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**John Clifford Holt
Fall 2000 Chairholder
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***The Hindu Buddha and the Buddhist Visnu:
Religious Transformations in India and Sri Lanka***

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The Lectureship

The Numata Chair in Buddhist Studies was established in 1987 in the Department of Religious Studies at The University of Calgary to support and advance the study of Buddhism within an academic context. The Chair was funded by the Numata Foundation (Tokyo) and the Honpa Buddhist Church of Alberta with a matching grant from the Province of Alberta. Scholars with exemplary research and teaching records are invited to The University of Calgary for a term and in some cases for a longer period. The Chairholder is asked to give the “Numata Yehan Lecture in Buddhism” during his/her appointment.

The Lecturer

The Winter 2000 Chairholder for the Numata Chair in Buddhist Studies was John Clifford Holt, Professor of Religion, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME, USA. Professor Holt holds a A.B. (cum lauda) in History from Gustavus Adolphus College (1970), an AM (with honors) in History and Phenomenology of Religion from Graduate Theological Union (1973), and a PhD in the History of Religion from University of Chicago (1977). His research interest are in the areas of Buddhism, Art and Politics in Late Medieval Sri Lanka, the historical, philosophical, literary and anthropological approaches to religious experiences and religious cultural expressions in South and Southeast Asia, and the topical and comparative studies of religion in myth, ritual, and symbolism, cosmogony and eschatology, and many others.

Professor Holt’s varied interest and research has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright, Asian Cultural Council, Social Science Research Council and Asia Foundation and has resulted in a lengthy list of books, papers, articles, book chapters, Encyclopedia articles, and ethnographic videos and documentaries.

The Hindu Buddha and the Buddhist Visnu: Religious Transformations in India and Sri Lanka

In many chapters of the history of religions, there are clear instances in which the myths, rituals, ethics, gods, metaphysics or symbolism of one religious tradition are assimilated, transformed, and subordinated by the devotees of another. It has also been the case that after these inclusions and transformations have occurred, counter reactions may prevail leading to attempts to purge or reject precisely what has been previously assimilated. This is fundamental pattern of ambivalence that can be discerned in any number of studies focussed on the nature of relations between various religions of the world.

Students of East Asian religions, for instance, know how important conceptions of Mahayana Buddhist thought, including *dharma* and emptiness (*sunyata*) exercised a profound on Neo-Confucian thinkers such as Ch'u Hsi and Wang Yang Ming during the tenth century C.E. and the fifteenth centuries in China, so that the principle of order and the nature of self awareness were fundamentally enriched. Simultaneously, however, Buddhist schools of monasticism and their institutions of practice continued to be regarded warily by many Confucian literati and political officials as an intruding or "foreign" presence, never to be fully considered as genuinely Chinese.

A second and perhaps more familiar instance: in the Near East, early Christians such as Paul as well as the writers of the New Testament gospels and epistles, transformed the understanding of various cultic and philosophical elements of Judaism, especially rites of sacred sacrifice, the eschatological hope of the messiah, and Hebraic conceptions of divinity and law, while subsequently adopting an ethic of exclusivity towards Judaism, an ethos that eventually contributed to shameful persecutions throughout medieval and modern European Christian history.

What these two examples illustrate is that relations between various members of given families of religion are often and obviously creative, intimate, dependent or even incestuous in nature. At the same time, they can become antipathetical, adversarial or inimical.

The focus of my Numata lecture, entitled "the Hindu Buddha and the Buddhist Visnu," is on the sometimes intimate and sometimes antagonistic state of relations obtaining between Hinduism and Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka. Because this is a massive topic, I am compelled to look specifically, and only briefly, at the changing manner in which Hindus have absorbed, subordinated and then claimed the figure of the Buddha on the one hand, and how Buddhists have assimilated, valorized and transformed Visnu, who is generally regarded as one of the three most important deities of Hindu tradition, on the other. In the case of the Buddhist incorporation of Visnu, which is the subject of my current research, I will also note the significance of a current monastic-led movement in Sri Lanka to discourage Buddhists from venerating the now thoroughly "Buddhacized" Visnu and proceed to discuss reasons for why this attempt to remove Visnu from veneration by Buddhists is now taking place. This will be my thesis: that the manner in which gods or prominent sacred figures of one tradition are appropriated or rejected by another is not so much the result of theological or soteriological innovations invoked by the careful reflections of erudite

ecclesiastics, but are more often a reflection of political dynamics occasioned by a heightened awareness of communal, national or ethnic consciousness. In the most abstract sense, I am suggesting that social, economic and political conditions are often refracted in the substance and dynamics of movements for religious reform or innovation, even though the ostensible rationales for these reforms and innovations are usually formally presented within a doctrinal frame.

The Hindu Buddha

As I have indicated at the outset, Hindu views of the Buddha and Buddhism have not been constant or consistent perceptions. Indeed, it is not really even accurate to speak of Hindu views per se in the ancient period up through several centuries into the common era, simply because the substance and scope of what we now refer to as Hindu tradition had yet to evolve. When the rites, practices and schools of thought of what we now call Hinduism did emerge, it was only after Buddhism had exercised a profound influence upon them, with many Buddhist notions pertaining to the nature of the self, the problematic nature of existence, and the solution to the existential condition, having been appropriated in the process. Ancient and medieval priestly (*brahmana*) followers of *Vedic* tradition with a self-perception of sustaining the *sanatana dharma* or the "eternal teachings of order and truth", were, indeed, very much aware that the historical Sakyamuni Gautama Buddha of the sixth century BCE was not an *aryan* kinsman, not a *Vedic rsi* or "seer," nor born into their priestly *brahmin varna* or caste. Moreover, the Buddha was recognized in many circles as an inveterate opponent of *brahmin* public rites, a religious teacher who had opened the ranks of his followers to people of all castes, who had challenged the verity of *brahmanical* metaphysical speculations pertaining to the self (*atman*) and the absolute ontological reality principle of *brahman* (cosmic soul), while declaring the efficacy of the sacred gods as irrelevant to the ultimate religious quest. In addition to these open challenges to *brahmanical* conceptions of self, society and cosmos, the Buddha's own *ksatrya* or royal origins made it practically impossible to acknowledge him as a teacher in any of the accepted *brahmanical* schools (*vaidika*, *vedantika*, *srauta*, *smarta*, etc.) or theological orientations (*Saiva*, *Vaisnava*, *Sakta* or *bhakti*). (To underscore the radical nature of the Buddha's opposition to existent *brahmanical* structures, consider the following analogy: imagine a self-ordained religious teacher in early medieval monastic-dominated Europe, say Italy, France or Spain, declaring that the sacraments of the church were futile exercises, that no soul exists to be saved in any case, that God is irrelevant to matters eternal, and that religieuses should not be involved in worldly transactions involving wealth and capital.) Thus, it is not very surprising, in light of the antithetical stance assumed by the Buddha toward *brahmanical* thought and institutions, that in one early medieval text, it is declared that "A *brahmana* who enters a Buddhist temple even in a time of great calamity cannot get rid of the sin by means of hundreds of expiations since the Buddhists are heretical critics of the sacred *Vedas*."¹

¹ *Naradiya Purana* I. 15. 50-52.

Moreover, it is not uncommon to find Buddhists referred to in other *brahmanical* contexts as "outcastes" (*vasalaka*), "devils" or "demons" (*daitya*, *danava*), and in extreme contexts, that merit would accrue to a Saiva who killed Buddhist heretics.²

Moreover, Buddhist archaeological mounds found in Andhra Pradesh to this day are referred to as "prostitute hills." In light of the Buddha's critique of *brahmanism* and the hostility it, in turn, evoked, it is somewhat astonishing to learn that the Buddha was, indeed, eventually incorporated into many Hindu normative constructions, embraced as one of the greatest teachers of humankind, and that some Hindus would go so far as to say the Buddha was, in fact, born a Hindu. On this last point, Lal Mani Joshi, a contemporary Indian historian of religions, has critiqued that assertion bluntly in this way:

To say that Gautama [the Buddha] was born a Hindu [as some contemporary Hindus and Western observers have claimed] is entirely non-sensical. There is no evidence to think that [Vedic religion] was prevalent among the Sakyas, Mallas or Licchavis [the pertinent political republics] in the days of the Buddha and Mahavira [the so-called "founder" of Jainism]. On the contrary, there is evidence of the progress and influence of several varieties of Sramanic religion and philosophy which had nothing in common with Brahmanic theism, sacrificialism, and world-affirmation. The ideologies of the *sramanas* cannot be traced to Indo-Aryans... Buddhism and numerous other forms of ascetically-oriented soteriologies propounded by *munis* and *sramanas*, together with some outstanding teachers of scepticism, materialism, realism, nihilism and eternalism flourished in that small area of modern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar at a time when it had not been fully aryanized and brahmanized. It is not insignificant that the anti-Vedic and ascetic tendency of a few Upanisadic texts was inspired by the teachings of these east Indian *sramanas*. . .³

Joshi's final comment is very significant insofar as he is signalling just how early (mid-first millennium BCE) Buddhist thought seems to have influenced what are later regarded as thoroughly classic Hindu formulations. Specifically, he is referring to passages in several *upanisads* that champion the life of internal meditation over external ritual performance, of the eremitical wanderer over the domestic priest, and the ethicization of the doctrine of *karma* and its consequences for understanding the theory of rebirth. Each of these notions become the bases for thoroughly incorporated Buddhist teachings within the syntheses of the *Bhagavad Gita*, especially the ethic of becoming detached from the fruit of one's efforts through the conquering of desire.⁴

Nevertheless, *brahmanical* incorporation of Buddhist ideas, what Arnold Toynbee once called "the philosophical plunder of Buddhism," was also accompanied by mean-spirited ridicule. While the Buddha

² Palkuruki Somanatha's *Basavana Purana*, a Saiva *purana*, contends that killing Buddhist heretics is meritorious. Personal communication, Sree Padma.

³ Lal Mani Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983) p. xvii.

⁴ See especially the third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* wherein the teaching of *karma yoga* and the realization of *nirvana* are presented as the means and goal of the spiritual path.

and some of his ideas were eventually regarded congenially, Buddhism as an institution and community were never accorded the same hospitality from within the *brahmanical* ranks. The Indian cultural historian P.V. Kane has argued that the assimilation of Buddhist ideas was not a consequence of Hindu tolerance or reflective of a Hindu proclivity for syncretism.⁵

Rather, because institutional Buddhism had become, since the days of the third century B.C.E. emperor Asoka, a pan-Indian presence and Asoka's Buddhistic interpretation of *dharma* apparently had become a matter of implemented public policy, the *brahmanical* community, as a matter of survival, had little choice than to adopt a dual strategy: to be congenial to those Buddhist ideas which had become accepted as almost matters of religious common sense on the one hand, but also to undermine, condemn or chastise Buddhist institutions on the other. The *brahmanical* strategic response to its Buddhist challenge, then, might be characterized in terms of the acceptance of aspects of Buddhist thought but the rejection of Buddhist monks and their sympathizers.

Hindu ambivalence towards the Buddha and Buddhism is no more clearly seen than in the Hindu assimilation and subordination which I wish most to emphasize in this brief portrayal: that is, the religious fact that the Buddha, by the seventh century C.E., had been declared an *avatar*, or an incarnation of Visnu, in not only one Sanskrit *purana*, but in no less than four.⁶

By this time too, inscriptions in the south, in what is today modern Tamilnadu, at Mahabalipuram, were declaring that the Buddha was the ninth of ten incarnations of Visnu.⁷

Eventually, sculpted images of Visnu's ten avatars, including the Buddha, would adorn the columns of the most renown Visnu temples in South India, with Tiruchapalli's famous Sri Rangam (Visnu) temple being perhaps the most conspicuous example. The legacy of this formulation was so widespread and enduring that even today in contemporary Sinhala Buddhist Sri Lanka, one can see paintings at the Visnu *devalaya* in Devinuwara on the southern tip of the island and a wall sculpture at Munneswaram in Sri Lanka's northwest, in which the Buddha is depicted as the ninth *avatar* of Visnu. Thus the notion gained widespread currency even beyond India where one can still hear it enthusiastically asserted by many today.

What does it mean to be an *avatar* of Visnu within the context of the *puranas*? The *puranas* are sometimes referred to as the "fifth *veda*" on account of their great popularity, and hence authority, among rank-and-file *brahmin* priests and Hindu devotees of the *bhakti* tradition. Unlike the *Vedas*, the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanisads*, texts which are substantially sacrificial hymns, ritual handbooks, and esoteric meditations on the secrets of the self and cosmos respectively, the *puranas* are essentially popular mythic stories detailing the fantastic exploits of the gods, the manner in which they have created the world, how they can reveal its truths, and how they can enter into the worlds of human beings to uphold the order of *dharma* and to prevent catastrophic destruction. They also contain many stories about how various

⁵ P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* (Poona: Bandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1973) 5: 913ff.

⁶ *Varaha Purana* 4.2; *Matsya Purana* 285. 6-7; *Agni Purana* 49. 8; *Bhagavata Purana* X. 40. 22 and I. 3.

⁷ H. Krishna Sastri, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*. No. 26, pp. 5ff.

places of sacred pilgrimage became hallowed. Within Vaisnava Hinduism, or the Hinduism that celebrates Visnu as the ontological truth of the fundamental reality of *brahman*,⁸ Visnu is not only the preserver of *dharma* or order in the cosmos, which is the manner in which he is popularly portrayed in synthetic understandings of Hinduism. Rather, he is also the very creator of the world, the reality behind the beguiling mask of *maya* (variegated illusion), who periodically and benevolently extends his protection to those who seek his refuge. These divine characteristics and prerogatives are the theological and mythic stuff of the *puranas*, and Visnu's *avatars*, or his "descents" into the realm of human beings, are his most well known attribute and method for intervening.

The myths and doctrine of Visnu's *avatars* are reflective of two important traits of Hindu *Vaisnava* perspective. The first trait consists of Visnu's radically transcendent nature, a transcendence that can be seen to be as ancient as it is abstract. For instance, in an ancient *Rg Veda* hymn⁹ (*samhita*), Vishnu is referred to as the mighty *deva* (god) whose three cosmic strides measured out the tripartite structure of the universe: the celestial, atmospheric and terrestrial abodes which become definitive not only for the categorical identities and functions of different types of divinities believed to populate the cosmos, but also, according to some scholars, are mythic projections of the tripartite divisions of society that are hierarchically arranged in the Indo-European social schematization.¹⁰ While Vishnu's transcendence was early on articulated mythically in ancient texts, and metaphysically in his later identification as the fundamental ontological reality of the cosmos, his abstract nature was also reflected in how he has been depicted in traditions of classical Indian painting and sculpture. For instance, Visnu is sometimes represented as a mist or cloud, because his transcendent abstract profile makes it difficult to render him in anthropomorphic form suitably. Moreover, a footprint also functions frequently as his preferred aniconic representation.¹¹ The point I am here illustrating is that Visnu's profile in the *puranas*, as creator and transcendent savior god par excellence, an analogue to Visnu's equation with *brahman* in *Vaisnava* theology, is so utterly transcendent that another device, the *avatar*, is needed to concretize his reality to make him accessible to human entreaties. Further, and this is important to grasp, the *avatar* device, whatever its origins, lends itself quite readily to the religio-cultural process of assimilation, since it so obviously implies that Visnu may take on any number of forms to make his power efficacious in the human world. It is this amenability to assimilation that is the second trait, in addition to Visnu's transcendence, that I wish to take note of here. For, other scholars have often suggested that the reification of Visnu's *avatars*, counted as ten, twelve or twenty-two in various *purana* texts,¹² masks an historical process of

⁸ For an excellent explanation of the substance and history of Vaisnava theology from a thorough-going Vaisnava perspective, see S. M. Srinivasa Chari, *Vaisnavism: Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994. See especially pp. 49-65 and 131-156 for discussions regarding Visnu as the ultimate reality.

⁹ *Rg Veda* I. 154.

¹⁰ See Jean Varenne, *Yoga and the Hindu Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of how the footprint becomes an aniconic symbol for both Visnu and the Buddha, see Jacob Kinnard, "The Polyvalent *Padas* of Visnu and the Buddha," *History of Religions* 40 (2000): 32-57.

¹² In addition to the *puranas* cited above in note 4 where the number of Visnu's *avatars* is said to be ten, the *Markandeya Purana* 4. 44-58 lists twelve while *Matsya Purana* 47. 32-52, lists twenty-two.

envelopment in which indigenous religious cults with roots in non-*aryanized* India have been enfolded into the *brahmanical Vaisnava* cult and thereby subordinated under a *brahmanical* umbrella. David Kinsley, for instance, argues persuasively that the myths and cult of Krsna were originally religious phenomena peripheral to the later amalgamized cult of Visnu.¹³ Thus, the *avatar* device, a consequence of Visnu's transcendence, made possible a handy means by which other deities could be assimilated, subordinated, and legitimated.

I have belabored this discussion relevant to Visnu's *avatars* because this was precisely the device used to assimilate and then to subordinate the figure of Buddha. Or, to put the matter differently, to put the Buddha in his *brahmanical* place. The assimilation of the Buddha as Visnu's ninth *avatar* was not formulated, however, without an interesting and revealing twist: for the *Visnu Purana* states that Visnu's "descent" as the *Buddhavatara* was accomplished so that the wicked and the demonic could be only further misled away from the truth in this current age of degeneracy, the *kali yuga*! That is, through his teachings, the Buddha was regarded as a divinely incarnated purveyor of illusion. The assimilation of the Buddha as Visnu's *avatar* and the consequent disingenuous interpretation or rationale for his inclusion, serve to reflect the considerable ambivalence characteristic of Hindu attitudes towards Buddhism. One of the effects of rendering the Buddha as an *avatar* was to undermine his historicity. Another was to assure serious-minded *brahmins* that the *Buddhavatara* was but a device used by Visnu to misguide heretics, the Buddhists in particular. It explained how divine absolute prerogative was responsible for the presence of an ancient and annoying rival.

While the Buddha as *avatar* of Visnu remained the Buddha's chief claim to fame among many Hindus from the seventh century through colonial times and even for many in the present, the fortunes of the Hindu Buddha took a decidedly different turn in the twentieth century, during the time of the Indian drive for cultural renaissance and political independence. Herein we witness a dramatic reclamation. In retrospect, it may be that this reclamation was made possible in light of the disappearance of the Buddha's religion, its institutionalization, from the land of its birth by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the common era.¹⁴ There was no longer any need for the previous duality or ambivalence since Buddhism as a religion was no longer a perceived threat to *brahmanism*.

The extraordinary transformation in the manner in which the Buddha was to be regarded in modern India was first signalled by Swami Vivekananda, one of India's national leaders of religious, cultural and intellectual "re-awakening." Self-proclaimed heir to the inclusive *bhakti* or devotional religious vision

¹³ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), especially the first chapter.

¹⁴Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha*, p. xviii, notes that that even in the sixteenth century *Ramacaritamansa* by Tulsi Das and in the *Satyarthaprakasa* by Swami Dayananda Sarasvati, this popular *puranic* view of the Buddha was sustained. He notes that Buddhist pilgrims to India, including those like the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang who knew Sanskrit, must have been shocked by the *brahmanical* Hindu formula of homage to the Buddha: *namo Buddhaya Suddhaya daitya danava mohine* ["Adoration to the Enlightened One, the Immaculate One, who enchanted (or deceived) the demons and devils."]

of the nineteenth century Bengali saint Ramakrsna, Vivekananda preached to Western and Westernized Indian audiences a *vedanta* philosophy in which the Buddha was eulogized as perhaps the greatest teacher ever of Hindu ideas. Vivekananda proclaimed that the Buddha was a reformer of Hindu ideas and that the Buddhist religion had been nothing more than a "rebel child of Hinduism." Further, Vivekananda declared the Buddha as his own *ishta devata*, his own "chosen deity" to worship. Among his many characterizations of the Hindu Buddha, what Vivekananda stressed, in harmony with the *zeitgeist* of his Westernized, intellectual and elitest religious orientation, was that the Buddha was a great rationalist thinker who rose above popular superstitions, a true democrat who preached liberation from caste hierarchy and the equality of all men, and a great prophet whose selflessness was unparalleled,¹⁵

Correctly analyzed the existential condition of man as being one of *dukkha* (or "unsatisfactoriness") and it's cause as being one of desire. In the following quote, we see Vivekananda identifying the Buddha more specifically as the fulfillment of a particular Hindu ideal type:

[The Buddha] is the ideal Karma Yogi, acting entirely without motive, and the history of humanity shows him to have been the greatest man ever born,. . . the greatest combination of heart and brain that ever existed, the greatest soul-power that has ever been manifested.¹⁶

In identifying the Buddha as the ideal *karma yogi*, Vivekananda is arguing that the Buddha is the model for one of the basic soteriological strategies articulated within the *Bhagavad Gita*. There is no doubt, as I noted earlier, that this section of the *Gita* is heavily dependent on Buddhistic ideas. So the *karma yogi* mantel, is, in fact, somewhat apt.

But what is more astonishing than the *karma yogi* litany of praise is the manner in which Vivekananda unabashedly appropriated the Buddha for his own version of a universalistic Hinduism. For instance, he linked the teachings of the Buddha to those of Sankara, perhaps the most well-known of all Hindu philosophers and the key proponent of *advaita vedanta*, and explicitly identified the Buddha as a promulgator of the *Vedanta* school of Hindu philosophy:

Buddha was a great Vedantist, and Shankara is often called a hidden Buddhist. Buddha made the analysis, Shankara made the synthesis of it.¹⁷

Such an appropriation and eulogistic praise for the Buddha is sprinkled throughout Vivekananda's collected writings in his attempt to make the case that *Vedantic* Hinduism, the religion par excellence through which the discipline of knowledge uncovers the hidden universal truth behind all variegated phenomonal existence, is the true philosophical mother of all religions. Notice that Vivekananda's assimilation of the Buddha is framed primarily in doctrinal terms. The Buddha's analysis of existence is

¹⁵For a summary of Vivekanda's understanding of the Buddha as publicly articulated, see Joshi, *op cit.*, pp. 58-73.

¹⁶Vivekananda, *Complete Works* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1971-73), I: 117-18; Swamin Sivananda also regarded the Buddha as a *karma yogi*. See David Miller, "Swami Sivananda and the Bhagavadgita," in Robert Minor, ed., *Modern Interpreters of the Bhagavad Gita* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 173-199.

¹⁷ Vivekananda, *Ibid.*, VII: 59.

congenial to setting up the solution of *jnana yoga* proffered by Sankara. C. D. Sharma, in his *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, is even more explicit in this regard. He writes:

Buddhism and Vedanta should not be viewed as two opposed systems, but which starts with the Upanisads, finds its indirect support in Buddha, its elaboration in Mahayana Buddhism, its open revival in Gaudapada, which reaches its zenith in Sankara...¹⁸

Vivekananda's agenda of rehabilitating image of the Buddha is not without merit, for it is clear that Sankara's thought seems to be influenced by Nagarjuna and perhaps other Mahayanists as well.¹⁹ Vivekananda actually went further than this. The Hindu neo-*Vedanta* theological agenda was, in general, aimed at promulgating the thesis that while the West was rich in material and scientific accomplishments, it lacked in genuine spirituality, a spirituality that Eastern religious teachings, in the guise of a *vedanta's* universal theology, was thoroughly prepared to supply. A refashioned image of the Buddha, whose message was now blended with Victorian sensitivities and *Vedantic* pretensions to universal truth, was a perfect accomplice for the task, which included converting the intellectual strata of Hindu society in late colonial times as well. The Buddha could be regarded as a great democrat as well.

That Vivekananda succeeded is graphically apparent in the way the Buddha came to be regarded by emerging nationalist leaders at the forefront of India's independence movement in the twentieth century. Consider the following statements by some of its most ardent leaders. First Mahatma Gandhi:

I do not consider for one moment that Buddhism has been banished from India. . . . It is impossible to banish Buddha. . . . that great Lord, Master and Teacher of mankind. So long as the world lasts, I have not a shadow of doubt that he will rank among the greatest teachers of mankind.²⁰

Similarly, here what Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Oxford-educated philosopher and the first president of India, had to say:

Among the the inspiring treasures of the human spirit is the memory of Gautama the Buddha. Its hold over the imagination of millions of our fellow beings is immense; its inspiration to braver and nobler living for centuries is incalculable' its contribution to the refining spirit of man and the humanizing of his social relations is impressive.²¹

¹⁸ C.D. Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (London: Rider and Co., 1960), p. 318. For a detailed analysis of the manner in which Mahayana ideas have exercised a profound affect, or were a heritage for Sankara, see S. G. Mudgal, *Advaita Vedanta of Sankara: Impact of Buddhism and Samkhya on Sankara's Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975).

¹⁹ Mudgal, *Advaita Vedanta*, pp. 173-188.

²⁰ Quoted in Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha*, p. 64 which in turn quotes A. Aiyappan and P.R. Srinivasan, *Story of Buddhism with Special Reference to South India* (Madras, 1960), p. 5.

²¹ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Eastern and Western Religious Thought*. 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 330.

More to the point I wish to make, the following is what Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, and one of India's foremost modern intellectuals and students of history, has to say:

The conception of the Buddha, to which innumerable loving hands have given shape in carven stone and marble and bronze, *seems to symbolize the whole spirit of Indian thought*. . . The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away after all, his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it... *The nation and race which can produce such a magnificent type must have deep reserves of wisdom and inner strength*. . . His appeal was to logic, reason and experience, his emphasis was on ethics, and his method was psychological analysis [*italics mine*].²²

In his memoirs, Nehru has reported that it was a print of the famous *samadhi* Buddha image from Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, that adorned his prison wall and provided moments of inspiration for him during his extended periods of incarceration. In what he has said about the Buddha in the quote I have provided above, we see how the Buddha has been reclaimed triumphantly as a symbol of indigenous, nationalist understandings of India's history, culture and its road to modernity.

Further, consider this statement about the Buddha from D.C. Sircar, one of India's leading historians in the immediate post-independence period of the 1950s, who saw as his task the recovery of India's indigenous voice:

Gautama the Buddha and the Maurya emperor Asoka are two of the greatest sons of India and the world, and their lives and achievements stand among India's best contributions to human civilization.²³

In short, the reclamation of the Buddha in modern India was complete. It was preceded by his transformation as an *avatar* of Visnu, his envelopment within Vivekananda's *vedanta* of universal pretensions, to being regarded finally as one of modern India's great *bhumiputra*'s or "sons of the soil." Indeed, what I wish to emphasize here is that the historical vicissitudes of this modern transformation or reclamation takes place within the context of an evolving rhetoric of nationalist discourse, the secularized successor to the missionary drive of Vivekananda. Herein, while Vivekananda's message was universalistic, the nationalist discourse was inclusive and historical. That is, India's post-independent nationalist politicians, like their counterparts in Sri Lanka, sought to create a popular awareness and an historical consciousness of depth and sophistication of their ancient culture. And in that inclusive understanding, they hoped to generate a great national pride. In reclaiming that history from its most recent colonial past, the Buddha was also reclaimed as a *bhumiputra* with international appeal.

It remains to be seen, with the contemporary eclipse of the Nehru and Gandhi attempt to forge an all-India identity within the folds of the Congress Party, whether the Hindu-inspired Bharata Janata (BJP) Party which now heads a coalition government, will sustain such a nationalist regard for the Buddha.

²² Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: 1956), pp. 121 and 109.

²³ D.C. Sircar, *Inscriptions of Asoka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1956), p. 3.

Suffice it to say, that the Buddha provided nationalists with a symbol to declare that India's civilization was noble, culturally variegated, and intellectually respectable. He served the political forces who advocated an all-India inclusive ethic quite well. It is doubtful that he would be as useful to those who are now propounding what seems to be an ethic of exclusivity.

The Buddhist Visnu

Sinhala Buddhists, who comprise two-thirds of the current population of Sri Lanka, are exceedingly proud of the fact that their's is the oldest continuing Buddhist civilization in the world dating back some 2,500 years. While Visnu is mentioned just once, and that in passing, in all of Pali canonical Buddhist literature, modern translations and interpretations of Sri Lanka's fifth century C.E. Theravada Buddhist quasi-historical monastic chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, identify Visnu with the hallowed role of being the island's and the religion's chief minister of defense.²⁴ This identification is derived from a seminal migration myth recorded in the *Mahavamsa* which explains that the ancient arrival of the progenitors of the Sinhala people, and the subsequent arrival of Buddhism, are in part the result of the protective powers of Visnu *deviyo*. A careful study of the *Mahavamsa*, however, together with a study of inscriptions, iconography, and late medieval Sinhala literature, shows that Visnu's Buddhistic identity as the island's and the religion's "minister of defense" probably does not much antedate the sixteenth century, and cannot be confirmed with any degree of certainty until the early eighteenth century. Nevertheless, it is now difficult to find any general appraisal of Sinhala religion, or of Sinhala deity propitiation more specifically, in either English or in Sinhala, which does not assume that Visnu has been protecting the Buddhist religion since its inception. There are even some popular folkloric accounts which claim that Visnu protected the Buddha from Mara, the personification of death, on the night of his enlightenment experience. Moreover, Visnu *devalayas* or shrines are now ubiquitous throughout all Sinhala Buddhist cultural areas in Sri Lanka, especially in village contexts. His integration into popular conceptions and transactions of Buddhist ritual cult has been as thorough as any other deity in the country. His power is propitiated in invocations at the beginning of virtually every public ritual. Late medieval Sinhala literature is replete with references to his beneficent presence. Indeed, many Sinhalas living in rural areas of the country would be surprised to learn that Visnu is a deity of *brahmanical vedic* and Hindu *puranic* origins. In the popular mind, Visnu is a very high god treading positively on the path leading to Buddhahood. Because of the vast amount of meritorious work he has performed on behalf of those who seek his help, he is regarded as a *bodhisattva*, or future Buddha. Here, then, we see subordination of Visnu. His rationalized legitimacy is the result of his being placed on the path to eventual buddhahood. He, too, has become a seeker after *nirvana*.

Just when and how Visnu entered into the popular strata of Sinhala Buddhist religion is a subject of much debate within scholarship in Sri Lanka. A number of scholars have argued, along with Wilhelm

²⁴ Wilhelm Geiger, among others, has identified Visnu with the indigenous deity Upulvan, who in the seminal *Mahavamsa* myth recounting the first migration of "Sinhalese" to the island, is appointed by Sakka (Indra), who was in turn appointed by the Tathagata, to protect the Sinhalese and their religion on this island where the *dhamma* will flourish. See *Mahavamsa* VII: 1-8.

Geiger, the German philologist who translated the *Mahavamsa* in the early twentieth century, that Uppalavanna, the actual name given for the god who is assigned the task of protecting the Sinhala and Buddhism in the seminal migration myth I have cited above, is Visnu, chiefly because the Pali term Uppalavanna literally means "the one who is in color like the lotus." This would seem to correspond to Visnu's blue body color. Others, however, disagree and have offered alternative identifications for Uppalavanna as the Vedic god Varuna, or Krsna, or Rama or even the Mahayana *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara.²⁵ I cannot review the warrants for those arguments within this space except to say that I think that there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that Uppalavanna was anything other than an indigenous deity until his cult was likely absorbed by Hindu *brahmanical* priests tending their own Visnu temple in the temple city of Devinuvara following the destruction of Uppalavanna's main shrine at the hands of the Portuguese in the late sixteenth century. Moreover, it is not until the beginning of the eighteenth century before there is definitive inscriptional evidence of the cult of Visnu being officially endorsed by the Buddhist royal court in Kandy.²⁶ But Visnu's Sri Lankan story is more complicated than this. It may well be that it was not until the early 1700s before his cult was formally endorsed by Kandyan kings, but Visnu images and shrines are among the conspicuous archaeological ruins of the eleventh through thirteenth century Sinhala Buddhist capital at Polonnaruva.²⁷ Moreover, there are currently icons

²⁵ See Senaret Paranavitana, *The Shrine of Upulvan at Devundara*. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Vol. VI. (Colombo, SL: The Ceylon Government Archaeological Department, 1953), pp. 18-59 wherein the author argues, in very abstruse fashion, for Upulvan's identity with the Vedic god Varuna. Obeyesekere, *Cult of Pattini*, pp. 312-321, has demolished Paranavitana's argument and submits that Upulvan was either an indigenous Sinhala deity adapted in the same way that Indra became Sakka, or was an early adaptation of Visnu from the beginning. M.B. Ariyapala, *Society in Mediaeval Ceylon* (Colombo, SL: Department of Cultural Affairs, 1956), pp. 187-190, suggests that Upulvan was either Krishna or Rama, the latter speculation supported by Anuradha Seneviratne in "Rama and Ravana: History, Legend and Belief in Sri Lanka," *Ancient Ceylon: Journal of the Archaeological Survey Department of Sri Lanka*, No. 5 (1984): 221-236. A.D.T.E. Perera, "Upulvan, the Patron God of the Sinhalese: An Attempt to Rediscover the God's Identity Through Literary and Archaeological Evidence," *Vidyodaya Journal of Arts, Science and Letters* 4 (1971), Nos. 1 and 2, pp. 88-104, argues strongly for the identification of Upulvan with the Mahayana *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara, a view that seems substantiated on iconographic bases by Ulrich von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka* (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 1991). Obeyesekere, *ibid.*, has a concise analysis of how aspects of Upulvan/Visnu have been grafted on to the mytic career of Aluthnuvara Deviyo.

²⁶ Mr. Dennis Ratwatte, the current *basnayaka nilame* ("lay custodian") of the Maha (Visnu) Devalaya in Kandy recently made available a gold plated *sannasa* (royal grant) in his custody which Prof. P.B. Meegaskumbura of the Department of Sinhalese at the University of Peradeniya has translated into English for the first time. In that *sannasa*, the god who is addressed is Sri Ramachandran thereby indicating that at least at the time of the *sannasa*'s date (1709 C.E), Rama, as Visnu's *avatar*, was regarded as this centrally important *devalaya*'s presiding deity. Rama is also addressed as the deity presiding at the royally endowed Maha (Visnu) Devalaya in Hanguranketa in the early nineteenth century panegyric poem *Rama Sandesa* written during the reign of the last of the Kandyan kings, Sri Vikrama Rajasinha (1798-1815 C.E.).

²⁷ Traditionally, the presence of these Visnu shrines, along with shrines for Siva, are said to have been constructed for the South Indian Hindu queens of the Sinhala Buddhist kings and their court attendants.

of Visnu in some of his Sinhala *devalayas* located within Buddhist *viharayas* (temples) which may very well date back to the sixteenth century.²⁸ Visnu's history on the island is embedded in a murky past.

Just as Sinhala villagers would be surprised to learn that Visnu could be anything other than a Buddhist deity, many Westerners are surprised to learn that gods have any kind of place in Buddhist cultures. The nature and function of the divine in Buddhism is one of the issues least understood by the discerning reading public in the West. Almost all books on the spirituality of Buddhism sold in European and North American bookstores scarcely mention deity veneration at all. If deities are mentioned, it is usually negatively or even derisively so. For Buddhism is often championed in Western circles as a religion without gods, a type of spiritual self-effort totally dependent upon the will of a determined practitioner, a religion of personal self-attainment, one in which mental, ethical and emotional proclivities causing existential unsatisfactoriness can be overcome by disciplined, intentional assertions generated out of a mindset of contemplative serenity. Logical rationality, the pride of the post-enlightenment era, is often emphasized in these presentations too. Most introductory academic textbooks in use at North American colleges and universities still present the teachings of the Buddha and the historical development of Buddhist doctrine in this manner. Moreover, Buddhism is understood in many circles as a philosophy, not religion, and in others as atheistic, proudly proclaimed insofar as it is not seen as a religious discipline dependent on the power of savior figures or omnipotent gods. Such is the profile of a philosophically sanitized Buddhism, one emasculated of its Asian cultural contexts and made fit for consumption in the spirituality markets of the new age West. On the Sri Lankan side too, learned monographs by Buddhist studies academics which, while noting the ubiquitous presence of the gods even within the oldest layers of classical literary tradition, assert that divinity is beside the concerns of the basic Buddhist religious quest.²⁹

My critique of these characterizations of Buddhism, the Western and Western educated Sri Lankan, is that they are basically presented without the benefit of social, cultural and historical analyses and often assume a normative posture exclusively. To the contrary, historians and anthropologists who have studied aspects of the religious cultures of South and Southeast Asia have labored, for the past forty or fifty years, to point out that while the gods may not be soteriologically significant in Buddhism, they function as genuine expressions of religious consciousness for many people insofar as they signify important cognitive and emotive experiences for people who quite self-consciously call themselves Buddhists.

This persistent problem of ignoring or banishing the gods into insignificance has been compounded for two fundamental reasons, both related to one another. In the first instance, there is a venerable

²⁸ For instance, the Visnu image in the *devalaya* at the fourteenth century Gadaladeniya *viharaya* appears to be as old as the *viharaya*.

²⁹ A good example is M.M.J. Marasinghe, *Gods in Early Buddhism* (Kelaniya, SL: University Sri Lanka, Vidyalankara Campus, 1974).

tradition, a kind of “Hindu deity-bashing,” within the textual and historical traditions of Sri Lanka’s monastic Theravada Buddhism itself. There are, indeed, a number of references in the Pali canonical corpus of the Theravadins which verge on ridiculing the perceived efficacy of *brahmanical* gods, either within the context of ritual implorations³⁰ or as impediments to maximizing the cultivation of the ethical life.³¹

Moreover, there are clear instances in the history of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, particularly in the thirteenth, fifteenth and nineteenth centuries CE, when learned monks chastised their lay followers for worshipping the gods.³²

It is an old problem. It has sometimes divided the Buddhist community. But it must be kept in mind that monastic hardliners on this issue do not exhaust the totality of views in Buddhist cultures.³³

Indeed, on the whole, theirs has been an infrequent, minor and extreme voice. The second reason for the persistence of this problem is that popular cultural flows from the West are frequently exported to Asia and thoroughly embraced uncritically, and not the least of these has been, ironically, popular Westernized understandings of Buddhism³⁴ available to the English reading public which correspond to the more extreme Theravada monastic views just referred to above. How the West understands Buddhism has had an indelible effect on how some Sri Lankans have come to understand their own tradition. Geiger’s translation of “Uppalavanna” in the *Mahavamsa* is but one small episode in this general process. A combination of these two reasons, the one internal to the culture and the external, drives the contemporary incarnation of this controversy today. But it is chiefly the internal one that has

³⁰ See for instance, F.L. Woodward, trans., *Udana: Verses of Uplift and Itivuttaka: As It Was Said* (London: Pali Text Society, 1935), p. 9; V. Trenckner, ed. *The Majjhima Nikaya* (London: Pali Text Society, 1888), 1: 39 and K.R. Norman, trans., *Theragatha* (London: Pali Text Society, 1961), especially vol. 1.

³¹ The *Sigalovada Suttanta* of the *Digha Nikaya* is a particularly apt example in terms of the manner in which the Buddha advises lay followers to abandon efforts aimed at worshipping the gods of the four directions and the zenith and nadir in favor of cultivating wholesome social relations with various sets of people, including family, teachers, etc. For a powerful argument asserting the superiority of a religion without God at its focus, see Gunapala Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (Antioch, CA: Golden Leaves Publishing, 1988).

³² Ariyapala, *Society and Culture*, p. 185, notes how the thirteenth century *Saddharma Ratnavaliya* admonishes the people to give up worship of Visnu and Siva. Vidagama Maitreyi Thera, an eminent royal preceptor in the fifteenth century was a famous rival and critic of Sri Rahula Thera, the great grammarian and poet who is recognized as having sanctioned the worship of the gods and the practice of ritual magic. Kitsiri Malalgoda’s brief account in *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976) pp. 169-70 describes how an anti-Visnu sentiment accompanied the formative years of the Ramanna monastic sect in Sri Lanka.

³³ Prof. P.B. Meegaskumbura of the Department of Sinhalese at the University of Peradeniya suggests that there is a long history of elite monks in Sri Lanka who have resisted an acceptance of deities within Buddhist religious life, but that deity veneration in general has been accepted as a cultural norm throughout Sinhala cultural history.

³⁴ Charles Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Roads Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism,” in Donald Lopez, ed., *Curators of the Buddha* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 31-61, notes how Sri Lankan scholars embraced Western scholarly analyses, particularly those of T.W. Rhys Davids, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

led to the rekindling and renewal of the debate, a debate which finds Sinhala Buddhist worship of Visnu at its center.

The continuing controversy about Visnu actually runs parallel to the public fortunes of Sinhala-Tamil relations in medieval and modern Sri Lankan history. Monastic reactions against deity veneration, especially to the gods of Hindu origins, occurs in conjunction with the significant establishment and assimilation of South Indian religious cultural traditions among the Sinhalese. While these assimilations belie a Sinhala historical genius for inclusivity, they have been, periodically, perceived by some as threats to the indigenous culture, as an advance signal of potential political domination. That is, the bi-focal penchant of assimilation and antipathy that we found in the case of the early medieval Hindu encounter with Buddhism is mirrored here within the context of Buddhist encounter of Hinduism. For example, sculpted gods of Hindu origins were first placed inside Buddhist image houses at Gadaladeniya and Lankatilaka, two historically important temples built and patronized by the kings and courtiers of the fourteenth century Gampola period in the upcountry region of the island. The Gampola period witnessed unprecedented migrations of peoples of South Indian origins into this upcountry region of Sri Lanka. A tremendous amount of folklore, including epic migration sagas, myths about the goddess, and the introduction of several minor deities, are still extant in upcountry villages as cultural derivations from this migratory experience. Like the Indian historian Kane's thesis that Hinduism had to absorb Buddhism for reasons of survival (see above), the same pattern holds here with roles reversed. It is not surprising that we would find concurrently in the Gampola era, one of Theravada's most outstanding critics of deity veneration, Dharmakirti Thera, the chief monastic incumbent of Gadaladeniya itself, articulating his perspective forcefully at this time.³⁵

The same pattern might be seen in the fifteenth century Kotte era, when Sanskrit, devotional Hinduism and caste became pronounced features in Sinhala literary, religious and social structures, but without a strident voice of monastic dissent.³⁶

In each of these three contexts, we find a Buddhist state sanctioning the religious and cultural traditions of newly arrived South Indians only to see a subsequent attempt aimed at purging the tradition. The pattern is clear: immigrations followed by assimilations and then attempted purifications. In general, it could be argued that the reason Sinhala Buddhist religious culture has survived for 2,500 years is more the result of its inclusive spirit, its ability to adapt and transform, rather than due to dogged adherence to the purity of doctrine. On the whole, the assimilations seem to have stuck. More specifically and to the point of the argument in this presentation is that during the contemporary period of ethnic strife, especially

³⁵ Though Dharmakirti seems to have been "imbued with Mahayana ideals," Godakumbura notes that "one also sees in him a profound hatred towards the Saivites who have been gaining power in the country and spreading their ways of life and religious practices." C.E. Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature* (Battaramulla, SL: Department of Cultural Affairs, 1955), pp. 91-92.

³⁶For instance, the scathing attacks of Vidagama Maitreya Thera on *brahmanical* practices during the Kotte period. See Ariyapala, *Society and Culture*, pp. 182-83.

since 1983, the old issue of Buddhists worshipping “Hindu” gods has arisen once more. As the civil war has unfolded, Sinhala public fears of potential Tamil political domination, founded or not, are surfacing in reactionary sections of the Sinhala community and being expressed sometimes in a xenophobic fashion.³⁷

As the government has tried to broker a peace deal by offering a devolution of power for the minority Tamil community, Sinhala communal and ethnic consciousness has been raised to almost a fever pitch among some sections of the Sinhalese community. There is a fear of being taken over, a fear of external domination.

The contemporary incarnation of the deity veneration issue has been rather dramatically brought to the general public’s attention by the monastic and charismatic sometime television personality, Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera. During the past several years, Ven. Soma has become one of the most popular and highly visible Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. Ven. Soma also writes his own newspaper column. His criticisms of government policies, and the political dynamics occurring between the government and the opposition party, are often witty and pointed. The rise in his stock has been meteoric as he brought the issue of deity veneration to center stage

In the process, Soma has made many controversial public statements on various issues. He has been continuously outspoken about how Muslims and Tamils do not practice birth control and, as an eventual result, how population demographics will lead to the inevitable domination of these communities over the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.³⁸ He has campaigned for the return of Buddhist temple lands distributed by the colonial British to Muslims around the sacred site of Dighavapi in the extreme southeast quadrant of the island, an area that has been for many centuries and remains today predominantly Muslim.³⁹ He has chided both the government and the opposition for being bankrupt in relation to the *pancasila* (the five cardinal moral principles of Buddhism), especially the policies of taxing alcohol and cigarettes which, he argues, gives the government an interest in promoting these vices.⁴⁰

Soma’s position in relation to deity veneration is usually couched first in doctrinal terms in an attempt to establish its veracity among his Buddhist listeners. Then he appeals to ethnic sentiments. Until recently, his fundamental position has been “that the idea of the gods is totally unacceptable to Buddhism.”⁴¹ But recently he has modified his position to distinguish between Buddhist conceptions and

³⁷ In the spring of 2000, a new Sinhala political party, Sinhala Urumaya, was founded to protect the interests of the Sinhalese community from being over run by the Tamils, Muslims and Christians. Buddhist monks have been deeply involved in the establishment of this new political party.

³⁸ Rajpal Abeyanayake, “He Cuts Down Gods, Real and Imagined,” *The Sunday Times*, January 17, 1999, p. 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, October 10, 1999, p. 6. In this interview, Ven. Soma charges that someone is hiding an inscription by King Saddhatissa which grants these lands to the Sinhalese temple. He says the land grant was last seen in the 1920s and that when it is rediscovered it will prove who really owns those lands.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, November 14, p. 15.

⁴¹ Ven. Soma, “Reflections...,” *The Sunday Times*, November 7, 1999, p. 14.

those of the other religions. Here is what he has said with my own commentary on Soma's statements interspersed:

Every other religion in the world is founded upon the belief that God created the world, that the world is composed of *nithya* (permanence), *sukha* (happiness) and *athma* (self) and that belief in God will help you.

It almost goes without saying that "every other religion" here is synonymous with Hindu thought.

According to Buddhism, if the gods possess power, that too was gained through *kamma* and can be changed by no being and therefore there was [sic] no powerful being.

The concept of gods in Buddhism teaches that there is no all powerful being. Gods are just another group of beings whose bodies are more beautiful, sensitive and radiant than human beings.

Ven. Soma is doctrinally correct in asserting the primacy of karmic retribution in Buddhist formulations of the gods. Indeed, Visnu gained his *bodhisattva* status on the road to buddhahood because of the perception that he had performed a fantastic number of good deeds to advance to his favorable rebirth as a god. What Soma frequently argues is that people should not depend upon the blessings of gods like Visnu when they are capable of solving their own problems. Indeed, Soma frequently laments that "pure Theravada Buddhism" is not practiced by most people in Sri Lanka. Rather, "what the Buddhists in Sri Lanka practice is a mixture, a concoction of Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity."⁴²

In addition to the self-help doctrine, Ven Soma often attempts to appeal to science and logic in his presentations. References of this nature help him in his personal appeal to an urbanized and educated professional constituency in the capital city of Colombo, a constituency which is quite understandably no longer able to identify very much with the residual traditional religious life of the village. For this group of Sinhala, Soma has styled himself congenially as the "modern monk" who has emerged from a tradition which has allowed itself to become embarrassedly immersed in superstition.

While Ven. Soma is also virulently anti-Christian and has clashed in a publicly televised debate with a leading Muslim MP and member of the government's cabinet, he and his fellow columnists at the *Sunday Times* newspaper save their most unsavory attacks and outlandish claims for Hindus and Hinduism. In the following piece,⁴³ the degree of Soma's understanding of the Hindu world view is self-evident. And so his motives as well.

Whenever a great son is born to humankind in India, it's a practice of the Hindus to call him a reincarnation [sic] of Vishnu--it's a tradition. For example, they say Sai Baba is a reincarnation [sic] of Vishnu. Now we know that Sai Baba is not an *avatharaya* (apparition) [sic!] and that he is a good man. . . The Hindus say that the Buddha is a

⁴² *Ibid.*, August 22, 1999, p. 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, January 17, 1999, p. 5.

reincarnation [sic] of Vishnu. Are we prepared to accept Buddha as a reincarnation [sic] of Vishnu? Not me! I know that the Buddha descended from a clan of Indian kings, he is no apparition or reincarnation. Even Sai Baba, if you touch him nicely, would not feel the touch as an apparition because he is a good man.

The Hindus know their religion is the polar opposite of Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha says the world is the result of causal phenomena, but the Hindus say Brahma created the world. So they don't try to match their religion with ours. In which case, why do Buddhists try to match Buddhism with theirs? . . .

When a Buddhist worships various imaginary gods [Visnu and Skandha] and other [Buddhistic] gods, he must be suffering from some mental condition! [parenthesis Soma's; brackets completely mine]

The political significance of this final sentence was not lost at the time it was written, for both the leader of the opposition and the current Deputy Ministry of Defense had just engaged in high profile activities in which they had declared that Sri Lanka could benefit from the assistance of the gods Skandha and Visnu respectively.

In early June of 1999, *The Sunday Times* (the independent newspaper that Soma frequently writes for) published a highly polemical expose⁴⁴ on plans to build a multi-religious complex, including a Visnu temple, just north of Colombo. Adversarial in strategy, style and substance, the expose identified the Deputy Minister of Defense, the Minister of Buddha Sasana and the President, among others, as backing the project which would require Rs. 600,000,000 (\$8,000,000) to complete.

Grasping at straws and blaming external factors for the war that is raging in Sri Lanka, the two ministers have made the extraordinary request for funds on the advice of some South Indian priests who say that a Vishnu temple in Tiruchirapalli has malefic effects on Sri Lanka.

But religious elders and businessmen who have been approached for funds feel the scheme is based on some religious belief or some attempt to blame the whole ethnic crisis on supernatural forces instead of facing reality and taking responsibility. . .

This temple, according to these priests, is facing Sri Lanka, thus casting evil effects. They believe it is largely responsible for the turmoil in the country.

The article goes on to state that a large Visnu image will be sea-freighted to Sri Lanka from South India at great expense and that the entire project is "shrouded in secrecy." Much space is then given to solicited reactions from the likes of Roman Catholic bishops, well-known Buddhist prelates and laymen in Colombo, etc., all of whom express their "shock and amazement" at how two cabinet ministers and the country's president could be heading a project based on "mere superstition." Two weeks later, *The Sunday Times* added Ven. Soma's reaction:

⁴⁴ Ruth Jansz, "Religious Star Wars," *The Sunday Times*, June 6, 1999.

It is imbecilic to construct a Hindu Kovil to deflect a curse on this island bestowed on it by Lord Vishnu.⁴⁵

I can not here detail the complicated truth of this matter as I uncovered it through my own interviews except to say that those sponsoring the project see the Visnu problem as one of *darsan*, that is, Visnu's benevolent view from India being blocked (and not one of sorcery), that the *Sunday Times* estimate of the project's cost is ten times its real estimate, and that the basic idea of the project's trustees is to build a multi-religious pilgrimage site containing a Christian church, Muslim mosque, and a Buddhist *vihara* in addition to the Visnu temple. What I uncovered in general has now been confirmed and published by the *India Today* magazine as well. The *Sunday Times* expose was but part of a politically inspired smear campaign.

Perhaps the most vituperative attack upon worshipping the gods, and Visnu in particular, occurred two months later, again in the *Sunday Times*, in a column by Soma's ardent well-wisher and colleague, Kumbakarana. The column was entitled: "Sanctioned by Religion, Killing Goes On."⁴⁶ The core paragraph recorded below speaks volumes for itself.

According to a dialogue between Krishna (Vishnu) and Arjuna, the taking of one's life and that of another is endorsed by religious belief. Under the Hindu concept of an unchanging soul transmigrating from life to life, death does not end life, and life does not end with death. Krishna tells Arjuna that there is no sin in taking one's own life. So suicide and killing others is justified by religion. Sections of the Defense authorities who are falling over each other to build Hindu kovils would do well to realize the newest sustenance of the Tiger killers is the Hindu atman concept. With great foresight, the LTTE is publicizing a video which shows Black Tigers performing Visnu pujas before their departure to kill their targets and themselves. The Christian missionaries supporting the LTTE and propogating their religion will soon meet the reincarnation of Vishnu, in the Wannu and the East.

Such a gross distortion of the *Bhagavad Gita's* teachings and the diabolical equation of Visnu with the Tamil militant leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran are symptomatic of the inflammatory rhetoric fueling the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka today. It also explicitly exposes why Sinhala Buddhists are being advised not to worship Visnu. For Visnu is now made to be seen as an element of the threatening alien Tamil Hindu force. He is seen as a god of the enemy.

Thus, the contemporary Sri Lankan controversy about worshipping the gods, Visnu in particular, is but the most recent manifestation of an enduring issue within the history of Buddhist religion. In the abstract, the problem would appear to be a classic doctrinal debate between those claiming purity in adherence to the Buddha's "original" teachings, and those who have assimilated popular aspects of South Asian religious culture. But as I have tried to demonstrate, abstract analyses, without benefit of historical analysis, can be incomplete if one is trying to ascertain what is driving the issue at hand. This

⁴⁵ Rajpal Abeynayake, "TV Demi-God and the Star-Crossed Leaders," *The Sunday Times*, June 20, p. 14.

⁴⁶ *The Sunday Times*, August 15, 1999, p. 15.

contemporary manifestation is driven by an ethos of exclusivity among some sections of the Sinhala Buddhist community, a section which has been made to believe its veritable future is under siege. It is less concerned about doctrine than it is with political and economic survival. That is, the catalyst for the current controversy is based on fears, real or not, experienced by a largely urban, educated, middle-class and “modern” segment of the Sinhala Buddhist community: precisely those who are the ardent supporters and share the religio-political views of Ven. Soma, the monastic leader who has argued that there is no sense in negotiating a settlement to the ethnic conflict. The only alternative is to fight a war to exterminate the enemy.

This ethos of exclusivity, a type of ethnic cleansing, embraced by this section of the Sinhala Buddhist community is not, however, indicative of the Sinhala community’s views in general. Over several months of field work at Visnu *devalayas* in Sri Lanka, I directly asked scores of *kapuralas* or shrine priests and lay devotees for their reactions to Ven. Soma’s views regarding the worship of gods, especially Visnu, in Buddhism. Responses to Ven. Soma’s position were uniformly very personal in character and varied from the polite to the agitated. Most said that worshipping the gods was a matter of personal religious discretion, part of the heritage of Sinhala religious culture, or that Lord Visnu protected the Buddhist *sasana*. More extreme responses included charges that Ven. Soma was a liar, really a Catholic sent to destroy Buddhism, and was not aware of the damage he was doing to Buddhism. These last were among the more visceral reactions. But perhaps the most thoughtful response was given by a *kapurala* at the Visnu *devalaya* in Kandy who said: “Ven. Soma doesn’t have a wife. He doesn’t have children. So he doesn’t have family. He doesn’t have property to look after, doesn’t need to worry about his food and seems to be in good health. If Ven. Soma had any of these problems, like the people who come to this *devalaya*, he would also come to worship Visnu Deviyo and to seek his help.”

While I have tried to make the case that the recent attack on the practise of Buddhists worshipping the gods has been driven by an ethos of exclusivity bred by ethnic and class consciousness, the *kapurala*’s response gives an existential clue as to why Sinhala Buddhists worship the gods. They don’t seem to do it for ethnic or political-economic reasons, yet these are the real reasons that they are being asked to stop. Rather, most of them do it to express some hope that the current existential problems they encounter might be recognized by someone, and that some compassionate force in the cosmos will respond to their entreaties for help. Ven. Soma persuasively argues that people ought to solve their own problems rather than laying them at the altar of gods. What he may have overlooked, and perhaps his monastic ancestors overlooked this to in earlier centuries, is that some people may not be in a position to solve their problems by themselves in rational, disciplined and “scientific” ways. In many circumstances, they may feel helpless to change their conditions. So they appeal to Visnu. Here are two examples of appeals for divine protection and assistance which indicate why the gods continue to have appeal among Sinhala Buddhists.

Many people making *pujas* in *devalayas* are seeking justice of one sort or another. It may be that neighbors are stealing coconuts, someone is practicing sorcery against them, or that a more powerful land owner has filed a court case against them. Any one living in Sri Lanka today knows that the police,

the politicians, the courts, and businessmen can often act in absolutely capricious ways. Justice is often elusive and no amount of self-effort or ethical diligence is going to change that. Visnu is particularly relevant in this context. Unlike other deities who exist on the lower rungs of the pantheon's hierarchy, Visnu is never invoked to undertake any actions which might be regarded as unethical. His *bodhisattva* status is not congruent with such behavior. He can only be petitioned to perform actions that are intrinsically good and ethically just. What he represents to those who call for his intervention is a hope for the existence of responsive justice in this world. Without this hope, or without gods who embody these hopes, existence can become a matter of dejection.

A second example is a direct answer to Ven. Soma's anti-Visnu campaign. Over months of field work at Visnu *devalayas* in upcountry Sri Lanka, many devotees made *pujas* to Visnu because their sons, brothers and husbands were currently serving in the government's security forces fighting the civil war with the LTTE. They are frightened and concerned for the safety of their loved ones and they have come for the obvious reason that they are seeking the protection of the gods, especially Visnu, the "minister of defense." Most of these devotees are not urban, educated and professional, because almost all the young men serving in Sri Lanka's armed forces are from the rural areas of the country. The matter is put bluntly by some who say that "village boys are fighting Colombo's war." In this context, it can then be seen that not only does Ven. Soma and his supporters want villagers to fight their war, but Soma also wants to relieve them of one sure source of their family's hopes that they will survive the carnage: that is, *santiya*, the protective blessing of Visnu, the protective god par excellence for Sinhala Buddhists.

Conclusion

Thus, in a study of the Hindu Buddha and the Buddhist Visnu, we find that in the former instance the Buddha was reclaimed as a *bhumiputra* precisely for political reasons at a time when all-Indian nationalists were making an inclusive appeal for unity; in the latter instance whether or not the Buddhist Visnu will retain his position in Sinhala Buddhist culture is dependent in part on who will win the current political war with the Sinhala Buddhist community itself: the spirits of traditional inclusivity or the contemporary advocates of exclusion.

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