

Disinformation, discrimination, destruction and growth: A case study on persecution of Christians in Sri Lanka

Godfrey Yogarajah*

Abstract

The article seeks to examine the trends and patterns of warning, and the stages of metamorphosis, towards violent persecution of the church, and God's redemptive transformation of the situation. Real life experiences and stories are used to illustrate and analyze trends of persecution through a case study of Sri Lanka.

Keywords Case study, patterns of persecution, stages of persecution, church growth under persecution.

As dusk creeps over the village of Tissamaharama, routine activity is taking place in a humble village home. A man is playing with his 11-month old son, while his wife cooks a simple evening meal. This serene, peaceful atmosphere is disturbed as two men walk into the home and ask for Pastor Lionel Jayasinghe. Disregarding the presence of the 11-month old infant, the intruders thrust a shotgun into Pastor Lionel's mouth, and pull the trigger.

A former Buddhist monk, who came to know the Lord through a discarded tract, Pastor Lionel graduated from Bible College, and served in Tissamaharama in the deep south of Sri Lanka for five years before he was brutally murdered. He was the first Christian worker to venture into this predominantly Buddhist area where there was no Christian presence.

* Godfrey Yogarajah (*1963) graduated from the Union Biblical Seminary in Pune, India with a B.Th. and a B.D. He is General Secretary of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCASL) where he has served since 1990 (for the past eighteen years). He has also served as General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia from 2001-2008 (the past seven years). He is presently the Executive Director Designate of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Religious Liberty Commission. A vigorous campaigner for religious freedom in Sri Lanka and Asia, Godfrey's efforts were recognized and honoured with the 'Good Samaritan's Award' presented by Advocates International in 2004. E-mail: godfrey@slt.net.lk

A cross was erected to mark his grave. It was the only cross to be found in this area, which stretches for 50 miles, and is inhabited by nearly a million people. This cross was to become the symbol of the living Christ who changed the lives of many through the widow of this martyr. His blood was to become the seed stock of revival in the deep south of Sri Lanka.¹

Pastor Lionel's story is not an isolated incident. The persecution of Christians worldwide is growing and intensifying. The modes of persecution vary from discrimination to severe assault, imprisonment, arson, looting, torture, rape, and even death. At this very moment, more than 200 million Christian believers worldwide suffer persecution simply because they profess that Jesus Christ is Lord (cf. Marshall 2008). I understand persecution as defined in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: "Persecution is the suffering of pressure, mental, moral, or physical; which authorities, individuals, or crowds inflict on others, for (one's) opinions or beliefs, with a view to their subjection by recantation, silencing, or, as a last resort, execution."

Along with Pastor Lionel, in Sri Lanka, many others such as Pastor Rohan Dissanayake, Pastor Vasu Sritharan, Father Michael Rodrigo, Rev. Nallathamby Gnanaseelan, Father Jim Brown, and Pastor Neil Edirisinghe have been martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ. In recent years, the violence and persecution of Christians has been more widespread in this country.²

Sri Lanka is home to 20 million people, comprising the world's main faiths – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Introduced in 247 BC to Sri Lanka, Buddhism still remains the majority religion, and a dominant influence shaping culture, language, government, and almost every sphere of Sri Lankan life. Christianity was introduced to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British

¹ This event took place on the 25th March 1988. The story has been extensively documented by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL). The writer personally visited and interviewed the widow.

² www.srilankanchristians.com collects incident reports. The editors are a group of concerned Christian citizens from a variety of ethnic traditions and diverse denominations, who have come together for the common purpose of ensuring freedom of religion, worship, and practice for Christians in Sri Lanka, and to be a voice for those whose rights are violated. NCEASL has been monitoring and documenting acts of persecution in Sri Lanka since 1987.

colonial powers (1505–1948) and is viewed and portrayed even today as a tool of colonialism. This view is particularly promoted by Buddhist nationalists (cf. Harris 2006; Vasanthakumar 2001).

Since the 1990s, the country has witnessed an upsurge in anti-Christian sentiments, to the degree that anti-Christian activity is a strong, organized movement today.

According to officials of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), an organization that has been closely monitoring anti-Christian activity in the country,³ “it is common to see a routine prototype to persecution which generally takes place in three phases – disinformation, discrimination and destruction.”⁴

Disinformation

During the past decade, the propaganda of the extremist Buddhist lobby began flexing its muscles in bold and innovative ways. In 1991 the Presidential Commission on Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs)⁵ was commissioned to investigate accusations of corruption against NGOs. However, the commission turned into a façade to investigate churches and Christian organizations. Proceedings were conducted in public, and were given wide publicity in the media. Immunity from defamation permitted wide, unsubstantiated accusations, and irresponsible reporting. This exercise fanned widespread opposition to Christianity.

In 2002, an anti-Christian newspaper, the *Buddhist Times*, was launched. This colourful monthly tabloid carries distorted and inflammatory articles, and vivid pictures, portraying Christianity as an enemy of Buddhist culture and religion (eg. Dhammika 2004).

During the past decade, a very successful media disinformation campaign has intensified, with distorted reports in print, radio, and television. Christians are systematically robbed of their good

³ www.nceaslanka.com

⁴ A similar structure was discussed by the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission. This specific structure (the three Ds) was conceived by NCEASL in 2003.

⁵ The report published by the government was not made available to the general public. However, proceedings were reported in Sri Lankan news papers.

reputation and the right to answer allegations made against them. Some of the false allegations which have been given media publicity include articles accusing Christians of being engaged in unethical conversions, supporting the terrorist movement, destroying and desecrating Buddhist holy objects, pornography, child abuse, promoting western ideology, and wilfully defaming the Buddha. Sadly, Christian responses, clarifications, or challenges to these reports are never published.

The hostility generated by the disinformation campaign has resulted in the criminal expression of hatred against Christians. Churches, and homes of Christians, are burned down, and Christian workers harassed or assaulted. During 2003–2005, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) recorded over 250 violent attacks and incidents of anti-Christian activity.⁶

This disinformation campaign reached a climax in December 2003. The death of a popular Buddhist monk, Ven. Soma Thero, on the 12th December 2003 became the rallying point for a brilliantly engineered hate campaign against the Christian community. The Ven. Thero died of heart failure – a fact which was confirmed by a team of eminent doctors (all Buddhists). However, a media and poster campaign created mass hysteria, claiming that Christians had murdered the monk (Wickremesinha 2003:1).

There was a plot to unleash violence on Christians after the monk's funeral on Christmas Eve. Fearing a religious riot and mass destruction, the country's president issued a directive to mobilize security for all Christian churches. Many churches held Christmas worship services with armed police or army personnel standing guard. Fearing attack, Christians in some areas cancelled Christmas services, and pastors were evacuated to safety. That Christmas, approximately twenty churches were attacked or torched in spite of tight security.⁷

There were no celebrations, no Christmas carols, and no decorations. Christmas 2003 in Sri Lanka was spent perhaps in the manner it should be celebrated – without the frills of commercialism, but rather in fervent prayer.

⁶ Incident Reports compiled by the NCEASL Records since 1987 to date are in possession of NCEASL.

⁷ NCEASL Incident Reports.

The resultant hate-wave was a shot in the arm for Buddhist nationalism. It became a fresh platform to call for legislation banning conversions, and preventing the construction of churches. Based on the extensive previous phase of persecution through disinformation, it was a step forward to a very effective second phase of persecution – that of discrimination.

Discrimination

The Christian community has been relegated to ‘second class citizens’, and made to feel like outcasts, guilty of shameful deeds. They have poorer legal, social, economic, and political standing than those who profess the majority religion. Every Christian is viewed with suspicion, a traitor to his people and nation.

Discrimination towards Christians takes place in many forms, with many of their fundamental rights denied. There are brutal attacks on Christian places of worship, including threats which prevent Christians from attending church. Aided by the police, Buddhist monks have issued illegal orders to close down churches.⁸ Often there is police inaction when complaints are made regarding attacks or threats. Judges in lower courts increasingly view Christian activity with suspicion. There are instances of refusal to permit burial of Evangelical Christians in public burial grounds.⁹ Evangelical Christian children are refused admission to schools, or there is the insistence that they study Buddhism, and participate in Buddhist religious observances. Building permits to construct churches are denied.¹⁰ Even when permits are issued, the local monk prevents construction. Often there is the refusal to sell land or rent premises to Christians. Christians also encounter biased legal opinion and economic embargoes which prevent labourers from working in the fields of Christians.

⁸ Example: Assemblies of God Church, Bolatha, Gampaha District, as reported in the NCEASL Incident Report of the 6th February 2006.

⁹ Example: Plight of a Christian family, Reindapola, Lunugala, Uva Province, as reported in the NCEASL Incident Report of the 20th December, 2005.

¹⁰ Example: Foursquare Gospel Church, Kelaniya, Gampaha District, as reported in NCEASL Incident Report, 3rd March, 2008.

Anti-Conversion Law

In January 2004, a newly formed party of Buddhist monks, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), won nine seats in parliament, and as of 2008 the JHU is part of the ruling coalition government. Their campaign promise was to introduce anti-conversion legislation.¹¹

The draft Bill for 'Prohibition of Forcible Conversion' was tabled in Parliament in July 2004. This was challenged in the Supreme Court by Christian and civil groups, at a high profile hearing on the 6th and 9th August 2004. Except for two clauses in the Bill, the Supreme Court determined that the rest were constitutional. As such, this bill could now be passed in parliament with a simple majority. The passing of this bill will result in legalized discrimination against Christians (cf. Owens 2006).

Destruction

The situation in Sri Lanka has entered the third phase of persecution, following disinformation and discrimination. In this stage, persecution takes place with impunity, without the normal protective measures of the law.

In 2003, 91 churches were attacked, demolished, or set ablaze.¹² This year (2008), to date, there have been over twenty reported incidents. Approximately 140 churches have closed down, either because no one will sell or rent a building to them, or because they are not allowed to continue ministry in that locality. There are pastors who are struggling to survive, not knowing where their next meal will come from. These are the poor rural pastors who survive on part of the tithes of the people. When the church is forced to close down, or they are forced to flee their homes, the pastor has no means of supporting his family. A few have been able to move to other villages and start afresh, while some others have found new and creative methods of pastoring.

Persecution and growth

Often there is a correlation between persecution and church growth. This is true in the case of Sri Lanka. During the past decade, the Church has grown tremendously¹³, and this growth has attracted

¹¹ This is not stated on their website.

¹² NCEASL Incident Report 2003.

¹³ See Johnstone and Mandryk (2001:587-588) on church growth in Sri Lanka. Also NCEASL National Church Survey 1998 and 2001.

hostility. Today, amidst persecution, and through ashes, the church continues to grow. The Church of the Living God is the community of believers among whom He dwells. Though the building can be destroyed, the body of Christ cannot be destroyed by human hands.

Were Pastor Lionel's murderers successful in ending a ministry with the death of this Pastor? No. His widow, Sister Lalani, returned from the funeral of her husband, and vowed never to leave the place, nor the cause for which her husband gave his life. She continued where he left off. When the church leadership offered to move her to a safe location, she told them, "Every time I see the blood stains of my husband splattered all over my house, each stain gives me courage to stay on and continue the vision for which he gave his life".

She remained with her infant son, and continued the ministry amidst threats, intimidation, and attacks. She faced death threats; her church was set on fire, destroying the roof; five bombs were placed in the church, but miraculously some did not explode, and those that did, did not cause much damage; she has been surrounded by mobs, and threatened; and on several occasions her home was stoned throughout the night.

But in spite of it all, Lalani stayed on, trusting God. The area where she ministers, in the deep South, is an area very resistant to the Gospel. Christian penetration was very low, as this was a citadel of idol worship – a stronghold of Hindu and Buddhist deities, who are revered, feared, and worshipped by millions. Even the British colonial rulers did not penetrate this area during their 150 year rule. But this courageous woman of God stays on, building on the foothold gained by her husband.

Lalani walks several miles a day ministering to the needy, sometimes spending the night in believers' homes because of a lack of public transport. Signs and wonders have accompanied her powerful ministry.

There is a congregation of 300 in the church she pastors, and over one thousand believers in the Tissamaharama area. She has established branch churches all over the Southern Province. These are the fruits of her faithful ministry among the people for whom her husband died.

The week before Pastor Lionel was murdered, those who instigated his murder had said, “We should have cut down this tree (his ministry) with our fingernail while it was small, but now we have to use an axe.”

Today, no human weapon can cut down this mighty tree that God has nurtured through this courageous and faithful woman. It has grown beyond the power of human effort or demonic influence. As the Lord said: “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die, it brings forth much fruit” (John 12:24).

Pioneer of ‘Night Church’

On the 17th September 2003, Sister Veena and three other female Christian workers were attacked in the small village where they ministered. More than thirty men broke into their house during the night, and assaulted them. It was the Hand of God that saved these four young women from brutal rape. They were dragged out of the house, kicked, and forced to march to the local police station. All along the way, the men kicked them, shouting aloud that they had raided a house of ill fame and had caught four prostitutes. At the police station, the bruised and terrified women were produced as prostitutes. They were humiliated and traumatized. The little church Veena pastored was demolished. But human hands could not crush her spirit and her firm commitment to fulfil her calling. Veena continued her ministry, risking her life, visiting Christians at night in secret, and leaving before dawn. She pioneered the concept of ‘night church’.¹⁴

Hope for the future

On the 25th September 2003, a Church in Kesbewa was set ablaze during the night. The Church was completely destroyed. All that remained of the building was its damaged outer walls. One month before this incident, a hand grenade was thrown at the church. A young man from the congregation, who was guarding the church from attackers, was injured. After the fire, the congregation was forced to

¹⁴ Original Source: NCEASL Incident Report 2003. Also *Concern magazine*, September-December 2003:8.

abandon the Church building. They were under threat, and had no safe place to meet. The gutted Church building was closely watched by 'informants', who monitored the movements of the believers, ensuring that they did not return to worship or re-build the church.

A year after the church was set ablaze, the congregation began to meet again on the steps of the roofless church for Bible study. On Sundays, over forty children sit on the floor listening to Bible stories. When it rains, the children hold umbrellas. Oblivious of discomfort and danger, they embody the true spirit and steadfast faith of the persecuted Church.

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Sri Lanka religious freedom profile

Statistics*

Population	19.7 million
GDP	\$93.33 billion
GDP per capita	\$4,600
Buddhist	69%
Hindu	15%
Christian (mostly Catholic)	8%
Muslim (mostly Sunni)	7%
Other	1%
Religious Freedom Rating ¹	5
Government Regulation of Religion Index (GRI)	6.1
Government Favoritism of Religion Index (GFI)	5.5
Social Regulation of Religion Index (SRI)	9.5

Background

Ethnic Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the sixth century BCE, probably from northern India. Buddhism was introduced into Sri Lanka beginning in about the mid-third century BCE. By the time Portuguese Roman Catholics arrived in 1505, they encountered three

* Reprinted with friendly permission by The Center for Religious Freedom from Paul A Marshall (ed.) *Religious Freedom in the World* Lanham: Rowman 2008, 371-374.

¹ The whole number score for religious freedom, which is on a scale from 1-7, is derived from the answers to questions submitted to country reviewers and refined in a collaborative process. The scores marked GRI, GFI, and SRI are calculated from answers to the questions in the Grim & Finke (2006) International Religious Indexes Questionnaire. The best score is 0, the worst score attained by any of the 110 countries measured is slightly above 10. (Footnote compiled by editors).

main kingdoms: ethnic Tamils from southern India had established a base in the north, while the ethnic Sinhalese had two long-standing kingdoms based in the southwest.

In 1815, the British became the first European power to conquer the entire island. Sri Lanka achieved peaceful independence in 1948. Since independence, political power has mostly alternated between the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), both of which are majority Sinhala Buddhist and both of which have had to contend with an enduring ethnic conflict.

The conflict initially pitted several Tamil guerrilla groups against the government, which is dominated by the Sinhalese majority. The first post-independence outbreak of ethnic rioting occurred in 1956 after parliament passed an act that made Sinhala the sole official language of administration and education and ushered in an era of widespread discrimination against minority Tamils. In the early 1980s, a Tamil guerrilla attack on an army patrol sparked widespread and very bloody anti-Tamil rioting. The deaths of thousands of civilians energized the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main guerilla force advocating for an independent Tamil homeland, and resulted in decades of open civil war. The militarily outnumbered LTTE frequently employed child soldiers, brutal assassinations, and guerilla tactics and pioneered the use of concealed suicide-bomb vests. The Sri Lankan government has been guilty of widespread human rights violations, covert support of kidnappings and extrajudicial killings by paramilitaries, and indiscriminate use of artillery and air attacks.

After nearly two decades of war without a clear victor, the government signed a cease-fire with the LTTE in 2001. The unprecedented destruction caused by the December 2004 tsunami ushered a respite in hostilities. However, because of a widespread boycott in Tamil-majority areas, Sinhala hard-liner Mahinda Rajapakse (SLFP) was elected president in November 2005, and the cease-fire began to unravel. Rampant violence is once again a daily fact of Sri Lankan life in a conflict that has already killed more than 65,000 people since 1983. The LTTE has effective control of large areas in the north and east of the country. An estimated 350,000 internally displaced refugees remain unwilling or unable to return to the northeast, while at least 500,000 were displaced as a result of the tsunami.

Direct elections for Sri Lanka's president and unicameral parliament are open to multiple parties but continue to be marred by some irregularities, violence, and intimidation. The LTTE generally refuses to allow free elections in the areas under its control. Official corruption is a growing concern. Independent media outlets can generally express their views openly, but state-run media have been used by the government for political ends. The LTTE does not permit free expression in the areas under its control. Journalists have also faced intimidation from government sources. Except in conflict-affected areas, human rights and social welfare nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) generally operate freely. However, the LTTE does not allow for freedom of association in the regions under its control.

The rule of law remains somewhat weak, and there has been little progress in reducing acts of torture by the security forces and police. Tamils maintain that they face systematic discrimination in several matters controlled by the state. Rape and domestic violence remain serious problems. Freedom House's 2007 Freedom in the World rates Sri Lanka a 4 in political rights and a 4 in civil liberties.

Religious freedom

Theravada Buddhism differs markedly from the better-known (in the West) Tibetan or Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. It is more strongly linked to the orthodoxy of early Buddhist texts and is hostile to any perceived dilution of Buddhist purity. This is particularly true in Sri Lanka, where many believe that Buddha himself entrusted the fate of "pure" Buddhism to the care of the majority Sinhalese people with Sri Lanka as its sanctuary. This melding of ethnic, religious, and political identity (especially post-independence) has resulted in an explosive strain of religious militancy – that justifies violence in the name of protecting Buddhism from corruption, especially from foreign peoples and foreign religions.

This fear of outsiders grew in part from repeated subjugation by foreign invaders, as typified by the 16th-century Portuguese occupation and then the Dutch Calvinists who replaced them in the 17th century. Both carried out campaigns of religious conversion and at times resorted to force to achieve their ends. Much of the island came under control of yet another foreign power, the British, in 1796.

While more tolerant of native religion and customs, the British system still granted power and privilege to those adopting Western styles, which were strongly correlated with Christianity. Many Sinhalese chauvinists still see ethnic Tamils in the north as long-standing invaders with a different language, religion, and customs that threaten Sri Lanka's native identity.

This fear of a majority culture besieged by minorities has resulted in large-scale violence in the past 70 years. In 1959, Theravada Buddhist monks assassinated Sri Lankan Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike because he was perceived to be backing away from protecting the privileged place of Sinhala Buddhism, a move prompted by widespread violence after "Sin-hala-only" language reforms. This violent episode is emblematic of a radicalism that many find difficult to harmonize with common Western stereotypes of pacifist Buddhist monks.

In 1978, Buddhist chauvinists won a significant legal and political victory when Article IX of the new constitution granted Buddhism "the foremost place" and gave the state the duty to "protect and foster" it. Although it would take many years for the full legal effects to be felt, the notion that the state should be "on the side" of Buddhism blossomed, as did political Buddhism.

Although Article X of the constitution asserts that every person is entitled to the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including "the right to have or adopt a religion of one's choice and to manifest that religion in public or private," the harsh reality is a government that practices legal discrimination against non-Buddhists and tolerates violence against religious minorities, particularly Christians. Two watershed events illustrate both aspects of the problem.

In the summer of 2003, a group of Catholic nuns sought legal incorporation for their religious order, whose mission included education, providing social services, and teaching their faith. Legal objections were lodged against this request based on the allegation that it would violate the constitution's protection of Buddhism. The case (*In re Sisters of the Holy Cross in Menzingen*) was referred to the Supreme Court, which held that "the constitution does not recognize a fundamental right to propagate a religion" and that "the propagation and spreading of Christianity ... would impair the very existence of Buddhism." After the nuns petitioned for a reversal of the decision, the United Nations found a clear violation of international law. However, in an

equally stunning move, the Supreme Court explicitly rejected the binding authority of UN decisions, which is guaranteed by its treaty obligations. The end result is that religious minorities can no longer gain legal recognition of their right to educate in the faith, carry out charitable activities, own and acquire property, or legally exist as institutions.

The *Holy Cross* decision was also culturally significant in that it heightened religious tensions in echoes of the Sinhala-only acts. The state itself had now “taken sides” and labeled common Christian activity as not only contrary to the constitution but also a threat to the very existence of Buddhism.

In late 2003 also came the death of Gangodawila Soma Thero, a very popular anti-Christian monk who had railed against Buddhist conversion to other religions. Although his death was proven to be from natural causes, many Buddhist monks propagated the idea that he was assassinated by Christian forces backed by foreign NGOs. His very public and provocative burial on Christmas Eve sparked an unprecedented wave of anti-Christian violence and church burnings. Since then, there have been nearly 200 violent attacks, including dozens of church firebombings and desecrations, yet arrests of perpetrators are few and prosecutions even rarer.

Radical Buddhists are seeking direct criminal sanctions against Christians and other religious minorities who practice common aspects of their faith. Specifically, these militants repeatedly hold “fasts unto death” in agitation for anti-conversion laws that would outlaw “inducing” voluntary conversion out of Buddhism. “Spreading the faith,” a goal common to Christianity, Islam, and many other faiths, would be punishable by five to seven years in prison.

Anti-conversion laws have come close to passing since the April 2004 elections left the country without a majority government and marked, for the first time, the entry of extremist Buddhist monks into political office under the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) banner. In recent elections the SLFP government has welcomed the JHU as a coalition partner, thus giving them power as a swing vote. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has put Sri Lanka on its “watch list” of religious freedom violators.