
SINHALA BUDDHISM, SECULARISM AND POLITICAL CULTURE

H.L. Seneviratne

In his column on religious intolerance (Sunday Island March 4, 2004) Mr Malinda Seneviratne has written enthusiastically of the attempt by a gang monks to capture state power and establish a Buddhist state. The prospect of that happening fortunately are negligible but that does nothing to erase the absurdity of Mr Seneviratne's statements. According to him Bishop Oswald Gomis, indeed every Catholic, is a citizen of the Vatican, and lives under the authority of the Pope. This is an insult to patriotic Sri Lankans (and citizens of other countries) who happen to be Catholics.

Mr Seneviratne's real problem is not the Bishop even though he bares his fangs at the latter, but the concept of secularism. Fundamentalists, irrespective of whether they are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu, want religion to capture state power so that they can the more brutally oppress and discriminate against members of other religious groups. In an attempt to show that there is no secularism in England, Mr Seneviratne makes a list of what he thinks are relations between the British state and the Church of England, little realizing that these are ceremonial relics of a past with no meaning in present day political reality.

It is the unique achievement of the Christian tradition that it was able to integrate its ethical imperatives into the pattern of behaviour of its adherents. This did not happen in the Buddhist tradition, as clearly demonstrated in our day to day experience --we pay lip service to high Buddhist morals but we do not practise them. This is not to say that every Christian practises the ethical content of his religion, although the five Buddhist precepts are more adhered to in western Christian democracies than in this Buddhist "punya bhumi". What I mean to say is that the general standards of personal conduct and public accountability are far higher in the Christian democracies than in this so called home of "pure Buddhism". And one corollary of those high standards is the separation of church and state.

Buddhism is a universalist ethical religion, but we have parochialised and ritualized it. What we practice is "Sinhala Buddhism", and not the Buddha's Dhamma, the essence and first step of which is sila. Sila is not sitting under a tree wearing the south Indian costume known as the national dress, but living a life of decency and civility by disciplining oneself within, and not being a nuisance to others. "Sinhala Buddhism" is an integral part of the Sinhala Jatika Cintanaya. Another component of the Sinhala Jatika

Cintanaya is the Sinhala political cintanaya, past and present, with lawlessness and violence as central motifs. One look at the national chronicle Mahavamsa will reveal that palace intrigue was the norm in succession. We owe the loss of kingship, a valuable social institution, not to the British but to the treacherous culture of Kandyan politics. Our culture and cintanaya were subject to a brief spell of colonial domination during which our society accepted enlightened modern ideas, one of which is secularism. But, starting from 1956, the disastrous year that marks the beginning of the country's path to ruin, we have compromised the principle of secularism, and allowed religion to enter the state arena, culminating in the enshrinement of Buddhism in the constitution, and the establishment of a Ministry of Buddhism.

Yet Buddhist fundamentalists are greedy for more, and never cease to complain of conspiracies to destroy Buddhism. In reality, "Sinhala Buddhism" replete with its murderous political culture, is hale and hearty. The nature of Sinhala Buddhist political culture is particularly evident in the projective situation of the recent general election where, to give one non-murderous example, only five candidates out of over five thousand have conformed to the legal requirement of declaring their assets and liabilities. All five are UNF candidates. This is an astonishing disregard of the law by future lawmakers, and no Buddhist activist seems to be bothered about it.

If Buddhist activists and Buddhist monks want to be of use to the nation, there are numerous ways in which they can be so. The Vidyodaya monks of the 1940s showed this by their dedicated efforts to help the rural masses through a programme of rural development. Making Buddhism the de facto state religion is not a step that fosters the national interest. It is a waste of scarce resources and, in a multi-religious state, it is incongruous and unfair.

"Buddhism" in the sense of the Buddha's noble Dhamma does not need preservers or preservatives. It is an autonomous body of knowledge safely enshrined in books, and other recordings, most recently on the web. Before the wide use of writing, the Dhamma was painstakingly committed to memory by monks who thereby preserved it for posterity. For this arduous and heroic task, humankind is grateful, but the credit for that goes to the ancient monks who actually performed this noble task, and not to those present day robe-wearers who claim loudly that they are the preservers of Buddhism and guardian deities of the nation. ■

Prof. H.L. Seneviratne teaches of Anthropology, at the University of Virginia, USA.