The Oslo Coalition on
Freedom of Religion or Belief:
Fact finding mission to Sri Lanka, January 2006

Inter-religious fact finding mission with Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana
1. Introduction

The Mission

The fact finding mission to Sri Lanka is part of the project on Mission and Human Rights by the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The mission to Sri Lanka had the following members: Senaid Kobilica (Islamic Council of Norway), Egil Lothe (Buddhist Federation of Norway) and Vebjørn Horsfjord (Church of Norway).

Reflections on the purpose of the mission

The issue of human rights and missionary activities stand at the centre of discussions concerning violations of freedom of religion. Very often it is those who want to proselytize who complain about restrictions in this area. In the last decade or so the complaints of those targeted by various missionaries have also become more vocal. The question is thus: to what extent is proselytizing a human right protected by the UN covenants on human rights, and to what extent has this right to be qualified in order not to violate the integrity and human rights of others.

The purpose of the Oslo coalition is not only to explore this issue from a legal point of view, but also to explore it as an ethical issue, trying to explore the possibility of establishing a code of conduct as common accepted guidelines for missionary activities.
Sri Lanka is a place where this discussion has been pursued with great vigour in the context of law and human rights, particularly in the contexts of bills that have been proposed to limit the right to proselytize among followers of other religions. Allegations of unethical practices among Christian have been made by the Buddhists. On the other hand there has also been violence against Christians by Sinhalese Buddhists. We therefore found this country to be of particular interest as a place to listen to various points of view on this issue as well as to learn about it as a problem on the grass root level.

2. Facts about Sri Lanka

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) is an island in the Indian Ocean about 28 kilometres (18 mi.) off the south-eastern coast of India with a population of about 19 million.

Sinhalese make up 74% of the population and are concentrated in the densely populated southwest. Ceylon Tamils, citizens whose South Indian ancestors have lived on the island for centuries, total about 12% and live predominantly in the north and east. Indian Tamils, a distinct ethnic group, represent about 5% of the population. The British brought them to Sri Lanka in the 19th century as tea and rubber plantation workers, and they remain concentrated in the "tea country" of south-central Sri Lanka.

Other minorities include Muslims (both Moors and Malays), at about 7% of the population; Burghers, who are descendants of European colonists, principally from the Netherlands and Britain and aboriginal Veddahs.

Sinhalese, an Indo-European language, is the native tongue of the Sinhalese. Tamils and most Muslims speak Tamil, part of the South Indian Dravidian linguistic group. Use of English has declined since independence, but it continues to be spoken by many in the middle and upper middle classes.

History

The Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the 6th century B.C., probably from northern India. Theravada Buddhism was introduced beginning in about the mid-third century B.C., and a great civilization developed at the cities of Anuradhapura (kingdom from circa 200 B.C. to circa A.D. 1000) and Polonnaruwa (from about 1070 to 1200). In the 14th century, a south Indian dynasty seized power in the north and established a Tamil kingdom. Occupied by the Portuguese in the 16th century and by the Dutch in the 17th century, the island was ceded to the British in 1796, became a crown colony in 1802, and was united under British rule after the conquest of the last Sinhalese kingdom in 1815. As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted into war in 1983. Tens of thousands have died in an ethnic conflict that continues to fester. After two decades of fighting, the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam formalized a cease-fire in February 2002, with Norway brokering peace negotiations.
**Buddhism**

Theravada Buddhism is the majority religion in Sri Lanka, with about 70% of the country’s population as followers. Sri Lanka is the oldest continually Buddhist country in the world, Theravada Buddhism being the major religion in the island since its official introduction in the 2nd century BC.

Monks from Sri Lanka have spread both Theravada and Mahayana throughout South-east Asia. In the 1st century AD the Buddhist monks wrote down the Buddhist scriptures for the first time. Sri Lankan nuns introduced the order of nuns into China in 433AD. In the 16th century the Portuguese conquered Sri Lanka and persecuted Buddhism as did the Dutch who followed them.

When the British won control at the beginning of the 19th century Buddhism had declined, particularly in the coastal regions. Although denominations originating in Britain began to promote Christianity in the island the Buddhist monastic and lay community succeeded in bringing about a major Buddhist revival from about 1860 onwards, a movement that went hand in hand with growing nationalism.

**Hinduism**

Hindus currently make up approximately 15% of the Sri Lankan population, and are almost exclusively Tamil speaking apart from immigrants from India and Pakistan such as the Sindhis, Telugus and Malays. In the 1915 census they made up almost 25% of the population. Due to assimilation, emigration and conversion to Christianity and Buddhism today they are a smaller and still dwindling minority. Hinduism is dominant in the Northeastern province, where Tamil people are in significant numbers. Hinduism is also practised in the central regions (where there are significant numbers of people of Indian Tamil descent) as well as in the capital, Colombo.

**Islam**

Muslims make up approximately 8% of the population. As in the case of the other ethnic groups, the Muslims have their own separate sites of worship, religious and cultural heroes, social circles, and even languages. The Muslim community is divided into three main sections—the Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Moors, and the Malays, each with its own history and traditions.

The Sri Lankan Moors make up 93% of the Muslim population and 7% of the total population of the country (1,404,534 people in 2005). They trace their ancestry to Arab traders who moved to southern India and Sri Lanka some time between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, adopted the Tamil language that was the common language of Indian Ocean trade, and settled permanently in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Moors lived primarily in coastal trading and agricultural communities, preserving their Islamic cultural heritage while adopting many southern Asian customs. During the period of Portuguese colonization, the Moors suffered from persecution, and many moved to the Central Highlands, where their descendants remain.
Christianity

According to Christian traditions, Thomas the Apostle first arrived in Sri Lanka (as well as India) during the 1st century. After his arrival, small Christian settlements were recorded to have been established on Sri Lanka’s coastline. However, the population of Christians in Sri Lanka didn't dramatically increase until the arrival of Portuguese missionaries during the 15th century. In the 17th century, the Dutch took over Sri Lanka and Dutch missionaries were able to convert 21% of Sri Lanka’s population into official Christians by 1722. Anglican and other British missionaries arrived at Sri Lanka during the early 19th century, when the British took control of Sri Lanka from the Dutch.

Christianity has declined in Sri Lanka since the end of colonial rule. By the 1980's, the population of Christians (mostly concentrated in the southwest of Sri Lanka) reached 1,283,600, about 8% of Sri Lanka's population. About 88% of Christians are Roman Catholics, and the rest are Protestants.

3. Meetings

Positions and statements reported in this section are those presented to us in meetings. Their listing here does not imply endorsement from the delegation nor that what is presented as facts have been verified by other sources.

The summaries of the meetings have not been presented for approval by those who took part, and the delegation thus carries responsibility for any misunderstandings or inaccuracies.

The meetings are reported in chronological order.

Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana

Ven. Dr. Bellanwila Wimalaratana is the deputy incumbent of Bellanwila Rajamaha Vihara, a prominent temple in Colombo as well as the General Secretary of the Kotte Sri Kalyani Samagri Dharma Maha Sangha Sabha, a regional division of the Syam Nikaya, one of the three orders of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. In 1980, he earned his Ph.D. at Lancaster University in the U.K. and taught as a professor at the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, Sri Jayawardhanapura University. Ven. Dr. Wimalaratana is also the General Secretary of the World Buddhist Sangha Council and Co-Secretary of the Congress of Religions, Sri Lanka. He is considered a moderate voice in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and is also active in inter-religious dialogue.

Ven. Wimalaratana underlined that there are serious concerns about conversion activities by Christian groups. He underlined that problems primarily are related to foreign church groups (NGOs), and not to churches that have been in Sri Lanka for a long time. Sometimes conversion activities also target church members, especially Roman Catholics.
Financial resources are the big issue. Foreign church groups provide material support to people and thus entice them to convert. This does not always happen openly. On the contrary, they may introduce the issue of conversion gradually after gaining confidence and respect through providing for material needs.

Traditionally the relationship between religions has been very harmonious in Sri Lanka. Ven. Wimalaratana underscored that there have never been complaints about Buddhist activities. The phenomenon of conversion, though important, is not very widespread. Most conversions occur in relation to marriage.

Ven. Wimalaratana expressed hesitations about the proposed bill to ban unethical conversion. He doubted whether it would pass through parliament, and questioned its workability. In practice it will be difficult in concrete cases to assess whether force, allurement etc. have been applied, and the bill also raises concerns about the possibility of false complaints. There is also the danger that it may be used against other groups, e.g. Buddhists, at a later stage.

Wimalaratana pointed towards two preferable approaches to the issue: First, the authorities should monitor the money flow of foreign NGOs much more closely than they do today and ensure openness about how money is spent and where they come from. Secondly, dialogue is the way forward to solve the problem. It should be possible to bring even the smaller but problematic marginal religious groups into the dialoguing process. The government should
appoint an interreligious commission to oversee inter faith relations. This commission should look into concrete cases and issue statements when relevant.

**Dinner with Buddhist lawyers, i.a. Prasanta Lal de Alwis and Manohara de Silva, and Gamini Perera**

In an informal conversation the Buddhist lawyers introduced their suggested bill to stop unethical conversions. A requirement to register conversions was originally included in the bill, but this has been scrapped after it was found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

The lawyers stressed that the proposed bill respects all human rights. Those critical of the bill claim that it is in breach of religious freedom, but they fail to point out exactly what parts of the bill they find problematic. It is not a bill to ban conversion, but to stop unethical practices. Those proposing the bill are willing to make amendments if that can assure broader support for it.

 Asked directly, they assured that preaching for example that Jesus is the only way to salvation or that damnation awaits those who are not Christians, which is common teaching in some churches, would not be illegal under the suggested legislation. Laws may be accompanied by concrete illustrations which could cater for such concerns.
Swami Kanagaratnam Kali

Swami Kanagaratnam Kali is a well known Tamil Hindu priest in Sri Lanka. He has set up his own temple in Colombo which has a following of Sinhalese as well as Tamils. He speaks Sinhalese and is a media figure that also appears on television. The Swami is involved in social and educational work through his organisation Dharma Social Service Society.

Swami Kanagaratnam maintained that conversion is not a problem for the Hindu community, but he also said that he was aware that it could be a problem to others. The problem in those cases is related to the use of money, that some groups may abuse people’s poverty to make them convert. The freedom of religion must be upheld, but anti conversion legislation may be warranted if it can prevent forced conversions. The authorities should monitor religious groups to ensure they act within accepted standards.

The Swami also underlined his support for religious education which introduces children to all major religious traditions in schools. All religions teach the same goal for humanity and the same ethics. Each must live according to the tradition in which God has placed her/him.

Ven. Galagodatte Gnanasara Thero (+ Prasantha Lal De Alwis)

Ven. Galagodatte Gnanasara Thero is the secretary general of the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya which is an organisation of Buddhist monks strongly engaged in the issue of Christian missionary activities among Buddhists in Sri Lanka.
Ven. Gnanasara stressed the tradition of religious harmony in Sri Lanka, in which for example Catholics were protected by Buddhists under protestant (Dutch) persecution in earlier centuries. The situation of tension is very new (within the last three to four years) and is related to foreign missionary activity. Conversion affects Buddhists but also Hindus. Religious freedom issues are not a big problem in Sri Lanka. It feels unfair that the world is so concerned with issues in this country while for example Sinhala Buddhists working in the Middle East experience very severe limitations on their religious freedom.

The presidential commission which investigated the issue identified 110 organisations that can be linked to unwanted activities. Most of them come from the US and have very heavy funding from abroad. 50 incidents have been reported of children dying after they have been refused medical treatment because their church believed in divine healing. Other churches employ former criminals in order to force people to convert. There are also examples of churches which register all newcomers and how they were introduced to the church. It is believed that this is in order to remunerate those who bring new people to the church.

Ven. Gnanasar expressed indignation at the churches’ targeting of specific groups, especially Gypsies and Veddhas (indigenous people). These groups have their own religious traditions and have never been targeted by Buddhist or other missionary activities. Their religious integrity should be respected, and their disadvantaged situation should not be exploited. It is also problematic that some churches employ a very managerial approach to identifying groups they want to approach and operate with lists of such groups. These may include the armed forces, prisoners, villagers etc. Some groups were mentioned specifically for their unacceptable practices: World Vision, Evangelical Reformed Church, Attidya Methodist Church (Korea), Emmanuel Church/Save Lanka Ministries (Texas).

The mainline churches in Sri Lanka were said to share many of the concerns of the Buddhists, but they have shied away from engaging in the issue and withdrawn their support. Thus the issue has severed relations between Buddhist and Christian groups. On the other hand the proposed legislation has eased tensions within the Buddhist community as people recognise a willingness to address the issue.

Ven. Gnanasara shared a collection of documents to support his contentions.

Meeting with various of Buddhist organisations

The meeting took place at the Dharma Vijaya Centre in Colombo and included representatives from a number of Buddhist organisations, including “Success”, “Ceylon Buddhist Women’s Congress” ao.

The meeting opened with a PowerPoint presentation by the president of the Buddhist organization, Success, Ven. Dhammananda, which spanned a wide spectrum of interrelated issues: conversion, persecution of Buddhists in other countries, misbehaviour by Muslims and Christians in other parts of the world and George Bush’s strategy to conquer the world which is built on faith in Christian supremacy.
In the conversation the organisations’ representatives underlined that there is a tradition of religious harmony in Sri Lanka and that the problems have occurred only very recently. They are caused by aggressive and fundamentalist foreign groups which exploit unequal power relationships. There is not a level playing field.

There is a general concern that Buddhist values, which are traditional values, are under attack from the West. Images of Buddha are desecrated (for example children are made to eat Buddha biscuits) or misused for commercial purposes, and there is created an impression that Buddhism was not the first and major religion in Sri Lanka. There are a number of examples of fraudulent healing practises, preaching that seeks to undermine confidence in Buddha and outright bribery in order to make people convert. When those who convert are made to desecrate Buddhist symbols etc., it makes reconversion more difficult as the convertee is ashamed of her/his actions.

The groups underlined that they are not against conversion as such, but unethical conversion. There is not a problem if Muslims or Christians maintain that their religion is the best or only true way to God, but how this is presented is important. There must be a genuine freedom of religion that protects both the right to engage in missionary activity and the right to protect one’s own religion.

Interreligious dialogue may be good, but there are experiences from villages where dialogue has been used as a method for Christians to gain access to new villages and groups.

It is a problem that most work for human rights is carried out by Christian groups. Thus human rights are seen to be a Christian or Western concept, which is an obstacle to its legitimacy among Buddhists. There is a need to involve more Buddhists in this work and to provide Buddhist perspectives on human rights work.

The conflict over the proposed legislation has affected the relationship between Buddhist groups and churches. The churches’ wholesale rejection of the proposed bill has led to a “complete breakdown of confidence” between churches and Buddhist groups. The churches’ refusal to discuss the legislation further is hard to understand and appears irrational.

Most Ven. Thibbotuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala Mahanayaka Thera

Most Ven. Thibbotuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala Mahanayaka Thera of the Malwatte Chapter of the Syam Nikaya was elected to be the 26th patriarch of the Syam Nikaya in 2004. This is the largest order of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. Traditionally this position is shared with the Mahanayaka Thera of Asgiriya Chapter (see below). These two Chapters are located at the monasteries of Malwatte and Asgiriya in Kandy, the old capital of the Sinhalese kingdom in Sri Lanka which lasted until 1815 when the British conquered Kandy.
We met the Mahanayaka Thera in his monastic seat at the Malwatte temple in Kandy. He described the long history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, which also displays many examples of religious tolerance and lasting religious harmony in the country. He underlined that he himself in his work never makes distinctions between followers of different religions.

Regarding the bill concerning conversion, the Mahanayaka Thera emphasised that the bill is a good instrument to address unwanted practices, but that it is more important to help the poor and combat poverty.

**Most Ven. Udugama Sri Buddhharakkhitha is the Mahanayaka Thera of the Asgiriya Chapter of the Syam Nikaya (see above)**

The Mahanayaka Thera, whom we met at the Asgiriya temple, maintained that there is a long tradition for religious tolerance in Sri Lanka, and that his ministry has never discriminated against followers of other religions. However, the traditional tolerance has been disturbed by the new churches with their more aggressive ministries. There are strong objections to this misuse of religion.

The Mahanayaka Thera expressed his clear support for the new bill and also underlined the importance of dialogue between religious leaders. It is a problem that church leaders have not supported the proposed legislation.
A concrete problem which also requires attention is what happens when churches withdraw support from a particular location. Sometimes people convert and receive benefits from the church. This severs relations to family and former social groups. When the church withdraws support, these people are left without any network.

**Sri Lanka YMCA**

Meeting with general secretary Chrisantha Hettiaratchi and three of his staff members. Sri Lanka YMCA is part of the international YMCA network.

The general secretary stressed that although YMCA is a Christian organisation, the majority, about 70 per cent, of the membership are non-Christian. The organisation focuses on social work and does not engage in evangelising activities.

The YMCA is totally against the proposed bill on conversion. They fear that this concrete legislation may be misused in the same way as anti terror legislation has been misused, but they also maintain that they oppose the bill in principle. Religious freedom secures everyone’s right to engage in missionary activities and thus there can in principle not be room for legislation in this field. In stead of legislation, there should be established a Supreme council of religious leaders which could deal with all questions related to religious harmony.

The problem with discussions about the proposed bill is that evidence of unethical practices is lacking. There are many rumours but never concrete proof. Today there is a breakdown of communication on top level although relationships are good on the grass roots.

The mainline churches in Sri Lanka do not pursue conversion, but sometimes people hear their preaching or see their social work and choose to convert. To a large extent Hindus and Buddhists have created the conditions that lead to conversion through social systems such as the caste system. Christianity also has a better tradition of sharing resources. Buddhists tend not to share resources in the same way. Muslims hamper inter faith relations by opposing intermarriage.

Conversion is a particularly difficult issue when children are involved. Many churches run orphanages. Usually these respect and encourage the integrity of the religious tradition of the children and cater for their religious needs.

**Bishop Ebenezer Joseph**

Bishop Joseph is bishop of the Methodist church in Sri Lanka. Until 2004 he was general secretary of the National Christian Council in Sri Lanka (NCCSL). In that capacity he has visited Norway several times and maintained relations with Church of Norway and Norwegian Church Aid.
The bishop is dissatisfied with the general public discussion on the issue of conversion as there is a tendency that nuances are lost. This makes it more difficult to find concrete solutions.

The conversion issue first emerged in the early 1990s and became more serious in 2000/2001 with the burning of a large number of Christian places of worship. Attempts to refuse registration of certain Christian charities (including one Roman Catholic) increased suspicion on the Christian side. The bishop opposes the proposed legislation on conversion, and as general secretary of NCCSL he issued a statement to this effect together with the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic Church also experiences targeting of their members by foreign evangelists. One should, however, ask whether conversion is a big problem in Sri Lankan society. The total number of people converted is very small, and more than half of the members of the new churches come from other Christian churches. This is not to say that there are not serious issues involved, but there is no reason to panic about the situation. There are also challenges within the churches when members of mainline churches become more fundamentalist in their theology under the influence of foreign TV evangelism.

There is no question that religious activities, as everything else, may be subject to legislation. The problem with the proposed bill is that the terms employed are very vague. This creates uncertainty as to what concrete activities will be targeted. Sharing the gospel is intrinsic to Christian faith, and so is involvement in social work. Some of the arenas on which special restrictions should apply according to the bill, are areas where the churches over many generations have had much of their ministry, such as in education and health. In addition the bill allows anyone to file complaints. This opens up the possibility for misuse. The legislation must be seen within a bigger framework. It has happened before in Sri Lanka that legislation brought in to control a minority has gradually become an instrument of oppression.

The bishops suggested two parallel tracks towards solving the issue: First, one should look more closely at the possibility of applying existing legislation more actively to arrest unethical practices. Visas are misused by foreign missionaries. This could be stopped. The flow of money to foreign NGOs could also be monitored much more closely. When fraud and pressure are involved, there are already clauses in the Penal Code that should be applied. Secondly, the Congress of Religions’ proposal of a Supreme Council of Religious Leaders should be adopted. This would be a system of two levels: One council of the religious leaders, and one level of groups that could investigate concrete allegations concerning breaches of ethical standards. Roman Catholics and Buddhists oppose membership of evangelical groups on the council itself, but they should participate in the investigation groups.

The churches must be aware that unethical conversion does happen. In addition there is a need for churches to realise that they often are financially and organisationally resourceful. Sometimes this requires them to hold back; both in missionary work and in inter faith dialogue in order to let others take co-ownership to processes. There is also some truth in the allegation that human rights work has been dominated by Christian groups which makes human rights appear a Western idea. This is unfortunate.
National Christian Evangelical Alliance (NCEASL)

Meeting with general secretary Godfrey Yogarajah and members of staff. NCEASL is an organisation that comprises 120 evangelical churches and groups in Sri Lanka. Some of these are also members of NCCSL and include mainline protestant churches. NCEA has a particular focus on religious freedom issues. They have been documenting human rights violations (against Christians) since 1986. NCEA was established in 1952.

NCEA finds that the issue of unethical conversion is exaggerated in the current debate. The number of Christians does not increase on the contrary there is a small decline. There is some movement of people between faith communities, not least from Roman Catholic and mainline protestant churches towards evangelical groups, but this is a trend all over the world. NCEA has repeatedly asked for evidence to support allegations of unethical practices, but this is never produced. NCEA has suggested that they investigate alleged malpractice together with Buddhist groups, but this has not materialised.

Allegations often concern bribery, but the churches involved are often small and poor churches which cannot afford bribery on the scale suggested. In addition, one would expect that if people convert for money, they would reconvert when the flow of money stops. This is not the case, which indicates that bribery does not play a role. There have been isolated incidents of preaching linked to relief work in the wake of the tsunami. This has been unequivocally condemned by NCEA. The issue of children dying because churches trust in divine healing and deny them medical treatment creates a lot of emotions. There is one very publicised and tragic incident of this. This is now before the courts, which shows that it can be dealt with within existent legislation. The allegation that 50 children have died is fully unsubstantiated.

NCEA opposes the proposed legislation in this field in principle and finds that there ought not to be legislation at all in this field since it interferes with the freedom of religion. The concrete proposal can be misused. Terms such as “misrepresentation of religions” leave too much power to the courts to interpret the law. There is no reason to introduce this kind of legislation against a small minority in order to protect a strong majority. It shows that Sinhala Buddhists have never been tolerant towards religious and ethnic minorities. The majority may not be intolerant, but the groups that speak on the Buddhists’ behalf are.

NCEA underlines that their codes of conduct bans preaching in relation to relief work. Likewise, Sunday school attendance always requires parental consent. Child protection laws etc. can be applied against inappropriate actions in this field.

NCEA finds that there is a strong tendency on the Buddhist side to misrepresent Christian positions. Commercial misuse of Buddhist symbols, for example Buddha-bikinis and Buddha Bars, has nothing to do with the churches. The newspaper Buddhist Times constantly brings distorted descriptions of Christian activities, such as presenting a child sponsorship programme under World Vision as “auctioning of Buddhist children”. There is a lot of
aggression against Christians because they are soft targets and react by turning the other cheek.

The proposed interreligious council may be a good idea in principle, but it will not work as long as NCEA is not included. This is the problem with many initiatives in this field: They purport to take a dialoguing approach, but they do not open dialogue with the groups that are actually affected, in this case the evangelical Christian groups.

With Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake

**Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake**

*Ratnasiri Wickremanayake (born on May 5, 1933) is the 14th Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and a veteran politician. He was sworn in as Prime Minister on November 21, 2005. He was formerly in charge of the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs (Buddhasasana).*

The Prime Minister underlined the need to work for religious harmony. He initially pronounced indifference to the introduction of a bill on conversion (which he himself drafted), but later conceded that there may be some value in it. The government’s proposal has been put aside in favour of the JHU proposal, but this too lingers in processes in parliament which have drawn out. The proposal to establish a council for religious leaders to deal with issues of religious harmony first appeared in the presidential commission in the 1990s. This proposal is now integrated into the proposed bill.
The Prime Minister sees the issue of unethical conversion as a serious issue that must be dealt with. Existing legislation is not sufficient to solve the issue.

**Muslim representatives**

We met two Muslim representatives, a traditionally educated scholar and a businessman engaged in Islamic organisations. They spelt out some concrete examples of religious discrimination or challenges they experienced as Muslims. These differ in some respects from those faced by Christians. Despite the problems, there is felt to be full freedom of religion. Muslims oppose the proposed bill on conversions because it infringes individual freedom.

There have been problems relating to Muslim calls to prayer to which some Buddhists have objected. Slaughtering of animals is another issue. Sometimes Buddhist monks have tried to stop Eid slaughter, even if Muslims seek to keep this out of public sight. There has been widespread discrimination in Government and army employment, where Muslims have been barred from reaching the higher levels.

**Archbishop Oswald Gomis**

Oswald Gomis is Archbishop of Colombo (Roman Catholic) and Secretary General of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences.

The Archbishop underlined the long historical presence of Christianity in Sri Lanka and urged that the variations of relationships between religions throughout history be acknowledged. There was a Christian community in Sri Lanka certainly in the sixth or seventh century if not before. Since colonial times Christians have often been seen as representatives of the colonial powers, but this was not always the case. Many missionaries wrote against the activities of the Portuguese, for example. Generally there have been harmonious relationships between religions in Sri Lanka. Even after the nationalisation of many church institutions in 1956 when Christian schools were taken over by the state and nuns had to leave hospital work, relations remained good. Only in recent years have they deteriorated severely due to foreign fundamentalist groups. Unfortunately many Buddhists do not distinguish sufficiently between different Christian groups.
Buddhist groups have a tendency of exaggerating conversion activities, but the existence of malpractice cannot be denied. Examples of unethical practices may be schools that offer double salaries to Christian teachers, groups that buy or rent business premises or houses without stating their intention to convert them into churches, and providing poor people with material aid and gradually introducing them to church life, often through activities for children. Very often financial resources play some role in this. There is certainly a need to do something about this. Existing legislation is not sufficient although it is possible to use it to look more closely at visas, money flow etc. Today there are too many ways of getting around the law for those who have much money.

The Archbishop underscored that he had studied the proposed bills against unethical conversion and oppose both of them. They contain grave human rights violations. Rather, the Archbishop favours the idea of an interreligious council which must have legislative powers or at least a certain legal status. Thus there is in principle openness towards legislation in this field. The National Evangelical Alliance is too young to be a member of the council yet, and anyway they only represent some of the fringe groups. There is a need for codes of conduct in this field, and they should be developed through an inter faith process.
National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL)

Meeting with general secretary Jayasiri Peiris and members of staff and of the Commission for Peace and Justice including Rohan Edrisinha and M.A. Samarthiaran. NCCSL comprises the mainline protestant churches in Sri Lanka and is a partner for Norwegian Church Aid and Church of Norway.

NCCSL acknowledges that there are serious problems related to unethical conversion in Sri Lanka, but also finds that the problem sometimes is exaggerated. It primarily concerns foreign churches. Conversion itself is not unethical, and it is difficult to define exactly what constitutes unethical practices. Discussions are often marked by fear and oversimplifications.

One example of oversimplification is the focus on parental consent for children taking part in a church run pre school. Such consent does not necessarily mean that parents are satisfied with its teaching. If there is only one pre-school in a village, parents will often give consent against their deep felt religious convictions.

NCCSL is opposed to the proposed bill on conversion, but accepts that there may be a need for legislation in this field. It favours the inter faith council model. There are human rights concerns related to a cap on registration of new religious groups, and one must ensure that church involvement in peace and justice issues, that may be seen to be political, is not banned.

There have been tensions between the National Evangelical Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church which the NCCSL has tried to ease. However, the attempt to establish a common set of codes of conduct for NCCSL and NEASL failed. Some momentum was lost when violence against Christians subsided. It is also a challenge to bring those who are not affiliated to any Sri Lankan church network into the discussions.

4. Analysis

This section lists and comments on a number of issues and concerns that seem to be of importance to the Sri Lankan situation.

The concept of “conversion”

It seems that the issue of conversion is among the most pressing issues in interfaith relations in Sri Lanka today, especially between Buddhists and Christians. Both sides confirm that mutual understanding and trust have deteriorated due to this issue in recent years. There also seems to be agreement on both sides that this issue has become much more difficult in recent years, since around 2000. In the most recent year tensions have eased a little, and at the time of our delegation’s visit, the tensions over the ceasefire in the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese by far overshadowed the issue we deal with here.
Sri Lankan discourse on “conversion” is sometimes lacking in clarity as to what the term means. This can cause confusion. “Conversion” is sometimes understood as an individual’s act of changing religious allegiance. Conversion in this sense is a recognised human right, and the individual’s decision must be respected whatever the reasons behind it. Conversion in this sense can in itself hardly be “unethical”. The term is however often used about the activity that leads to a person converting in the former sense and thus associated with the activities of missionaries. This activity has the potential to be both unethical and illegal, and it is about conversion in this sense one may employ terms such as “fraudulent”, “coercion”, “bribery” etc. The unethical behaviour is attributed to the person effecting the conversion, not the individual who changes religious affiliation. This may seem obvious, but sometimes confusing these two usages causes unclear communication. Both representatives from the National Evangelical Alliance and YMCA could argue that “conversion can in principle never be unethical” or “no one has ever complained about his/her conversion”, using the first definition of the term. Their Buddhist opponents would however generally be referring to the second definition above in their struggle against “unethical conversions”.

There is however a third sense of the word which is also often underlying especially anti-conversion rhetoric. This is activities often covered by terms such as “mission” or “evangelism” and refers to broader (Christian) activities that aim at convincing people to convert to Christianity. In human rights discourse this is “propagating one’s religion”, which enjoys protection, although such protection is balanced against others’ rights. Again, such activities may be associated with fraud or bribery. It is necessary to distinguish this from the other two usages of the term because such “conversion” may be objectionable even if it does not lead to a single “conversion”, i.e. any one individual actually changing religious allegiance. The methods involved may infringe on other people’s rights even if they do not convert.

This suggests that the most pressing debates about “conversion” in Sri Lanka is not so much about changing religious allegiance as it is about what methods are used in order to effect such changes, both on a macro level (the nature and message of campaigns, the structure of NGOs etc) and on the micro level (concrete promises or favours given to individuals).

Apart from allegations of clearly fraudulent methods (the prevalence of which remains unproven), conversations with both Christians and Buddhists have shown that there are concerns about the sincerity and openness of some Christian churches. There are complaints regarding churches that are not open about their intentions and set up churches in houses or business premises acquired for other purposes. Likewise, some churches avoid government limitations on foreign missionary activity by setting up their organisation as a business rather than as a church and by travelling to Sri Lanka on business or tourist visas rather than openly stating their purpose of visit. Some of this is illegal according to Sri Lankan law, some is not. Some of these methods are typical for tent-maker mission, which is often recognised and sometimes encouraged by churches. The concrete issue this raises is whether these methods can be deemed ethical in the present situation in Sri Lanka.

Another very central challenge is the relationship between material aid and evangelisation. Allegations of outright bribery – “conversion for money” – abound, but it is hard to think such practices are widespread. However, most churches are involved in various forms of
social work. This is clearly not unethical but requires very careful thinking concerning how the activities work together. The awareness of this issue appears high with all groups we have met, but the issue deserves constant attention. It is impossible to draw exact lines between ethical and unethical in this field. On the one hand helping people on the condition that they convert is clearly unacceptable. On the other providing help to a village without hiding the fact that the organisation is Christian is clearly acceptable. It is also necessary to be aware that even practices that by objective criteria are deemed ethical may leave space for suspicion of malpractice. Sometimes churches may need to operate with wide margins in order to avoid even such (unfounded) suspicion in the interest of religious harmony.

**Children**

The issue of missionary activities involving children is particularly sensitive. In situations of widespread poverty this becomes especially pressing. There are allegations that some groups target children in order to reach their parents with a Christian message. Evangelisation through activities for children is a common strategy in many traditionally Christian countries. On the other hand, Christian groups maintain that the welfare of children is a goal in itself and the basis on which work for children is built. All church groups underline that attending Christian education or worship always requires parental consent, and they often take active steps to cater for the religious needs of children in their care who belong to other religions. It is worth exploring further the mechanisms involved around parents’ consent. For such consent to be meaningful, one might need to ensure that parents enjoy a free choice unhampered by material or other constraints.

**Proposed legislation**

Many of our conversations revolved around the concrete suggestions for new legislations in order to ban “unethical conversion”. Although we did not conduct an investigation into the details of the proposed bills, they have become very useful illustrations of many of the issues involved:

Requirements of registration may refer both to registering religious communities and registering concrete conversions. Some have suggested that a cap be introduced on new religions, in order, so to speak, to retain the status quo. One of the bills originally contained a requirement to register all conversions (changes of religious allegiance) with the authorities. This would be similar to provisions in the anti conversion legislation in certain Indian states, on which the bills to a certain extent are modelled. This requirement was scrapped when it was found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

The most widespread criticism of the bills, also from those quarters that do not oppose anti conversion legislation in principle, is that the terminology is vague and that it is very hard to apply the legislation in concrete cases. Terms such as “misrepresentation” of other religions, “threats of divine displeasure” etc. will at best invest very extensive powers in the courts that will decide concrete cases. If legislators today make assurances that legislation will not
target certain activities or practices, there remains the question of trust in the courts. For a minority this feels especially pressing.

A very relevant question is whether the goals that the bill seeks to achieve may be equally or better reached through existing legislation or through new legislation that does not in the same way single out religious activities. Fraud, discriminatory behaviour, misuse of visas and funds and taking advantage of children are all illegal under existing legislation. The understanding of whether this is sufficient varies both among Buddhists and Christians. It is worth exploring whether alternative more general legislation in principle is a better solution than legislation specifically aimed at certain missionary activities.

Christians seem to feel that the bill targets them as a minority. Majority and minority concerns are clearly of relevance. It would seem easier to justify legislation that limits the majority’s intrusive activities over against a weak minority than vice versa. However, the power relationship – or perceived power situation – may be more complex than simply a matter of numbers.

Among Christians there is a widespread feeling that the problem of unethical missionary activities is exaggerated by some Buddhist groups. This feeling seems justified. Among certain Buddhist activists, in addition to collecting and presenting genuine cases of misconduct by missionaries, there is a clear tendency to present rumours and hearsay as if they were proven facts, to present individual instances of unethical behaviour as if they are representative of very widespread phenomena, and to interpret actions by Christian missionaries with extreme suspicion. Christians claim that there is very little proof of unethical conversion. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that malpractice does occur, and that there are more widespread activities that justifiably may be viewed with suspicion even if they are not blatantly unethical.

This raises the question: If the problem does exist, but only on a small scale, to what extent is it reasonable to introduce legislation? Two approaches to this question can be suggested: On the one hand, if the number of cases of bribery, fraud etc. may be small, that does not affect the severity of these incidents for those who are affected, and victims deserve protection even if they may be few in number. From this point of view, the contention that the problem is relatively small is not valid as an argument against legislation. On the other hand, some of the arguments in favour of legislation concern not only the suffering of individuals but the need to protect Sinhales (Buddhist) society against unwanted foreign influence which threatens traditional values and ways of life. If this is the major rationale behind the new bill, if there are few instances of the type of behaviour targeted by the bill, and if the total number of Christians is not increasing, this speaks against introducing new legislation.

Interreligious council

The idea of an interreligious council has been discussed in Sri Lanka for some time, and a concrete model has been worked out by the Congress of Religions. The idea is to create such a council with the explicit intention to ease interreligious tension. The model is usually
presented as an alternative to introducing anti conversion legislation, but in principle one does not necessarily exclude the other.

The most elaborate model we have been presented to consists of two levels: A council for religious leaders on the top and smaller interreligious working groups on a level below which would look into concrete cases of alleged misbehaviour. The tasks of the council structure would be to monitor interreligious relations and missionary activities, to investigate concrete cases, to make pronouncements on matters referred to it and generally to work for religious harmony in the country. Some also suggest that the council itself, after a while, should suggest necessary legislation concerning matters such as missionary activity based on its experience.

The legal status of the council is important, and different models have been presented. One possibility is that it is set up by religious leaders without government involvement. More often we have been presented to the idea that it be given some legal status, possibly that it be established by an act of parliament. The status of its pronouncements is important: To what extent could they be binding? Also, when it comes to monitoring and investigating, it is important to know against what standards assessments are made. These could be existing legislation, new legislation or some form of voluntarily agreed codes of conduct. Especially in the latter case, the question is how to deal with those who do not abide by decisions by the council.

This again raises the question of who should be represented. At the moment this appears a major obstacle to the realisation of the council. Some form of proportional representation has been suggested, with relative overrepresentation to the minorities. On the Christian side, however, there are many small denominations and there would not be space for all. Both Buddhists and Roman Catholics argue against the presence of evangelical groups (National Evangelical Alliance) on the council. One suggestion was that they should not be on the actual council, but take part in the working groups. The evangelicals naturally oppose this idea and claim that if the perceived problem makers belong in their constituency, then there is a need for them to be present at the table. This appears a justifiable position. For the council model to work, the council’s legitimacy in very wide circles is a requirement. Another question concerns those on the fringes of the evangelical movement who do not belong to any Sri Lankan organisation. The gravest allegations are directed towards these, and the question is whether any voluntary system can exert influence over them.

**Victims and fear psychology**

We have met Christians, Muslims and Buddhists who feel that their religion is under pressure from the others. Both Christians and Buddhists convincingly explain that their religion, due to ideals of meekness, non-violence or “turning the other cheek”, is a “soft target” and therefore victimised. There seems to be some potential power in presenting one’s group as a victim to others. Fear and suspicion play very important roles in the present inter religious conflict.

In order to understand the dynamics involved it is necessary to recognise that minority-majority consciousness operates on several levels. Christians in Sri Lanka are a minority.
Their minority situation must be acknowledged and calls for certain protective and anti-discrimination measures. At the same time the churches have in periods in the past enjoyed many privileges that still give them advantages, for example in the field of education. Churches are organisationally strong compared to Buddhist traditions, and they often have powerful and resourceful partners in more affluent parts of the world.

When Buddhists feel threatened this must be understood on the background of international trends. Although a majority in Sri Lanka, Buddhists see themselves as small compared to Christianity on the global scene. In addition, Christianity is seen as the religion of the economically and military strong West, and “Christian” culture spreads through the processes called globalisation. These processes are not primarily linked to missionary activities, and happen through global media (satellite television etc.), and the spread of western business concepts, products and lifestyles. Especially churches that are culturally insensitive may be experienced as threats in the same way. It is tempting to see a connection between Sinhalese Buddhist fear and the rage against western interest in the wake of the Muhammed caricatures that washed over many Muslim countries soon after our visit to Sri Lanka. Though it takes different expressions, it may be nurtured by some of the same global development.

The Buddhist fear of Christian power is strengthened when churches approach their missionary activities with methods that are typical for a western managerial attitude. Lists of target groups and specific methods that should be employed in order to reach them, underline the churches’ organisational strength and may be seen to make people religious objects rather than subjects.

There are important challenges regarding communication in this field: Some Christian groups fail to realise how their preaching is interpreted by a sometimes fearful Buddhist majority, whereas representatives from this majority appear to underestimate the minority consciousness of the churches which makes them suspicious of the authorities.

The several layers of majority – minority relationships and the potential power in projecting a victim image of one’s group, also point to an very sensitive issue in the field of mission and human rights: To what extent do human rights protect collectives and their values. To what extent can individual freedoms be limited in order to safeguard traditional patterns of life. Some Buddhists see in the human rights discourse a form of individualism that go hand in hand with Christian interests and which threatens traditional Sinhalese culture.

Another sensitive issue concerns the historic presence of the religions in Sri Lanka. For one thing, the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches feel under pressure when they are presented as foreign religious groups in Sri Lanka together with newly arrived churches, often of an evangelical and charismatic type. This creates tensions which threaten Christian ecumenical relationships. It is worth noting that the most top ranking religious leaders we met, the two Buddhist patriarchs and the Roman Catholic archbishop, all put a lot of emphasis on telling the religious history of Sri Lanka. Their storytelling differed although none could be said to be untruthful. The patriarchs emphasised the indigenous nature of Buddhism in the country, whereas the archbishop stressed the long presence of Christianity.
in the country, significantly from long before colonial times. In both cases, claims to a recognised position today are implicitly grounded in history.

**Contextualisation**

The complexity of the issue just mentioned is illustrated in the question of Christian contextualisation of theology. Contextualisation means expressing the Christian faith using the symbols of the cultural context in which the church lives. The alternative is most often to employ expressions developed within European culture. Contextualising Christian faith is often seen as an ideal by churches, not least among those with a long history in the country. When some foreign churches are criticised for being culturally insensitive, this contextualisation of the Christian message is often lacking.

However, those churches that stress the importance of embedding their faith in their Sri Lankan culture also come under criticism. Some Buddhists view as intrusive Christian use of traditional ways of singing and reciting, for example. And translation of Christian concepts into Sinhalese, where religious expressions historically have been linked to Buddhism, appear to some as dishonest or as a form of language theft that aims at giving undue credibility to the Christian faith.

The challenge to the Christian churches is big. Absence of contextual sensitivity as well as the opposite may meet with criticism from the Buddhist community.

**Indigenous peoples**

There are some serious concerns related to the indigenous peoples of Sri Lanka, notably the Veddhas which we have not studied further, but which merit mentioning. According to Buddhist activists, these groups have retained their religious traditions without interference throughout the centuries. Some Christian churches now seem to target them for evangelisation. It is clear that the issue of power relations must be considered very carefully when any religious group takes up work among small ethnic minorities such as the Veddhas.

**Common values/ Codes of conduct**

On the background of the present report and analysis, we briefly mention some issues that should be reflected in a code of conduct in the field of mission and human rights: (1) honesty and openness about intentions, (2) how to handle differences in financial resources and potential material gains, (3) children, and (4) descriptions of other religions.

It is also worth defining some values that should underpin the codes of conduct. These will be general and perhaps self evident, but it may still be useful to make them explicit. Some of these are to seek peace, avoid conflict, show respect and actively seek to find ways for religions to live together.

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