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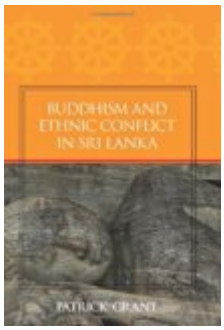
Patrick Grant. *Buddhism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. xiv + 146 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7914-9353-3.



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In *Buddhism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Patrick Grant examines the impact of three Sinhala Buddhist writers on the Buddhist reform movement during the independence and postcolonial periods in Sri Lankan history. Grant's focus is on what happens when religion, in this case Buddhism, is used not for its liberating vision, but to reaffirm prejudices and further conflicts. While there have been numerous similar conflicts throughout the late twentieth century, Grant hopes to make the lesser-known political conflict in Sri Lanka accessible to Western readers and succeeds admirably in doing so. Grant examines how religious traditions have been mobilized in ethnonationalistic conflict, using the role played by Buddhism in the Sri Lankan conflict as an example. In an effort to explain this conflict, Grant proposes the concept of "regressive inversion," which is "what happens when a universally liberating religious vision is re-deployed to supercharge the passions associated with loyalty to a group" (p. x). During a moment of "regressive inversion," he explains, there is a return to an exclusionary identity (something that the religion is supposed to transcend) simultaneous with an inversion of those religious values that rely on the idea of transcendence.

Although Grant is dealing with topics unfamiliar to nonspecialists, he makes the concepts easily understandable. To help with this, Grant divides his book into two parts. Part 1 provides a framework for understanding Buddhism in relation to both his concept of regressive inversion and Sri Lankan history. Part 2 focuses on the conflict in Sri Lanka through the lens of three Sri Lankan Buddhists who were active during the period surrounding independence from Britain in 1948. Overall, Grant sets out to emphasize the role that language plays in this conflict. He does note that other factors are also important, but it is language that holds a special place in his explanation.

Part 1, "Reading Buddhism," consists of two chapters that focus on how Buddhism and regressive inversion interact and how the Buddha dealt

with the apparent contradiction between his liberating vision and the Vedic hierarchical tradition. In chapter 1, "Vedic Tradition and the Buddha: How to Say the Unsayable," Grant begins with an account of the main teachings of Theravada Buddhism with special attention to the Pali Canon, a collection of Pali language texts considered to be the foundation of Theravada Buddhism. To set up his discussion, he uses what Thomas M. Greene terms the "disjunctive view" of language to mean language that frees people and the "conjunctive view" to mean language that engages people. Grant argues that the Buddha in the Pali Canon negotiated the middle space between these two uses of language "with great skill," and the dialogical example Grant "provides in doing so remains basic to the meaning and practice of compassion, the heart of his message" (p. 6). While the Buddha was able to walk this line, Grant is concerned with the fact that others fail to grasp the need to find a balance in the relationship between disjunctive and conjunctive language.

Grant focuses on the Pali Canon and how the Buddha deals with the relationship between a transcendent universalism and its cultural antecedents in chapter 2, "Buddhism: The Art of the Detached Agonist." He starts by providing an overview of the life and teachings of Gotama Buddha. Readers can easily follow Grant's discussion of the central teachings; he provides a solid basis for those who are not familiar with them. He follows this overview with an explanation of how the discourses deal with the use and abuse of language. He describes how the Buddha employs a variety of strategies to deal with interlocutors. Grant concludes this part of the book by asserting that "the Discourses especially insist on how central such a dialogue [one committed to the middle way] is to the promulgation of an authentic and vital Buddhism" (p. 42). Furthermore, he puts forth the idea that it is the failing to understand this that has led to "regressive inversion," which is the focus of the rest of the book.

In part 2, "Reading Sri Lanka," Grant examines how this Buddhist framework informed, or failed to inform, modern thinkers in Sri Lanka. He focuses the writings of three key figures in Sri Lankan nationalism--Anagarika Dharmapala, Walpola Rahula, and J. R. Jayewardene--who addressed Buddhism and politics in the years surrounding Sri Lanka's independence from Britain. These three pushed for a revival of their vision of pure Buddhism, which Grant argues supports the concept of regressive inversion. He illustrates how these figures made connections between Buddhism and politics.

Before he begins his examination of the writers, Grant starts by giving an assessment of Sri Lanka's historic Buddhist chronicle tradition in chapter 3, "Sri Lanka: Buddhist Self Representation and the Genesis of the Modern Conflict." He starts by explaining the *Mahavamsa*, "Great Genealogy," from the sixth century, which provides the connection between the monarchs and Buddhism. Grant argues that this historic tie influences the revivalists' idea that the pure Buddhism, along with the return of the Sinhalas, will help Sri Lankan nationalism. Following this discussion of religious ideology, Grant provides a brief survey of major events in Sri Lanka from the 1600s until the late 1900s. He uses this to set up the backdrop for how "undiscerned prejudice can override principle despite good intentions" (p. 65).

In chapter 4, "Anagarika Dharmapala: Buddhism, Science, and the Crisis of Historical Imagination," Grant discusses how Dharmapala began to the make the links between the Buddhist revival and the Sri Lankan nationalist movement. In this chapter, Grant's main point is to provide evidence that Dharmapala's reliance on science caused a misestimation of the "powerful exclusionist element in his own thinking, which in fact prevented him from promoting the tolerance, compassion, and universalism which he admired"

(p. 67). Grant provides an overview of Dharmapala's early life and his path to becoming a reformer. In the end, Grant argues that Dharmapala exhibits regressive inversion because he used science as a vehicle to recreate an exclusivism that was in fact the antithesis of Buddhist teachings.

In chapter 5, "Alpola Rahula and Gamini Salgado: Buddhism, Dialogue, and the Political Imaginary," Grant examines how Rahula's writings were seemingly incongruent--a scholarly understanding of Buddhism and nonviolence and an espousal of militant nationalism. Once again, Grant provides an overview of the life of the writer he is examining to help explain the effort at reform later in life. Rahula arrived at the argument that the principle of relativity worked well with the *Mahavamsa*, based on little regard he had for traditional Buddhist practices. Grant uses Gamini Salgado's *The True Paradise* (1997), a Sri Lankan author's stories about childhood, as a counterexample to Rahula's *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (2003). Salgodo focused on daily life and Buddhism's place within it. By contrast, Rahula concentrated on the issue of colonialism and subverted his own scholarly understanding of Buddhism.

In chapter 6, "J. R. Jaywardene: Playing with Fire," Grant explores how as prime minister, Jaywardene's policies helped to further the violence and disorder he had sought to end. Grant argues that it was Jaywardene's promotion of Sinhala Buddhist cultural nationalism that led to conflict. After reviewing Jaywardene's rise to power, Grant explains how he hoped to use Buddhism, the *Mahavamsa*, and the development and restoration of Buddhist artifacts and buildings to end the ethnic conflict. In the end, Grant sees Jaywardene's failure as tied to his promotion of regressive inversion.

With this book Grant wants to show "how seductive is the process whereby the liberating vision of a great religion is re-deployed to confirm prejudices that the religion itself expressly offers to transcend" (p. 115). Overall, Grant does a solid job of making this point in a manner that is accessible to most readers. However, Grant's concept of regressive inversion could have been more clearly developed and integrated into the work more fully. At the outset, the reader is led to believe that the concept will play a vital role in the book. However, it is largely absent from part 2. At the end of each chapter, Grant makes passing reference to regressive inversion, but it would have been helpful if it had been more closely woven into the analysis throughout the book.

Overall, the book is a solid introduction to Buddhism and its relationship with the conflict in Sri Lanka during the twentieth century. This work will be especially beneficial to scholars looking at the intersection of religion and politics in times of crisis. It also will be a useful text in courses in religion, history, sociology, and conflict. ***Buddhism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*** provides a useful lens that could be used to examine similar conflicts around the globe.

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