two major carriers of this ideology at the moment are, the *Deshahithishee Jathika Vyaparaya* (Patriotic National Movement) of which the *Janatha Vimukthi Peremuna* (JVP) is a major ally and the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU). Apart from these two dominant forces, there are a number of fringe groups who subscribe to the line of thinking I have discussed above. The social base of the above politics tends to concentrate in the urban and semi-urban Sinhala middle class. Certain elements of the Sinhala upper middle-class professional layer have become responsive to the above politics. These sections of the society view themselves as an endangered nation in the face of Christians, Tamils, and Muslims with global populations having access to vast amounts of resources and political backing. The attacks against Christian workers and institutions clearly arise from these forces.

There also seems to be a significant presence of Buddhist monks in anti-Christian violence, sometimes leading them and in other times functioning as members of fascist squads. Apart from their nationalist self-perception as 'guardians of the nation', more material considerations have motivated their increasing involvement with the politics of the extreme right. With the migration of youth from villages in search of employment, their base of sustenance has shrunk over the years. As a result, in many rural areas Buddhist temples have been shutdown. Moreover, the Buddhist institutional hierarchies have not shown much interest in their welfare either. On top of all this, through religious conversions, evangelical groups are threatening even the meager existence they have managed to sustain. The increasing involvement of Buddhist monks in anti-Christian violence has to be understood in this light.

Misinformation campaigns go hand in hand with campaigns of violence. Such misinformation campaigns justify anti-Christian violence. The Sinhala nationalist weekly, *Divaina Irida Sangrahaya*, has become one of the main carriers of hate literature against minorities, especially the evangelical Christian community. According to the spokesperson of the Jehovah's Witness, the series of articles which appeared in the *Divaina Irida Sangrahaya* linking the death of Reverend Gangodavila Soma, an outspoken critique of evangelical missionary activity, with an 'anti-Buddhist conspiracy' hatched by the Jehovah's Witness, led to the wrath and violence of extremist forces against them. The *Divaina* journalist, Manoj Abayadeera, who usually represents the *Chinthana Parshadaya*¹ line of thinking in his articles, wrote the particular series of articles. A monk who is a sort of a 'specialist' on evangelical groups writes features on this theme to *Divaina Irida Sangrahaya* regularly. He is also a project director of the NGO called SUCCESS, which is linked to the *Sihala Urumaya*. His articles are incendiary, to say the least. The following was taken from one of his articles to give you an idea of the flavor of his writing. "In 1993 Ratugala village became prey to a Christian religious group. Some in the village were baptized in the Rambakan Oya in the most barbaric way. They were given beef to eat saying its Buddha's meat and arrack to drink" (*Divaina Irida Sangrahaya*, 2005 April 24). Another regular contributor to this sort of hate literature is the *Divaina* journalist Chathura Pamunuwa, who in his articles does not hide the fact that his political sympathies lie with the JHU. What is common to this kind of propaganda is that it justifies violence against Christian activists and their institutions on the allegation that conversions are forced or induced. Mainline churches, especially the Catholic clergy, also entertain conspiracy

theories with respect to the evangelical Christian movement. For them, evangelical Christianity is a conspiracy hatched by the Americans to undermine the Pope's authority and to expand their sphere of influence.

The group that was responsible for a large number of attacks against Christian workers and institutions throughout the country was arrested in 2004 February. It was lead by an organizer of the *Sinhala Urumaya* in the Homagama area. This particular squad also included three Buddhist monks who resided in a temple that is under the authority of the chief of an ultra-nationalist outfit known as the *Deshapremi Bikku Paramana* (Patriotic Bikku Front) (Rawya, 2004 December 26). In an interview with me in 2005 January, Ignatious Warnakulasingham, the priest in charge of the three-attacked St. Michael's Catholic Church in Homagama, accused Buddhist monk of leading the attacks against his church. The attack on the Christian Worship Centre at Nawarawalhtha, Hingurugoda was orchestrated by a medical officer affiliated to the *Sinhala Urumaya* (Daily News, 2001 February 20). The attack on the World Vision office in Dorella in 2004 was carried out by a group of monks calling themselves *Vediyawandana Bikkaya*. This particular squad was made up of members of the *Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya* of the JHU. (Hiru, 2005 May 15).

In many attacks against Christian activists and places of worship, the instigators as well as the attackers have been outsiders and the relations between the residents in the vicinity and the churches have been cordial. Intelligence sources suspect the group led by the *Sinhala Urumaya* organizer as responsible for the vast majority of attacks in the country (Rawya, 2004 December 26, International Religious Freedom Report 2004). Some institutions of Christian worship that have come under attack recently have existed in relative peace in these locations for very many years, until the political mobilization of the extreme right. There seems to be a correlation between intensifying anti-Christian violence towards the mid 1990s and the political mobilization of the extreme Sinhala right, primarily in reaction to the People's Alliance government's constitutional reform attempts.

Contrary to the interpretations of spontaneous violence of 'incensed local populations' as proposed by some researchers (Perera 2004: 16), the above examples emphasize two points. Firstly, anti-Christian violence has not taken place in an ideological void. Secondly, in some cases, we are able to establish a direct link between violence and the groups of the extreme right. If we have had effective and impartial

investigations the hand of sinister right-wing elements in these incidents of violence would have been revealed beyond a reasonable doubt. In comparison to the situation in Sri Lanka, many investigations in India have established the crucial role played by groups in the *Sanghi Parivar* such as, the VHP and the *Bajrang Dal* in systematically inciting hatred and unleashing violence against Christians (Punjiyani 2003).

The remains of a destroyed church complex in Angamkulamve, Thimmauvila. This particular church was established in this village in 1950. It was attacked and demolished in 2003 with the arrival of a Buddhist monk to the area.



A More Aggressive Evangelism

The outcome of the conservative backlash seems to be a more aggressive and more insensitive form of evangelical Christianity. Even though the leadership of the NCEASL has admitted the past mistakes of the ‘church’ of cultural insensitivity with respect to the activities of the mission (<http://www.cswusa.com/Reports%20Pages/Reports-Sri Lanka.htm>), the behavior of some of these groups does not show any signs of less aggressiveness or insensitivity. Two examples are given to illustrate this point.

The first incident took place in 2003. In this case, a particular evangelical group, implied in one of their newsletters, a cause and effect relationship between their prayer and fasting period and the passing away of a well-known Buddhist leader. The Buddhist leader implied is none other than the well-known nationalist monk, Madihe Pannasihe (Perera 2004: 16). The second incident concerns a poster campaign. The posters came up soon after the passing away of the incumbent of the Sunethradevi Pirivena in Pepiliyana in 2005. He also held the post of Chancellor of the Sri Jayawardenapura University. This monk is somewhat prominently associated with the Sinhala nationalist populism of the 1956. The poster which was in large lettering stated that Jesus is the salvation, the cure for sickness and peace. No particular organization took the responsibility for it. It was prominently displayed in the vicinity of the Sunethradevi Pirivene in Pepiliyana and the surrounding areas. The posters came up while the Buddhist residents in the area as well as in other parts of the country were in mourning for the monk and while arrangements were being made for his funeral.

Some of the activists of the evangelical movement seem to have a fatalistic attitude towards the inevitability of inter-religious conflict. One such activist says, “persecution and attack against us is something that we expect. Jesus said we would be hated in his name.” Another activist told me that inter-religious conflicts were common even during the time of Jesus and is nothing new to them. Certain elements in the evangelical movement seem to think powerful international backing itself is sufficient to face the onslaught of conservative forces. With this in mind, some of these groups are engaged in serious lobbying at international level to pressurize the government to crackdown on extremist forces.

Further Fragmentation of Society

The dialectical relationship between evangelical Christianity and extreme Sinhala nationalism has led

to the polarization of religious communities in Sri Lanka. The religious freedom of the evangelical Christian community in Sri Lanka is seriously threatened. Their religious activities are seriously hampered and the authorities seem to give a blind eye to their plight. The violence has not specifically targeted evangelical churches and workers as commonly believed. A number of mainline protestant as well as Catholic churches have come under attack. A good example for this is the thrice-attacked St. Michael’s Catholic Church in Homagama. The police had been ineffective and partial in responding to many of these incidents. In many instances, they are dragging their feet in bringing the culprits to justice, especially when they are Buddhist monks with political backing. But the police have also made some arrests in this connection.

Against the background of the ‘unethical’ conversions hysteria, the state in Sri Lanka has taken steps that are clearly biased against faith minorities. It has been pursuing a policy for the last three decades to limit the number of temporary work permits issued to foreign Christian religious workers. Moreover, in 2003, the Supreme Court ruled against an incorporation petition by an order of Catholic nuns known as the Teaching Sisters of the Holy Cross of the Third Order of Saint Francis. The court ruled that the order could not be incorporated if it were involved in proselytization and providing material benefit. According to the NCEASL, apart from this particular order, the Supreme Court has ruled against the incorporation of two other Christian ministries since 2002 (<http://www.cswusa.com/Reports%20Pages/Reports-Sri Lanka.htm>).

The draft bill of the JHU titled, ‘Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion’ of 2004 and the bill of the Minister of Buddhist Affairs, titled “Act of Safeguarding Religious Freedom” which is yet to be tabled, are attempts at further communalizing the Sri Lankan state. Basically, both of these bills intend to curb the freedom of choice with regard to religion. Therefore, both of these bills violate the basic principles of the constitution of Sri Lanka as well as the international conventions on human rights. All Christian denominations perceive the proposed anti-conversion legislation as a devastating attack on their religious freedom. Even the Muslim Theological Council viewed the tabled bill of the JHU as having serious implications on human rights (Perera 2004: 22).

Under these circumstances, religious minorities, especially the Christian community, is feeling alienated and insecure. A Christian belonging to a mainline church said that they

were seriously worried that something like the 1983 anti-Tamil violence would take place against the Christians during Reverend Gangodavila Soma's funeral. Against this background, there is talk of Christian political mobilization. There are plans to launch a Catholic party, one main objective of which is to face the onslaught of the Sinhala extremists (*Hiru*, 2005 March 20). A common consensus is emerging among most Christian members of parliament, sans party lines, to vote against anti-conversion laws, if tabled in the parliament. This situation is uniting the Christians across denominational lines and creating a rift with the Buddhist community. In this context, possibilities for dialogue and transformation are rapidly diminishing. Even certain leaders associated with the so called dialogue centers that emerged in the 1960s to promote better relations with Buddhists and other religious communities are becoming disillusioned with the whole idea. They feel that the majority Buddhist community has not shown any sincere interest in maintaining a dialogue.

According to a leader of a dialogue center, the possibilities to initiate a dialogue with the more militant sections of the Buddhist community are nil. He characterizes them as "not even a bit open, tolerant and flexible." "For these sections of the Buddhist society," he further said, "every Christian is a traitor and a subversive." On the other hand, the evangelical groups are getting more evasive and secretive, which seems like a reasonable defensive strategy in their predicament, but unfortunately, a strategy which will further fuel aggression against them. The dialectical relationship between evangelical Christianity and extreme Sinhala nationalism is contributing to further fragmentation of Sri Lankan society, adding another dimension of conflict to an already fissured society. Recently I visited the headquarters of an Evangelical Christian group. It was basically a high-tech fortress. Inside this fortress, they showed me a photograph with nostalgia, taken in the 1950s, of a smiling Buddhist monk flanked on either side by two missionaries of their group.

Conclusion

The reasons for conversion have to do with concerns in this life rather than the life after. Many people who have joined evangelical groups have done so because their former religious institutions have not addressed their needs. The evangelical Christian groups operating in Sri Lanka have basically become networks of material and emotional support for marginal and vulnerable sections of the society. Their

activities are an attempt at re-creation of community amidst the increasing alienation felt in contemporary society. Spreading misinformation and hate, aiding or condoning violence, sponsoring legislation to curb religious freedom, are not the proper responses on the part of mainstream religious institutions. The proper response is to reform their own institutions to become more responsive to the needs of their members. Finally, responsible governments should give thought to measures that concern the welfare of the people and not promote reactionary tendencies that deny freedom and equality.

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End Notes

- 1 The school that pioneered the Jathika Chinthanaya ideology.

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