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THE POLITICS OF CONVERSION: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

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"When you get saved, you get an American accent!" exclaimed one of my Christian friends, protesting my participation in an "Evangelistic Crusade" at Bogambara.

I grew up in Kandy in the politically turbulent late 60s, in the Christian ecumenical environment of the Theological College at Pilimalalawa, where my father was professor and principal, whose deep respect for clergy and lay Buddhists and Buddhism, I easily imbibed. I also grew up a Baptist, whose theology requires its members to be "witnesses," and to "preach the gospel to all nations." This illustrates a dilemma that, I believe, many Sri Lankan Christians find themselves in: a sincere respect for Buddhism and a mandate to evangelize.

Despite my friend's protest, I did go to the "Crusade." (This awful word with connotations of invading armies of Christians in the Middle Ages to sack the Muslims from Jerusalem, may illuminate the true intent of these events, just as the same word on President George Bush's lips before going to war in Iraq, seemed to describe his intent.) At the meeting, I had a privileged place behind the stage because I was one of a band of counselors recruited and trained to pray with those who made "professions of faith in Jesus." From that vantage point I observed a sea of faces that crowded into that vast field, and stood amazed at the large number who came forward either to "receive Jesus as their personal savior" or to receive healing.

The preacher, a handsome Sinhalese man probably in his early 40s, advertised the event using his Sinhala family name, rather than the Biblical, English-sounding name he commonly used. Although he had returned recently from a stint abroad, he spoke fluent Sinhala, which he used in training us counselors, prior to the event. When he preached at the event, however, he preferred to speak in English (and did so with an American accent!) and used Sinhala and Tamil translators.

"There's a great hunger for the gospel in this country," emphasized the Evangelist to us young recruits to his band of followers. It seemed true at the time, and probably is still. But there was a nagging disquiet in my heart that even these seemingly minor manipulations belied a level of genuineness that was required of the Evangelist. I am still puzzled about why the Evangelist who wanted to establish his Sinhala pedigree in his advertising, chose to preach in English with an American accent.

Now I work for the premier ecumenical organization in the United States, the National Council of Churches, as its executive officer responsible to lead the Christian communities to build relationships with people of other religious traditions. Mostly, this means helping Christians through this dilemma of being true to their evangelistic mandate on the one hand and cultivating a deep respect for people of other religions on the other. I write, therefore, to offer a perspective to the vigorous debate Sri Lanka is presently engaged in, on the Anti-Conversion Bill that is presently before the Parliament.

First, let me offer a few observations:

1. Buddhism and Christianity as well as most other major religious traditions are under scriptural mandate to seek converts.

That is to say, if Buddhists and Christians do not seek converts, they are not living up to their full religious calling and duty. And like Christians, Buddhists have been active in propagating their faith. Anagarika Dharmapala was one of Sri Lankan Buddhism's pioneering evangelists to the west. He and others who followed in his steps lived up to the command that the Buddha gave to his disciples, which incidentally is remarkably similar to the so-called Great Commission that Jesus gave to his disciples.

The Buddha commanded the *Sangha* thus:

Caratha bhikkhave carikam bahujanahitaya bahujanasukhaya lokanukampaya atthaya hitaya sukhaya devamanussanam. Ma ekena dve agamittha. Desetha bhikkhave dhammam adikalyanam majjhe kalyanam pariyanakalyanam sattham savyanjanam kevalapariyuppannam parisuddham brahmacariyam pakasetha. Santi satta apparajakkhatika assavanata dhammassa parihayanti, bhavissanti dhammassa annataro.

Go, *bhikkhus*, and wander for the benefit and happiness of many people, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of divine beings and humans. Two (of you) are not to go by the same (path). *Bhikkhus*, teach the meaning and detail of the Doctrine that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, fulfilled in its entirety, wholly pure. Make known the holy life. There are those who have few defilements, who are going to ruin through not hearing the Doctrine. They will be the ones who fully understand the Doctrine.

It is important to note that the missionary impetus does not arise because of any desire to selfishly boost numbers or control the allegiance of people, but out of a genuine conviction that this *dhamma* (doctrine), noble in the beginning, in the middle and the end is for the benefit of the people of the world, "who will go to ruin through not hearing the doctrine." It is indeed propagated "out of compassion for the world."

One of the more interesting conversion stories comes out of India where, on November 4, 2001, fifty to one-hundred thousand (estimates vary) of Hindu Dalits (untouchable caste) converted to Buddhism in a massive public ceremony in New Delhi. The Dalits formally rejected the caste structure along with their Hindu faith, embracing instead the more egalitarian teaching of the Buddha. Similarly, in 1956, an estimated half a million Dalits converted to Buddhism in a ceremony in Nagpur, led by B.R. Ambedkar, considered to be the father of the Dalit liberation movement in India. Just as it did in the Buddha's day, the *dhamma* provides a strong critique of the oppressive status quo of the caste system and provides a path of liberation to the oppressed.

Despite my Christian convictions -- rather, because of them, I can honestly say that there is no question in my mind about the high and noble value of propagating the *dhamma*, both because of its socially liberative uses and for its personal benefits. I know people from many cultures and in different parts of the world for whom the convictions of Buddhism and its practice have provided a deep sense of meaning and purpose. I, myself try to live my life with an equanimity based on Buddhist meditative practices. I have visited Buddhist temples in the United States, built friendships with *bhikkus* and encouraged their work. I do this because I know that this *dhamma* is indeed good for the welfare, benefit and happiness of the many and can be proclaimed in compassion for the world.

Interestingly, the Buddha's instruction to the *Sangha* is quite similar to Jesus' so-called Great Commission to his disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19). Christians understand this as a clear and unambiguous mandate to evangelize. A corollary scripture from an occasion when Jesus sent out his disciples on a mission spells out the content of the teaching: "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The Kingdom of Heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You have received freely; give freely" (Matthew 10:7-8). The proclamation is not to "receive Jesus as your personal savior and come join our church," rather it is the message of liberation contained in the announcement, "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near." The Kingdom of Heaven (where, as a Christian hymn succinctly states, "justice rules with mercy and love is law's demand") stands in sharp contrast to the kingdoms of this world. It is a risky announcement to make because while it is good news to the poor and oppressed with whom Jesus closely associated, the Kingdom of Heaven is distinctly bad news to those who oppress and marginalize the poor and the powerless. The announcement is not to be empty rhetoric. It was to go hand in hand with liberative acts towards those who were sick, in bondage and marginalized from society. And just as the disciples had received this grace freely, they were to give freely.

Christian missionary organizations of the colonial period were so closely aligned with their European governments that they were rightly seen as oppressors rather than liberators. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes the scenario: "In the beginning, we had the land and they had the book; then they said: 'close your eyes, let us pray'. When we opened our eyes, we had the book and they had the land!" Their collusion with the oppressive powers was nothing but a betrayal of the very gospel they sought to preach. Rather than the bold liberative message of God's kingdom, their gospel was watered-down -- in order to accommodate the oppressive colonial structure -- to a simplistic hyper-individualism of the west. Ever since the end of the colonial period, Sri Lankan Christian theologians have made significant strides towards articulating a theology that is true to this liberative mandate and free from this hyper-individualism.

Despite this, and fifty plus years after the colonial period, we are still struggling to get beyond western dominated mission theology. The recent influx of western missionary organizations, most of which have little or no understanding for the local cultures, religions or efforts by local Christians to formulate indigenous theologies and forms of worship, compounds the problem. While I will defend their right to evangelize and win converts, I must question their theology and evangelistic methodology.

Buddhism too is susceptible to the trap of individualism. At recent interfaith panel discussion on "Poverty in the United States" (which is an obvious reality as can be demonstrated through any economic analysis) a Japanese Buddhist monk insisted that poverty is only a condition of the mind. Such interpretations are not uncommon and dilutes the *dhamma* that was preached for the benefit of the "*bahujana*" (masses) and in compassion for the "*loka*" (world), neither of which is an individualistic term.

Alternatively, when the gospel and the *dhamma* are preached with boldness, they are liberative messages that threaten all oppressive structures. There will be conversions -- but not necessarily from Buddhism to Christianity, but from forms of religion (Buddhism, Christianity or any other) or secular and political ideologies that legitimize oppression or are apathetic towards it, to expressions of liberation that challenge the oppressive status quo.

2. Guarantee of Religious Freedom by the State Is Essential for the Proper Practice of Religion.

I will take the example of the United States, simply because it is my adoptive country and apart from Sri Lanka, the land of my birth, it is the country I know best. Two interconnected principles -- the guarantee of religious freedom enshrined in the Bill of Rights and the separation of the church and state -- have provided an environment conducive for religions to thrive. The Anti Conversion Bill or anything like it would not be entertained as a public policy in the US, because of the high value given to these two principles. The guarantee of the freedom of religion means that religious groups are free to propagate their faith however they see fit and people are free to convert however they see fit. The separation of church and state assures that the government will not interfere in religion, even to support or defend.

I must state for the record, that I deeply disagree with both the foreign and domestic policies of the present US government and worry about the steady erosion of civil liberties and human rights that have taken place in the past four years. But this period in US history is not unique. Its short 230 year journey has been a bumpy ride. At each bump, though, Americans have consistently looked to those ideals enshrined in the Bill of Rights, which include freedom of thought, expression, assembly, religion and the press. Despite claims by some, the United States is not a Christian country. The founders never intended it to be. It was founded and remains a steadfastly secular country.

But religion has flourished in the United States. Professor Diana Eck of Harvard University, who directs its Pluralism Project, and is one of the foremost authorities on religion in the United States, claims that today, the United States is the most religiously diverse country in the world. According to a recent Gallup poll, 92% of Americans say that they believe in God(s) or a higher power and 85% say that they have prayed in the past week. They may not regularly attend a place of worship, but they are spiritual. Interestingly, considering the wide variety of Buddhist groups from Theravada to Nichiren Shoshu (a sect that originated in Japan), establishing temples in the US and gaining adherents (census data indicates that those who identified themselves as Buddhists in the US increased 170% between 1990 and 2000), and considering the decline of Protestant Christianity (now below 50%) Professor Eck also suggests that if anything, the US might be called a Buddhist country!

It is interesting that Baptists in the United States were in the forefront of the struggle to establish the two principles of religious freedom and separation of church and state. As dissidents in England (because they did not want to belong to the king's church by virtue of birth, but by virtue of conviction), Baptists were persecuted and came to what they considered a "new world" in the 16th century. The new colonies were not hospitable to them either. The story of how the pioneering Baptist Roger Williams was driven out of the Massachusetts colony for his "radical" ideas together with his Baptist co-religionists, and how he established the city of Providence as a bastion of religious freedom, is legendary. Later they would exert significant political influence on the framers of the US constitution and the Bill of Rights on establishing the principles of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. In those debates, they were very clear that they were not seeking religious tolerance, because, tolerance implies an attitude of superiority of the majority religion, which condescends to tolerate the minority religions. They insisted that nothing less than Religious Liberty would suffice.

3. Conversions Occur Within Religious Traditions

Religious traditions are not monolithic, and within each tradition there are a variety of perspectives that run the gamut from fundamentalisms to liberalisms. Within the Christian tradition there are at least four identifiable groupings: fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics and moderate to liberal Christians. It is not unusual to find adherents who "convert" from one religious perspective to another

within the same tradition. Sometimes this requires moving their membership or allegiance from one church or denomination to another, but at other times they will remain within the same institution but will express their individual faith in different ways. While we can readily identify churches that are fundamentalist, evangelical or charismatic as distinct from each other and from the established (Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian or Catholic) churches, it is also possible to easily identify those Christians who are fundamentalists, evangelicals or charismatics within the mainline churches.

We need to pay particular attention to the word fundamentalism, since it is often found expressed in misleading ways on the lips of Sri Lankan TV and radio commentators. This designation arose in the early 20th century in the United States as a way of referring to those who attempted to be true to the Christian scripture at a time when they perceived it to be under threat from “liberals” who began to apply new forms of critical tools to Christian scripture. Theirs was the noble idea of wanting to make sure that the “fundamentals” of the faith were preserved. Faithful Muslims use the term to designate those who sincerely seek to follow their faith. Buddhist scholars have also used the word to describe Theravada Buddhism, particularly the Sri Lankan variety. Indeed, Sri Lankan Buddhists have often felt that the mantle of preserving the purity of Buddhism is a special privilege and duty bestowed on them by the Lord Buddha himself.

Today, the word is politicized. In the United States, Christian fundamentalists form the bulk of a formidable political lobby, called the Religious Right, aligned with the Republican Party. When applied to Muslims, as in Muslim Fundamentalists, it refers to terrorist organizations. Other extremist or violent groups, who may resort to violence, are often termed fundamentalist by the media. When speaking of those groups of Christians who have come from abroad to propagate Christianity in Sri Lanka in recent years, it is not accurate to lump them all together as fundamentalists. Some are charismatics and evangelicals of different sorts. Unlike fundamentalists many of them are more open to alternative ways of biblical interpretation. Charismatics are those who have a more “ecstatic” form of religious worship that include practices such as speaking in tongues and healings and Evangelicals are those who give priority to the mandate to evangelize and understand salvation primarily in individualistic terms. It is safe to say that almost always Charismatics are Evangelicals, but not all Evangelicals are Charismatic. All of these groups are present in this new missionary movement in Sri Lanka, and all of them tend to have a more conservative approach to religion and politics.

This conservatism yields an unfortunate result. Mission groups and agencies funded largely by conservative, evangelical western churches do not necessarily understand the difference between culture and the gospel, and tend to import western cultural values as gospel. During my regular visits to Sri Lanka, I have made it a priority to travel to many villages where such evangelistic work occurs. My observation is not that these missionaries are intentionally engaging in unethical practices, but that they are caught in a dilemma that because of their economic advantage and their western approach to life, they are unable to resolve. For instance, along with the mandate to evangelize, Christians are under scriptural mandate to love their neighbor. When the new missionaries meet poor villagers and hear of their need, they may give them material help. The recipients in turn may decide to continue the relationships and participate in their church, and thus be converted. It is almost always a variation of this scenario that is played out in most so-called unethical conversions. They happen not so much because of deliberate attempts to unethically gain converts, but because of a certain naiveté regarding how money should be used.

Moderate to liberal Christians who form the bulk of the established churches in Sri Lanka have over the years learned to express their theology and religious practices in a more culturally appropriate Sri Lankan idiom. Some of them are sophisticated in dealing with the complexities that money brings to evangelistic relationships. Additionally, they have learned reasonably well to engage in interfaith dialogue and work with Buddhist and other religious leaders for the benefit of local communities. It is now urgent

that established churches recognize the need for a dialogue within the Christian community. They must find ways to engage the churches and mission groups that have recently begun to work in Sri Lanka to bring them on board with the remarkable insights that have been gained by work already done by Sri Lankan theologians.

4. Conversions Occur Because of a Complex of Factors

This is true for those who were born in Christian families in the U.S. and Europe who convert to Buddhism, as for those who were born in Buddhist families in Sri Lanka who convert to Christianity. This is also true for Theravada Buddhists who convert to the practice of Zen and mainline Protestants who convert to a charismatic form of their faith. Spiritual enlightenment is often cited as the main motivation for such a change, and it is likely to be so. However, careful observation reveals that family influences, new relationships, personal grievances, economic prospects, social positions or the belief that the new way of life will yield a greater sense of well-being, play crucial roles in motivating persons to convert.

Neither can we discount the complex issue of the “American accent” for those who convert to Christianity. While the example at the beginning of this article may be a single case, Sri Lankan Christians must admit that they have not done enough to dispel this connection. Christianity, brought to Sri Lanka by the colonial powers, is still seen by many Sri Lankans as a “western” religion. The rise of evangelical church groups beholden to western values and theologies has with it the charge that recent evangelistic efforts signal the rise of a new colonialism.

The church in Sri Lanka must take this charge seriously. It is a charge that comes in the context of the relatively new phenomenon of globalization which critics charge, with some validity, is a new colonialism. Just as much as the gospel that was brought to Sri Lanka during the colonial period was a “western” gospel, unregulated and unchecked by Sri Lankan values, it seems obvious that the gospel that is proclaimed by present day missionaries is also a western product. The difficulty with most western missionary enterprises is that few of them would try to understand and incorporate into their theological world-view the work that Sri Lankan theologians have done to indigenize the gospel. And that makes them susceptible to the charge that they are nothing but purveyors of western values. Not only would you get an American accent when you are saved, you might also develop a taste for Coca Cola! Thus the question is serious: Are the present day missionaries coming to pave the way for an economy of globalization?

Christians must recognize that the Buddhist grievances from the colonial period are still not adequately addressed. Given that, to presume that there might be a new colonialism is a frightening prospect. In addition, Sri Lanka’s Catholic church is preparing to celebrate the 500th year of the arrival of the Portuguese in Sri Lanka. Rather than a celebration, I suggest that it would be far more appropriate for that anniversary to be an occasion for Catholics and other Christians to engage in a serious reflection of its colonial legacy and find ways to disengage from the vestiges of colonialism that still prevents the church from being rooted in the Sri Lankan soil.

5. Conclusions

These observations lead me to the following conclusions. They are an attempt to address the concerns that have led to the Anti-Conversion Bill that is before parliament, which (as a recent writer in the *Sunday Leader* observed) is not so much anti-Christian as it is anti-religious. I offer these in a spirit of

humility, with sincere concern for the well-being of each religious tradition represented in Sri Lanka and for inter-religious harmony.

First, I suggest that Buddhist leaders need to have an internal conversation about openly declaring their mandate for the propagation of the Buddha *Sasana* and the value of conversion to Buddhism. At the same time, it will also be valuable for them to consider the roots of their anxiety about the threat that is posed to Buddhism by the so-called unethical conversions. Such a conversation, I hope, will yield a stronger commitment to making the Buddha *dhamma* so relevant and meaningful to the masses that whatever enticement foreign missionaries are able to bring, the Buddhist masses will stand strongly committed to their faith.

Second, I think it is imperative that Sri Lanka's political leaders understand that religions can flourish when there is a political climate that allows religions freedom to practice their faith free from interference from the government. Odd as this may sound, the US experience shows that religions can be guaranteed to flourish, not only if governments won't oppress them, but also if they will not support or defend them. Buddhist efforts at propagating the *dhamma* are yielding good results in the United States because the political climate that is conducive to the free expression of religion is available there. The freedom that Buddhists have to do so is also good for Christians, because they are now forced to reconsider their faith in relation to Buddhism.

Third, established Christian denominations led by an ecumenical organization such as the National Christian Council need to initiate an urgent internal dialogue with those Christians who have recently come to evangelize. They need to immediately establish a self-monitoring mission agency that keeps these missionary organizations accountable to mutually agreed-upon, missiologically appropriate evangelistic practices. In addition, they need to engage the Buddhist clergy and lay leadership in an unprecedented, honest dialogue about the colonial missionary legacy and the church's captivity to the colonial theology and practice, and forge together with them a new impetus for renewing an indigenous theology and practice.

These suggestions, I hope, will address at least some of the concerns that have led to the Anti-Conversion bill that is now before the parliament. If the bill becomes law, in the short term, Christians will bear the brunt of its brutality. In addition, because government support and defense of religion is known to be detrimental, this bill will not be good to Buddhism either. The bill will further alienate religious communities from each other. Sri Lanka, still reeling from the protracted war with the LTTE based on ethnicity, cannot afford another split, this time based on religion.

One good thing happened because of this bill. It engaged Sri Lankans of all stripes in an unprecedented conversation about religion and its role in society. The bill was useful to that extent. Now it should be taken off the table.