The Politics of Sinhala-Buddhist Cosmology

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De Silva-Wijeyeratne, R 2014, *Nation, Constitutionalism and Buddhism in Sri Lanka,* Routledge, London & New York; pp.256, ₹895.

Although Buddhism does not believe in a Creator-God, many Buddhists believe in a cosmology, made up of myriad realms of existence and world systems, a large number of heavenly beings, deities, and demonic spirits, and even a heaven and a hell (Karunadasa 2013, p.156; K. Sri Dhammananda 1998, pp.297-311). In Theravada Buddhist countries, different gods – some local, some imported – play important roles in various rituals and practices: such as in the popular practice of transferring merit to good gods in exchange for protection (Tilakaratne 2012).[1] These practices have been part of the life of the majority Sinhala-Buddhists too, with the origins of such practices being traceable to pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka (Walpola Rahula 1993, pp.297-311).

However, the idea of a Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology (i.e. the cosmological conception believed by Sinhala-Buddhists) affects the thinking of many, not just on matters of an ontological nature, but also of a political and constitutional character. For example, from the ancient texts we learn of god Vishnu being asked to protect the country from foreigners (evils). In works such as the *Sumana Sutraya*, there is reference to the coming of Prince Diyasena who would protect the country, a prophecy of god Saman (Malalgoda 1993). More recently, a group of researchers claimed that it was god Natha (*Natha Deviyo*) who revealed to them that there was arsenic in the soil and water which caused the deadly kidney disease in the North-Central Province.[2] Thus a formidable cosmic world of an essentially Sinhala-Buddhist nature has influenced, and influences, the thoughts of many Sinhala-Buddhists.

A book which critically examines certain aspects of this cosmological dimension in matters relating to politics, nationalism and the ethnic conflict is Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne's *Nation, Constitutionalism and Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (2014).[3] Its central argument is that Sinhalese nationalists have invoked a centralizing cosmic order which in turn has influenced and informed the institutional and constitutional history of Sri Lanka since independence. This cosmic order, as promoted in the nineteenth century, has also appropriated a European colonial historiography. Yet, the author argues that this very same cosmic order provides the resources for thinking beyond the country's present, and for thinking of a more pluralistic Sri Lanka (p.xv). In arguing so, the book promotes the view that Sinhala-Buddhist historiography offers the necessary resources for alternative thinking and imagination about the state we presently inhabit.

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In assessing issues of nationalism, constitutionalism and Buddhism, the book's main emphasis is on the cosmological dimension of the debate.[4] By the 'cosmological', the author is referring to "the over-arching and interconnected system of reference that forms the relation between the Buddha, the Hindu deities and the forces of demonic fragmentation that inhabit this multi-layered sacred order" (p.3). This cosmic order is further subdivided into different regions, such as the terrifying hells below, the worlds of animals, men, the guardians above and the still higher brahma heavens (p.3). The problem with this cosmic order (as imagined and understood by the Sinhala nationalists) is that it is hierarchical in character, influencing the debates and policies of the state in ways that adversely affect minority peoples of the country.

The book begins (chapter 1) with the author introducing the reader to the essentially political and subjective character of the ancient Pali chronicles (the *Vamsa* texts such as the *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa*), texts in which the impact of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology is prominent. The author argues that they are not to be read or looked at as accurate representations of the past. Rather, what needs to be recognized and understood is how these texts originated and were circulated, and that the task of interpreting the *Vamsas* depends much on an understanding of the concerns and priorities of the authors of those texts. Critically engaging with the idea of a centralized state as claimed by Buddhist kingship, the author argues that the *Mahavamsa*'s reference to the monarchy exercising rule over the whole island (since Vijaya's time) is "nothing short of a retrospective re-imagination of the claims of kingship – both Buddhist and pre-Buddhist – to encompass the whole island" (p.17). Though nationalists interpret these chronicles as providing evidence of a timeless centralized state, archeological and inscriptional evidence suggests that sovereignty was far from centralized (p.14). Even the

Sinhala-Buddhist state, as conceived in the Anuradhapura period, took the form of a galactic polity; which, inter alia, lacked an army that could maintain a centralized state (p.22). According to the author, it is this "mythic consciousness" which continues to inform Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism of the modern Sinhala-Buddhist state (p.23).

Chapter 2 examines the cosmology of Sinhala-Buddhism. Here, the author explains the Sinhalese Buddhist cosmic order as "fundamentally hierarchical in character", with the Buddha standing at its apex, while below the Buddha is the world of the gods headed by the four guardian deities of the island namely, Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Saman. Beneath this plane of deities lies the world of other powerful deities, and finally there is the world of the demonic, inhabited by disordering spirits and ghosts. Within this layered cosmos, the Buddha is pure, while demonic beings vary in their polluting capacity, depending on their degree of orientation towards the Buddha and his teaching. This orientation in turn is determined by their capacity to personify the "disordering and ordering potential of the cosmic order" (p.25). The gods would always triumph, with the demonic being ultimately encompassed, but never excluded (p.25). In this process of encompassment, there is an upward movement in the hierarchy whereby the lower forms of existence are slowly and progressively transformed by the principles defining the higher form (p.25) – as studies by Kapferer *et al* have pointed out.

This understanding is best exemplified in the Pali chronicles, which often begin by enunciating the cosmology of Sinhala-Buddhism, referring to the Buddha's mastery over Mara (which personifies evil), followed by the successive visits of the Buddha to the island and his domestication of demonic beings through which he prepared the island for human habitation. It is such demonic beings that are sought to be defeated in military battles, such as in Dutthagamini's military campaign against the Tamil king, Elara. The *Mahavamsa* and more so in the later texts such as *Culavamsa* and *Pujavaliya*, King Elara and the Tamils get projected as demonic invaders, with the former being equated with the rampaging hordes of Mara. Thus, Buddhist historiography frames violence as a clash between the righteous and the unrighteous, a clash ontologically grounded in the cosmic order (p.31). If the Tamil is potentially demonic and thus embodying evil, the implications for practices of the modern Sinhalese-Buddhist state are extremely problematic (p.43).

In chapter 3, the author discusses some South Indian influences on the Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness, especially in the middle period of Sri Lankan history. For instance, in Sinhala-Buddhism acquiring the form and content associated with it today, there has been a combination of the Buddhist ideal of kingship according to the Dhamma (*cakkavatti*) and the Hindu ideals of kingship (such as the *cakravarti* and *rajadhiraja*) through force, as popular in South Indian politics (p.50). However, there was antipathy towards the incorporation of Hindu practices, with authors such as John Holt noting that Hindu gods were 'Buddhacicized' or 'Sinhalized', incorporating the Hindu other in a hierarchical relation (p.51).

The book moves then to point out (in chapter 4) that Sinhala-Buddhist polities were more devolved and less centralized, that the "multiple meanings proffered by the cosmology of Sinhalese Buddhism render a devolved galactic polity ontologically possible – a timely reminder that Sri Lanka has not always been a unitary state with a centralized locus of power" (p.60). The development of a galactic polity facilitated the successful incorporation of diverse groups from South India (p.62). Furthermore, the Kandyan Kingdom too is considered to have exhibited a significant degree of administrative and jurisdictional devolution (p.62). Drawing from the works of S.J. Tambiah, Michael Roberts, and others, the author points out that this devolved character is reflected: in practices such as *dakum* (i.e. an act of homage by regional chiefs to the Kandyan King), in the role and responsibilities of the *adigas*, in the territorial division of the kingdom into provinces or *disavanies*, etc. – with the authority of the king slowly waning as one moved from the centre to the provinces replicating the structure of a *mandala* system, with outer provinces able to exercise greater autonomy (pp.69-74).

This analysis is followed in chapter 5 by an examination of the impact of British colonialism. If the previous chapters had discussed the different historical sources, rituals, and practices that promoted both the idea of a centralized state as well as a more devolved and pluralistic state, this latter potentiality breaks down during the British Colonial period; a period in which the modernization of the Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness takes place, which had a dramatic effect on the minorities in Sri Lanka (p.78). Through this chapter, the author discusses the impact of British Colonial rule in the further consolidation of the Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness. Centralization of power or the construction of a centralized state was one of the key features of this period. And in doing so, the British colonial rule transformed the cosmic state into a bureaucratic state (p.78). Thus, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was "thoroughly derivative of Western modernity" (p.78).

Chapters 6-9, thereafter, engage with the post-independence history of Sri Lanka. The principal argument raised in these chapters is that Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology has shaped the debates on the state, citizenship and devolution in the country, providing these debates an ontological ground – resulting in the denial of equal citizenship (to the Upcountry Tamils) and the devolution of power to the Tamil people in the North and East of Sri Lanka. In chapter 6, for example, the author discusses how Sinhala-Buddhist cosmic metaphors affected the upcountry Tamil community in particular, and how D.S. Senanayake "drew on the Buddhist imaginary" to transform the demography in the island through resettling Sinhala families (p.109); a resettlement policy which ignored the nuanced relationship of the Vanni chieftains to the ancient Jaffna kingdom and the Kandyan kingdom (p.110). This influence of cosmic metaphors is reflected in the debates about language policy too: "The Tamil language is imagined

as having a demonic capacity to both 'extinguish' the Sinhala language and divide the Sinhala-Buddhist nation" (p.126). Just as the Buddha is imagined to be encompassing the demonic, Sinhala comes to encompass Tamil (the demonic) in a hierarchical relationship.

Continuing the intensification of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist project, the influence of the cosmic metaphors thereafter came to be reflected even in constitutional texts such as the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions. Yet, Sinhala leaders could not avoid criticism which was inspired by Sinhala-Buddhist cosmological metaphors. J.R. Jayewardene, for example, was portrayed as a demonic protagonist fragmenting the Sinhala-Buddhist state from within; a fragmentation caused by his willingness to compromise on the issue of political power-sharing under pressure from India (p.154). Chapter 9 focuses on a period from the 1990s to one closer to the present, i.e. the immediate post-war period under the reign of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Here too the author makes the case that the "cosmic order – with its metaphors of unity, fragmentation and reordering – provides ontological meaning to the state's hostility towards devolution", further fuelled by violence directed at the Tamil people (p.154). After a brutal military campaign, there is rebirth of the state; one which defines ethnicity in hierarchical terms (p.188).

In conclusion, then: "[w]hat modern Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism imagines as a centralized state that has existed from time immemorial is fundamentally the product of the modern bureaucratic order consolidated by the British." (p.195). Unfortunately, the modernist reading of the cosmic order has resulted in promoting a single and dominant mode of being "at the expense of the inherent diversity of meaning that this rich mythology announces" (p.196). Therefore, if "the imaginary of the modern Sinhalese Buddhist state is to transcend the horizon of the present, it must rediscover the diversity of an ontological ground that lends itself to multiple possibilities" (p.195).

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While the critique of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is a very popular theme in books about politics and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the most useful contribution of Wijeyeratne's book lies in its emphasis on Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology. In examining this cosmological dimension of the debate, the book shows how Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology was transformed, in creative ways, by Sinhala-Buddhists during the colonial and post-colonial period. Thus, the "cosmic order constitutes the inner logic or dynamic that conditions a number of Sinhala-Buddhist rituals, practices and myths of state", further orienting the form of the ritual life of the kings and laity (p.24). Given that such conditioning is detrimental to the minority peoples of the state, Wijeyeratne's book is a call for a re-imagination of that cosmic order as a more devolved and decentralized terrain; one which helps the people re-imagine and re-envision a more plural Sri Lanka.

Yet, my intention here is to briefly set out a few reasons why this exercise of re-imagining the potential of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology is fraught with challenges and difficulties, some of which are difficult to overcome.

The first concern arises with regard to the subject matter itself. Undoubtedly, critiquing the hierarchical, centralizing and discriminating nature of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology and its impact on contemporary debates concerning constitutional governance is an essential task. However, in critiquing and re-imagining Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology differently, one may also be contributing (albeit, unwittingly) to consolidating the relevance of the broader subject matter and terrain of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology. This is perhaps an unavoidable dilemma. In critiquing and re-imagining Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology, there is at play a dual process of de-legitimization and legitimization of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology.

Prima facie, de-legitimization of an essentially discriminatory understanding of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology and the legitimization, in turn, of a more pluralistic understanding of it, is certainly not problematic. Yet the real concern arises only when one acknowledges that the very terrain and subject matter of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology is one of myths and human constructions. In such a terrain – just like with the idea of God animating other religious teachings – almost anything goes. For here, what takes prominence is creative imagination, based on and shaped by one's deeper hopes, desires, anxieties and prejudices.

In other words, through Wijeyeratne's book, we are introduced to a necessary critique of the underside of political imagination inspired by cosmology. But we are also invited to thereafter re-imagine a polity that is again based on something essentially mythical and unverifiable; cosmology. However, in the ensuing battle of differing understandings and interpretations, what attracts greater acceptance is a cosmological order that can add greatest meaning to life: one which, I believe, would need to be essentially hierarchical in character, centralizing, differentiating between good and evil, deities and demons. In other words, it is perhaps to overcome the sense of de-centering and the absence of order that humans crave for a cosmological understanding of the world in which they live. The world is a very gray place, and we need cosmology largely to make it appear black and white. Thus, Wijeyeratne's appeal would only make sense to those who already believe in a highly devolved or federalist state – but for such persons, cosmology may not be all that relevant anyway.

The second concern with the issue of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology is the following: Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology and its many metaphors emanate from a deep sense of faith and belief, and not as a consequence of any scientific inquiry as such. What this implies is that no amount of historical analysis or critical re-interpretation of historical evidence can challenge or change a belief; for beliefs defy any such attempt at 'rationalizing' the debate.[5] One does not experience the many realms of existence, the different gods, deities and demons and then form an idea about a Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology. Rather, one believes in the idea of gods and demons;

one believes that there are heavens and hells; one believes that the Buddha visited Sri Lanka, for example. One believes in such things having taken place, and one has faith. Just as one believes and has faith in the existence of a God. Thus, it is doubtful whether the kind of evidence Wijeyeratne adduces would be appealing to those whose political beliefs are shaped and influenced by Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology.

The third observation to be made relates to Wijeyeratne's re interpretation and understanding of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology in the language of modern constitutionalism. For instance, the author draws from the works of scholars such as Michael Roberts (2003) to assert the devolved character of an ancient and past Sri Lanka. But the question which always arises here is: how accurate or useful is the attempt to understand the complex political structures and practices of ancient times with the aid of modern terms and concepts derived from Constitutional and International Law?[6]

Here, both the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and their critics appear to be making the same mistake, with the attempt of the latter being a reaction to the attempts of the former. For instance, the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists consider the political system established by King Duttagamini to have been a unitary one – while their critics point out that the idea of a unitary state is a more modern (European) construction. But in that case, it would be equally inaccurate to think about the ancient systems of governance in the language of 'devolution' or 'federalism' – which are equally modern contributions to our understanding of constitutional governance. So, the many references in the book to terms and phrases such as, 'highly decentralized state structure', 'administrative devolution', 'galactic decentralization', 'galactic sovereignty', etc., need to be appreciated with great caution. In short, if Duttagamini did not establish a 'unitary' state, then he cannot be claimed to have ruled over a 'devolved' or 'federal' state either. And, if the above reflect only broad ideas that may have been shared by people in the past, one cannot dismiss the probability of the idea of a unitary political structure animating ancient kings and their subjects too.

Apart from the above observations, there is finally an expectation animating Wijeyeratne's work: "My only expectation is that this book provides wider debate about the nature of nationalism in Sri Lanka and helps in some way towards the recovery of Buddhism from nationalist forces" (pp.xiv-xv).[7] Though this issue requires a more detailed examination, one specific reason why this laudable expectation (one which is shared even by some Sinhala-Buddhists) has not materialized is due to the simultaneous existence of Buddhism in a variety of forms. For instance, there is a Buddhism which reflects the original teachings of the Buddha, and also a Buddhism which is a manifestation of a more culturally-oriented understanding of the majority (e.g. Sinhala-Buddhism).

The existence of these different forms implies that that which is sought to be recovered – (i.e. a more humane, reconciliatory, 'pure' Buddhism) already exists, somewhere. Yet, the more challenging political fact is that these different forms of Buddhism get articulated and promoted from the same sources: i.e. monks, and religious and political institutions.[8] In other words, it is very difficult, or even almost impossible today, to differentiate between those who promote Sinhala-Buddhism and those who promote the kind of Buddhism Wijeyeratne favours. The remarkable ability of coexistence of these different forms of Buddhism in a singular entity makes Wijeyeratne's expectation – the recovery of Buddhism from nationalist forces – an extremely difficult one to be realized in practice. For the nationalist forces which promote Sinhala-Buddhism and a hierarchical and discriminatory understanding of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology may admit that their version is not to be confused with the true word of the Buddha, the Dhamma. Such nationalists often argue that the very construction and promotion of Sinhala-Buddhism is a way of preserving (aggressively, where necessary) the purer version of Buddhism. This is also why monks, during very rare moments, agree that the Sinhala-Buddhist state cannot be protected if the Buddha's words on compassion and loving kindness were truly followed.[9] If so, how is Buddhism to be recovered from nationalist forces?

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Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne's *Nation, Constitutionalism and Buddhism in Sri Lanka* is an important and unique addition to a long list of studies on Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology, nationalism, and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. One cannot dismiss the view that it contains a message which needs to be taken seriously if a more pluralistic and devolved Sri Lanka is to be envisioned. A key message of the book – that Sinhala-Buddhist historiography and more specifically, Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology, provide the very resources for such an envisioning of an alternative Sri Lanka – is an essentially theoretical and practical task that requires serious thought and attention.

However, proceeding a step further, we may even argue that it would be more useful to imagine Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology (with its different realms of existence, deities and demons), as human constructions, impermanent and fleeting in character, mere symbolizations of the present world we inhabit, thus not deserving any attachment and serious consideration.[10] In other words, "they are merely theories based on speculation", ideas or concepts which are only of a regulative nature (Kalupahana 1976, p.66). Yet this was the Buddha's teaching; and many of his 'followers' have found it difficult to respect the teachings of the great Master. Troubled by the mysteries and uncertainties of life, cosmological notions – which help people break up the world into the good and the evil, the superior and the inferior, the favored and the less-favored – will continue to add meaning and happiness to their lives.

Notes

1 For a brief examination of deities and demons, see Aryasinghe (2000).
2 See Nalin de Silva (2012)

3 Theoretically rich and dense, the book draws heavily from the works of such scholars as Bruce Kapferer, S.J. Tambiah, Steven Kemper, and Michael Roberts.
4 It is largely this cosmological dimension and its relationship with Sri Lankan politics/ethnic question that will receive attention in the present review. And this review is only a political analysis of the impact of Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology on political debate and practice.
5 This point is largely influenced by what Arjuna Parakrama stated with regard to a book published recently on the Tamil question. Parakrama's point was that the said book – titled *Demalaage Prashnaya*, authored by Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, which, inter alia, strives to correct the problems of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and its interpretation of history – is a necessary one, but is ultimately bound to fail because the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist historical imagination is largely one of belief.
6 In a somewhat acerbic review of Wijeyeratne's book, Roberts (2015) argues against the former's characterization of ancient Sri Lanka as an essentially devolved entity.
7 It needs to be mentioned, though, that for the book to create wider debate its arguments need to be more accessible to a wider readership. The book is not an easy read. Therefore, unfortunately, the book is destined to be read only by a limited academic community. In this regard, Jayadeva Uyangoda observed some years ago that it is usually the case that books on Sri Lanka fail to get much response from the Sri Lankan intelligentsia (1998, fn 2 at p.180). Interestingly (and somewhat curiously for present purposes), the books named by Uyangoda as receiving very little attention were those of Bruce Kapferer; one of the principal authors influencing and animating Wijeyeratne's book.
8 Many are the instances when this writer has personally witnessed how politically prominent monks who would get on stage to deliver public speeches favouring ultra-nationalist Buddhist groups deliver sermons (publicly and privately) which are about the Dhamma and are (alarmingly) apolitical.
9 For a moment when a monk expressed the impossibility of the *Metta Sutta,* Senaratne (2014).
10 There is enough material from Buddhist studies which help one rethink Sinhala-Buddhist cosmology (and its different planes of existence, deities etc) as impermanent and unnecessary for the realization of the ultimate aim of enlightenment. Buddhist scholars have also pointed out that the Buddha talked about cosmological aspects only when consequences of the good and bad had to be emphasized to unenlightened human beings (Kalupahana 2006).

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