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CREATING CHRIST-CENTERED COMMUNITIES IN BUDDHIST ASIA

# BECOMING the PEOPLE of GOD

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*Becoming the People of God:*
*Creating Christ-centered Communities in Buddhist Asia*

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# CHAPTER 1

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A BUDDHIST VISITOR TO AN EVANGELICAL WORSHIP SERVICE IN SRI LANKA: A LITURGICAL ANALYSIS

*G. P. V. Somaratna*

Missionaries in their heyday complained that Sinhala-speaking Buddhists were the hardest people to convert, but during the recent past there has been a notable movement among this same group from Buddhism to Christianity (Beaty and Small 1926, 4). Buddhism has been the main moral and spiritual force in Sri Lanka for the last 2,200 years, having survived a prolonged period of nearly 450 years of persecution and discrimination directed at its adherents under Western colonial rule (Dharmadasa 1993, 88). Buddhist leaders expected to recover from colonial oppression in the postindependence era under a leadership democratically elected by the majority (Wickremeratne 2006, 192). However, they now have to face a serious challenge from a growing Christian evangelical movement under indigenous leadership. The Sinhala Buddhists who cross the boundary of Buddhism to embrace evangelical Christianity do so amidst social and cultural stigmatization.

An inquirer from a Buddhist background who makes his or her first visit to an evangelical church would notice several strange practices that he may not find in his Buddhist environment. His worldview thus far is determined by traditional Buddhism, which has been learned from

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childhood. The first thing such a person would do is a comparison of his familiar place of worship at the Buddhist temple in his village with the worship that he encounters in the evangelical church that he visits.

## Buddhist Inquirer

Any Buddhist inquirers entering a place of Christian worship would be influenced by this worldview. However, they come to a Christian church because they have had some kind of tangible spiritual experience. They rarely come alone. They come either with a Christian friend or as a result of an invitation extended by a well-wisher to attend a worship service. They know that it is a different religion and are willing to experience a change. They may even have the desire to cross the boundary of Buddhism to enter Christianity. Some even have expressed disgruntlement with the Buddhist practices of their heritage.

They have not had any experience of Christian worship when they come to an evangelical church for the first time. Christian worship is totally new to them. Most of what they have heard as Buddhists is anti-Christian propaganda through the media regarding the use of unethical means such as financial, educational or medical practices that evangelical groups have used to induce Buddhists to change their religion. However, they know that they themselves have not come to the church as a result of any of the above means supposedly used by evangelical Christians. The power of Christ that they have experienced is motivation enough to even face any social ostracism.

Participant observation and in-depth interviewing have been the main methodologies used in this study. The study is based on selected areas in Sri Lanka. In our research we interviewed some new Christians from several villages in the southern and western provinces of Sri Lanka who were previously Buddhists. We tried to gather their first impression of their first experience of Sunday worship. For that purpose we had interviews with several new Christians in Colombo, Hanwella, Galle, Matara, Dewinuwara, Tangalla, Ambalantota, and Hambantota. Their responses to our questions have a remarkable similarity. Most of the churches we visited are churches of the Assemblies of God, Calvary group, Foursquare Gospel, and some independent churches. All of them have worship services with very similar format. Their places of worship lack

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any external symbols other than a cross placed above the Communion table. Their pastors are in plain clothes, and the worship service reminds a Buddhist of the patterns of a public musical show.

Newcomers have no previous knowledge about Christian practices of any kind. Nothing is known about the Christian liturgy used in traditional churches for worship. They have decided to experiment with a Christian worship service as a result of the request of a Christian who prayed for an answer to a problem they may have had. It may be because some problems in their life have been answered. It could be a healing of an acute ailment, a family relationship restored, a land dispute solved, occupational issues settled, and so on. Because of the tangible nature of the religious experience, they have decided to come to the church where there is regular congregational Sunday worship. They have already settled in their minds that this would be a place where relief from their mental distress would be reduced or eliminated.

## Buddhist Worship

Buddhist public worship is conducted in a Buddhist temple. These can be found in any part of the country. Any Buddhist can perform their worship in any temple in the country irrespective of *nikaya* (sectarian) difference within the Buddhist order in Sri Lanka. Buddhist temples are not single units. They comprise the *dagoba*, (bo or bodhi tree), shrine room, preaching hall, *devale* (temple building for gods), and an altar for incense and other offerings. Usually there is no officiating priest or person to lead the people in worship. On special days such as full-moon days, there would be *pinkama* (meritorious act), accompanied by people observing *sil* (Buddhist teaching and meritorious rituals) at the temple. On this day food will be offered to the shrine of the Buddha accompanying the chanting of the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. There will also be a *bana* (preaching) on this day. The *bana* will be held at the preaching hall of the temple (Kariyawasam 1995, 5–24).

### *Buddhist Patterns of Worship*

Buddhist worship is ritualistic. Therefore the worship is accompanied by offerings of increasing complexity which include food, drink, and

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clothing. Buddhist worship is generally performed in a public place such as a temple shrine room, in front of a *dagoba*, or at a *devale*. The worship of these objects is an important merit-acquiring act of devotional Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

The expression of respect and reverence is absolutely essential throughout the Buddhist worship in a public setting. The devotees respectfully clasp their hands in the gesture of worship in front of a religious symbol such as a statue of the Buddha or a *dagoba*, and recite certain familiar stanzas beginning with the *Namo tassa* (obeisance) formula. The term *sadhu* is used by Sinhala Buddhists for the purpose of reverential worshiping. It is somewhat similar to "amen" in the Christian usage.

Flowers take foremost importance by their ritualistic offering in worship. They are respectfully placed on the altar in front of a statue of the Buddha or a *dagoba* or any other place where such worship is performed. In addition to the flowers, other popular offerings of importance are those of lighted lamps, or burning joss sticks, camphor, and incense. The offering of food and drink is another feature of the formal procedure of worship. The religious act should be accompanied with hands clasped together in adoration in the gesture of worship. Stanzas and formulas in the Pali language are recited solemnly. Usually any act of Buddhist worship begins by repeating three times the formula of homage to the Buddha followed by the Refuge formula and the Five Precepts. The physical posture adopted by the devotees when performing these acts of worship is very significant because it expresses respect. Such expressions of public worship would usually be performed as general acts of merit acquisition. Religiously important days such as full-moon days or commemorative days of important dead personages are chosen for public worship, which is also known as *pinkama*.

The Buddhist worshiper, depending on his or her need, would go to a particular section of the temple or to some of the places of his selection. If there is a need for a propitiation of a god, they would go to the *devale* in the Buddhist temple premises. For blessing they would go to the *dagoba*; if it is an astrological prediction of a calamity, they would go to the bo tree to make a *bodhi-puja* (worship at the bo tree). Since the worship is merit-oriented, the merit-making act of the individual devotee needs no intervention of any priestly guide in a Buddhist temple.

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It is only in the *devale* where the *kapuwa* (priest) would perform some rituals to appease or propitiate the deity for a fee.

### *Bana*

Most of the Buddhist religious activities are individualistic in nature. Each individual seeks to worship at a time convenient to him or her. The preaching of doctrine in the form of a discourse undertaken in the preaching hall of a temple is an exception. It may be the closest parallel to an evangelical Sunday worship. The setting is in a separate building of the temple. However, it too is a merit-making activity. The devotees dressed in white enter the hall, leaving their shoes at the entrance or in a place arranged by the temple. They solemnly enter and sit on the floor, as there are no chairs in the preaching hall.

The Buddhist monk would come with a *dayaka* (lay devotee) to the hall and sit in a chair on an elevated platform. The *dayaka* would sit on the floor or on a lower elevation. In order to pave the way for the monk to preach, the lay devotee in waiting would chant the Three Refuges—the Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*. Then the monk would chant the Five Precepts and other stanzas before starting the sermon.

At the end of the sermon the monk would chant two or three stanzas transferring merit gained by listening to this *bana.* The merits are transferred to "gods" and departed loved ones. The devotees would then disperse, believing that they performed a meritorious act. There is no seeking of a personal deity or any ritualistic acts to perform to please such a deity.

## Prejudices against Evangelicals

The following is what I have found are common prejudices found in the background of first-time Buddhist visitors to an evangelical worship centre:

> The use of unethical means such as financial, educational, medical, and the media by the Christian evangelical groups to induce Buddhists to change their religion has been viewed as a glaring abuse of the tolerance displayed by Buddhists

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