



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

The Role of Buddhism in Society and Radical Buddhist Mobilization:  
An Explorative Study of Young Monks in Sri Lanka

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Minor Field Study – Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

Radical Buddhist mobilization in post-war Sri Lanka is taking place in an international context where religious groups are gaining a lot of attention in for instance media and by political leaders as well as by researchers. The aim of this thesis was to explore young monks' perceptions of the role of Buddhism in society and on radical Buddhist mobilization in Sri Lanka by specifically looking at perception of threats, protection of Buddhism, and cases of religious intolerance and violence. The material was collected through interviews with young monks in Sri Lanka. The contribution of this study provides an account on the monks' views which gives us a first insight into issues they reflect upon which may be relevant in relation to Sri Lanka's social development. The material is discussed in relation to discourses within International Relations research which in a mutual way situates the material in a theoretical context and contributes to these discourses by discussing them in relation to the material. Also, one source of perceived threats less pronounced in previous research was found which concerns ways Buddhists and monks themselves can threaten the role of Buddhism in the Sri Lankan society. In conclusion, elements of fear exist among some of the monks which should be addressed as it may have a decisive role on the future development.

**Key Words:** Sri Lanka, religion, mobilization, radicalism, threats, protection, intolerance, violence, Buddhists, monks, Muslims

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## 1. Introduction

Buddhist monks attacking Muslim communities, mosques, boycotting Muslim owned stores and spreading hate and anti-halal campaigns. This depicts an unusual image of the saffron sheeted Buddhists, shattering all stereotypes of the religion. Buddhism is believed to be perhaps the most non-violent religion among the major world religions, yet the examples above, which I in this essay refer to as a part of radical Buddhist mobilization, are very real and evident in present day Sri Lanka and challenges our view of a tolerate religious community in the country (CPA 2013). The events are important to address as they will impact how well Sri Lanka, which ended a three decade long civil war in 2009, is to succeed with a sustainable and inclusive reconciliatory process of peacebuilding.

The cases of radical Buddhist mobilization against Muslims are not confined only to Sri Lanka. In other Southeast Asian countries a similar trend can be seen, most prominently in Burma and in Southern Thailand. In all of these countries Muslims make up a minority of the population, still Buddhists turn to violent means setting aside the human rights of Muslims (Time 2014). On an international level cases of radical religious mobilization can be witnessed from all of the major world religions (Svensson 2012). The Sri Lankan case is in other words part of a bigger trend.

The Buddhist mobilization in Sri Lanka is mainly led by religious and nationalistic groups, in which monks are the driving force. The majority of Sri Lankans are Buddhists and many monks see themselves as the protectors of the faith (deSilva & Bartholomeusz 2001). Literature on Buddhist violence in post-war Sri Lanka concludes that possible causes of Buddhist mobilization are many, ranging from personal disputes to the dislike of religious practices of minority religions. However, an outstanding factor is that of perceived threats and insecurity, taking place in an environment where a Sinhala<sup>1</sup> Buddhist national identity is being pronounced by some groups. Narratives of fear and threats are taking root and previous research has shown that there is a persistent perception of threats within the Buddhist community (CPA 2013).

Youths have an important role in any society in relation to social development as they constitute the future generation. It is important as well as interesting to explore what they reflect upon in relation to the current development in Sri Lanka. Especially young monks' views may tell us whether the world view of radical monks is shared by other, younger monks. Monks play an important role in the society as they are representatives of Buddhism and have influence among

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the Sinhalese ethnicity

the lay people<sup>2</sup>. Young monks are already representatives of Buddhism and soon they will have an even more pronounced role in the temples acting as consultants for the laity, and constitute the future clergy. An exploration of their views and discourses are thus relevant in relation to Sri Lanka's social development.

This paper concerns the perceptions of young monks in relation to the role of Buddhism in society and radical Buddhist mobilization. As an attempt to explore this issue, the paper will take its departure in discussions present within International Relations scholarship. Religion's role in International Relations scholarship has become more pronounced and more research is focused on religion's importance and its influence on local, national as well as international levels of politics. The theoretical discussions will take off in the once underlying belief that religion's role in society would diminish as a consequence of modernization (Svensson 2012). The Sri Lankan case is thus interesting even on a broader theoretical level.

### 1.1 Aim and Research Questions of the Study

The aim of this study is *to explore young monks' perceptions on the role of Buddhism in society and on radical Buddhist mobilization in post-war Sri Lanka.*

Recurring themes in literature (outlined in chapter 2 and 3) regarding religion in society and religious mobilization are perception of threats and the need to protect one's faith, which in this study have been chosen as specifications of the aim. Religious intolerance is viewed as something which can, and in the Sri Lankan case has, resulted in violence, referring to radical Buddhist mobilization. I will thus focus on three research questions in order to explore the aim;

- How do young monks see and understand threats to Buddhism?
- How do young monks see and understand the need of protection of Buddhism in Sri Lanka?
- How do young monks see and understand cases of religious intolerance and violence?

### 1.2 Contributions

The contribution of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, by taking its departure in themes found in previous research on the Sri Lankan case (eg. CPA 2013), this study differs from previous research as it has dedicated time to get an in-depth account of young monks' perceptions, a group not addressed previously. The main contribution of this study is thus the unique material collected in April – June 2014 in Sri Lanka. The empirical material is interesting and noteworthy in relation to the current social development in Sri Lanka; it gives a first insight

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<sup>2</sup> A lay person is a follower of the religion but not part of the clergy

into the views of young monks and can be a step to explore issues and underlying currents that will have a decisive role on the future development, and which may need to be addressed. Such an exploration make it easier for further research and/or action to be taken concerning religious intolerance in the country.

Secondly, this study contributes to a theoretical level by situating International Relations discussions in a specific case; in relation to the young monks' perceptions in order to see how well they can (or cannot) be applied to shed light in the specific case. The field study also contributes by bringing forward perceptions of religious representatives on topics related to religion, which are more and more pronounced within International Relations scholarship.

### 1.3 Delimitation

The study was carried out between April – June 2014 and this paper was to the greater part written during the two following months, July – August 2014. The main concern of the study was the current situation in Sri Lanka, where religious and nationalist groups were mobilizing against the Muslim community. These groups and such events are less pronounced today. In January 2015 Sri Lanka held a presidential election and there was a shift in power. As the study is situated in and reflects a specific context it does not develop on changes taken place since this time period.

### 1.4 Disposition

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In section two I will present theoretical discussions within International Relations research and the analytical framework which provides the basis for analysing the results. Section three provides the reader with background information about Sri Lanka and the recent cases of Buddhist mobilization. Previous research will also be presented, focused on the specific case in Sri Lanka. In section four I will present the method used to reach the aim of the study, including problems with the method and research ethics. Thereafter the method for analysis and problems with this method will be outlined. Thereafter, section five presents the empirical material and section six provides an analysis. In section seven I will conclude.

## 2. Theoretical Discussions

This section is designed in order to situate the field study in relation to theoretical discussions. When analysing the results I will take off in these discussions; highlighting the monks' thoughts within a broader and more general theoretical and academic frame. At the end of the theoretical



discussions, the analytical framework used for analysis will be presented. The discussions relate to the overarching aim of the thesis; to explore the role of Buddhism in society and Buddhist mobilization in Sri Lanka. While the field study mainly explores Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the framework will draw on literature on religion in general. This framework borrows and combines theoretically from other scholars and the chosen discussions for this study may not have been related to each other in previous research.

## 2.1 The Role of Religion in Society

In International Relations scholarship the common underlying assumption was for a long time that along with globalization and modernization, religion's role would decline. Consequently, religion was to a large extent disregarded in studies of International Relations. However, in the past decades, and especially so after 9/11, the fact that religion has an impact on, and even a vital role in shaping international politics became evident and could no longer be overlooked (Svensson 2012).

Clearly religion was not as threatened by global forces as the dominant secularisation paradigm suggested as one can witness by religion's vital influence on local, national as well as on international levels. Globalization is here characterised by often destabilising social, political, economic, and technological effects as the world is becoming increasingly interlinked in all of these aspects. If globalization did not lead to the decline of religion, how has it then come to impact religion's role in society? Haynes (2013: 160) suggests that one impact of globalization could be that people feel confused and therefore turn to religion as a source of comfort and stability. Religion can also provide renewed feelings of identity and group identification. Together with the fact that globalization leads to increased interactions between people and communities, deepened importance laid on religious identity and group identification can contribute to inter-religious competition and conflict. Haynes notes that conflicts are increasingly framed in religious terms.

With the influence of religion in the public sphere it is not easy to draw a distinct line between what is political and what is religious. Strenski (2010: 3) discredits both the idea that politics has no place in a house of worship, and that religion solely belongs to the private and personal sphere. These ideas, he notes, are not the reality. He gives the example of clerics who are state politicians, calling upon the divine authority they hold; and demonstrators protesting the results of an election by singing to God. Is one of these examples political, he wonders, and one religious? And in that case, which is which? In this way he demonstrates that perhaps our

distinctions between religion and politics do not work. Labelling an event as either religious or political might add something to our understanding of it which we should be aware of.

Lausten & Waever (2000: 720) discuss religion's involvement in international politics. They elaborate on two ways through which faith (religion) can see to be threatened; first, faith can be threatened by non-religious actors or processes such as modernization, and second, faith can be threatened by other religious discourses or actors. Faith being threatened by non-religious processes or actors is about the defence of religion from politics and other non-religious threats. The authors highlight that when this is the reason for religion's involvement in international politics, it is not religion as such that acts. The actions take place in a political context formulated in the nexus of religion and politics. The second way concerns a clash between different religious discourses and actors. For a long time it was believed that these type of conflicts were mainly found before the peace of Westphalia, and according to Lausten & Waever (2000: 722f) this is probably not as common as clashes between fundamentalists and secularists. Both of these ways have to do with perceived threats to religion, and in fact it does not matter to the outcome whether the threats are real or only perceived to be so.

So why are threats to religion so fundamental? Lausten & Waever (2000: 718, 739) maintain that religion is perceived as existential by nature and hence threats to for instance religious objects are seen as existential threats. Faith is in other words easily securitized<sup>3</sup> because it is already existential, and by consequence extraordinary measures can be called for in its defence. Furthermore, one's faith is closely tied to one's being and identity and a perceived threat to "the self" or to a security perceived on basis of identity usually overrides rational thought and reason (Kadayifci-Orellanda 2009: 265). This leads us to the following discussion regarding religious mobilization, which can be a way of uniting adherents against a perceived threat to "the self".

## 2.2 Religious Mobilization – Actors and Motivations

Since 9/11 a lot of research has focused on Islam and conflict and especially so in the Middle East and North Africa region. Religious conflicts have however occurred on almost all continents and with participants from all world religions (Svensson 2012:31). Even though the main reasons for conflict may not be of a religious nature, religion has a significant role in

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<sup>3</sup> Securitization theory is a part of the Copenhagen School of Security studies. Security issues are produced by actors who pose something, a referent object, as existentially threatened and by consequence call for extraordinary measures to defend it. The process of labelling something as existentially threatened is called securitization and the means of doing so is a speech act; by labelling something as a security issue it becomes one. The success depends on the acceptance of it by the relevant audience (Lausten & Waever 2000: 708).

conflict situations, especially when different religious systems encounter each other. Since time immemorial leaders, political as well as religious, have exploited religion to justify violence and to mobilize masses (Kadayifci-Orellanda 2009: 264). An early example is that of the crusades.

Many of the societies with ethno-religious conflicts are faced with a crisis of legitimacy which makes it easier for religious leaders to use their moral legitimacy to incite hatred, violence, and depict enemy images by employing religious language, texts and images (Kadayifci-Orellanda 2009: 266f). Religion can thus inspire conflict when leaders who hold authority and/or legitimacy because of their religious position tell their followers to engage in conflict. Another way is when a specific place or thing is sacralised, resulting in a perceived duty to protect it (Patterson 2013: 118f).

Concerning effects of global forces like globalization and modernization, Haynes & Hennig (2011: 217f) suggest that a decrease of religiosity on the individual level is accompanied by an increase of religious issues in the public sphere where religious leaders have come to play a crucial role. Religious representatives act politically, address civil society, political society and/or the government arena to pursue their concerns. The objectives often go beyond religiously motivated self-interests but do not solely concern political ambitions, even though the objectives often concern a redefinition of the political agenda.

So it seems that when religious representatives mobilize it is motivated religiously as well as politically. According to Strenski (2010: 17fff), dominating the current public discourse is the assumption that all religions are religions of peace; it defines religion as internally spiritual and hence privileges it. By viewing religion as something which can do no wrong, naturally follows the view that religion is being manipulated by politicians when it seems to 'be bad'. It has been corrupted and is not 'true' religion. In this way religion is portrayed as something passive, as a tool used by people, without an intrinsic connection to the individual manipulating it. An example of such a view is the understanding of 9/11 as an outcome of Islam being hijacked; it was not an event of pure or true Islam that one could witness. Strenski asks why we should not adopt a new paradigm; one which does not blindly label all religions as inherently good but also accepts religion as worldly, political, and violent.

Abeysekara ((2002) in Gould 2011: 22) also argues that it does not enhance our understanding to dichotomise between a true authentic religion (in this case Buddhism) and the actuality of political religious representatives (monks). One cannot simply say "This is not true religion",

that the events are not Buddhist ones. He holds that such an assumption is problematic as it takes each category as a given cultural category and fails to explain why something labelled as Buddhism today becomes violence tomorrow and vice versa.

The idea that religion is used as a tool for other social factors and motivations has deep roots in the social sciences. Important to note is however that this does not imply that religious motivations never influence actions. What can be concluded however, is that if religion can be used as a legitimating or mobilizing tool, it has some resonance among the masses who are the target of these attempts at legitimization and mobilization, making religion an important social factor (Fox & Sandler 2005: 299f). Kadayifci-Orellanda (2009: 266f) maintains that religion has shown to be an effective tool to mobilize people as it touches on deep levels of identity. Religion is a critical component of identity as it influences the attitudes and behaviours of individuals. Because of this religious feelings can often mobilize people faster than other elements of their identity.

However, much International Relations research tends to see religion as an effect of something instead of a phenomenon in its own right. Most often it is seen as a tool used by political and social leaders to unite people for their own personal objectives. With this view, religion as a cause of actions is overseen which is a shame as committed believers will go to extreme lengths in order to protect their religion from a perceived threat (Waeber 2006).

The state structures of a given country can play an important role when it comes to violence. The actual and the perceived weakness of state structures relates to religious radicalisation and everyday violence. Religious and ethnic mobilization can provide a means of protest, where representative institutions have failed. The failure of state institutions has been central to the escalation of conflicts around religious identity. It can also be a way of dealing with an uncertain future or simply an effective way to uphold social stability, paternalism, and local power (Gould 2011: 3).

### 2.3 Analytical Framework

From these discussions I have chosen to make use of the following discourses in this paper in order to answer the three research questions and shed light on the aim;

- To answer the first question concerning perceived threats to Buddhism, the monks' views will be discussed by taking a departure in Lausten & Waeber's (2000) categorization of threats posed to religion from (1) non-religious global forces and actors and (2) from other religious discourses and actors.

- To answer the second question about perceptions on the need to protect Buddhism, the discussion will take its point of departure in the two ways Patterson (2013) argues religion can inspire conflict; (1) religious leaders tell their followers to engage in conflict and (2) when a specific place or thing is sacralised, resulting in a perceived duty to protect it.
- To answer the third question addressing cases of religious intolerance and violence, a discussion following Strenski (2010) and Abeysekara (in Gould 2011) will consider some of the monks' views in relation to the understanding of religion as intrinsically peaceful, and to an understanding of religion as also political, and violent.
- Concluding, the aim of the study will be highlighted by the previous discussions and related to Haynes & Hennig's (2013) idea that a decrease of religiosity on the individual level is accompanied by an increase of religious issues in the public sphere.

The interviews will be analysed by taking off in these discussions.

### 3. Background Information and Previous Research

This section will introduce Sri Lanka and situate Buddhism in the country in order to position the study in a historical and cultural context. Recent events will also be presented and will provide the reader with an understanding of the outcomes of Buddhist mobilization in the country. Thereafter previous research on Buddhism in Sri Lanka, particularly on the recent cases of Buddhist mobilization, will be presented in order to situate the study in relation to existing research and thereby also clarify how this study could contribute with new knowledge.

#### 3.1 Introducing Sri Lanka

In 2009 Sri Lanka ended a three decade long civil war. The conflict was mainly an ethnic conflict fought between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam striving for autonomy and the Sri Lankan government (UCDP, IISS). Recovering from the damages of the civil war, Sri Lanka is becoming more connected by rebuilding of railway that had been destroyed. However, while roads are re-built, religious sites are attacked. The Sri Lankan constitution states that religious freedom should predominate *and* that the state should foster Buddhism (Utrikespolitiska Institutet 2010). In Sri Lanka, Buddhism is the religion of over 70 % of the population, of which almost all are Sinhalese, the majority ethnic group. The Hindu population amounts to 13 % and the Muslim to 10 % and Christians constitute 7 % of the population (UN Data Statistics 2013).

According to the Pew Research Centers' Social Hostility Index measuring social hostilities involving religion as of the end of 2012, Sri Lanka is among the top 20 countries in the world

with the highest level of religious intolerance (Pew Research Center 2012)<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, compared to data from 2011 there is a decline in the Muslim community's assessment of freedom (CPA: 2 2013). These figures suggest a reflection of the ongoing discrimination of Muslims in Sri Lanka.

### 3.2 Situating Buddhism in Sri Lanka

The Sinhalese migrated to Sri Lanka from Northern India 400 B.C. Buddhism was introduced to the island in 250 BC and came to have a historical role in building and uniting the Sinhalese community (Peiris 2015, Ivan 2009). Sri Lanka is by some monks seen as the place where the pure form of Theravada Buddhism (the 'conservative' Buddhist strand) is to be preserved (de Silva & Bartholomoseuzs 2001:2, 9). Enlightened monks in the mytho-historical chronicle Mahavamsa, narrating the history of Sri Lanka, reassure that violence used in defending the Dhamma, the Buddhist teachings, does not go against Buddhist precepts, even though canonical texts<sup>5</sup> condemn violence both for offensive and defensive usages (Keown 2013: 123f). (For more information on Buddhism, see appendix A; on Buddhism in Sri Lanka, see for instance Ivan 2009; UI 2010; deSilva & Bartholomoseusz 2001).

Muslim traders came to settle on the island in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Tamils from South India established a province in the Jaffna region. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards the colonial period of Sri Lanka started and Buddhism was undervalued during this period. As a reaction to the changes brought by the Western colonisers, Buddhist nationalistic tendencies grew during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1948 the island of Ceylon gained independence and with a new constitution adapted in 1972, Ceylon became the Republic of Sri Lanka (Peiris 2015).

In Sri Lanka there are about 50 000 monks and 35 000 monks enrolled in pirivenas (MES 2013). A pirivena is the site for education at temples for monks although the higher education is also open for the lay community. The pirivenas are maintained by the Ministry of Education on a national level. When a boy<sup>6</sup> enters a temple to do his education there, he moves in and spends all his time there, eating, sleeping and studying (Subramanian 2005).

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<sup>4</sup> "The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) measures acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations or groups in society. This includes religion-related armed conflict or terrorism, mob or sectarian violence, harassment over attire for religious reasons or other religion-related intimidation or abuse" (Pew Research center 2012)

<sup>5</sup> The canons are the official sacred Buddhist writings. The Pali canon is the complete writings of the Theravada school, forming its doctrinal foundation

<sup>6</sup> There is no government founded pirivena for Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka

### 3.3 Recent Events

Since the end of the civil war in 2009 there have been several acts of religious intolerance in Sri Lanka. Attacks have been carried out on religious sites of worship of all prevalent religions, in all regions of Sri Lanka. The most widespread is however that of Buddhists and Buddhist monks attacking the Muslim community by spreading anti-halal and hate campaigns as well as attacking Muslim owned stores and mosques (CPA 2013).

Hate speeches and attacks are mainly carried out by organized groups, led by monks, and their followers, such as the Bodu Bala Sena (SAPRI). The Bodu Bala Sena (The Buddhist Power Force, BBS) is a Buddhist nationalist group driving this trend, mobilizing anti-Muslim sentiments. The group was formed in 2012 by monks Kirama Wimalajothi and Galagoda Aththe Gnanasaara as they saw that the protection of Buddhism needed a more militant approach. By attacking, both violently and non-violently, sites of religious worship, the group aims to “save the Sinhala race” and to preserve the dominance of the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka. Mainly the group is targeting the Muslims but also the Christians in the country (TRAC). At a meeting in February 2014, Gnanasaara urged the crowd to become an unofficial civilian police force against “Muslim extremism” and said that “so called democrats” are destroying the Sinhala race (BBC 2013).

The Muslim criticism has mainly been directed towards a halal critique and that of a growing Muslim population. In 2012 the president of Sri Lanka issued a ‘directive’ through the media that no animal sacrifices are allowed. Moreover, Sri Lankan Buddhists have also been reported talking about a revival of fundamentalist Islam. The revival is said to be evidenced by cultural practices such as more Muslims adopting an orthodox attire which is seen as evidence that Sharia law is taking hold in the country. Orthodox interpretations of Islam have by some been labelled as extremist (CPA 2013: 55, Daily FT 2013). The rhetoric of Muslim extremism has been reproduced in state media, reproducing anti-Muslim hate speeches and violence, mainstreaming such a narrative (Faaiz 2014).

During my stay in Sri Lanka for the purpose of this study there were two examples of the ongoing Buddhist mobilization that stand out. These two will briefly be presented here to allow the reader to get a picture of what the Buddhist mobilization looks like.

In April 2014 a Buddhist monk organized an event to build bridges between the Buddhist and Muslim communities to which followers of the two religions along with the media had been invited. During the gathering the BBS stormed the event and forced the main monk to apologize

for interacting with Muslims. The BBS has thus not only directed attacks on people of other religions, but also on fellow Buddhists for interacting with them (Hirunews 2014).

June 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 the intolerance erupted in a clash between Buddhists and Muslims in a coastal town in Sri Lanka, asserting the seriousness of the matter. The clashes resulted in 4 deaths, 3 Muslims and one Buddhist were killed, another 80 people injured, and homes and shops were attacked and destroyed. The dividing line was clearly religion as Muslim homes had been identified and attacked. The riots started after a meeting where the BBS claimed that “It is our country, Sinhala government, Sinhala army and everything is ours!” There is no consensus on whether these attacks had been coordinated beforehand. The BBS itself has denied being behind the riots. This event has made some people draw parallels to the anti-Tamil riots in July 1983, leading up to the civil war (Women’s report July 9<sup>th</sup>).

### 3.4 Previous Research

The most comprehensive study carried out which maps the recent cases of religious intolerance and attacks is a report published by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in 2013. The report states that there is a widespread perception among Sinhala Buddhists that Buddhist faith and the Sinhala Buddhist religious identity are under threat. The report identifies that the experienced threat towards Buddhism in Sri Lanka is mainly perceived to be posed by the Muslim community. The threats include economic threats as Muslim businesses are going well in Sri Lanka, territorial threats as Buddhists find that Muslims are buying more and more land close to Buddhist religious sites, and threats to Buddhists and Buddhist sites of worship due to incidents of physical attacks. Furthermore, there seems to be a widespread feeling of threat regarding conversions, posed by both the Muslim community and by Evangelical Christians, which is expressed in a support for an anti-conversion law. Muslims are claimed to convert Buddhists to their religion through education and intermarriages, which increases the Muslim population (CPA 2013: 3, 30, 55).

According to Ramanathapillai (2012), the creation of narratives of threats posed to Buddhism by for instance land controversies and religious conversions serve to support a certain world view, in this case a Sinhala-Buddhist one. These narratives help to victimize Buddhists and such images become part of identity. The fact that the language of victims is powerful and persuasive and has been kept alive through generations, is today used to support Sinhala-Buddhist dominance and nationalism.



A Sinhala Buddhist dominance and nationalism has been pronounced since independence. Since then, monks have included fundamentalist principles in their teachings during times when the Sangha<sup>7</sup> has perceived threats from a Christian ‘West’ and/or non-Buddhist minorities. The history that is taught in the pirivenas tend to be influenced by a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist point of view and often press for reforms that would strengthen the relationship between the monkhood and the state. Also, since independence many monks have perceived themselves as caretakers and defenders of Sinhala Buddhism. A conviction of the interconnectedness between the nation, religion, and the Sinhalese has led some leading monks to call for the use of force in order to defend the special position of Buddhism in Sri Lanka (de Silva & Bartholomoseusz 2001: 5ff, 12, 20).

The recent Buddhist mobilization can thus be seen as a continuum of a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism present in Sri Lanka. As a counter reaction to the changes brought by the British, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a Sinhala Buddhist nationalism develop alongside a politically nationalistic movement. The foreign European powers were seen as powers of a foreign religion and thereby the resistance against them took religious forms. Religion and language came to represent an answer to colonialism and the monks became the moral guides (Helbardt et al. 2013).

The CPA report (2013) states that there is no single source of the post war violence; the motivations vary but a recurring factor seems to stem from a Sinhala Buddhist national identity. After the civil war there has been an increasing importance placed on religious identity. The post war violence is mainly led by religious and nationalist groups where the Muslim community is the new target. The persecution of minority religions today can be seen to “arise out of the extreme Sinhala nationalism that is ever present in Sinhala-Buddhist society” (Stewart 2013).

In the 1980’s and 1990’s protests against political compromises with the minorities and peace negotiations with the LTTE were normally lead by the clergy. There have thus been recent examples of monks engaging in political matters; protesting against peaceful solutions to the civil war. Their involvement lends credibility to violence against minorities and help fuel violence: “if a religion like Buddhism, known for its peacefulness, can sanction violence against a particular group, then surely that act must be justified” (Stewart 2013). Moreover, the CPA report (2013) states that narratives of fear and insecurity have developed in post-war Sri Lanka.

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<sup>7</sup> The monastic community of ordained monks

These narratives contribute to the perception that attacks are defensive rather than offensive as a feeling of fear exists.

In summary, the recurring ideas regarding the development in Sri Lanka can be summarised as follows; perceived threats to Buddhism, a perceived duty to protect Sinhala Buddhism, nationalistic tendencies tied to Sinhala Buddhist identity, and the use of historical narratives to support contemporary claims as well as the use of narratives of threat to justify violence as defensive. These ideas will be related back to in the analysis. The reading of previous literature has resulted in the focus of this study, namely which operational research questions that will be used to shed light on the overall aim. These are; perceived threats to Buddhism, protection of Buddhism, and religious intolerance and violence.

## 4. Method for Collecting and Analysing Material

This section will present the method used in order to reach the aim of the study. Strengths and weaknesses of the methodological approach will be discussed and the process of collecting and analysing the empirical data will be presented, including choices and changes made throughout the steps. This is done in order to invite the reader to understand the active role of myself as a researcher shaping the research process.

### 4.1 Type of Study

The study carried out has been an exploratory one, with the aim to explore the views of young monks. In an explorative study there is no aim to attempt an explanation of why this or that phenomenon is happening. Rather, an explorative essay contributes with laying the ground for future research, exploring which topics are present and central in a certain phenomenon (Esaiasson et al. 2012: 136, 210). The study thus has no aim to conclude the frequency of a certain perception, or to generalize, but rather to explore different thoughts and perceptions present within a certain sample. As far as I know no in depth accounts of young monks' world views have been explored in Sri Lanka and this study will thereby provide a first insight providing an exploratory character of their accounts.

In order to explore the perceptions of young monks I have carried out a field study in Sri Lanka (April – June 2014) and used in-depth interviewing as the method for collecting material. The study is a qualitative one which allows me as a researcher to go in-depth and to be flexible. The interviews have taken the form of a respondent character which means that the aim is to explore perceptions, which cannot be claimed to be either true or false (Esaiasson et al. 2012: 259).

To broaden my own insight on the societal and cultural context I arranged interviews with five key informants in different fields. These interviews are not included in the results section, rather they provided me with background knowledge of the topic from different perspectives. Of these interviewees, one is a monk from the Ministry of Education, one is the editor in chief of a Sunday newspaper, one a professor in History at Colombo University, one a programme officer for a project on religious tolerance at a think tank and lastly one of the interviewees is a monk studying Sociology at the University of Colombo (see appendix B).

#### 4.2 Selection

The selection of interviewees for the study was based on McCracken's suggested number for in-depth interviewing; that eight interviewees will suffice and that more importance ought to be placed on working longer, closer, and with more precision with the participating interviewees (McCracken 1988: 17). There was thus no aim of finding a representative sample of the category 'young monks in Sri Lanka'. As I was not sure how deep reflections I would be able to get, for instance as an outside researcher (as will be discussed in section 4.4), I aimed for 10 - 15 interviews and the result section presents the answers from 12 young monks.

I chose to conduct the interviews with monks in different *pirivenas* and even in different towns. This choice was made in order to not be too one-sided and to avoid characteristics and world views that may be unique to a specific temple or *pirivena*. The reason for this is that the teachers have a great influence on the students and thus the explored perceptions at one *pirivena* may be typical for the monks there. The towns which have been the basis for the study and in which proximities the *pirivenas* have been situated are Colombo, the most developed, commercial and international big city, Anuradhapura, the most ancient kingdom, an important place in Buddhism history in Sri Lanka, and Alawwa, a small village situated between Colombo and Anuradhapura.

The selection of *pirivenas* and temples where the interviews were conducted was more of a coincidence and an outcome of the people I met in Sri Lanka, either through my contact in field or by visiting temples. At each *pirivena* I thus had a contact person introducing me to the chief monk at the temple or the principle of the *pirivena*; for each interview I needed the permission of either of the two. In one of the towns I initially did not have a contact person and when the head monks heard that I am a foreign researcher they became reluctant and did not want to participate in the study. It became clear that having a contact person helped create the trust needed to arrange the interviews. Those who acted as my contact person were only involved in

the initial meeting and my evaluation is that they have not been able to steer the interviews in any way.

Likewise, the selection of young monks was a coincidence as well. The United Nations works with a definition of *youth* as those between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNDESA 2013). As the category of youth is a fluid one which differs from society to society, the UN's age limit has only functioned as a starting point. At each pirivena visited for this study there were usually 2-3 monks within or close to this age span and these were consequently the one's interviewed. The age group for this study is 17 – 26 years of age, which is a result of the availability of young monks in the chosen pirivenas (see appendix B for a list).

#### 4.3 The Interview Sessions: In-depth Interviews

The interviews were at first designed to be semi-structured interviews; each interview exploring each topic in an interview guide but in different ways and focusing on what is relevant and important to each interviewee (McCracken 1988: 34). An interview guide was constructed with the basis in previous literature and gone through with my contact in field to make sure that the questions were locally anchored (see appendix C). This design was modified after the two first interviews which came to function as pilot interviews.

I found that the monks tended to answer in a way more reflecting what they learn in the pirivena than their own deep reflections. I thereafter changed my approach to the interviewees, concentrating more on hopes and fears as a way to address feelings rather than thoughts and thereby hopefully get a clearer picture of what is important to the monks. The following interviews also took a more conversational form, more liberated from the interview guide. The reason for this was to make it easier to follow the interviewees' line of thoughts and to register unexpected answers. It is a suitable method as there is little knowledge, with no previous studies, on young monks' thoughts and feelings (Esaiasson et al. 2012: 251ff). I found that this approach gave a friendlier tone to the interviews and some ended in mutual discussions.

It was important for me that the interviewees would be able to fully and freely express themselves and thereby conducting the interviews in their native language was an obvious choice for me. I had the help of the same interpreter in all the interviews. The time of the interviews varied between 40 minutes up to 2 hours, depending on the time schedule of the monks. Each interview was recorded after first receiving the permission from the interviewee. I made it clear that the recordings were only to be listened to by myself and only used for the purpose of this study.

#### 4.4 Problems with the Method

The validity in a scientific study concerns the absence of systematic errors, in other words, whether I am studying what I claim to study (Esaiasson et al. 2012: 56). In my case it is important to state that I have been guided by my research questions which I aimed to discuss in each interview. So while the interviews had a conversational in-depth character, they at the same time had a tendency to explore the questions under study. I may thus have angled the interviews when being guided by the research questions which is ethically problematic in an explorative study as the outcome will show a lot of focus on these particular questions.

The reliability of the study is ensured by making sure that there are no, or being aware of the, possible mistakes during the data collection. These can include those of stress, tiredness, messy notes and misunderstandings during the interviews (Esaiasson et al. 2012: 63). In my case the most crucial factor is that of the language barrier. Language might have been a barrier for me to fully comprehend the youths' world of ideas and to represent and analyse them in a fair way. Thankfully I have had an interpreter who was well acquainted with Buddhism history in Sri Lanka and with Buddhist concepts and has explained local and religious terms used by the young monks.

During some of the interviews there was a teacher or the principle present. Once because it was demanded by one of the interviewees and another time because the headmaster did not let us conduct the interviews alone. During a few interviews there were also other monks passing by, we were thus not able to conduct all the interviews privately. This can have limited (or increased) how comfortable and relaxed the interviewees felt and the amount of information and type of thoughts they choose to share.

A note will be mentioned on my standpoint in relation to the interviewees. Being a woman and coming from a Western society I hold a standpoint very different from my interviewees. This is important to highlight as this means that I most likely miss references or metaphors specific for the Sri Lankan or Buddhist society and culture. It is reasonable to expect that interviewees will speak differently with people they consider 'the same' than with someone viewed as 'the other'. There are however not only blind spots with holding such a standpoint. The fact that I come from a different culture may also spur the monks to talk more freely as they have no obligations towards me in the sense of moral guidance as they have towards the lay community (Sprague 2005: 123f).

#### 4.5 Ethical Considerations

The topic and method I have chosen requires some consideration of my own role in the study and in the interaction with the interviewees. Since the starting point of my study I have reflected upon who my study can come to affect and how. It has been important for me to ensure anonymity to the interviewees as well as emphasize that the interviews are completely voluntary and can be ended at any point. I have decided to not mention in which pirivenas I conducted the interviews in order to ensure my interviewees full confidence. An information letter (see appendix D) was handed out to the chief monks or principles of the pirivenas on which my contact details were specified.

The conclusions made in this paper may stir up emotions among people of the different religious communities in Sri Lanka. However, as the study does not aim to be representative of a larger population, rather focus on these youths specifically to gain a deeper insight on their reflections on Buddhism in Sri Lanka I hope readers of this paper respect their perceptions. In order for the participants to access the paper they will need internet as I can only share my thesis with them electronically. Language poses a barrier as most of the monks have limited English skills and may therefore not strive to be involved in the results as much as they would otherwise.

Lastly, the choice of topic for the study needs to be discussed in order to present a critical study which is not blindfolded by my own standpoint. When choosing the subject of my bachelor thesis it was the recent development of radical Buddhist mobilization in Sri Lanka (and in parts of East Asia) that caught my interest. How one sees the Buddhist mobilization is closely intertwined with how one understands the role of Buddhism in the society. When introducing my study I have presented it as an exploration of young monks' perceptions on the role of Buddhism in the Sri Lankan society. As my curiosity for the mobilization is what has steered my research, it can be considered unethical to not have informed the interviewees about this particular focus. As I am writing about a sensitive issue it has been a necessary evil as I might not have been allowed to conduct interviews if the monks were aware of this focus or they might have answered in a different way having this knowledge beforehand. By sharing my initial interest in the research topic I hope to reveal any agendas and biases I might have as a researcher (Sprague 2005: 167f).

In fact, during my first interviews it became clear to me that I am writing about a sensitive issue. After the first interview the head monk of the temple approached me and kindly asked me to not ask questions about Buddhist radical groups because, as he explained it, the monks in his

temple are not connected to these groups and do not know about their claims and acts. He feared that my study may give Buddhism a bad name by writing about incidents of radical Buddhists. When approaching the following interviewees I was clearer in explaining that the purpose of the interviews are not to find facts about Buddhism, rather the aim is to explore youths' views on topics related to Buddhism in society and that these will not be generalized upon.

#### 4.6 Method for Analysing Data

During the interviews I made notes and noted the time when something new, interesting, or relating to the research questions was said. After this I listened to the timings I had noted down to elaborate my notes. I then printed the notes and started to read through all of them in order to get an idea of which categories that reappeared throughout the interviews. I took off in McCracken's method for analysis which aims at finding into which categories the respondents organize the world. The aim of identifying categories is not to discover how many of the interviewees that share certain characteristics. Rather, it is used as a method to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions used to interpret the world (McCracken 1988). These categories were then sorted under the three research questions and ordered into subsections.

When I had a clear overall picture of the material, I went through each interview individually, noting examples of the different categories as well as marking ideas that stood out. The result of this process is that the result section includes both a presentation of categories commonly found in the interviewees, and some examples of how these categories were expressed by an individual monk. Also some unique categories or ideas only expressed by one or a few monks are included and show other understandings of the topics in this research. Important to note is that the discussions in the interviews were much broader but for the reason of this paper and in order to answer the research questions, only material relating to the questions are presented in the result section.

When the result section had been written I analysed it using the analytical framework. The discussions from previous literature and the theoretical discussions were the tools used to give meaning and to put the results into an academic context. This way interesting and surprising results as well as possible contributions of the study are highlighted.

#### 4.7 Problems with the Method for Analysing Data

A problem present when analysing the results is that the interviewees and I most likely do not understand nor define the words and concepts used in the same way. For instance I include Buddhist attacks on minorities as religious intolerance, the monks may on the other hand not.

Furthermore, the connections I make in the analysis may be steered by my background assumptions based on previous research. This can limit the appreciation of the matter but it is not necessarily a bad result, rather a natural process which helps us to perceive the new knowledge within an already existing frame of reference (Gilje et al. 2007: Chapter 2). Important to note is that other concepts and discussions may have been able to highlight and explain the results in another light which could be equally as important approaches to understanding the youths' perceptions. Nevertheless, this study gives a first insight to the matter.

## 5. Empirical Findings: Results

This section will present the results which have been structured after the three research questions.

### 5.1 Perception of Threats

The theme of threats was usually discussed as a follow-up to other discussions about for instance Buddhism's role in society or protection of Buddhism. In the interviews, threats to Buddhism were perceived to originate from minority religions, the followers of Buddhism themselves, the West and from elites. Mainly threats perceived to originate from the West were based on a suspicion about the West's founding's and interests in the country. Threats perceived from domestic elites concentrated on when they threaten heritage sites. As the perceived threats posed by the West and elite groups in Sri Lanka were articulated by only one or two monks and not elaborated on, these will not be included in this section. Also the view that nothing can threaten Buddhism was expressed.

#### 5.1.1 Perceived Threats from Minority Religions

Concerning threats from minority religions, some of the interviewees expressed a worry that the Sinhalese population was decreasing while the Muslim community in Sri Lanka was growing. One interviewee referred to the fact that Muslims are allowed to have many wives and will therefore naturally have more children. Others highlighted conversions as a way for the Muslim population to grow fast. The growing Muslim community is perceived as a threat and many of the monks interviewed referred to the cases of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as examples of previously Buddhist countries that have become Muslim dominated, and a few feared the same developing for Sri Lanka (eg. interviewee 10). One monk distanced himself from the discourse of threat that many of the monks took for granted, saying that "the Muslim



ethnicity is growing [in numbers] but [I] cannot say whether it is an actual fact or not” (interviewee 8).

The other threats perceived from the Muslim community were less expressed than that of a growing Muslim population. These include an economic threat as Muslim businesses are going well, territorial threats referring to land issues, and to threats stemming from attacks on Buddhists and Buddhist temples. A threat expressed by a few of the monks, is that people from minority religions in the country interpret the Buddhist teachings in a wrong way and try to spread that message, what a wrong way entailed was however not elaborated upon. Furthermore, the term *pseudo monks* was brought up, that is, Muslims and Christians who become monks and try to undermine the religion from within by not adhering to Buddhist rules, for instance by eating during the night which is not allowed for monks (interviewee 9).

Interviewee 6 explains that he is worried as Buddhism has experienced “some kind of” backwardness in Sri Lanka and become less prominent because of the presence of other religions. Another monk stated that minority religions have influenced Sinhala values, he states that “Sinful habits have spread to Sinhala Buddhists”. When talking about threats from the Muslim community, some interviewees referred to the Muslims as immoral or less moral as animal sacrifices are a part of religious customs. One interviewee said that

“the Muslims are misconducting, doing illegal business. They have a different legal frame in Sri Lanka, they can marry many wives and thereby have more children, their population is increasing and if you compare to others, they do not have that many children in a family” (interviewee 10).

He also stated that extremist Muslims are damaging Buddhism. One of the monks speculated that already in 2030 Buddhism in Sri Lanka may be in a disastrous situation if what he perceived to be extremist Muslims damaging Buddhism continues.

One of the monks explained that when Arahat Mahinda, a Buddhist envoy from India, came to Sri Lanka he smoothly increased Buddhism in the country by a reinterpretation of already existing religions. He emphasised the fact that Mahinda did not neglect any of the religions present and that the outcome of his reinterpretation was Sinhala Buddhism. The monk illustrated this example as to portray the difference between Buddhists and Muslims. He said that when Muslims come to a country, they convert everyone, mainly through intermarriages, to their religion and completely neglect all other religions present (interviewee 10). Christians are also viewed to pose threats, however in a more explicit way than Muslims, making them

less of a threat. Their tactics are considered explicit as they are concentrated on converting Buddhists to Christianity by foreign aid or aid given by churches in Sri Lanka.

Interviewee 12 expressed the idea that no other religion can threaten Buddhism, the essence of it will sustain. The essence of Buddhism, as explained by this monk, is the realistic understanding of things in a society; the nature of impermanence of the world and the body.

“The truth is this impermanence and transformation. At the centre is the suffering. Buddhism is the understanding of this”.

However, he addressed the fact that other religions can threaten the devotees of Buddhism. He gave the example of other religions having tactics to convert Buddhists to their religion, this he views as a threat. He explains that Buddhism has no strive for increasing their devotees, that the Buddha had asked people to come and listen if they want, and if they agree, they can practice and adhere to a Buddhist understanding of the world. In a few interviews the view that when you speak in the context of Buddhism there is no worry or fear and that Buddhism will ever be destroyed, was brought up.

Some of the monks referred back to the time of the Buddha saying that even then there were challenges and threats to Buddhism. There were for instance religious missionaries preaching against Buddhism, trying to condemn it. At some point people who previously insulted Buddhism went to see the Buddha and became Buddhist. With the basis in, some monks explained that one should therefore accept that there can be threats in present times as well (for instance interviewees 7 and 8). One interviewee referred to what the Buddha himself has said; that the Buddhism of him, that is the Gautama Buddha, will only last for 5000 years, till the next Buddha becomes enlightened. Now that we are midway (approx. 2500 years has passed) it is natural that Buddhism is not as strong.

#### 5.1.2 Perceived Threats from within Buddhism

One category of threats that was repeatedly expressed by the interviewees was threats posed from within Buddhism. Throughout the interviews the monks placed as much attention to the behaviour of the monks as to that of the lay people when discussing threats from within. The young monks identified several ways Buddhism can be undermined from within. These include the declining number of monks, the questioned moral behaviour of monks, and the distance created between the lay community and the temples as the devotees have become more busy with their lives.

A common perception, which will be further outlined in the next section 5.1.3, was that to protect Buddhism the priority goes to the protection of the monkhood (eg. interviewee 12), mainly through making sure that there are monks. Many of the interviewed monks expressed that there are fewer boys enrolling as monks today and one reason for this is that families have fewer children and thereby do not want to give one child to the monkhood. Another perceived threat to the monkhood, as expressed by monks in the same *pirivena*, was that the rate of leaving monkhood is increasing, especially among the monks that attend the university; the explanation given was the luxury life that a university degree makes possible. A perception of threat as a consequence of decreasing morality among some monks was also mentioned. A few of the monks expressed the view that some monks are becoming less devoted to their tasks as monks by for instance engaging in political affairs.

In the same *pirivena* all of the interviewed monks emphasized that the devotees have today become much distanced from the practice of Buddhism because of their busy daily lives. Referred to as more material, the busy contemporary lives of Buddhists lead to a greater distance between lay people and the temples. Interviewee 10 expressed it as “today people are just Buddhists by name”, referring to the decrease in spirituality in the society as people only enjoy worldly things and do not think beyond this, specifically, he explains, they do not think about dying. The emphasis among the interviewed monks has however been on the free choice of the lay people; that it is completely up to them to engage deeper in Buddhism or not, they cannot be forced to be more spiritual or Buddhists by heart. Even though it should stay a free choice, one monk said that the morality of the people in society will decline if they do not engage with Buddhism. Some of the monks expressed a concern that Buddhism’s role and status in the Sri Lankan society is degrading as a result of the increasing distance between the lay community and Buddhist teachings.

One monk explained that people are getting more attached to Buddhism at the same time as they are getting distanced from it. The idea he expressed was that the lay community tend to do more explicit worshipping but are becoming more distanced from following Buddhist teachings and scriptures, that is, the philosophical and moral ground of Buddhism. This monk explained that the reason for this is most likely the busy modern lives of the lay community and the development of science which has made people follow financial and commercial dreams. This gives them less time to “be with Buddhism” and thereby become less knowledgeable about religion and are only left with worshipping which they know how to practice. The monk emphasized that in order to understand Buddhism you have to question the thoughts behind it

and engage with it in a critical and logical way (interviewee 5). Other monks addressed the fact that the lay community are actually doing less explicit worshipping, only visiting temples at poya<sup>8</sup> days and that soon it might even be less.

## 5.2 Protection of Buddhism

When discussing the protection of Buddhism in Sri Lanka the main question posed was:

“I have heard that some Sri Lankan monks consider Sri Lanka as the sanctuary for pure Theravada Buddhism. And Sri Lankan monks as the protectors of it. What are your thoughts on this?”

The interviewees’ answers concerned by whom and how Buddhism should be preserved and protected in Sri Lanka, if at all. Frequently the role of the government was mentioned as a key actor in preserving Buddhism. Some monks also highlighted the role monks and the lay community hold, for instance by working together to strengthen Buddhism in society. Radical Buddhist groups were referred to as having been created for the protection of Buddhism. Furthermore, some monks expressed that a Sinhala Buddhist majority on the island would protect the religion, while others highlighted that a reinterpretation of Buddhism is needed.

### 5.2.1 Protection by the Government, Monks and the Lay Community

Some of the interviewees emphasized the role the government should have in protecting Buddhism. Examples of how the government could protect Buddhism were usually given by referring to action taken to develop the financial situation of the Sinhalese in order to see to that they increase their population. The reason to have more children was usually motivated by the fact that families in this way may give a child to the monkhood which is becoming less common today as parents only have two to three children and want them to protect them when they get older (eg. Interviewee 7). It was also mentioned that the government should be the main actor in making sure that the Muslim population does not expand more.

One interviewee expressed the thought that if the government and monkhood can work together to enhance the prominence of Buddhism, then the backwardness which the religion has experienced due to the presence of other religions will be solved. This monk believed Buddhism should hold a special position and the government should for instance act according to a Buddhist perspective. The interviewee here gives the example of animal sacrifices which he considers not appropriate and something the government should prohibit (interviewee 6).

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<sup>8</sup> Poya means full moon. Each full moon day in Sri Lanka are public holidays and during some there are festivities.

Some monks highlighted the role monks can play through arranging special programmes, for instance during poya days, giving speeches about Buddhism, and to teach about Buddhist philosophy. While some monks referred to the increasing distance between lay people and temples as something created by the devotees, one monk also addressed the fact that some monks are becoming more distanced from their duties in the temple. Instead of being present in the temples and acting as moral guides and giving time to the devotees visiting, many are now busy being active in politics, attending the University, or giving tuition classes. In order to protect Buddhism and to not harm it in the long run, monks have to take on their full responsibilities as monks (interviewee 12).

Interviewee 10 explained that some geographical areas of towns in Sri Lanka have become completely Muslim dominated and that there is no way of getting these back. He refers to Muslim dominated areas as specific areas in towns where more Muslims than Buddhists or people of other religions are living and says that there are many recent examples of this. He emphasized that areas with Sinhala Buddhists need to be protected. The monks in his temple encourage the Buddhists in the neighbourhood to stay and to not sell land; “You shouldn’t fight and make another war, just think about what we have now and protect it”.

Furthermore, some of the interviewees referred to the protection of the monkhood as the first priority when it comes to the protection of Buddhism. Some of the monks addressed the lay community’s role in assuring that there are monks. Referring to the tendency of leaving the monkhood, one monk outlined how the lay community should improve their relationship with the temple and respect and protect monks in order to decrease this tendency. He stated that to save Buddhism in Sri Lanka the monkhood and the lay community should work hand in hand. Practically the lay people should first provide the basic needs for monks, secondly the lay people should realise that there are temples that do not get enough food for survival<sup>9</sup> and thirdly the lay community should follow the principles of Buddhism (interviewee 6).

The same monk identified the greatest obstacle for such a connection between the lay community and the monkhood to be that the lay people are too busy with their worldly activities and have forgotten the existence of temples: “This distance cause more to disturb Buddhism in Sri Lanka”. He says that enhancing this relationship will serve and save Buddhism role in society; lay people should provide temples with needs they have and monks should engage

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<sup>9</sup> The temples and monks staying at them are to a large extent dependent on lay people as they provide the monks with daily food, other personal needs, and donations in order to maintain the temples.

actively in preaching Buddhism in society. Buddhism's role can thus be 'saved' by devotees and monks working hand in hand, each part doing their share.

Interviewee 10 speculated that in 50 years Sri Lanka will be well developed and become a material heaven but that spiritually the country will decline. Furthermore, the monk also said that Buddhism will not be protected in Sri Lanka but in Europe and in the United States. He is confident that it will be safeguarded somewhere; "In Buddhism nothing is permanent, at some point Buddhism will not be present in Sri Lanka". He also explained how the strand of Theravada Buddhism is what is giving prominence to the discipline of Buddhism and that "if you follow the discipline, then Theravada will be protected". This puts the role of protecting Buddhism on everyone, the more people that follow it, the more protected it will be.

#### 5.2.2 Protection by Radical Groups

One of the interviewees expressed the opinion that monks have to lead the protection of Buddhism and that the lay community should follow them. He said that even though Buddha never preached that attacks against other religions can be a means to protect Buddhism, times have changed and sometimes the situation may call for such actions; "Any religion tries to protect their own religion [...] The monks play a leading role" (interviewee 8). According to this monk a leading role entails a somewhat radical one. He tells that the radical monks are the strength and the ones that protect the religion. According to him, most lay people support these leading monks (interviewee 8).

Another monk brought up the BBS when asked about monks' role in contemporary Sri Lankan society. He explained how BBS initiatives try to protect Buddhism by having a surveillance on the religion by for instance trying to stop monks who try to undermine Buddhism. He refers to these monks as pseudo monks, trying to undermine the religion from within. He also gives the example of when the BBS stormed a press conference (the one outlined in section 3.3) where one monk was, in his words, praising other religions such as Islam (interviewee 9).

Interviewee 12 expressed that he found the acts of Gnanasaara, the head of the BBS, to be good but that the way he uses words is at times really harmful to some parts of the society. He explained that Gnanasaara wants to protect the monkhood and that he finds it good and appreciates it. Interviewee 11 on the other hand clearly stated that he did not accept the BBS's initiatives to protect Sinhala Buddhism and said that it should be the government's role to adopt proper policies, for instance to make sure that the Muslim community does not expand more.

### 5.2.3 Protection by Maintaining a Sinhala Buddhist Majority

A recurring theme that was brought up when discussing the protection of Buddhism was that the Sinhala Buddhist community should increase their population. A common perception was that Sinhala Buddhists should have more children. One of the monks explained that

“The main thing is religion, whatever the nationality, whatever the ethnicity, you could become Buddhist. Sinhala people are naturally Buddhist, they are born Buddhist. If the majority is Sinhala, then the probability is high that Buddhism will be protected. Sinhala people think that Buddhism is their own heritage, their own thing” (interviewee 8).

Islam was explained as stronger than Buddhism in the world; the majority in the world are Muslims while Buddhists, and Sinhala Buddhism especially, are in minority. A few monks feared that Sri Lanka at some point will be converted to Islam, as the growing population of Muslims are seen as the cause to how Islam has changed some countries in the world (eg. interviewee 1, 5). When arguing for a Sinhala Buddhist majority, one monk expressed it as “Sinhalese people only have this country” (interviewee 9) and another one said “Sinhala Buddhists should be in majority”, especially because sinful habits from minority religions have spread to Sinhala Buddhist culture (interviewee 2).

One interviewee expressed that;

“the monks in particular, they love Sinhala nationality. The problems we are having here in Sri Lanka is a kind of an ethnic problem and this problem will be more harmful in the future, so we like if Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese country” (interviewee 5).

When discussing the possibilities of religious coexistence in Sri Lanka one of the interviewees explained how this made no sense to him. He gave the case of Bangladesh as an example. The monk explained how other religions will invade the space under a false coexistence and like in Bangladesh, a previously Buddhist country will become Muslim dominated. Therefore, it is important to maintain a Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka. One interviewee differentiated from the others as he explained that it

“doesn’t matter if a country consists of mixed religions. As long as the Sri Lankans can live in harmony, helping each other, then there is no need for Buddhist majority in the country” (interviewee 3).

#### 5.2.4 Protection by a Reinterpretation of Buddhist Practice

It was also suggested that there is a need for a reinterpretation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. One monk expressed a fear that the status of being a monk in Sri Lanka will degrade as well as the social respect for the monkhood. This worry stemmed from the involvement of monks in politics or monks mobilizing for demonstrations, which according to him is not suitable. The interviewee maintained that society can be lost if people do not have a place to go to for advice, referring to the temples where monks advise the lay community. He recognizes that something should be done about this and that action should be initiated from the chief monks at a national level as they have the power to influence the Sangha. They should reinterpret the moral and disciplines of Buddhist monks to find new rules, thus, not the doctrine of the Buddha but rather the rules monks live by (interviewee 1). One monk found a need of a reinterpretation of Buddhism as he said that lay people find that there are “no more moral monks”. A reference was made by two monks to Ashoka, the Indian emperor who made a reinterpretation of the Buddhist disciplines which expelled 60 000 monks from the monkhood. One monk referred to a reinterpretation as an effective way to get rid of pseudo monks (interviewee 9).

One interviewee suggested a reinterpretation to be initiated as monks should not engage in politics. When discussing monks engaging in riots and violence as a defence of Buddhism, the monk explained that if action is taken for this *sole* reason, that is, to protect the Sinhalese nationality and Buddhism, “you have to raise”. When asked to elaborate on this the monk explained that small uprisings towards Muslims can be justified as there is a conspiracy of them degrading Sinhala Buddhism. He further explained that when he talked about a reinterpretation he did not consider it a necessity due to monks mobilizing towards outside threats, only when it comes to the active involvement of monks in politics as they do it to get power, which cannot legitimate their actions. He says that this point of view is not only his own but reflects that of a larger population.

#### 5.3 Religious Intolerance and Violence

The theme of religious intolerance and violence was approached in many different ways depending on the discussions developing in each interview. Cases of religious intolerance which may, or already has, resulted in violence was discussed as stemming from both the Muslim and the Buddhist communities.



### 5.3.1 *Religious Intolerance?*

When discussing the recent cases of religious intolerance in the country, one of the young monks provided a new perspective. He was very clear in explaining and talking about the recent tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in terms of nationality. He also talked about it as a cultural and ethnic conflict; “I would like to perceive it as an ethnic problem, not as a religious one”. When referring to monks acting radically, for instance by attacking mosques and using violence, he said that their anger can be justified and that they act as if it is a nationalist question, not as a religious matter. He explains that they are patriotic and therefore act in this patriotic way, and not mainly as monks;

“This is not monks engaging in violence, this is not Buddhism, Buddhism is something different and you have to follow it. The image that follow these sort of actions of monks can be bad for Buddhism, but it is nothing of Buddhism” (interviewee 5).

The same monk gave the example of when a recently built mosque was attacked. The young monk explained that there is a historical background to the place where the mosque was constructed, it is close to a Bodhi tree<sup>10</sup> and situated in the most ancient kingdom of Sri Lanka. He refers to the Muslim community as trying to make a statement when building a mosque at this place and as a way to steer conflict. The monk also explained how there are Muslim countries which monks cannot visit, contrasting it to the case of Sri Lanka where all religions are welcomed. He states that Muslims can practice their religion as they want in Sri Lanka and that “they use this freedom to make a problem”.

### 5.3.2 *Views on Violent Actions*

When asked about the topic of violent actions all of the interviews said that you should never use violence. However, as the interviews proceeded, some of the monks would later on express that the use of radical actions might be a necessity for the protection of Buddhism if there is a threat towards it. The young monks who expressed such an idea did not regard such actions, which could include violence, as sins or as immoral, rather they saw them as stemming from the good initial thought of protecting Buddhism.

When discussing karma<sup>11</sup> the interviewees referred to the idea that the thought always precedes the action; that the thought itself becomes the deed and lastly the words. I asked questions aimed at exploring how the young monks reflect upon karmic effects in relation to violent actions.

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<sup>10</sup> The Buddha gained enlightenment under a Bodhi tree and the tree remains holy for Buddhists still today.

<sup>11</sup> Karma governs the way moral deeds affect individuals today and in future lives

Regarding instances of violence carried out by Buddhists and monks towards sites or people of other religions, some of the interviewees explained how the good intention of protecting Sinhala nationality and the future of the Sinhalese population will make any such actions considered a merit. One monk explained that even if a good intention harms people there will be a bad reaction in one's karmic cycle and the merits and sins will in this case be the same, they will cancel each other out (interviewee 7).

When asked about thoughts on the riots which took place June 15<sup>th</sup> 2014 in Sri Lanka (mentioned under section 3.3), one monk expressed that

“Sinhala Buddhists have a compassion, a patience, a love towards humanity and all living things. But there is a limit, if you have a threat to your existence, there will be a limit to this love towards humanity. If it comes to this, there may be another war, a possibility of such a clash (between Buddhists and Muslims), because there is a limit for their patience. The Sinhalese will not stay patient if there is a threat to Buddhism and Sinhala”,

referring to the Sinhalese ethnicity (interviewee 10).

### 5.3.3 Motivations for Radical Buddhist Mobilization

The young monks' understandings of motivations for radical Buddhist mobilization include threats to Buddhist faith, Buddhism being in decline, pseudo monks trying to undermine Buddhism, extremist Muslims and weak state structures. As only the latter has not been developed upon already it will be the focus in this section.

One of the interviewees compared the political and juridical structures of European societies with that of Sri Lanka. He explained how he views European societies to have profound political and legal frames which protect the nations, which Sri Lanka lacks. Because of this, monks have to engage with these matters (referring to actions taken towards Muslims) more than engaging in religious matters (interviewee 5). Another young monk agreed on the fact that failed political and juridical institutions are a reason for the formation of Buddhist radical organizations.

“The law didn't work. There were incidents that the law didn't give solutions to. There were incidents like cutting of Bodhi trees” (interviewee 9).

In order to solve such injustices, something needed to be done outside of the political and legal frame. He highlights that it is good if law and order works and if there are measures to clear up such incidents. However as it has proved to fail, there is a need for other actors to take on the role of defending Buddhism, for instance by getting rid of pseudo monks who give wrong

interpretations of Buddhism, destroy Buddhist sacred places, and steal Buddhist ruins (interviewee 9).

Interviewee 5 stated that monks should engage in what he perceives as an ethnic problem because monks have historically given advice to the nation. However, he stresses that monks should provide a proper understanding of the situation and not to engage in violent manners. Interviewee 10 used the example of how in previous times the kings used to protect Buddhism. According to him, the protection of Buddhism was even more important than their own lives. Today on the other hand, the political institutions and the new form of government, referring to the presidential system, cannot protect Buddhism sufficiently. Interviewee 13 explains the formation of groups like the BBS as a consequence of Buddhism being in decline, which he says you can feel is happening.

## 6. Analysis

In this section the research questions will be answered and thereafter the aim will be addressed. The analysis of the results will take off along the line of the analytical framework, as outlined at the end of the theory section (2.3). The results will also be presented in relation to previous research to show some contributions of this study.

### 6.1 How do the young monks see and understand threats to Buddhism?

How the monks talked about threats varied; some regarded threats as natural while others suggested actions to be taken against them. Taking off in Lausten and Waever's categorization of threats posed to religion from (1) non-religious global forces and actors and (2) other religious discourses and actors, the latter will firstly be discussed. Among some monks the most pronounced threat to Buddhism stemmed from other religions. In line with previous literature (CPA 2013), the Muslim community, and to some extent the Christian community, were perceived to pose a threat to Buddhism. The threats mentioned during the interviews were similar to the once mentioned in the CPA report; territorial threats, economic threats, threats of conversions, and also threats of attacks. The most pronounced threat stemmed from a perception of a growing Muslim community.

The feeling of threat stemming from a growing Muslim community in Sri Lanka can at a first glance seem exaggerated when looking at the population numbers of the religious communities where Buddhists constitute over 70 %, while Muslims make up 10 % of the population. However when speaking to the young monks they tend to see the problem in a larger context,

referring to a threat that the number of Muslims are increasing in the world and changing some countries into Islamic countries. A few monks feared that Sri Lanka at some point will be converted to Islam. Thus, the interviewees refer to a global context when arguing for the importance of a Sinhala Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka; they see themselves as a minority in the world.

Furthermore, the fact that the perceived threats from minority religions concern numbers, population growth, can be crucial in future conflict dynamics. When the conflict is about *how many* of the others there are, one might assume that anti-Muslim sentiments will address Muslims as individuals rather than their cultural, religious practices. Muslims by their very existence are seen as a threat and as a result, measures taken aimed at solving the perceived problem might be directed at restricting or getting rid of numbers; that is individuals.

Moving on, none of the interviewees explicitly mentioned a threat from non-religious global forces or actors, which according to Lausten and Waever (2000) is the most common way through which religion is involved in international politics. Instead, a third source of perceived threats to Buddhism was found which has not been found in the previous literature, namely that of threats posed from within the religion itself; by Buddhists themselves, including both lay and monastic Buddhists.

This understanding of what threatens or weakens a religion suggests that it is in fact the believers of a faith that are the strength of it. One could argue that there are always threats and that they can be perceived differently at different times and in different contexts. For instance, if the Muslim population is increasing, it can be seen as a fact by some and by others as a threat. It shows more about oneself, about what is important and/or what one feels insecure about, for instance about a loss of something which may be because of completely other reasons than the perceived threats. Such an interpretation is strengthened by the fact that some monks perceived the Muslim population to be growing and perceived threats to Buddhism, but understood the facts as natural which did not engage them in a special way.

We have now clarified where the perceived threats stem from. A note will also be made on what exactly it is that is perceived to be threatened. A growing Muslim population is perceived to threaten the dominance of Buddhist faith in Sri Lanka. While a decrease in the religiosity among lay people challenges the need for the religious institution of Buddhism; the monkhood and the temples. In relation to this many of the monks referred to the need of protecting *Sinhala* Buddhists, mainly by assuring a majority. Sinhala Buddhism refers to the ethno-religious

identity held by many Buddhists. This reflects the discussion by Lausten & Waeber (2000) who claim that religion is existential by nature and thereby threats towards for instance sacred objects are perceived as destroying faith and thereby abolishing being; it concerns both the survival of the faith and of the religious identity of believers. This is similar to what the CPA report (2013) concludes, that there is a perceived threat to Buddhist faith, and also to Buddhists religious identity.

## 6.2 How do the young monks see and understand the need of protection of Buddhism in Sri Lanka?

Concerning the monks' understandings of protecting Buddhism, what the monks chose to talk about varied more than for instance concerning threats. Some monks did not consider Buddhism to be in need of protection, while others saw a protection of the faith as something which could call for the need of violence.

According to Patterson there are different ways through which religion can inspire conflict. The two mentioned in this paper can be applied to the Sri Lankan case; Religious leaders can tell followers to engage in conflict as seen in Sri Lanka by monks calling for Buddhists to become unofficial policemen towards Muslims. The other way is when a specific place or thing is sacralised, which can also be seen in Sri Lanka where the island is believed to have been sanctified by the Buddha as the island where the Dhamma should be fostered, consequently leaving the monks with a perceived duty of protecting the faith (DeSilva & Bartholomeusz 2011). Some of the monks referred to this but mentioned the government as a key actor in the protection of Buddhism; strengthening my understanding of their view of Buddhism as a religion which should be prominent (even protected) in Sri Lanka.

Concerning the importance placed on the state as an actor for protecting Buddhism, Gould's (2011) discussion concerning the relationship between a perceived weak state and religious mobilization could be used to make sense of the monks' thoughts. Gould holds that mobilization can be a means to protect where state intuitions have failed. Such a climate makes it easier for religious leaders to incite hatred (Kadayifci-Orellanda 2009: 266f). Two of the monks held similar understandings of the importance of the state structures, explaining that Buddhism is not protected sufficiently by the government and therefore radical monks take action. One can thus conclude that radical mobilization essentially suggests the failure of the state to establish a system that is both socially and culturally inclusive as well as politically secular and democratic. If the state fails to provide security to groups, whether of the same or different

ethnicities or religions, it can thus be a breeding point for mobilization, even a radical one. This stresses the need of a stronger state and suggests that the mobilization in Sri Lanka might say something about the political system as well.

When discussing the protection of Buddhism none of the monks expressed a view that radical actions or violence can be a way of protecting Buddhism. Some would bring up radical groups as having been formed to protect Buddhism, without placing a value on the fact. It was only when discussing Buddhist mobilization that some would say that more radical forms may in fact be necessary for the protection of Buddhism, if there is a threat to it. This could suggest that the use of discourses of threat and victimization are used to justify the use of violence, it serves to portray violent acts as defensive rather than offensive (CPA 2013, Ramanathapillai 2012).

### 6.3 How do the young monks see and understand cases of religious intolerance and violence?

The two perceptions concerning the intrinsic nature of religion mentioned in the theory chapter (Strenski 2010) can be used to categorize some of the monks' answers: the mainstream perception sees religion as peaceful and the other one sees religion as also worldly, political and violent. One of the monks explicitly said that the radical mobilization by monks are in fact nothing of Buddhism. He saw and understood the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims as about cultural and ethnic issues, not religious ones. He talked about Buddhist mobilization in terms of nationality and said that radical monks act as if it is a nationalist question. In his view Buddhism should not be connected to these events. That the Buddhist mobilization might in fact be a nationalistic issue follows Helbardt et al. (2013) who suggest that it can be seen as a continuum of a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. This viewpoint could be a reflection of religion as peaceful, and when seen to act 'bad' it cannot be religion and must be used for other purposes. Furthermore the monk labels the conflict after the issues he perceives to be the driver of it rather than with a basis of the religious identities between the parties; Buddhists and Muslims.

Perhaps this monk's take on the events can in fact enhance our understanding of the current Buddhist mobilization. Perhaps the mobilization has more to do with a national identity, stemming from the interconnectedness of the Sinhalese ethnic group, the Buddhist religion and the Sri Lankan island which was stressed by deSilva & Bartholomeusz (2001). Following the line of Abeysekara (in Gould 2011) it is however not fruitful for our understanding of the events

to distance such events from ‘true Buddhism’. The reality is that monks can be witnessed acting violently and we need to understand religion as also political.

The viewpoint which accepts religion to also be political and violent can be used to highlight the understanding of two of the monks. One monk said that times have changed and in today’s context Buddhism can and may have to be violent. Another monk explained how there can be a limit to Buddhists compassion and patience toward others. These two monks illustrate an understanding of Buddhism as also political, and violent.

Strenski’s discussion can thus help us understand the monks’ viewpoints along a distinction of religion as peaceful or as also political. However, one could also suggest that religion is foremost cultural, and that culture can be violent. Following the monk who understood the mobilization of monks as about culture and ethnicity, perhaps cultural Buddhism could be a useful analytical category. Sinhala Buddhism could be seen as a cultural ‘strand’ of Buddhism, a product of the role Buddhism had in creating and uniting the Sinhala ethnicity. Rather than being understood in relation to the Dhamma, Buddhism in Sri Lanka is understood in relation to tradition, rituals, and identity.

Lastly, some of the interviewees held the view that the motivation for Buddhist mobilization determines if they find it acceptable or not; if it is done with the good initial thought of protecting Buddhism or not. In other words, the motivations justify the means. This can have severe consequences if it get to the point when harming innocent people is seen as a good deed. References to the protection of Buddhism when committing radical actions can thus serve to justify them. If the motivations justify the means, religion can easily be used as a ‘tool’. However, as Waeber (2006) argues, seeing religion as a tool, as an effect of something, regards the view that committed believers will go to extreme lengths in order to protect their religion from a perceived threat, as seen in the case of Sri Lanka.

#### 6.4 Reaching the aim: Exploring young monks’ perceptions on the role of Buddhism in society and radical Buddhist mobilization

The three research questions will in this section be the starting point for shedding light on the aim by shortly presenting how some understandings of them tell us something about the aim. Firstly, threats perceived to Buddhism are seen to lead to the declining role of Buddhism in society. This is true for threats perceived from the outside, in this case minority religions, as well as from the inside, for instance by lay people becoming less religious. Secondly, the viewpoint that Buddhism should be prominent in the society is highlighted by the fact that the

religion should be protected by the government. Likewise, the emphasised importance on a Sinhala Buddhist majority suggest that Buddhism should have a prominent role. Thirdly, the perception of protecting Buddhism from perceived threats and from a perceived decline as the *sole* legitimate reason for uprisings, even violent ones, shows us how the ideal (a prominent role of Buddhism in society) and how the current role of Buddhism (Buddhism is in decline in the society) are perceived and that such a view impacts, and leads to, religious mobilization. This line of thought shows how all the questions are interrelated and highlights the aim of this paper. However, it is important to note that among the results we also find alternative viewpoints and explore the perceptions that Buddhism cannot be threatened, that Buddhism does not need to be protected, it tells the truth and nature of things and this will sustain, and that violence should never be used.

None of the monks had a positive outlook on Buddhism future in Sri Lanka which may reflect a common understanding among the monks that the role of Buddhism in the Sri Lankan society is in decline. However, how a decline was viewed differed; some thought that the government should take steps to protect the prominence of the religion, others saw the decline as a natural outcome of the nature impermanence which governs the world, while yet others said it would decrease the morality of society. While International Relations research assumed a decline of religion to be the outcome of globalization and modernization, the monks mainly highlighted two reasons for Buddhism's decline in society; the presence of other religions in society and the fact that Buddhist lay people are becoming less religious. A fear that Buddhism is becoming less prominent in society at the expense of the expansion of Islam, mainly due to the perceived growth of the Muslim population was expressed. It is thus only Buddhism which is perceived to be in decline in the Sri Lankan society, not religion in general.

However, the impact of modernization on religiosity in Sri Lanka can be seen as the reason that the lay community is becoming less religious. The monks that talked about a decrease in the religiosity among the lay people said it was at the expense of people becoming more occupied with their modern lives and striving for economic goals, which suggests an impact of modernization. Haynes & Hennig (2011) write that a decrease of religiosity on the individual level is accompanied by religious leaders having an increasingly vital role in the public sphere. Such a connection was also mentioned among the interviewees; that some monks are reacting to the feeling that Buddhism is in decline. One monk explained that groups like the BBS were formed in order to fight this decline and the group has attacked both those outside of the



religion, for instance the Muslim community, as well as Buddhist monks as in the example presented under section 3.3.

An active role of monks in society by engaging in politics or engaging violently, was by some monks perceived as potentially harming the good name of Buddhism and leading to a decrease of the respect for the monkhood. Attempts to protect the faith from a decline may end up hurting the religion even more, especially when violent means are involved. The young monks' understandings of the role of religion in society and radical religious mobilization can thus help us illustrate a debate within International Relations scholarship. The debate I am referring to is that of the once dominating underlying belief that religion's role was in decline following modernization at the same time as religion's importance on influencing societies and policies on all continents of the world are very evident today. The analysis above can help us highlight what processes are at work in such a relationship; for instance how a modern life style can lead to a decrease of religiosity accompanied by a threat perceived to the role of religion, a perception that religion is in decline is turning some religious representatives to take up a fight for it. This is of course a simplified picture and in reality many other factors are involved.

## 7. Concluding Discussion

In conclusion, this exploration of young monks' perceptions suggest that the world view of radical monks driving the mobilization is shared by others. This may pose implications for Sri Lanka's future. Even though the Buddhist mobilization is less pronounced today, this study shows that some monks have fears which most likely persist and which need to be addressed. Their reality includes elements of fear and prejudice which need to be stressed and responded to in order to work for an inclusive society with understandings between ethno-religious communities and for Sri Lanka to make her transition from a post-war country to a post-conflict one.

The research questions have allowed us to explore an understanding among some of the monks that Buddhism in Sri Lanka is the religion which should be the most prominent and that Buddhism is perceived to be threatened by the growing population of minority religions as well as from Buddhist lay people who are becoming less religious. Intolerance toward minority religion, which may result in violence is only perceived as justified if it is for the sole reason of protecting Buddhism. The religious mobilization in Sri Lanka is viewed as having been initiated to fight the declining role of Buddhism in society and to protect it from perceived threats.

One can understand such a relationship as an outcome of the close connection of the Buddhist faith, the Sinhalese ethnicity, and the Sri Lankan island. That Buddhism has become territorialised in Sri Lanka and intertwined with nationality and as a consequence, even a religion commonly recognized as peaceful can become radical in the defence of it. The post-war tensions seem to stem further back in history and be a part of larger trend. However, recent observations, such as a feeling of Islam's expansion in the world and that of weak state and juridical structures, are mixed with cultural and historical underpinnings. These findings can complement previous research, and foremost contribute with the conclusion that recurring references of fear exist among the interviewed young monks, including fear stemming from perceived threats posed by Buddhists themselves.

For International Relations research the study has contributed with the setting of existing discourses in a context increasingly highlighted in the field: that of the role of religion in society and religious mobilization. This may provide ideas for discussions on new understandings and relationships between for instance that of religious representatives' understandings of the decrease of religiosity among lay people and the feeling of protecting one's faith. Even though the understandings and relationships drawn are specific for the Sri Lankan case, I believe they can be further developed and explored in other contexts. This study contributes with a new fuse of studies; combining theoretical discussions which are related to previous research and situated in the Sri Lankan case by using the qualitative method of interviewing respondents to get in-depth accounts. This fuse can be of interest for further research.

### 7.1 Recommendations for Further Research and Action

My evaluation is that the quality of the interviews has been deep enough to provide us with an insight into the monks' reflections. This paper does not aim to generalize, nevertheless, now that we have a young monk perspective on the topic, a word will be said about how representative the selection of interviewees may be for monks in general in Sri Lanka. Monks belonging to the same *pirivena* tended to talk about certain topics in a similar way, for instance referring to *pseudo* or stressing the importance of a close relationship between the lay and monastic communities. Thus, even though similar topics came up in the interviews, studies exploring monks in other *pirivenas* may provide even more insights on *how* these topics are understood and talked about; on what is emphasised in other *pirivenas*. For further research it is thus recommended that the variation of *pirivenas* should be larger, rather than the number of

interviewees in each pirivena, in order to fully chart worldviews present among young monks in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, with a narrow aim, this study has not brought attention to the perceptions or feelings present among lay people or non-Buddhists. Writing a paper on religious tensions the present study cannot cover conflict dynamics by only studying members of one religious community. Mainly it is important to address how the Muslim community might respond if cases of Buddhist mobilization toward them continue. One might assume that mobilization within one community feeds into mobilization in the other, escalating the conflict. Therefore it is recommended that further research should study the perceptions among Muslims regarding radical Buddhist mobilization.

It is recommended that steps be taken to address the fears and perceptions of threat which exist among the young monks. This is crucial if Sri Lanka is to move on to become a post-conflict state. This could be done by both inter- religious as well as intra-religious meetings and dialogues. Such initiatives aim at creating relations between young monks and those of other religions as well as discussions between monks from different pirivenas will provide a ground for sharing alternative understandings of religious, societal, and cultural issues.

Lastly, the fact that the state is not perceived as strong enough suggests that action needs to be taken on a political level. Reassuring that actors of religious intolerance are held accountable and that a safe society is provided for citizens of all religious communities should be a top priority for politicians.

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## Appendix A: Information on Buddhism

**This account is based on Keown (2013).**

Gautama Buddha, who lived in India 500 BC, laid the foundation of the current “Buddhism” when he gained enlightenment. The Buddha’s teachings are called Dhamma and are the natural law of things which the Buddha discovered. He put this truth of life before people in a simplified form. Those who gained enlightenment through listening to the sermons of the Buddha were called Arahants. Buddha ordered them to go forth as missionaries spreading the teachings and Sangha’s were established throughout Asia. The Sangha, the order of monks (bhikkus), is the social heart of Buddhism. By the time of Buddha’s death he left followers to interpret the Dhamma for themselves. He left no successor as he never had regarded himself as the “leader” of the order. He advised everyone to think for themselves on matters of the teachings before deciding to accept them. There are today many sub-traditions of Buddhism, including Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism.

Dhamma is the universal law which governs both the physical and the moral orders of the universe. The Dhamma is manifested in the law of karma. Karma governs the way moral deeds affect individuals today as well as in future lives. Living in accordance with the teachings lead to salvation from the endless suffering in the cycle of samsara, ie rebirth. Karma is of fundamental importance of Buddhist thought. The doctrine of karma holds that future rebirths are determined by the moral deeds a person performs in life. Karma can be either good or bad, the good deeds are referred to as merits. One of the best ways to earn merits is by supporting the monkhood. For instance by attending sermons, donating food and funds for the maintenance of temples.

At the heart of Buddhist ethics is the principle of non-harming. This is manifested in the respect for all life, whether human or animal. Another key virtue is that of compassion. Early Buddhist scriptures condemn the use of force and violence to further the aims of religion. Before the Buddha’s enlightenment he experimented with different techniques such as retaining the breath for a longer time and reducing his intake of food. These exertions did not give the results he was looking for, however, they taught the Buddha that extremes of any kind are unproductive. The most productive course is thus a “middle way” and that the most appropriate lifestyle would be one of moderation.

The aim of Buddhism is to dissolve the sense of self and thus also the fear and hostility which causes conflicts to break out. A strong sense of a self (of my country, my race etc) leads to

suspicion and hostility towards what is “alien” or “other”. Early Buddhist sources condemn war as it involves killing, whether it be an offensive or defensive war. History on the other hand reveals many cases when Buddhist rulers have failed to live up to pacifism. Throughout several centuries Buddhists, lay as well as monastic have been involved in wars.

In the Sri Lankan case there were many battles fought between the Sinhalese and the Tamil “invaders” from India. The Mahavamsa for instance, portrays the king Dutthagaman as a national hero because of his victory over Tamil general Elara and Buddhist victory is glorified. Against Buddhist precepts, the king was assured by Arahants that he had done nothing wrong in defending the Dhamma. In modern times monks have spoken with approval of religio-nationalism. During the civil war in Sri Lanka Buddhist monks and laity would back a militaristic approach toward the LTTE. The support for war was a way to preserve Buddhism. Buddhist monks also held services for the army. In Thailand, Japan and China Buddhist monks have declared attacks on their opponents, calling for them to be eradicated by the use of force.



## Appendix B: List of Interviewees

In order to retain the anonymity of the young monks, the pirivenas and temples which have served as locations for the interviews are not specified. As the study focus on the monks' thoughts and not their place in the pirivena, it does not affect the study if such information is not included. Instead, only the nearest city of the pirivenas are indicated. Due to the situation of press freedom, ranked by Freedom House (visited 2015-05-24) as not free, I have chosen to grant all my interviewees anonymity in this paper.

### **Explorative interviews with young monks:**

- Interview no. 1: 24-year old, pirivena no.1
- Interview no. 2: 20-year old, pirivena no.1
- Interview no. 3: 19-year old, from Nepal, pirivena no. 2
- Interview no. 4: 17-year old, pirivena no. 2
- Interview no. 5: 24-year old, pirivena no. 3
- Interview no. 6: 18-year old, pirivena no. 3
- Interview no. 7: 19-year old, pirivena no.3
- Interview no. 8: 18-year old, pirivena no. 4
- Interview no. 9: 18-year old, pirivena no. 4
- Interview no. 10: 21-year old, pirivena no. 4
- Interview no. 11: 26-year old, pirivena no. 5
- Interview no. 12: 26-year old, from Bangladesh, pirivena no. 5

### **Discussions conducted in order to deepen my own insight as a foreign researcher into the topic of Buddhism in Sri Lanka from different perspectives:**

- Interview with administrative chief director in the Ministry of Education (Pirivena branch)
- Interview with editor of the Sunday newspaper *The Nation*
- Interview with professor in History at the University of Colombo
- Interview with programme officer for the project "Building Resilient Communities" at the think tank *International Centre for Ethnic Studies*
- Interview with a monk studying Sociology at the University of Colombo and active in a group working against religious intolerance

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### **Interview Guide for a Semi-Structured Interview**

Open questions from which the interviewees are free to talk about what is central to them. All themes will be discussed in each interview, with unique follow-up questions depending on the interviewees' responses. From their stories I will analyse and deduce how certain phenomenon (especially Buddhist radicalization) are perceived.

Examples and dilemmas will be used and elaborations and definitions asked for.

#### **Theme 1: Introductory Questions: Personal**

- Name, age, village of origin, time spent in the pirivena

#### **Theme 2: Introductory Questions: Education**

- What subjects do you study (at the moment)? Favourites?
- Do you sometimes question or critically comment on what your teachers/monks say? Openly or for yourself?
- For what reasons have you been educated in the pirivena? Was it your own decision?
- Do you have plans on staying in the temple after your secondary graduation?
- As a student of Buddhism in the temple, do you see yourself foremost as a Buddhist, student, son, friend, monk to be or anything else? (identity)

#### **Theme 3: Sri Lankan Identity**

- How would you define a Sri Lankan? What is characteristic for a Sri Lankan identity?
- What is characteristic for a Sinhalese identity? (According to a survey conducted in 2013 by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, religion was ranked as the most important aspect of the Sinhalese identity (59.7 %). Minority groups that participated in the survey (including Muslims) ranked the place in Sri Lanka where they live as the most important in describing who they are.)
- In your perspective, is Buddhism important for the Sri Lankan identity? For the Sinhalese identity?
- I have heard that some Buddhists consider Sri Lanka as the sanctuary for pure Theravada Buddhism? And themselves as the protectors of it. Have you come across the same mentality in your surroundings? What are your thoughts about it?
- To you, what does it mean to be a Sinhala Buddhist? (The interconnectedness)

#### **Theme 4: The Role of Buddhism in Society**

- In your pirivena, have you discussed Buddhism role in contemporary Sri Lankan society? If so, what aspects of it?
- How do you perceive the role of Buddhism in the Sri Lankan society?
- What influence do monks have? Can they serve to legitimize actions?
- I have heard that the involvement of Buddhist monks in politics is disputed. What are your thoughts on combining Buddhism and politics? (For instance monks in parliament? Monks campaigning before elections?) Are you involved in politics?

- Imagining 50 years ahead, how do you see the role of Buddhism in the society?

### **Theme 5: Perceptions of Threat to Buddhism**

- Recently land issues, conversions and the success of for instance Muslim companies have been discussed (in media, articles). Is this anything you have heard of? How? From whom? How was it presented? Have you discussed it with your friends? What are your thoughts on it?
- I have heard that some Buddhists feel threatened by the Muslim community. Do you feel this? Can you understand this feeling? What do you think could be the reasons for this perception of threat? → If the interviewee perceives a threat; what could or should be done about it according to you?
- Against what do you think this threat is perceived? Which values? Who has articulated these? Are they a norm? Still relevant?
- Perception of threat from the West?

### **Theme 6: Minority Religions**

- Do you have free time when you can visit the village, see your family and socialize with other friends?
- Are you in contact with, or have you met youths that are not Buddhist?
- Do you learn about or discuss other religions in the temple?
- What is your view on other religions in Sri Lanka?
- I have heard that there are some tensions between the religious communities in Sri Lanka. Have you heard about this and what is your take on/understanding of it?
- Do you perceive there to be an intolerance between religious communities in Sri Lanka? (According to the Pew Research Centres' Social Hostility Index measuring social hostilities involving religion as of the end of 2012, Sri Lanka is among the top 20 countries with the highest level of religious intolerance.) → If yes, what do you think the main reasons for this is? Is the intolerance recent or does it have a longer history? What could or should be done about it?

### **Theme 7: Violence (Religious Violence)**

- What associations/connotations do you get when I say *religious violence*?
- What do you feel about Buddhists and Buddhist monks acting violently? For instance by attacking sites of religious worship.
- What do you think are the motivations behind Buddhists acting violently? → Only hardliners or reflect a widespread mentality among Sinhala Buddhists?
- Have you thought about the consequences of such acts? For the monks? For society? For the Muslim community?
- Have you heard about the groups Bodu Bala Sena and Sinhala Ravaya? What do you know about them? → Only hardliners or reflect a greater majority? Do you think they should get space in media?
- In your perspective, are violent acts consistent with the teachings of the Buddha? → If yes: How? If no: Would you still call for instance these monks that act violent, true Buddhists? (Monk turning violent = Buddhism can be violent, can justify violence OR = Monk no longer Buddhist?)
- Do you think the recent violent acts are a recent trend or stem further back in time?

- What are your thoughts on the future development of these violent acts? Are they closely tied to a perception of threat? To an idea of what Sri Lanka as a country is/should be and to the idea of who is a Sri Lankan?
- How do you think the near future will develop concerning religious tolerance among the hardliners?
- Should something be done about it? By whom? The government? Police? Civil society? Other monks? You?
- What role does or should the Sangha take in relation to attacks by other Buddhist monks?

## Appendix D: Information Letter

Dear interviewee,

My name is Thea Pettersson and I am a student from the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. I am currently in Sri Lanka as I am interested in Buddhism and wish to explore youths' perceptions, thoughts and worldviews. In order to explore this I will conduct interviews.

I have chosen you as I wish to explore the perspective of young monks as a part of my Bachelor thesis. My hope is that you can help me by letting me interview you on your perspectives on Buddhism role in the Sri Lankan society.

The interview is completely voluntary and you are welcome to withdraw during the interview, in this case all notes will be destroyed. You are also welcome to ask me to proceed to the next question if there is any question or topic you do not wish to talk about.

If you choose to participate in the study I will ensure anonymity. Your name and identity will not be identifiable.

During the interview I wish to record our conversation if you feel comfortable with it. The recordings are only for my own use for completing my project. With your consent I may contact you after the interview if something is not fully clear to me. This I will do as I want to be sure that I will represent what you say in a fair and correct way.

As I do not speak Sinhala I will have an interpreter with me if you wish to perform the interview in Sinhala. The interpreter is also acquainted with my study and will do his/her best to make the conversation flow.

If you wish to receive a copy of the thesis when it is finished please let me know and I will share it with you as an electronic copy. If wanted, I will try to make sure there is a hard copy available.

Your help is valuable to my study and I hope you would like to let me interview you in the form of a conversation between us. Your participation is very much appreciated!  
Please contact me if you have any questions!

Yours Sincerely,

Thea Pettersson

Number: [REDACTED]

Mail: [REDACTED]