Preface

The seeds of this study were sown in 1960 when I entered Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, as an undergraduate. At that time, Gamini Salgado was a lecturer in English, specializing in Renaissance drama. He was a favorite among students—mildly bohemian, captivating, eloquent. His remarkable lectures were, somehow, the product of a natural flamboyant energy combined with abrasive critical intelligence. Also, Gamini was from Ceylon.

In Northern Ireland during the early to mid-1960s, civil unrest was gathering a momentum that would soon erupt into the violent conflict that was to last for more than thirty years. By the end of the decade, long-standing antagonisms between the Unionist ("Protestant") majority and Nationalist ("Catholic") minority had taken a catastrophically virulent turn, and Northern Ireland thereafter rapidly found its way to becoming one of the world's most widely publicized ethnic conflict zones.

Even before the violence of the late 1960s, the religious divide in Northern Ireland was taboo for lecturers at Queen's, who were required not to address the politico-religious debate in their teaching. But, for personal reasons, I had a special interest in connections between religion and literature, and soon developed an extracurricular conversation with Gamini about Ceylon, and how Buddhism played into the political situation there. This was my first introduction to both Buddhism and to Sri Lanka (as Ceylon has been called since 1972).

Gamini eventually left Queen's to take a post at the University of Sussex where, by coincidence, I went to read for a D.Phil. And so the conversation continued (including, this time, lessons in Sri Lankan cooking). My interest in Buddhism developed from these beginnings, and was influenced from the start by what I saw as an affinity between modern Sri Lanka and modern Northern Ireland.

After I left Sussex, my academic career was taken up for many years with the writing of a series of books, mostly about religion (Christianity, in particular),

literature, and politics. Then, in the late 1990s, I returned to the source, as it were, and eventually published two books about religion and violent ethnic conflict in modern Northern Ireland. As I was working on these books, I found myself increasingly preoccupied by the fact that similarly structured ethnonationalist conflicts had sprung up across the world in the second half of the twentieth century (Bosnia, Lebanon, Sudan, Rwanda, among others—including, more recently, Iraq). And so I thought I could best learn more about this widespread phenomenon by turning to my interest in Buddhism (which had continued to develop over the years) and to the political problems of Sri Lanka, to which I had been introduced a long time previously.

These remarks can help to clarify the approach I am taking in the present study. That is, I hope to make some central aspects of the Sri Lankan conflict accessible, especially to Western readers, and to that end I provide an introductory account of the main teachings of Theravada Buddhism. I also make suggestions about the literary dynamics of the Buddha's Discourses, which I believe are important for understanding the Buddha's teaching practice and how it informs, or fails to inform, modern interpreters. I then focus on three influential Sinhala Buddhist writers whose works are in large part translated into English, and whose agenda is the revival of what they take to be a pure Buddhism, interpreted in the context of Sri Lanka's political independence from Britain. These writers do not represent the full range of Sri Lankan opinion about the independence movement and the ensuing ethnonationalist conflict. Rather, they show the workings of a process I describe as "regressive inversion," which offers some explanation of the means by which religion can be dangerously annexed to ethnonationalist interests, not just in Sri Lanka, but elsewhere.

During the 1970s, I had come across the idea of "moral inversion" in the writings of Michael Polanyi, who explains modern secular nihilism as a violent recoil of idealism upon the educational and social institutions that gave shape to that same idealism in the first place. The irony by which a liberating discourse might set loose forces that end up destroying liberty I found highly interesting, even though such a process does not quite describe the phenomena of ethnoreligious conflict. And so I have proposed the term "regressive inversion" to describe what happens when a universally liberating religious vision is re-deployed to supercharge the passions associated with loyalty to a group. This process is *regressive* insofar as it reaffirms an exclusionary identity (the very thing that the universal religious vision was designed to transcend). Also, it entails an *inversion* of value insofar as it draws power from the languages of transcendence, informed as these are by aspirations to an absolute liberation.

In part I of the following study, I discuss some implications of regressive inversion for Buddhism, and how insightfully the Buddha deals with relationships between his own liberating vision and the Vedic tradition from which it emerged and which placed a heavy emphasis on caste and social distinctions.

As history shows, the idea that a person can be spiritually liberated regardless of kin, class, cult, or status was far from self-evident and had to be discovered. The period when this kind of discovery was first making itself felt among many of the world's major religions is sometimes known as the Axial Age, extending roughly from 900 to 200 B.C.E. Central to Axial Age thinking is the claim that believers are defined by their individual adherence to a transcendent principle or reality. By comparison with the integrity of that interior observance and the compassion and selflessness that flow from it, external factors such as cult practice, social or family obligation, and the like were held to be insignificant.

Buddhism provides an especially good example of this kind of Axial Age universalism. Basically, Buddhist meditation and instruction are concerned to free people from attachments, because ties that bind cause only suffering. Consequently, liberation entails the relinquishment of every desire and selfish concern; also, it requires no ritual appeasements or invocations, and does not depend on caste or other forms of group allegiance.

In a pure form, the Buddha's teachings on such matters are austere and demanding and Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) are, in a sense, specialists who are able to devote sufficient time to the discipline of meditation and to exemplifying nonattachment in their daily lives. By their presence and example, the *bhikkhus* ensure that laypeople are kept mindful of Buddhism's high ideals, and, in return, the *bhikkhus* receive material support from the laity.

Nonetheless, although the idea of an individually achieved liberation remains central to Buddhism, it is also the case that our basic nurture as human beings entails a variety of attachments and dependencies. Only someone who has been nurtured within a group and who is able to feel sustained by a sense of belonging can emerge into a healthy adulthood with sufficient independence to grasp the moral force of the key Axial Age ideas in the first place. Even people who commit themselves wholeheartedly to a higher principle of nonattachment are not likely to remain indifferent to their families and to the cultures in which they grew up and to which they owe some degree of loyalty based on deeply enculturated feeling-structures. The recommended transcendence of attachments therefore needs to be managed discerningly in relation to our actual, humanizing relationships with those who are close to us and who have provided for us. On the one hand, excessive idealism, and, on the other, mere submergence of one's identity within a group are therefore best avoided. Yet these alternatives are not mutually exclusive and can easily become confused. The process I describe as regressive inversion offers a telling example of such confusion, which occurs when aspirations to a universal ideal are deployed to intensify the kind of group solidarity that the ideal itself requires us to transcend.

For instance, imagine a neighbor harming your cat or dog (or, let us not think about it, your child). You call the police so that the higher principles enshrined in law can adjudicate the case. Understandably, your recourse to the law

might not assuage the anger and hostility you feel toward your neighbor; nonetheless, you contain yourself out of respect for the principles informing the legal process. But should the law then fail to provide a satisfactory resolution, you might well find yourself even more angry, perhaps inclined to take matters into your own hands. Your actions then are fired by a conviction that justice must be done, and in the name of a thwarted ideal you are, as it were, implacably angry rather than just passionately so. The term "regressive inversion" is shorthand for this perplexing but dangerous state of mind, the unintended offshoot of an idealism that would liberate us from the very violence that, in certain circumstances, it endows with a boundless intensity.

My argument in part I suggests that Buddhism is a great religion not least because of the manner in which it deals with the dangers of regressive inversion. Although meditation is central to Buddhist practice, the Buddha also teaches discursively, by way of verbal communication. And, as the Pali Canon (the body of texts with which I am most concerned) shows, the Buddha deals repeatedly with a wide range of people whose worldly attachments and loyalties are impediments to the universal truth that he proclaims. Throughout his discourses, the Buddha repeatedly confronts the recalcitrance of a wide range of interlocutors, using various rhetorical strategies to wean them away from attachments and habits of mind that impede their understanding of his core message. For the most part, these attachments are to the rituals, myths, and philosophy of Vedic tradition; indeed, much of the language in which the Buddha himself proclaimed his teaching was also that of the Vedas. The Buddha's new vision therefore remains embedded in older practices that enable its expression. Yet the Discourses also show the Buddha's skill in assessing how people are negatively affected by enculturated feeling-structures that compromise their ability to interpret his main teaching about liberation, and he adjusts his style of conversation accordingly.

In chapter 1, I describe these concerns by distinguishing between a predominantly "conjunctive" (Vedic) and a predominantly "disjunctive" (Buddhist) use of language. In practice, these different emphases cannot be fully separated, and, short of *nibbana* (a "blowing out" of all the traces of discourse and attachment), we need to preserve a vigilant sense of how they can remain fruitfully in dialogue. In chapter 2, I am especially concerned with how this dialogue is conducted within the Buddha's Discourses: as I have mentioned, the Buddha offers a remarkable range of strategies to engage his interlocutors, taking into account their passionate ("conjunctive") involvements, and adjusting his austere, universal ("disjunctive") message accordingly, to prevent the dangerous confusions that might arise from a misunderstanding of his instructions about radical nonattachment.

One main problem in modern ethnic conflict zones involving religion is that such dangerous confusions do in fact prevail, as passionately felt loyalties

are infused with an absolute, religious significance. The boundless aspirations inspired by a transcendent, disjunctive religious vision are then annexed to the exclusionist, conjunctive identity that the religion itself requires us to transcend. As we shall see in part II, modern Sri Lanka provides a compelling and disturbing example of this process.

Part II deals with Sri Lanka, focusing on three influential Sinhala Buddhists who wrote immediately before, during, and after the period of Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948. As part of the independence struggle, all three advocate the revival of what they take to be a pure Buddhism, but in so doing they also exemplify the seductions and dangers of regressive inversion.

To show how modern Sri Lankan Buddhists were, for historical reasons, often predisposed to interpret the Pali Canon in support of a Sinhala national identity, I begin part II with an account of the ancient Sri Lankan chronicle tradition. The *Mahavamsa*, written in the sixth century (C.E.) was composed by *bhikkhus* to address and consolidate relationships between the monarchy and the Buddhist monastic community (*Sangha*). The *Mahavamsa* offers a legendary account of the origins of Sinhala civilization, and provides a historical chronicle of its monarchs and their support for Buddhism, as well as their armed resistance to non-Buddhist usurpers. Although the *Mahavamsa* does not have a modern understanding of national or ethnic identity, it stresses that Sri Lanka's legitimate rulers have been Sinhala Buddhists, and that their authority is confirmed by the Buddha himself (who is said to have visited Sri Lanka on three occasions, flying through the air to get there).

Modern Buddhist revivalists have often looked especially to the *Mahavamsa* to confirm their arguments in support of a Sinhala Buddhist national culture. In doing so, they have frequently imposed on the *Mahavamsa* modern theories about race (derived from Western sources) and about national identity. The result is a racialized and nationalist rereading of the chronicle, which had already insisted on a Sinhala Buddhist exceptionalism in contradiction to what (as we now see) the Pali Canon teaches. Chapter 3, on the *Mahavamsa*, therefore provides a bridge between the opening discussion of the Buddha's Discourses and the writings of the modern revivalists whom I discuss subsequently.

The three figures on whom I concentrate in chapters 4 to 6 are Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), Walpola Rahula (1907–1997), and J. R. Jayewardene (1906–1996). All three were highly influential in shaping an independent postcolonial Sri Lanka, but in each, also, regressive inversion gives rise to contradictions that become evident when their writings are examined in relation to what we have learned about the Buddha's actual teaching in the Pali Canon.

A summary of certain key contradictions that (as I will argue in detail) opened the way to regressive inversion in the writings and policies of these three figures runs, briefly, as follows. Dharmapala's optimistic trust in modern science to establish a golden age Sinhala Buddhist utopia causes him to misestimate the

dangers of an exclusionism that he also promotes, and which becomes an impediment to the very progress he desires. Rahula's scholarly appreciation of Buddhist nonviolence stands uncomfortably opposed to his espousals of militarism in support of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony, and three considerations help to explain how this is so: first, Rahula's appeal to a principle of relativity in interpreting the Buddha's teachings; second, his rereading of the *Mahavamsa*; third, his lack of sympathy for how traditional Buddhist practices mediate the Buddha's teachings in an imperfect world. Jayewardene strongly opposed the kind of *bhikkhu* activism advocated by Rahula, and insisted that the monks stay out of politics. But Jayewardene also promoted a Sinhala Buddhist cultural nationalism, handsomely supported by state funds. Although he supplies careful arguments to justify his policies, his intellectual sophistication was overwhelmed by the passionate intensity of the conflict to which, tragically, his own cultural agenda contributed. In the analysis of the writings of these figures, my central claim is that in all of them we see the liberating vision of a great religion redeployed in unfortunate ways to confirm and intensify prejudices that the religion itself expressly repudiates.

Throughout this study, I concentrate on language and its interpretation, but I do so not without realizing that there is a great deal more to the religious and political issues I discuss than language alone. Nonetheless, words remain our special privilege and liability. We are civilized because we have language, but we are dangerous because we can effectively plan the destruction of what we have built. Yes, we are more complex than the languages we speak, but we surrender at our peril the vigilance required to allow our languages to build for us rather than destroy.

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