

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 13 p. 1

Volume 13 • Number 1 • January 1989

Evangelical Review of Theology



WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission p. 3

But it also must be admitted that the ideals of evangelicalism need working out afresh for the contemporary situation. Thus 'wowsers' may have expressed a vital and necessary conviction about the ethical concerns of the day, but now evangelicalism must address itself to such intricate questions as bio-ethics and justice in a nuclear age. [p. 59](#) Similarly, it is not enough merely to assert the authority and sufficiency of Scripture; the significance of these affirmations must be articulated in relation to the questions of modern biblical scholarship and hermeneutics. Voluntarism is no longer expressed in terms of a protest against establishment and patronage, but needs to be examined in the light of leadership of the church in the 'global village' of the 20th. century and the place of spiritual gifts. Then there are moral issues that face Christians living in the 'lucky country', such as employment, industrial relations, wealth and poverty; Christian family life; the handling of leisure, recreation and entertainment.

To cope with such issues, theology is needed, and sophisticated skilful theology at that! Evangelicals should be relieved to hear this; but how should it be done in an Australian context? The deductive, rationalistic approach of traditional orthodoxy so well practised by evangelicals is foreign in a climate where you act first and then think about the meaning afterwards, if at all. It is equally foreign to an attitude that despises theory, principles and ideology (even in political concerns, to allude to a recent well-publicized prime ministerial utterance) and gives recognition only to practical issues and contemporary relevance. It is not immediately clear how this kind of thinking can be reconciled with a system like evangelicalism that takes as its starting point such a notion as the authority of Scripture, and in all its thinking makes allowances for the fallen state of humankind. And so it seems that the evangelical's love of theology turns out to be a considerable liability in communicating with Australia. But evangelicalism cannot compromise its beliefs in this area without destroying itself.

The key lies not in the theological arena alone, but also in the realm of the practical—which is also a classical evangelical strength, at least in principle. As a reform movement, evangelicalism has laid great stress upon the vital importance of genuine faith and authentic Christian living. In fact, this is what gave it meaning over against the nominalism and moral laxity of English Christianity in its early years. It was also a major 'plus' in colonial Australia, although often misunderstood and mis-handled. It will also be the secret of communication with modern Australia.

As history has demonstrated, when Christians of any persuasion live out the radical demands of Christian faith in integrity and spiritual power, there is no shortage of inquirers. Evangelicals in Australia need to re-learn this lesson. If their faith still has the meaning they profess, let that meaning be demonstrated in daily life with greater strength of personal character and integrity, with a better apologetic for the faith [p. 60](#) in the 20th. and 21st. century and with deeper compassion and greater commitment to the real lives of men and women in this world. When this occurs, there will be many opportunities to explain the 'reason for the hope that lies in us' as people feel compelled to search after the secret of such moral and spiritual power. In this way, the future of Australia's evangelical heritage will not only be assured but will prove to be the benefit we all believe it is, under God's good hand. [p. 61](#)

The Church amidst suffering in Sri Lanka

Charles R. A. Hoole

Printed with permission

The following article reached our office some months ago before the present truce, and so needs a slight updating. The Christian population is 7.8% of the total Sri Lankan population of about 15.5 million. 67.4% are Buddhists (all Sinhalese), 17.6% are Hindus (all Tamils), 7.1% are Muslims (Tamil-speaking Moors), 6.4% are Catholics and 1.4% are Protestants. 93.5% of the Sinhalese are Buddhists and 6.5% are Catholics or Protestants. Of the Tamils, 81% are Hindus and the rest Catholics or Protestants.

Editor

RELIGIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Contrary to what the tourist advertisements claim, Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) was not known as a paradise island in earlier times. Sadly, it has now become an island smeared in blood. The situation is grim in the Tamil-dominated north of the island. The declaration of a 'no-man's land' from Mannar to Mulaitivu, including 'free fire' zones, has brought life virtually to a standstill. Even the sea has been declared out of bounds, affecting the livelihood of 25,000 fishermen.

The growing crisis in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the assimilationist ambitions of Sinhalese nationalism. A deliberate policy of assimilation is being pursued by successive Sinhalese governments not only against ethnic minorities—the Tamils and the Moors—but also against religious minorities—the Hindus, Muslims and Christians. This has been combined with the policy affirmation that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist nation, which by definition means a *Sinhalese* Buddhist nation. Today in Sri Lanka the term 'Buddhist' implies 'Sinhalese', and these two cultural labels are constituent elements of a single identity. Although all Sinhalese are not Buddhist, all Buddhists in Sri Lanka are Sinhalese.

Sinhalese self-perception and the resultant attitudes towards national minorities have been shaped by legends or historical myths found in the sacred Chronicles of the Sinhalese, the *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa*, as well as literary works of the 13th. century. These mythical discourses are not devoid of historical facts. However, as myths, they are only overstatements about reality.

The mythical claim that the island belongs to the Sinhalese is not [p. 62](#) open to either debate or verification. The crux of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict is over this claim. A Sinhalese prose work of the 13th. century echoes this sentiment:

This island of Lanka belongs to the Buddha himself; it is like a treasury filled with Three Gems. Therefore the residence of wrong believers in this island will never be permanent, just as the residence of *Yaksas* [demons] of old was not permanent.

The *Mahavamsa*, which records the sacred history of the Sinhalese people, repeatedly confirms this claim. The Buddha, states the chronicle, visited Sri Lanka three times, flying through the air from India, and implanted his footprint at the top of the highest mountain *Sri Pada* (Adam's Peak). Prince Vijaya, grandson of a lion and a princess, and the legendary founder of the Sinhalese race, landed in Lanka on the precise day the Buddha passed away, but not before the Buddha had designated Lanka the chosen place where his religion would be established, entrusting it to the protection of the king of the gods. In this way, the chronicle vests the origin myth with a religious significance. Even more important is the assertion in the chronicle that Buddha just before his death summoned Sakka, the king of the gods, and the divine protector of the *Sasana* (The Universal Buddhist Church), and

instructed him, 'Vijaya, son of Sinhabahu, is come to Lanka ... together with 700 followers. In Lanka, O Lord of Gods, will my religion be established; therefore carefully protect him with his followers and Lanka.' By such injunctions of the master, the chronicler represents the legendary founder and his descendants the Sinhalese—as a chosen people with a unique mission: to preserve Buddhism in its pristine purity and to make its light shine out to the world.

This basic myth is the psychological foundation of Sinhalese Buddhist civilization. The national myth of Buddhist reconquest is one such facet of the basic myth. It addresses a specific problem—the problem of unbelievers—that has threatened the existence of the Sinhalese civilization ever since its foundation. Yet it maintains its connections with the basic myth by revealing the deep significance of the civilization. It lends the basic myth a brilliance, colour and a resurgence of vitality.

The myth of reconquest is embodied in the story of Dutthagamani, who to this day is regarded as the greatest national hero of the Sinhalese people. A respected Sinhalese scholar, Gananath Obeyesekere states:

The mythic significance of Dutugemunu as the saviour of the Sinhalese race and of Buddhism grew through the years and developed into one of the p. 63 most important myths of the Sinhalese ready to be used as a powerful instrument of Sinhalese nationalism in modern times.

From a Sinhalese Buddhist point of view, Sri Lanka is a sacred isle, designated as a *dhamma dipa*, the land of the Buddha's doctrine. The present crisis and the Sinhalese government's campaign in the North may be described as a dramatic twentieth century re-enactment of the Buddhist reconquest. Twenty-two centuries ago Dutthagamani, a young prince launched his Buddhist reconquest against a Hindu Tamil army with the war-cry 'Not for the kingdom but for Buddhism'. In the handle of his spear, which served as the royal sceptre, he placed a Buddhist relic. Then Dutthagamani secured 500 monks to march with his army; the sight of the yellow, he explained, would bring blessing and protection to the warriors. After defeating the Tamils, thus reuniting Sri Lanka under one royal umbrella, the chronicle claims that Dutthagamani was in remorse over the lives lost in war.

He thus addressed eight *arahantas* [Buddhist saints]: 'How shall there be any comfort for me, O venerable sirs, since by me was caused the slaughter of a host numbering millions?'. The *arahantas* replied, 'From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings were slain by thee O Lord of men.... Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest.'

Today clerical support is no less important in the campaign against the Tamils; and the expanding Sinhalese frontiers are marked by the erection of Buddhist images and edifices. (Tamil churches too have become a target in the campaign. I personally witnessed the destruction of a Tamil church by cannon fire in April, 1984).

As in the past, political religion plays a dominant role in the self-perception of the Sinhalese, and the revitalized religious myths motivate government policy towards religious minorities. Contrary to expectations, the process of secularization has not weakened religion. Socio-economic changes did lead to a loosening, if not disintegration, of local identities of family, kinship, caste, region and the ideologies of values that centred on those identities. But the weakening of these identities enhanced the individual's commitment to the all-inclusive religious identity. It is now the religious identity revitalized and reinforced by myths which gives meaning and coherence to the individual existence. Today every issue, be it economic or social or anything else, is settled within the parameters of such theocratic polity.

In spite of these advances, the Buddhist reconquest is far from complete. The campaign in the north shows that there are important [p. 64](#) objectives still unrealized. A conscious deliberate policy of assimilation generally brings about an opposite reaction. From 1956 there has taken place a drawing together of ranks among all segments of Tamil society, for they have a shared historical experience, a continuous linguistic and cultural tradition, a common way of life and a defined territory as homeland. In addition to the Tamils and the Moors, the Sinhalese Buddhists will have to deal with the Sinhalese Christians. Until recently there were a large number of Marxists who had rejected their Sinhalese identity, but these have now reverted back to it having betrayed the truly poor. The sight of a leading Marxist doing *puja* (worship) at the Dalada Maligawa shortly after the general elections of 1970 was an example of this. Here, it is not so much a matter of a secularization process as of its opposite!

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

The position of Sinhalese Christians is still ambiguous. Sinhalese Buddhists today perceive the Sinhalese Christians as not only non-Buddhists, but also in a sense as non-Sinhalese; which makes them appear as aliens, like other minorities. Their presence poses a serious identity crisis for the Sinhalese. The introduction of Christianity caused a major split in the old identity, for the historic equation of 'Sinhalese = Buddhist' ceased to have the kind of universal validity it once had. It split into contrasting sets: Sinhalese Buddhist versus Sinhalese Catholic, Sinhalese Buddhist versus Sinhalese Protestant. According to one myth, a new Sinhalese hero *Diyasena* will arise, kill all Christians and re-establish the glory of *Buddha sasana*. But this attitude has changed since independence. To affirm their Sinhalese identity, Christians have adopted national dress for their services, have taken up Sinhalese (but not strictly Buddhist) calendrical rituals like New Year, and in many ways have implicitly recognized Buddhism as the dominant religion. The cultural markers that distinguish Sinhalese Buddhists from Sinhalese Christians have to some extent been evened out. So the Sinhalese Christians are no longer regarded as aliens; but their status remains ambiguous. My personal view is that those Sinhalese churches which are vigorously evangelistic, that take up the cause of the oppressed minorities, will continue to remain in a state of conflict with Sinhalese Buddhists, because such actions are opposed to Buddhist interests and will raise questions about Sri Lanka's status as a Sinhalese Buddhist nation. At least *some* churches are nevertheless likely to move further towards accepting an all-inclusive Sinhalese Buddhist identity, giving recognition to Buddhism as a civil religion. In [P. 65](#) return they may be tolerated in continuing with their peculiar cultic practices—a position similar to that of the Syrian Christians in pre-modern Hindu India.

FEAR NOT, LITTLE FLOCK ...

The so-called 'resurgent' Buddhism is spiritually bankrupt, a spent force, and that will in the end seal its fate. Sri Lankan experiences show that Buddhist teaching on non-violence combined with abstract values such as *karuna* (compassion), *metta* (loving kindness), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekka* (even-mindedness) is far removed from the Buddhist ethical way of life. The abstract ideas of Buddhism live in a world of their own. Westerners frequently make the mistake of evaluating Buddhism solely on the basis of its ideology; Buddhism is primarily a way of life. Jesus Christ said, 'You will know them by their fruits' ([Matt. 7:20-24](#)). Sri Lanka is desperately in need of Christ and his gospel. Both in the south

and in the north of the country, in very different ways, the value of life is rapidly depreciating.

The church in Sri Lanka is responding to these needs. The largely nominal church has been going through a period of renewal. It may be seen as God's preparation for a time such as this. The 'forces of chaos' are undoubtedly at work, as never before, leaving behind a trail of death, destruction and despair. Yet the one who is greater, who defeated the powers ([Col. 2:15](#)) is also at work, saving and building. Out of the ruins and desolation God is building his church on the unshakable rock ([Is. 28:16](#)). p. 66

The Renewal of the Church

Klaas Runia

Printed with permission

I am sure it will not be necessary to deal extensively with the *reasons why we need a spiritual renewal of our churches*. In a Dutch doctoral thesis I read the following illustration: 'The future of God in the Netherlands evokes the image of a camping-ground in the autumn. In the green pasture there are still a few trends, on the edge there are a few immovable site caravans. Here and there is a car with a foreign number plate. There is a lonely boy carrying a rucksack and looking for the Manager. The latter gives him a searching glance and asks: For how long?'¹ It is a splendid but also a shocking picture. There are still a few tents, a few churches, but they do not mean much any more; they are only 'tents'. There are a few immovable site caravans, a few old-fashioned chapels that did not move along with the times. There are a few cars with foreign number plates, a few sects that came from across the Atlantic Ocean or from the Far East. There is a lonely boy with a rucksack, the image of young people who are still looking for God (the Manager—with a Capital M!), but he has little faith in their search and therefore asks: 'For how long?'.

I believe this picture of Holland applies to other Western European countries as well. In West Germany church attendance has dropped from 7% in 1968 to 4% in 1983. Among young people it has even dropped from 9% to 2%! In the big cities it is still worse: not even 1%. Since 1970 some two million people have officially broken with the EKD (the Evangelical Church in Germany). In Great Britain, in the seventies, a million people stopped going to the church. In the same period a thousand church buildings were closed and the number of clergymen dropped by 2500. In the last thirty years the Free Churches lost 700,000 members.

Particularly alarming is the fact that so many young people drop out. The churches seem to be completely losing their grip on their future members. And this dropping out of the young people does not happen only in families that are on the edge of the church, but also in families that are actively participating in church life. There is hardly any church family nowadays that does not experience the sad fact that one or p. 67 more children do not show any interest in the church and in the Christian faith. Apparently secularization

¹ Paul Schnabel, *Tussen Stigma en charisma. Nieuwe religieuze bewegingen en geestelijke volksgezondheid*, 1982, 186.