

Neoliberal shifts and strategies of religious adaptation in post-war Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Neoliberal shifts have brought about a centring of market logics and a new focus on the individual as consumer. Some religious groups are better able to adapt to these shifts than others, which reveals the changing role of religion in people's daily lives. This article explores how the adaptive strategies of religious groups in response to neoliberalisation can trigger a reimagining of the role and value of religion in/to society. I illustrate these ideas through a comparative exploration of the way Buddhist élites and evangelical Christians engage with theology, tradition, and the market in Sri Lanka. While Buddhist élites struggle to overcome a sense of disjuncture in the way Buddhist principles relate to the market, evangelicals have always been more integrationist in their approach. Comparing these approaches reveals the extent to which neoliberalisation shapes the (trans)boundary modernities of religious leaders seeking to make the most of opportunities for expansion in post-war Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Neoliberalisation, religious adaptation, Buddhism, evangelical Christianity, Sri Lanka

Introduction

While religion is always adapting to the needs of society and the demands of the world, the capacity to adapt is not uniform across religious traditions. Difference stems from the extent to which religious groups are willing to evolve, or even deviate from, the category of 'religion' to suit contemporary circumstances. In turn, the capacity to adapt ensures that the "incompatibility" (Obeyesekere 1977, 377) of belief with secular modernity is not reified but overcome. Accordingly, this article explores the premise that neoliberalisation—and the associated embedding of market logics throughout daily life—has become an important driver of religious adaptation. It argues that the capacity for religion to adapt to the market can reconfigure the terms by which religious groups engage with, and express agency through, the lives of the pious. I illustrate these ideas through an empirical exploration of the adaptive strategies of Buddhist élites and evangelical Christian groups in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, recent decades have witnessed the transformation and splintering of Sri Lankan Buddhism along political lines

As monks have adapted to the evolving political milieu by becoming embedded within local and state politics, so, too, do they remain largely distinct from the livelihoods, struggles, and aspirations of Buddhist laypeople (Tambiah 1992, 66; Abeyesekere 2012, 211). On the other hand, evangelical Christian groups have long been depicted as a ‘threat’ to Sri Lanka’s Buddhist society, yet so, too, have they embraced neoliberalisation in ways that reveal the beneficial effects of adaptation on the working lives of Christians. This is particularly true in the post-war epoch, which is defined by a new era of neoliberalisation that favours groups that help laypeople respond to the opportunities and challenges associated with rapid socio-economic change.

By exploring the neoliberal drivers of religious adaptation, this article engages with broader debates concerning the interplay between religion and the market. Of these, most pertinent is a recent flurry of scholarship that seeks to “illuminate the economic life of Buddhism and the diverse modalities of Buddhism and economic relations” (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2017, 1; see also Borup 2019; Schedneck 2019). This scholarship explores the idea that, despite being known for its otherworldly renunciations, Buddhism is a religion that has always been rooted in the economy. While these developments are to be lauded, two areas require further exploration. The first is the need for comparative understandings that pit the ways in which one religion engages with economic life *against* or otherwise *relative to* another. Doing so will both validate, but also complicate, the economic valence of Buddhism. It will demonstrate how these underpinnings might be less effectively resonant than, or otherwise different from, those that underpin *other* religious traditions. This is particularly important in Sri Lanka, where Buddhism and (evangelical) Christianity have long been distinguished along majority/Sri Lankan and minority/foreign lines, causing the former to be construed as socio-culturally integrated, the latter as distinct. Comparing the extent of economic engagement reverses this position and reveals how economic life as a basis for religious engagement with society has become a driver of contemporary religious vitality. The second is the need to recognize the fact that ‘the economic’ is not a distinct system but implicated in broader processes of marketisation that are driving the neoliberalisation of daily life. Thus, while the embrace of a neoliberal ethic reveals the capacity of religious groups to adapt to market conditions, the wide-ranging effects of neoliberalisation require closer attention.

Three sections follow. The first provides a comparative overview of theoretical debates concerning religion and the market in the Christian and Buddhist traditions. The second provides an overview of the ‘first wave’ of Sri Lanka’s neoliberal transition—from 1977 to 2009—and its effects on religion. The third draws on qualitative data to explore how the ‘second wave’ of neoliberalisation—since 2009—has set the terms of religious

adaptation in post-war Sri Lanka and poses challenges to Buddhist élites, but opportunities for evangelical Christians.

Religion and the market across time, space, and tradition

The influence of secular modernity has caused religion to become more relationally construed. No longer can religious life be seen as separate or distinct from daily life; rather, it is intimately, although sometimes subtly, implicated within it. Similarly, no longer can different religious traditions be seen in distinct terms; rather, they are in competition with each other to adapt to the changing needs of society in ways that go *beyond* the ostensibly ‘religious’ domain. Thus, while “the very words ‘modernity’ and ‘modernization’ often imply society’s temporal movement away from the regressive mire of the sanctities of tradition, kinship, and enchanted sacred life” (Jazeel 2013, 10), so, too, can these ‘movements away’ continue to be shaped by, and contain traces of, the sacred. Nowhere is this truer than in South and Southeast Asia, where religion has been marketised in response to the social problems that are a corollary of modernisation (Woods 2018a, 250). Marketisation not only manifests as close(r) relationships with the everyday economic realities of survival and thriving, but also reflects the integration of a neoliberal ethic into ever more aspects of ‘religious’ life. While these assertions are not necessarily new, the idea that religious differences are increasingly indexed to, and even relativised by, the strategies by which groups adapt to the forces of neoliberalisation is. The two subsections that follow review existing scholarship concerning the relationships between Christianity and Buddhism and the market, the aim being to draw out the distinctions between each worldview and their evolution over time.

The Protestant Ethic in a neoliberal age

For many years now, the relationship between religion and the market has attracted scholarly attention and debate. Originally and most famously associated with the work of Max Weber ([1905] 1992) in his articulation of *The Protestant Ethic*, theorisation of this relationship continues to be defined by the idiosyncrasies of the European Christian tradition. Weber’s intervention considers how religion might shape economic activity in general and engagements with specific types of industries and business activities therein. His notion of the ‘Protestant ethic’ manifested in Enlightenment Europe as “rational ascetic acts” that came to be a “central catalyst for a capitalist ethic and for entrepreneurial activity with an ‘ethical fitness’ and ‘non-dualistic economic ethic’ (with no differentiation between monk and lay)” (Borup 2019, 50). Ironically perhaps, the Protestant ethic can be interpreted as the forebear of secular modernity and the secularisation of

Europe that followed. Despite offering foundational insight into the mutually constitutive relationship between religion and the market, Weber's ideas have since been developed, challenged, and in some cases rejected. In this vein, Jeaney Yip and Susan Ainsworth observe that the sense of distinction between the church and the market that underpins *The Protestant Ethic* does in fact “reflect a broader normative dichotomy in Western societies between the sacred and the secular or profane that persists despite its historical inaccuracy” (2016, 444). Challenges like this bring to light the restrictive ontological frame through which *The Protestant Ethic* has been conceptualised.

Over time, understandings of the relationship between Christianity and the market have evolved in response to broader shifts in the economic ordering and rationalisation of the world. Neoliberalisation has brought about a centring of market logics as an organising principle for socio-spatial interaction. Associated with the deregulation of markets, the opening of borders, and the shift towards individual liberty, privatisation, and accumulation, neoliberalism can be understood as both the “political rationality” and the “governing technology” (Yip and Ainsworth 2015, 240) of the contemporary world. Importantly, this rationality is not limited to the economic domains of business, trade, and industry: it is pervasive. It has come to shape the worldviews of many, “as enterprising, self-reliant subjects continually seeking self-improvement and as consumers exercising personal freedom and taking responsibility for the calculating choices they make from the many on offer” (ibid). The centring of market logics has brought about a new focus on the individual as consumer. This has important ramifications for religion in a neoliberal age. Not only can individuals be seen to exercise greater choice over what religion they identify with, and what sort of religious products and services they consume, but so, too, has it caused religious groups to adapt their offerings to suit the neoliberal religious consumer. This dynamic is pronounced in Asia, where the religious–secular dichotomy challenged above is less prevalent. In Singapore, for example, Terence Chong (2015, 217, 215) demonstrates that “seamlessly” integrating spiritual meaning with a market logic enables mega-churches to “appeal to young economically mobile Singaporeans”. Indeed, the extent to which religious groups can adapt to neoliberalisation by repurposing religious traditions in ways that appeal to the market can be seen to define “postsecular” religious expression (Gomez, Hunt, and Roxborough 2015, 153).

The ‘Buddhist ethic’ of merit, karma, and exchange

The inter-relationships between merit, *karma*, and the market underpin normative understandings of what a ‘Buddhist ethic’ entails. These understandings typically focus on the cosmological economy of accumulating, giving, and receiving merit. Buddhist value exchanges draw on

the three principles of the cycle of rebirth (*karma*), the idea of the gift or donation (*dana*), and the accumulation of merit (*punya*). Altogether, these principles form the central mode of economic exchange between the *sangha* (the Buddhist monastic community) and the laity. Historically, they have helped “to secure social bonds and, through a network of mutual obligations, institutional stability”, which reveals the extent to which “no monastic system can exist without the backup of the laity, and lay donors from different strata of society” (Borup 2019, 53). By virtue of housing monks who dedicate their days to the accumulation of merit, temples become the engines of merit production and exchange. Importantly, this system of exchange is imbalanced insofar as, while the laity provide the *sangha* with food, donations, and other material goods, in return they receive the immaterial gifts of blessings and *punya*. The local community of laypeople therefore provides the material basis of the Buddhist monastic institution, while the monastic institution takes care of the spiritual needs of the laypeople. Merit links the spiritual economy of the temple to the market economy of everyday life; it is “so desirable as an exchange commodity because it is believed to guard against a bad rebirth for oneself or others as well as leading to this-worldly benefits” (Schedneck 2019, 40). Taking these ideas into consideration, monks are, out of necessity, engaged in economic life; moreover, their socio-economic value rests on the trading of spiritual goods and services with the laity.

The markets through which Buddhism has traditionally traded have, however, been disrupted by the modernisation of Asian societies, thus forcing Buddhist adaptation. Often, the spiritual value of the temple has waned in line with the encroachment of alternative systems of value creation and exchange. This has forced the boundaries formed by temples—between the spiritual and material marketplaces, monks and laity, this life and the *next* life—to be redrawn. Buddhism has, in other words, had to respond to the effects of the neoliberalisation of religion—evinced in the shift towards the consumer—to prove its ability to adapt to the changing material and spiritual needs of the world. Evidence of adaptation abounds. In Thailand, for example, amulets have been shown to create a “sacred economy” that has, over many years, morphed into a “powerful economic tool that benefits tens of thousands of mostly poor or middle-class small business owners, craftspeople, and lay communities operating monasteries” (McDaniel 2015, 401). Creating these marketplaces for sacred goods and services—whether amulets, *pirit* threads (a white piece of string that has been chanted over by monks and is tied around the wrist to signal protection), talismans or funeral rites—can be seen to create a micro-economy centred on the temple and the monks therein. Yet, while religion is constantly evolving its traditions and practices to remain relevant to society, under conditions of religious pluralism, these evolutions must always be understood *in relation to* those of

other competing religions. Doing so reveals the strategic overlaps between competing religions and the reimagination of what ‘religion’ is, or might be, to people. These ideas find resonance in Sri Lanka, where recent decades have brought about a series of neoliberal shifts and a reimagination of Buddhism in response. I now consider these shifts in more detail and how they have driven religious adaptation.

Redrawing the boundaries of religion in neoliberalising Sri Lanka

The evolution of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is closely associated with the country’s economic reforms. These reforms have ushered in two distinct waves of neoliberalisation, the first being a response to the acceptance of loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1977, the second a response to the end of the civil war in 2009 (which continues to the present day). My focus in this section is on the first wave of neoliberalisation and its impact on religion; the second wave is the focus of the empirical section that follows. With this focus in mind, 1977 has been recognized as a “landmark year” (Gamage 2009, 250) in Sri Lanka’s post-independence history—a year in which the newly elected government of J. R. Jayawardene opened Sri Lanka up to free-market economic policies to meet the loan conditions of the IMF. These policies stimulated industry, with open trade policies allowing the importation of goods and services and tax relief encouraging foreign companies to relocate their production and manufacturing plants to Sri Lanka. However, they also triggered several ancillary social, political, and economic effects. Neoliberalisation led to a deepening of economic disparities and has been shown to have “contributed to the rise of militant nationalism and insurgency” and thus “catalyzed exclusion and arguably conflict in Sri Lanka” (Hyndman 2009, 876). These effects were felt at all levels of Sri Lankan society—from political élites to the *sangha*, businessmen, and daily wage labourers—and led to the

radical transformation of everyday life on the island, especially in southern cities, where urban form was rapidly overwhelmed by commodity form, as a conspicuous influx of televisions, private cars and luxury goods began advertising the daydream of capitalist development promised by the open economy—especially to the subaltern classes most unlikely to attain it (Goonewardene 2020, 297–298).

As the economic became a driver of religious change, so, too, did it become the grounds for exclusion and injustice. A void was created by the “mismatch between educational levels and employment opportunities, especially for young people” (Rogers, Spencer, and Uyangoda 1998, 771), which itself triggered political unrest. Against this backdrop of rapid change and destabilisation, the role of religion began to transform in tandem with the disenfranchisement of society. Arguably the most profound transformation

to have occurred is the emergence of political Buddhism and its rhetorical vehicle: Sinhala Buddhist nationalism or *Jathika Chinthanaya*. Characterised by the embedding of monks into the machinery of the state, Stanley Tambiah (1992) was among the first to condemn *Jathika Chinthanaya* as an illegitimate and oppressive move to politicise Buddhism. For the purposes of my argument, I interpret this politicisation of Buddhism as an attempt to reinforce the *value* of Buddhism to contemporary Sri Lankan society by establishing it as a political force. As political force, it draws on an ideal yet naïve vision of Sri Lanka's Buddhist traditions to define and validate its place in and for society. This is a vision that at best ignores, and at worst obstructs, the need to address the everyday economic challenges that many Sri Lankans have faced. For example, Soma Thero, one of the revered architects of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, would “castigate those who turn temples into places of business” (Berkwitz 2008, 94) and argue that the

degree to which Sinhala Buddhists and Sri Lanka suffer from economic woes, civil unrest, and the disintegration of the traditional family unit are [sic] directly attributable to the Sinhala people's failure to adhere to the genuine Buddhist tradition (ibid, 90).

Indeed, Soma Thero often portrayed economic modernisation as *antithetical* to Buddhist morality.

As much as the first wave of neoliberalisation brought about the emergence of political Buddhism, so, too, did it cause the disjuncture between Buddhism and the socio-economic realities of everyday life in Sri Lanka to grow. In many respects, political Buddhism can be seen as one outcome of the splintering of Buddhist praxis in response to the fact that people “want a lot of things and no longer see rational or practical ways of getting them” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 100). This splintering underpins Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere's (1988) distinction between the traditional Sinhala Buddhism of the *sangha* and the emergence of a supernatural form of ‘non-Buddhism’ among the laity. A response to the failings of Sinhala Buddhism to meet the lived needs of laypeople, the embrace of spirit religion involves evoking deities in the pursuit of this-worldly gain. This embrace is clearly demonstrated, for example, in Obeyesekere's study of the rise in popularity of the Skanda (Kataragama) deity in the 1970s due to its perceived ability to help people “overcome difficult obstacles” (1977, 383). At a more structural level, the shortcomings of tradition have galvanised further the splintering of Buddhism in ways that capitalise on the “traffic of aspiration, contestation, and charismatic affinity between Buddhism and rival religiosities” (Mahadev 2016, 127). Examples of these ‘competing religiosities’ have become a focus of recent scholarship. For example, in his study of lay Buddhist meditation movements, George Bond explains how the emergence of “lay gurus” has become a “major factor in shaping the way that many lay Buddhists

construct what it means to be Buddhist today” (2003, 30). These constructions range from a deviation from orthodox Buddhist teachings in the pursuit of a more sectarian identity to an adaptation of these teachings to suit Colombo’s middle and upper classes and business élites.

Against this backdrop of Buddhist transformation, the country’s evangelical Christian groups have always comprised a beleaguered minority. Since the proliferation of Pentecostal churches in the 1980s, they have been forced to embrace the market to sidestep the constraints they face when perceived as a ‘threatening’ religious other. The Christian ‘threat’ is multi-faceted. Legally, attempts have been made to contain it through a public discourse of ‘unethical’ conversion and the tabling of the “Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill” in 2004 (Woods 2018b). Theologically, evangelical groups leverage the immediate appeal of salvation as an end to this-worldly suffering, while contrasting it with the slow and otherworldly pursuit of *nibbana* through Theravada Buddhist praxis. According to Neena Mahadev, this is symptomatic of the “competitive theologizing” that emerges from the “discursive interplay between Christian evangelism and Buddhist nationalism in contemporary Sri Lanka” (2016, 127). Yet, such competitiveness goes beyond ‘theologising’ and speaks to the ways in which Buddhist and evangelical groups engage differently with Sri Lankans—and the mechanics of the marketplace, broadly conceived—throughout their lives. Indeed, these engagements make the competitive threat of evangelical groups even more compelling, as they are better positioned—theologically, professionally, ideologically—to take advantage of the growth opportunities that come from traversing the boundaries of the religious, social, and economic domains. While inter-religious tensions have often made it difficult for evangelical groups to approach people from a religious perspective, approaching them through the guise of business, education or personal improvement is more acceptable (see Woods 2012a, 2013a). With these ideas in mind, I now illustrate empirically the neoliberal drivers that underpin the adaptive strategies of Buddhist élites and evangelical Christian groups in post-war Sri Lanka.

Religious adaptation in post-war Sri Lanka

The data presented below draw on qualitative research conducted in Sri Lanka from late 2019 to early 2020. I conducted 71 unstructured interviews with representatives of Buddhist, Protestant (of various denominations) and Catholic organisations, and laypeople, located mostly in Colombo (and Negombo in the West) and Hambantota in the South. Of the 71 respondents, the majority were male (62), recruited primarily through the author’s existing networks, developed since 2010, and through the networks of two local field assistants. Most interviews were conducted in English by the

author (48), with the remaining 23 in Sinhalese with the help of the field assistants. All interviews were recorded (with interviewees' consent), transcribed as soon as possible upon completion, and analysed using an open coding approach. The analysis below draws primarily on interviews with 18 Buddhists and 18 evangelicals, all of whom might be identified as among the *élite*—well-educated working professionals, most of whom were Colombo-based. For the Buddhist cohort, most were senior industry leaders who also voluntarily held leadership positions within some of Sri Lanka's largest and most well-known Buddhist organisations. Accordingly, their views are those of a sub-set of Sri Lanka's Buddhist society that claims to represent the 'national Buddhism' of the *sangha*, but in reality they might be more similar to the radical Buddhist innovations outlined earlier or to their evangelical counterparts. For the Christian cohort, most were pastors, entrepreneurs or individuals working for Christian NGOs. What distinguished them from their Buddhist counterparts was their relative embeddedness within transnational networks of ideas, funding, and support. In many respects, their work entailed creating network effects by sharing these ideas and resources among Sri Lanka's peri-urban and rural communities. For the Buddhist *élites*, their work was more focused on modernising the *sangha* and working with temples throughout the country to engage their communities on terms that go beyond 'religion'. In many respects, both groups were similar in their desire to effect change in and through Sri Lankan society. The difference was that, while the Christians do so by offering an integrative vision of religion and the market, the Buddhists do so by attempting to overcome the disjunctive relationship that still reflects Buddhist structures of social influence and cultural protection.

While portraying Buddhism as 'disjunctive' and evangelical Christianity as 'integrationist' is a false dichotomy, it outlines two ideological positions that reflect the adaptive capacities of two distinct religions in post-war Sri Lanka. Likewise, while the focus on Colombo-based *élites* could be interpreted as unrepresentative of the rural majorities that define Sri Lankan Buddhism, it can be argued that, as the epicentre of Sri Lanka's neoliberal transition, Colombo is a harbinger for developments that might eventually be felt throughout the country. Moreover, the fact that most of the interviewees focused their religious work and outreach on communities *outside* Colombo suggests that they play a subtle but important role in reproducing the differences that neoliberalisation gives rise to.

Places of Buddhist disjuncture

While the social, cultural, and even political roles of Buddhism in Sri Lanka are now relatively entrenched, its economic role continues to be a source of disjuncture that might limit the capacity to adapt, thus undermining its

relevance in and to society. Over the course of Sri Lanka's modern history, various attempts have been made to reconcile the other-worldly and this-worldly concerns of the *sangha* and the laity. For example, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reformist monk Anagarika Dharmapala galvanised the English-educated Sinhalese middle classes to forge a new form of 'Protestant Buddhism' that moved beyond the abstract idealism of monastic life and focused on *this* world instead (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 202; Grant 2009, 67). Since then, more formalised and institutionally driven initiatives, of which the "Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement" is a good example, have attempted to forge a degree of socio-economic reconciliation. These attempts are responses to the premise that laypeople are becoming less dependent on monks and the temple and that the role of religion in their lives is diminishing in response to the variegated pressures of secular modernity. The Colombo-based founder of a Buddhist political organisation, and former IT executive, argued that the centripetal draw of the temple—and the monks therein—within villages and communities has been eroded over time:

Buddhist people need to meet in a common location where they practise rituals and religious practices... Earlier, only monks got education, [meaning] the temple was a social development location. If you want to learn something, you have to go [to the temple], because [there were] no schools... But lately, that organic relationship between temple and people is lost because monks and the temple couldn't change and modernise... Village people have better economic and education opportunities [outside the temple]... The need for the monk and the temple for day-to-day life is lost in most of the places... There is a big gap created between the temple and society. (Personal interview, 9 February 2020)

This participant speaks on behalf of a political organisation that attempts to protect—but also, perhaps intentionally, to politicise the issues surrounding—Buddhist culture and tradition. In doing so, he offers a seemingly frank, albeit also potentially biased assessment of the disjunctures that might be seen to shape Sri Lankan Buddhism. This may close down the potential for neoliberal adaptation. In particular, the traditional basis of Buddhist economics—*exchange*—is believed to be eroded by the forces of modernity and the intransigence of Buddhist teachings. Indeed, while he speaks of education as the mechanism of exchange that has been eroded, education is symptomatic of a more broad-based sense of disjuncture between monks and laypeople. Interpreting this situation in a more specific way, the pastor of a Colombo-based evangelical church observed that the temple remains a place that "sticks strictly to the philosophy of the Buddha, [meaning] the life of a monk is a pretty secluded, very dumbed down sort of life" (personal interview, 11 December 2019). Despite the clear bias that underpins the pastor's sentiment, it was reiterated by the committee member of a Colombo-based Buddhist organisation and former chairman of various state institutions and

professional bodies who lamented that most monks “don’t know what is happening outside [the temple]” (personal interview, 9 December 2019). This view finds further empirical support in Julia Cassaniti’s ethnographic observation that, compared to their Thai counterparts, Sri Lankan monks appear “relatively less accessible and less open to participating in secular life” (2018, 204).

The life of the *dharma* means that monks are less able to understand the struggles of living in the material world of work, property, and accumulation or the social world of spouses, children, and responsibility. As the pace in which these socio-material worlds change for laypeople, monks are left behind. The Colombo-based secretary of another Buddhist organisation, different from the one above, and the leader of one of Sri Lanka’s publicly listed companies, reiterated this sentiment. He lamented that,

if you go to a temple, 99% of the monks preach the importance of letting go to laypeople and you cannot connect, because we are in the mode of accumulating, we need to live our lives (personal interview, 10 February 2020).

He explained how this disjuncture came about:

Among monks, there is a big misconception about what is to be taught. Actually, in their education, in their temple education, everything they get bombarded with is doctrines and principles related to monkhood. And you must remember that most of these monks are ordained at a very young age, so they don’t understand the rigours of household life... They don’t understand the problems faced by the householders. (Personal interview, 10 February 2020)

To help reconcile this disjuncture, this business leader, in his capacity as secretary of the Buddhist organisation, has developed a programme of workshops about the applications of Buddhism to everyday life that he and his organisation run *within* temples during the monthly *poya* (full moon) holidays. The idea is that doing so can help overcome the “huge mismatch” that emerges when “Buddhist monks come and preach to laypeople what the Buddha preaches to monks” (personal interview, 10 February 2020). While efforts like these can be seen as strategic attempts to reconcile the differences between *sangha* and society within the temple, the fact remains that they are filling a gap by inserting something into it, not by changing the conditions—the *sangha* and its role in society—that create the gap in the first place. This reflects the broader sentiment that, as the leader of the Buddhist political organisation quoted above suggested, “the temple is not in the position to take to the changing needs of the people” (personal interview, 9 February 2020). In a similar vein, the committee member lamented that “the monks are not really looking at this ... but they have to see how the Buddhist community can really come up in life” (personal interview, 9 December 2019). Tradition prevails, even if it means that religion ultimately becomes the victim of the disjuncture between people’s other- and this-worldly lives.

Evangelical integration and the neoliberal ethic

The integration of Sri Lanka's evangelical community can be seen to overcome—not even to recognize in fact—the distinctions between clergy and laity, between the otherworldliness of God and the thisworldliness of people's everyday lives. Indeed, one of the community's defining characteristics is its tendency to be fully integrated into socio-economic life. Many pastors do not just engage in religious work, but concurrently hold secular jobs, run secular businesses, and otherwise work in and through secular society. They do this for many reasons. Perhaps the most important is the persecution the evangelical community faces, which foregrounds the need to operate in flexible, informal, and discrete ways. In these respects, they are distinct from Sri Lanka's mainline Christian community (which includes Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Catholic denominations) whose pastors tend to be operationally closer to Buddhist monks than their evangelical counterparts. These characteristics “reflect a certain seamlessness of religion and life” (Gomez, Hunt, and Roxborough 2015, 154–155) and the integrationist mould that has come to define the evangelical community. Evidence of integration abounds. For example, the Colombo-based representative of an international Christian NGO that runs rural development and skills-upgrading programmes throughout the country explained that

you can actually look at the Bible from start to end as a business administration manual ... whether it's logistics, whether it's finance, whether it's marketing, whether it's innovation ... it's a launchpad to embrace a calling in the marketplace. (Personal interview, 19 February 2020)

Reversing this logic, but reiterating the sentiment it captures, a Colombo-based pastor, CEO of a local software company and serial entrepreneur, recalled how, after having been asked to teach leadership at a theological seminary,

Steven Covey's principles of highly effective leadership *became* my bible. So that is really powerful. Seven very simple principles, but those are universal principles. I really applied [those] principles to my life, and it really worked for me. So then [the seminary] gave me the opportunity to teach this to some seminary students. (Personal interview, 8 December 2019)

No distinction is seen between the Bible and business manuals, between the worlds of theology and business and management. Lessons from each can be found in the other, to the extent that even seminary students—those ostensibly training to become *pastors*—are taught leadership from the perspective of business management. This is an approach that is not just about making Christian theology relevant to secular marketplaces; it is about embedding it within and throughout these marketplaces, causing any distinction between the two to be overcome. This ensures that evangelicals

have a greater range of access points through which society can be engaged and that the growth orientation of the evangelical community is reproduced throughout all walks of life, including personal, professional, and public. Not only that—it also provides clear routes to personal and spiritual growth, which is important, given the longstanding problem that “‘modernisation’ and ‘development’ have produced new goals but the means or pathways for achieving these goals are ill-defined or fuzzy” (Obeyesekere 1977, 388). Evangelical pastors engage people on spiritual terms and provide spiritual value, but they also engage them on professional terms and provide professional value. The Christian owner of a café in Kandy, for example, recalled how he was inspired to start his business because of the mentoring provided by a Colombo-based evangelical pastor, who

came to our church and started a small business group, a Christian business group. He taught me so many things, like basics, like foundation ... how to do the bookkeeping and the numbers, like, in a Christian way. (Personal interview, 18 February 2020)

This shows how a pastor essentially taught the café owner the practical skills needed to run a business. This is a characteristic that reflects the transboundary modernities of evangelical groups and the sense of distinction thereof.

Transboundary modernities and the evolution of ‘religion’

The transboundary modernities of evangelical groups pose a threat to political Buddhism. They offer a religious alternative which can be attractive to people on multiple levels and which therefore sidesteps the identity politics of religious difference. Various efforts have been made to curtail the influence of these groups, ranging from informal and localised acts of violence and intimidation to the tabling of the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill at national level by the *Jathika Hela Urumaya*, a Buddhist political group (Woods 2018b, 222). Reflecting these acts, public and scholarly discourses concerning resistance to evangelicalism in Sri Lanka are couched in mainly political terms. While not explicitly acknowledged, the fact is that “the religious face of business and the business face of religion ... can present threats to established or entrenched centres of power”, especially so when “business adds to the social capital of a religious identity or religion adds the sanction of a higher power to the commercial and social aspect of a business” (Gomez, Hunt, and Roxborough 2015, 154). These transboundary modernities give evangelical groups access to a wider range of publics and sources of influence. For example, the Colombo-based entrepreneur and pastor, introduced earlier, told me that even when he was willing and able to compromise his religious and commercial ambitions,

my pastor told me ... “you’re not a full-time person [i.e. pastor], you should run your own business, you have strength in that area” ... I realised that I was trained to do both, without compromising either side. (Personal interview, 8 December 2019)

The idea of not ‘compromising either side’ is rooted in the transboundary logic of both/and rather than either/or, which provides a clear contrast to the place-based practices of Buddhism.

By locating religion in place, Buddhists can draw on and reproduce the sanctity of tradition. The risk, however, is that the role of the monk in society becomes unwieldy and divorced from broader social shifts. Evangelical groups, ironically because of the persecution they are subjected to, tend *not* to be place-based and instead operate through informal networks of house churches, home cells, and other makeshift arrangements to protect themselves from surveillance and (sometimes violent) reproach (Woods 2013b, 1062, 2018c, 531). As Chad Bauman and James Ponniah explain, evangelicals

ward off persecution by downplaying or hiding their Christian identity ... to circumvent legal hurdles preventing their official legal incorporation, some Christian churches and missions have begun incorporating themselves as ‘companies’, ‘trusts’, or ‘societies’ (2017, 74).

While such strategies are often depicted as concessions to the context in which they operate, they also reflect the embrace of a neoliberal ethic and the inherent *value* of operating in a transboundary way. By taking Christianity out of its ‘place’—the church—it becomes a more integrative part of the lives of pastors and laity alike (Kong and Woods 2016, 116). The café owner in Kandy shared that, when he first visited the premises of his café, he “felt, like, a godly atmosphere, a spiritual atmosphere here. That’s why people feel more calm, more relaxed. That’s why they like to come here.” (Personal interview, 18 February 2020) The café has subsequently become a hub for Christian activity, which, in turn, is claimed to be the reason *why* the business is successful. It blends the spiritual goods of belief with the economic goods of the marketplace, creating a hybrid space of neoliberal becoming. By collapsing categories of distinction, the café has become a space that reproduces the neoliberal ethic that underpins evangelical integration. The representative of the international Christian NGO explained that,

when it comes to marketplace ministries, whether it’s a café or a salon owner, it’s people meeting people at the same level. So, all these barriers, whether it’s connotations of westernised concepts or cultural contradictions, are removed. And where there are several areas of commonality, bridges are formed between individuals. So, the transference of gospel principles becomes easier: it’s not from us to them, it’s from us to us. (Personal interview, 19 February 2020)

The logic of overcoming the hierarchy that comes with religious tradition and replacing it with a more personable modality of social engagement—one that

enables commonalities to be identified and bridges forged—reflects the pervasive benefits of transboundary integration. In a bid to maximise these benefits and thus reproduce the neoliberal ethic that defines evangelical groups, transboundary integration has become a strategy of operation that has been pushed to the point of *reversing* the distinctions between religion and the marketplace. This market-first mentality continues to set evangelical groups apart from their Buddhist counterparts and ensures their close alignment with the spread of a neoliberal ethic throughout post-war Sri Lanka.

Conclusions

Over the past decade, Sri Lanka has undergone a period of intense transformation. The end of the civil war has ushered in an era of neoliberalisation that benefits some groups at the relative expense of others. It is an era that has caused pre-existing categories of social difference and understanding to be collapsed into each other, paving the way for more transgressive and market-oriented modalities of being instead. While this dynamic has affected all walks of life, its materialisations have had a profound impact on the position, role, and meaning of religion especially. Religious pluralism is no longer defined according to the distinctions of tradition, scripture or belief, but is now based on the demands of the market as well. These demands draw on various reference points that span all walks of life; they are not limited to ‘religion’ as category. This reality foregrounds the need to explore the full extent of Tariq Jazeel’s observation that,

if we can locate religion, thought this way as an identifiable system of doctrines-scriptures-beliefs, a *thing*, then it follows that its constitutive outside, the secular, will not be too far away (2013, 13, emphasis in original).

Neoliberalisation is the integrative glue that binds the secular to the religious, with each construct serving the other *through* the logics of the market.

This interplay goes beyond the marketisation of religion. In many respects, it foregrounds the need to dissolve religion as a category and to rematerialise it as an ontological position through which individuals engage with modernity. It is by “decoupling religion from orthodoxy” that we can begin to appreciate the full “extent of religion’s adaptive capacity under market conditions” and the associated “emergence of a more-than-religious world of integrated meanings, self-oriented practices and the rationalisation of the divine in response to the marketisation of everyday life” (Woods 2021, 121; see also Woods 2012b, 440). The relative success of some ‘religions’ in enabling this decoupling reveals the disruptive effects of neoliberal sensibilities as the new grounds for difference and the new basis of belief. Exploring the effects of this dynamic provides a fertile direction in which future research could unfold.

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