

## Review

*Buddhist Monks and the Politics of Lanka's Civil War: Ethnoreligious Nationalism of the Sinhala Sangha and Peacemaking in Sri Lanka, 1995–2010*, by Suren Rāghavan. Sheffield: Equinox Press, 2016. xvii + 274 pp. £85 (hb), £26.99 (pb). ISBN 978-1-78179-078-6 (hb), ISBN 978-1-78179-574-3 (pb).

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In *Buddhist Monks and the Politics of Lanka's Civil War*, Suren Rāghavan focuses on the role played by the Buddhist Sangha in Lanka's civil war between the Tamil minority and Sinhala majority. Primarily focusing on the intersection of religion and politics, Rāghavan argues that the Sangha's self-understanding as the defining force of what it means to be Sinhala undercut proposals for Federalist power-sharing with Tamils, and thus accelerated and intensified the war (p. 4).

To establish this thesis, the book is organized into five main chapters. In chapter 1, Rāghavan frames the project by discussing Lankan political history and distinguishing his intentions from prior work on the region, which has focused to a large extent on the, as Rāghavan calls it, the 'meta-physical aspects' of Theravāda Buddhism in changing times. In chapter 2, the author undertakes a synopsis of the development of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka, with attention to the Sangha's reaction to aspects of colonialism and political reform. Chapter 3 looks into the past history of the Sangha in Sinhalese political movements, identifying these activities by period. Chapter 4 highlights salient personalities across these periods, such as Walpola Rāhula and Athuraliye Rathana. In his conclusion, Rāghavan once again sets out the points of contention between the Sinhalese Sangha and a Federalist solution to ethnic strife, which included a perceived devaluation of the country's Buddhist heritage and erosion of the special relationship between the Sangha and the state.

The interrogation of Western political assumptions about the role of Buddhism in the civil war (i.e. the notion that Federalism constitutes an obvious solution) is one of the strengths of the work. On this score, Rāghavan provides cogent explanations of the Sinhalese Sangha's reticence and

outright hostility to the prospect of power-sharing, isolating the analytical 'blind-spots', as he calls them, which occluded previous political interpretations (p. 95). At points, however, the argument is also strained, as when he turns his attentions against all of preceding Western scholarship, arguing that it sees all societies in terms of binaries (religious/secular, etc.), whereas the Sinhalese Sangha breeches such categories (p. 181). The book makes an excellent case for the latter claim, yet the former comes across as painting with too broad a brush. Additionally, some scholars may wonder about why other movements, such as *sarvodaya*, are given short shrift. These groups might, if not challenge the author's thesis, at least complicate it. Still, overall, scholars of Buddhism and South Asia will find Rāghavan's discussion of the relations between the Sinhalese Sangha and the state to be a useful exercise in thinking through the relationship between politics and religion. In the classroom, the text would certainly serve as good potential fodder, in whole or in part, for courses dealing with religion and politics, particularly as they relate to discourses of Western modernity in South Asia. One could even envision the work in a comparative environment alongside other texts that similarly delve into the connections between religion and nationalism, surely a relevant topic in the contemporary global political environment.