

DISSECTING BUDDHISM

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BUDDHISM BETRAYED? RELIGION, POLITICS, AND VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA by Stanley J. Tambiah, with a foreword by Lal Jayawardena, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London. pp.203, 1992.

Buddhism *Betrayed?* is a masterly follow-up to Tambiah's earlier work on ethnic violence in his homeland - *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. The new book expands previous arguments but concentrates on the issue of Buddhist ideology in the conflict. He eschews a common Western view of Buddhism, a purist one founded on the nineteenth century researches of Western Pali scholars, which presented a rarefied Buddhism somehow separate from the political and social pragmatics of everyday life. He correctly dismisses a largely Western surprise that a religion which stresses non-violence should be involved in political violence. This is an idealism which refuses its own history, divorces the formation of ideas from within historical practices, and fails to realize that ideas only have force through the relations and structures of social existence and practice.

Tambiah addresses three main concerns. The first relates to shifts in Buddhist ideology and interpretation from the early nationalist period (from the later British colonial period to 1960) to later transformations of nationalism (the post 1977 period which has seen the greatest escalation of inter and intra ethnic violence). His second, closely related, interest is with the changes in the organization of the Buddhist clergy in connection with nationalist issues and with the growing complexity of their involvement within and resistance to local and state politics. Tambiah's thesis is upon the question of the historical continuity of Sinhala ethnic identity and antagonism to the Tamil minority which also involves a discussion of conceptions of power and modes of political integration among the Sinhalese that might be traceable to the past. Tambiah's careful investigation of these issues extends an understanding of the violent crisis that is consuming Sri Lanka.

Tambiah examines aspects of the Buddhist revival and the development of so-called Protestant Buddhism in the last century focussing on the years up to and immediately

after independence. He presents the largely legitimate claims of major Sinhalese interpreters that Buddhism had been disadvantaged, relative to other religious interest groups and especially Christian, during British rule. The key texts which Tambiah explores were influential in changes which gave Buddhism and Sinhalese culture and language a greater role in the institutional apparatuses, particularly educational, controlled by the State. They were vital in a re-examination of the role of Buddhism in pre-colonial Sri Lanka and supported the active role of monks in politics, a role which the authors of the texts said that the British rulers had undermined.

There is little doubt that monks have been active in politics, sometimes violently so, in the course of Sri Lanka's history. What Tambiah demonstrates is that the current activity of the monks is not a mere extension or re-enlivening of their past role but produced and shaped in the political dynamics of the modern state. Tambiah describes how the Buddhist clergy were an important source of popular support for the political parties, particularly those in the left coalition following Independence. They shed much of their marxist clothing and quickly revealed powerful chauvinist and populist tendencies providing a major pressure on all governments. The political activity of the monks declined momentarily after the assassination of Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1958, perhaps because of the disrepute that befell the clergy following their implication in the murder.

Tambiah suggests a distinction between the nationalism and ethnic tension of the immediate post independence period and the nationalism and violence which has consumed the country since 1977. Indeed, after the anti-Tamil riots of 1958 ethnic tensions subsided for some seventeen years. Tambiah speculates that this may have been because many of the Sinhalese nationalist feelings of injustice hitherto expressed had been redressed. However, the bloody Sinhalese youth uprising of the JVP in 1971 (precursor of the far more violent revolt of the late eighties early nineties) indicates that populist nationalist feeling was still running high. This movement was also one in which monks took an active part. Observations like

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this do not undermine Tambiah's thesis that the turmoil of post-1977 correspondents with shifts in nationalist ideological emphasis and vital organizational and structural changes in the political and economic order of the state.

As far as Buddhist ideology and the participation of the monks is concerned Tambiah asserts that the current period, vis a vis earlier nationalist developments stemming from the Buddhist Revival, manifests a reduction in concern for the doctrinal and ethical aspects of Buddhism and an intensification of monk participation in the political process, the organizational structure of the monkhood following the complexities of the infrastructures of political parties. To put it another way, religious institutions became dominated and subsumed in the political; they become an energy in the multiple directions of power and much-reduced as a constraint on its excesses. This is evidence in the increasingly violent practice of monks whereby the often murderous factionalism of the political party process is a feature of life in the temple.

Recent nationalist ideological developments among Sinhalese are becoming much stronger than before in rejecting foreign and especially Western values. Tambiah looks at some of the Buddhist models for the reshaping of political society in Sri Lanka. He discusses the notions of Buddhist democracy that are being advanced. He is critical of them arguing that there is little place in their vision for ethnic minorities. Such ideological developments are consistent, Tambiah considers, with a deepening of a romantic imaginary (often of the noble peasant kind) which supports nationalist notions of the Sinhalese as a homogenous collectivity. These developments exacerbate the present conflict and make resolution all the more difficult.

Tambiah's discussion of debates on democracy in the Sri Lankan context have implications for debates going on elsewhere, not the least in Europe. Many of the ideological directions that Tambiah describes for Sri Lanka especially redefinitions and interpretations of what constitutes appropriate democratic process refract, in my view, similar compromising and potentially dangerous processes going on in other parts of the world.

The volume concludes on issues relating to the historical depth of Sinhalese ethnic consciousness and the force of the past in the present. These are not just intellectual concerns but matters of import in the ethnic conflict and internal to its discourse. Intellectuals, usually members of the powerful elites and struggling fractions of urban and rural bourgeoisie, have great influence in the political course of Sri Lanka and they are divided, often bitterly, over such issues. Given this context Tambiah makes a courageous move in giving scholarly weight to the view, increasingly unpopular in many Sinhalese circles, that a

Sinhala ethnic consciousness is a comparatively recent phenomenon (possibly taking form round about the 12th century C.E.). It is not primordial, present at the very start of a Sinhalese presence on the island. Tambiah goes further to argue that there was no necessary enduring or firm Sinhala/Tamil opposition before the final British takeover with the conquest of Kandy in 1815. The last kings of Kandy and of independent Sinhalese were Tamil of the Nayakkar line. Tambiah's deconstruction of the relevant texts indicates (contra the nationalistic interpretations of some Sinhalese scholars) that such opposition to these kings as did develop was not born of ethnic hostility but of more complex and grounded lineage and intra-lineage fractious antagonism. This is so even where the metaphors of the conflict were ethnic which disguise roots to the conflict other than ethnic. The scandal of the betrayal of the last king of Kandy to the British was, in part, the outcome of a power struggle among competing lineages.

Tambiah's point is powerful and is reinforced by anthropological evidence collected elsewhere in the world. The import of ethnic identity and of its assertions of historically and culturally constructed difference for the constitution and shaping of the character of social and political relations emerges in situations of social distance (see e.g. the path-breaking work of Gluckman, Mitchell and Epstein on Central Africa in the 1950's). Ethnicity or the significance of ethnic identity is stimulated under the conditions of colonial and post-colonial industrialization and urbanization and, too, in the development of the bureaucratic order of the modern state. The modern state and its political and economic structural circumstances is entirely different from pre-colonial polities. It follows that the place of ethnic consciousness in the processes of the formations of pre-colonial systems were distinct and that the present is not reducible to them.

Tambiah shows that the pre-colonial state in Sri Lanka functioned along the lines of an incorporative ideology whereby waves of immigrants to the island over the centuries from South India (many of whom now staunchly declare themselves to be anti-Tamil Sinhalese nationalists) were brought within the cultural order of the state. In this process difference was changed from being potentially conflictual and oppositional to being consistent and integral within a unifying state order.

At the very least Tambiah's argument is likely to be resisted by some within Sri Lanka who are ideologically committed to a reverse interpretation. In my own opinion continuing disagreement is exacerbated by a global discourse on ethnicity which attaches explanation and understanding to the concept and consciousness of identity *per se*; which give analytical weight to oppositional principles of identity over and against notions of interrelation and structure. This concentration on identity,



even the fetishizing of it, often in combination with the implication that it is the source of social and political relations, rather than the other way around (identity is constituted and emergent in particular political and economic processes), is an outgrowth, I suggest, of comparatively recent historical global changes or transformations. Continual argument which focusses on such abstractions as identity and identity consciousness without a thorough attention to the ground, structures and relations wherein they derive their import maintains discourse at a level at which it cannot be resolved. The insistence on such discourse may be potentially dangerous, as in Sri Lanka, for it yields to identity and authenticity and a legitimating power which it does not have. Tambiah's deconstruction and exploration of the conditions of ethnic identity and consciousness is a move to break out of the vicious circle.

Tambiah concludes this work through a dialogue with some of the arguments on Sinhala nationalist ideology which I presented in my *Legends of People, Myths of State* (1988). There I confined myself to exploring the political ideological use being made of the ancient chronicles by the agents of the modern state and their popular appeal as a function of their doxic or what I called their ontological resonance. I used the term 'ontology' not in the sense of fundamental and immutable being (which was the sense that some of my critics assumed) but as a 'logic' of orientation which could underpin a variety of ideological interpretations. Such a logic, which I suggested was capable of numerous even contradictory meanings being placed upon it, facilitated what could be termed a process of metaphoric transfer whereby meanings established in one sphere of relations could be moved into another sphere conditioned in completely different circumstances. I developed the notion to understand how people could experience and interpret their current historical situation as continuous with the past when, in fact, it wasn't. In other words how the meanings of ancient texts could appear sensible in the present, and vice versa, giving passion and shape, though not the cause, to some of the violence.

Tambiah (p.178) queries that I seem to be having it both ways conflating past processes of the cosmic state with the present dynamics of mass nation-state politics. My point was not that the ancient meanings of the past con-

tinued into the present. Rather that old ideas carried in the ancient chronicles used by nationalists achieved original meaning in the contemporary context. They had appeal through their hierarchical ontology which enabled them to gain force and sense in other practices of widely different import and meaning but sharing, in their structural process, a similar ontology. The metaphors of the past are tropes, their meaning changed within present contexts and, also, changing the orientation of some Sinhalese to their understanding of their everyday experiences. In my view the ideological processes of nationalism in Sri Lanka are not reducible to a Sinhalese past. It is the imagination of the past, something far different from what the past might in actuality have been, upon which I focussed. My concern was to investigate the dimensions of one imaginary, a current nationalist selection of particular events described in the ancient chronicles, and the parameters of its potency in the contemporary context.

The importance of Tambiah's discussion is that he identifies a number of ideological orientations arising in reinterpretations of the past, and not just the one I discussed. Tambiah also indicates more positive possibilities in the interpretation of the past and that there are pathways out of the current situation.

This work is a mine of information. It is accessible to the general reader and in a way, all too rare, which does not compromise scholarship. Tambiah's discussions of the ideological and organization changes affecting the Buddhist monkhood is of general importance. He expands an understanding of the dreadful situation in Sri Lanka. It is a courageous study for the work of scholars is willy nilly caught up in the politics of Sri Lanka and Tambiah's study is likely to be criticised by those whose commitments are the subject of Tambiah's carefully reasoned discussion. His work contrasts with so much critical work in anthropology which these days is often safely positioned at considerable historical distance from the subject addressed. Tambiah explores a major contemporary issue in a way which is illuminating for the study of similar political processes elsewhere. The book should be read by all those concerned by modern global developments and who are interested in the contribution that anthropologists can make towards their understanding.

What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend it ceases to exist. Without the freedom to challenge, even to satirize all orthodoxies including religious orthodoxies; it ceases to exist.

Salman Rushdie