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**Waves of Conversion?  
The Tsunami, ‘Unethical Conversions,’ and Political Buddhism in Sri Lanka**

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*Kleinfeld (2007) argues that humanitarian space should not be thought of as distinct from the political space, and that the repertoire of humanitarian actions always takes place within this pre-existing political space. This article explores this proposition within the context of the public debates on ‘unethical conversions’ in Sri Lanka following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. While, for my Buddhist informants, the tsunami was seen as enabling a sudden influx of numerous foreign NGOs to Sri Lanka, some of whom were suspected of proselytizing intentions, my Christian informants related to the post-tsunami period as involving a “suspension of hostilities”, which opened new opportunities to prove their worth to Sri Lankan society through their tsunami rehabilitation work. Indeed, some Christian relief organizations were able to temporarily negotiate a humanitarian space for themselves in local particularities. Nevertheless, allegations of ‘unethical conversions’ and the general mistrust of NGOs, which came to dominate Sri Lankan political discourse, were vital issues in the creation of a ‘nationalist’ political discourse which has had extensive and long-term effects.*

**Keywords:** Proselytization, Indian Ocean Tsunami, unethical conversion, humanitarian space, Sri Lanka, Buddhism, disaster relief.

**Introduction**

**“Unethical Conversions” and the Anti-Conversion Bill in Sri Lanka**

The issue of proselytization invokes a wide specter of responses beyond the monolithic frame of religious identity alone, and conversions are often associated with a plethora of interrelated notions such as wealth, power and perceived cultural condescension. Jean-François Mayer argues that conflicts involving proselytism rarely deny the basic principle of religious freedom. Instead, accusations of unethical

conduct or charges of offers of allurements and the application of pressure are far more common reactions against missionary activities (Mayer 2008). Thus, combining missionary activities with aid delivery is in itself a pivotal source to conflict. After disasters a state of necessity emerges—time becomes compressed—making the people affected more vulnerable and the aid delivery more needed. The focus of this paper is the public debate surrounding ‘unethical conversions’—that is, conversions through force or inducement (not conversion with conviction)—in Sri Lanka following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. This context had further complications, including the fact that the tsunami struck in the midst of an ongoing civil war. Wisner (2012, p. 71) argues that “violent conflict complicates, confuses and obstructs the efforts of disaster risk reduction”, violent conflict also makes disaster recovery and reconstruction even more challenging. In this paper I argue that while disasters can open up negotiations for humanitarian space, they by no means necessarily lead to the resolution of conflicts. A humanitarian space is a separate and non-political field within highly politicized or militarized environments, to enable basic, and often urgent, needs to be met, especially concerning the civil population. While the creation of humanitarian spaces in itself is a political act, in that it designates some actors as non-political, these boundaries can be challenged. Hence, humanitarian space following disasters is in many ways determined by pre-existing political space (Kleinfeld 2007).<sup>1</sup>

To understand the context of the post-tsunami debate on ‘unethical conversions’ in Sri Lanka, it is impossible to ignore the impact of the sudden death of Ven. Soma, a popular preacher monk and high-profile media personality in Sri Lanka. When Ven. Soma suddenly died during a trip to Russia in 2003, it sparked sentiments and provoked speculation concerning an alleged Christian conspiracy against ‘Sinhala-Buddhist heritage’. Ven. Soma himself had been an active spokesman for the Sinhala-Buddhist heritage in Sri Lanka, and one year before his death he had formed a small political party where he fielded himself as the next presidential candidate on the Sinhala-Buddhist ticket (Uyangoda 2007). The famous monk was known for his fierce criticism of Christian activities, and his death brought the issue of unethical conversions to the national stage, as well as a wave of violent attacks against Christian churches. The timing of his funeral was also a politicized event, and it is claimed that the Sinhala-Buddhists initially tried to fix it on December 25 2003, on Christmas day, yet the then Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga denied this wish outright. However, his funeral was nevertheless a national occasion, and according to Uyangoda (2007), one of the biggest public events to take place in Sri Lanka in recent years, made manifest not only through the grand ceremony but also various mourning ceremonies in towns and villages around the country. During the funeral, the President of Jathika Sangha Sammelanya, a Buddhist pressure group, Ven. Ellawala Medhananda,<sup>2</sup> openly accused the alleged role of Christian fundamentalists in Ven. Soma’s untimely death (Deegalle 2006).<sup>3</sup>

While the death itself and the subsequent funeral were turned into a political spectacle, another political formation of Buddhist monks arose and used the occasion for their own political ends—a political party that would later be named Jathika Hela

Urumaya (National Sinhalese Heritage). The party was able to exploit the situation and mobilize the anti-Christian sentiments that ensued following Ven. Soma's death (Deegalle 2006; Uyangoda 2007). The demand for the legislature to curtail unethical conversions became a high-profile task when two monks, Ven. Omalpe Sobhita and Rajawattee Wappa, staged a fast-unto-death outside the Ministry of Buddha Sasana on December 30, 2003. Their aim was to put pressure on the then Minister of Justice and Buddha Sasana W.J.M. Lokubandara to address the issue. However, this was not the beginning of demands for legislation against unethical conversions. Such concerns had already been voiced both by the then Minister of Hindu Affairs T. Maheshwaran after a visit to Tamil Nadu in November 2002, and advocacy for legislation against unethical conversions was also one of the recommendations of the Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission of 2002 (Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission 2002). In addition, several incorporation cases which had sought to prevent the registration of Christian social work organisations had already been decided in favor of Buddhist interests in 2001 and 2003 (Owens 2007), something that further added to the Buddhist confidence in pursuing the matter.

The new political formation Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) registered as a political party in February 2004, only two months before the general election, and it fielded over 200 Buddhist monks as electoral candidates for the occasion. Their election manifesto was ceremoniously blessed on March 2 at the Tooth Relic Temple,<sup>4</sup> the most venerated temple in Sri Lanka, after the JHU monks and their supporters had staged a sacred march from another significant temple. Under the general election held on April 2, 2004, JHU was able to secure 9 parliamentary seats. The decision by Buddhist monks to enter politics in such a direct way was highly controversial, and sparked extensive debate both within the sangha, the order of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, and amongst the laity (Deegalle 2006). The party had two main justifications for its entry into politics; one was the growing dissent with the government's involvement in the peace negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a process facilitated by Norway, and the other was the impatience to introduce anti-conversion legislature into Sri Lanka (Deegalle 2006). Both issues were framed as seeking to protect the Sinhala-Buddhist heritage. Frydenlund (2011) notes that her informants, mostly nationalist Buddhist monks, would rather discuss the issue of 'unethical conversions' rather than the peace process, and that it was the mobilization to legislate against such conversions that secured JHU parliamentary success.

It was within this political climate that Ven. Omalpe Sobhita, a prominent JHU member, launched a Private Member's Bill on May 28, 2004 entitled "Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion" (commonly referred to as the Anti-Conversion Bill). This Bill sought to criminalize any conversion by 'force', 'fraud', or 'allurement'. The reasons stated for the need of such a Bill were both for the protection of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and also the promotion of religious harmony. Subsequently, 21 petitions, mostly from various Christian bodies but also from some secular advocacy groups, were filed with the Supreme Court challenging the Bill. While the Bill itself was considered to be in general accordance with the constitution, parts of it

would need to undergo revision if the Bill was to pass with just a simple majority. The Bill stirred a vehement outcry from Christian churches in Sri Lanka and also attracted international attention. Many mainstream churches had already de-emphasized their evangelistic activities, and they felt that the legislation was particularly targeted at smaller and more active evangelical groups. However, the mainstream churches were concerned that the legislation could be abused, and so might also affect their social services and other activities (Matthews 2007). Evangelical Christian organizations, such as The National Christian Fellowship of Sri Lanka (NCFSL) and The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), emerged to coordinate and administer the Christian opposition to the legislative efforts of the JHU. They were dealing with, in their perception, a Buddhist-dominated coercive state that sought to impose limitations upon their freedom of religion (Berkwitz 2008).

The issue of ‘unethical conversions’ cannot be separated from the more general suspicion against foreign NGOs at the time, an issue that also formed a prominent part of JHU’s election manifesto:

The Government should control and monitor all the activities and monetary transactions of the non-government organizations (NGOs) that are in operation in Sri Lanka. This is an indication of a religious concern that the JHU has raised with accusations to evangelical Christians that the majority of NGOs that are registered in Sri Lanka under the corporation law undertake evangelical activities of converting poor Buddhists and Hindus to Christianity in the guise of providing technical education.

(Deegalle 2006, excerpts from the election manifesto).

This concern with foreign NGOs is not something that belonged solely to the JHU. NGOs were subject to suspicion both from the state and the general population since they were typically understood as corrupt entities working to promote foreign interests in Sri Lanka (Orjuela 2008). Allegations that NGOs were subversive and unpatriotic have emerged regularly since the 1980s, and several of my informants asserted that concern over ‘unethical conversions’ had been growing in salience since the economic reforms of President J.R. Jayawardene in 1977. Suspicions rose to a climax with the NGO commission under President Premadasa in 1993 (Saravanamuttu 1999). The NGO commission at that time, among other things, also addressed allegations made against evangelical Christian groups that they were using NGOs as a cover for their evangelistic work. The commission’s recommendations included stronger monitoring of the NGOs operating in the country (Wanigaratne 1997). The NGO sector and their respective ‘humanitarian space’ have been the subject of intense political debate in Sri Lanka for a number of decades, and the allegations of NGOs conducting ‘unethical conversions’ under the guise of aid work has only added to the antagonism directed against NGOs as anti-national elements. Because of this NGOs in Sri Lanka have constantly sought to dissociate themselves from the term ‘NGO’, a process that, according to Orjuela (2008, p. 211), was deemed necessary to “navigate and survive in an environment which has been very anti-NGO”.

Beyond offering an occasion for Buddhist monks to form a political party, the death of Ven. Soma in late 2003 also triggered widespread attacks against Christian churches. Frederica Jansz in the *Sunday Leader*, a Sri Lankan weekly, attributed these attacks to the ongoing tensions about ‘unethical conversions’, and noted that over 100 instances of violence against Christians were reported in 2003, and that immediately after the funeral of Ven. Soma, 20 incidents alone were reported. She argued that this trend continued into 2004, with over 30 attacks in January 2004 (Jansz 2004). Bastin (2010) notes that up to 100 churches were attacked in 2004. Most attacks were directed at property and vehicles, though physical assaults were also not uncommon. Several of these instances of violence have been well documented by international Christian monitoring organizations.<sup>5</sup> One particular noteworthy episode was the attack on a concert named *Temptation 2004*, which was met with several protests from Buddhist pressure groups before the event. Despite tight security on the night of the concert, toward the end of the performance, a grenade was thrown in among the spectators killing two audience members and injuring many others (Bastin 2010). This was not the only incident at the end of 2004. In the early morning on December 19, 2004, a Catholic Church in Homagama, Colombo District was set on fire and severely damaged. As it had been in 2003, the Christmas season in 2004 was a period of high tension, and many Christians were on their alert for forthcoming attacks.

It was in this context of heightened and prolonged inter-religious tensions that, on December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck. Over 70% of Sri Lanka’s coastline was affected by the waves and the damage was extensive with over 1 million people displaced and an estimated 36,000 casualties. Only the Indonesian province of Aceh was more severely affected than Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, such a disaster had extensive societal impacts that stretched well beyond those communities that were most immediately affected. Le Billon and Waizenegger (2007) argue that the post-disaster relief and reconstruction process may either help foster a “window of opportunity” for conflict resolution or lead to an amplification of pre-disaster political dynamics. To what extent did the Indian Ocean Tsunami disaster, and the ensuing relief and reconstruction process, change the trajectory of the existing religious tensions in Sri Lanka? Were disaster relief actors able to negotiate a ‘humanitarian space’ that suspended religious hostilities? The following section takes up these questions.

### **The Humanitarian Space of Disaster: On the Post-Tsunami Response**

Immediately following the tsunami, Naeaegama villagers reported a prevailing sense of generosity, equality, and open-hearted community spirit (“*communitas*” in the language of Victor Turner (1974)). Shortly thereafter a reassertion followed of self-interest and social hierarchy (Gamburd 2010, p. 71).

Michelle Gamburd’s depiction of the post-tsunami situation in Naeaegama along the lines of the immediate/thereafter cleavage seems to have been a common observation (Frerks 2010; Hyndman 2009; Keenan 2010). Initially, a sense of unity prevailed, and some Sri Lankans remain deeply nostalgic about the lack of divisions that characterized the first three-week period of relief (Renner and Chafe 2007).

Stories of heroism and actions of amity dominated the newspapers. One event that caught the attention of Buddhists was how the Pushparama Buddhist Temple in the south of Sri Lanka housed up to 4,000 homeless Catholics in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. While the church building had withstood the force of the waves, it was seen as unsafe for the remaining congregation to shelter in given the ongoing post-tsunami high water levels. Thus, the parish priest had told his congregation to seek higher ground, and look for shelter at the temple (Prashad 2005). Buddhist temples are traditionally built on higher ground, and as a consequence many temples were spared the worst effects of the tsunami and they were also used as safe shelters during and after the disaster. Such narratives served to reinforce the sense in which pre-existing tensions were erased by the disaster, enabling new relationships unencumbered by religious differences.

After this initial period of amity between different communities and groups, however, “old divisions reasserted themselves, fueled by new resources and a new set of grievances” (Keenan 2010, p. 17). Some blamed the ‘innate dynamics’ of the Sri Lankan state for the resumption of enmity. According to Jeyaraj in his article in the *Sunday Leader*, “The state that failed its people at their hour of need must not be allowed to disrupt the climate of amity again” (Jeyaraj 2005). Gaasbeek (2010) argues that while the tsunami brought about an unprecedented devastation, the immediate response was not one of chaos, but of cooperation and coping, as the citizens of the east of Sri Lanka already were, as a consequence of enduring years of civil war, all too aware of what to do in emergency situations (where to gather, and whom to wait for). He argues that chaos erupted only with the arrival of large numbers of international and national NGOs. Also Keenan (2010, p. 24) asserts that it was the influx of international aid money that disrupted this initial period of amity as it “became a source of renewed political competition, suspicion and mistrust”. When the Christian aid organization World Vision wanted to arrange a cricket match for the tsunami victims, several political leaders from JVP and JHU questioned the intentions of World Vision, as they had earlier been accused of conducting “unethical religious conversions” in Sri Lanka.

At the end of January 2005, the rhetoric in the newspapers became increasingly critical of the aid industry and the allegations against them became more severe. Excerpts from media both nationally and internationally give vital clues as to the continuing controversy on the ‘unethical conversion’ issue. The *New York Times* was the first newspaper that presented a solid case on active proselytisation efforts: “A dozen Americans walked into a relief camp here, showering bereft parents and traumatized children with gifts, attention and affection. They also quietly offered camp residents something else: Jesus” (Rohde 2005). The group had presented themselves as a humanitarian aid group to gain entry into Sri Lanka, but claimed that missionary work and aid work could not be separated. The reporter for the *New York Times* further noted that “The Antioch Community Church is one of a growing number of evangelical groups that believe in mixing humanitarian aid with discussions of religion, an approach that older, more established Christian aid groups like Catholic Relief Services call unethical” (Rohde 2005). Several of my informants,

both Christians and Buddhists, mentioned this incident when discussing religious relations in the aftermath of the tsunami. In fact, the example has become the focal point of allegations of unethical conversions in Sri Lanka. Another incident in the east was noted by journalist Frederica Jansz in the *Sunday Leader*: “A high profile political leader who requested anonymity in view of the serious clashes Sri Lanka was exposed to between Christians and Buddhists in the months leading up to the tsunami, said, ‘a dangerous situation is brewing in the east – particularly in areas like Amparai where foreign aid workers are suspected to be advocating Christianity to tsunami victims who remain mentally battered and bruised since the killer waves robbed them of house and in many instances family too’” (Jansz 2005).

The front page of the *Buddhist Times* in February 2005 ran “Tsunami of Conversions” as the bold headline (Anonymous 2005). The lead article reported on how the government accepted different Christian charities to undertake relief work even though a number of these had a track record of ‘unethical conversions.’ While the article praised the humanitarian efforts of the Buddhist monks who made no distinction of ethnicity or religion, it also noted how a monk had wryly remarked to a visiting Christian clergy that “he had not converted a single Christian!” Commenting on this remark the article’s author noted that “This was a sly reference to the ongoing attempts by unscrupulous sections of Christian clergy to make undue advantage of the calamity for purposes of harvesting ‘lost souls’” (Anonymous 2005). Another feature in the *Buddhist Times*, “Eastward, Evangelical Soldiers!”, discussed the case of the Antioch Community Church from Waco, Texas which was accused of conducting unethical proselytization in Sri Lanka. It traced the history of the Antioch Community Church to other controversial episodes, and its alleged role within the Bush administration: “U.S. evangelicalism does not represent Christianity, but it does, however, represent the agenda of the Bush administration” (Prashad 2005). This argument is further advanced by tracing the historical genealogies of the concept of the “10/40 Window”, a geographical demarcation of the region lying between 10 degrees South and 40 degrees North of the equator which is regarded among some Christian evangelists as a region requiring concerted evangelistic attention. The author deploys military terminology to characterize this geospatial missionary imagination, arguing that “[t]he heathens in the 10/40 Window are all in the gun-sights of the U.S. evangelicals” (Prashad 2005). Bastin (2010) took notice of two posters during the post-tsunami recovery phase urging people to fight the ‘religious tsunami’, while another explicitly stated ‘Let’s defeat the NGO mafia’.

While, as I have shown, public polemics against Christianity, and especially against Christian evangelists and NGOs, had been increasing throughout 2004, the fervor of these complaints grew considerably after the devastating tsunami. This critique of the coupling of humanitarian aid and proselytizing agendas also gained a certain momentum in the international press, and it was the international press that particularly highlighted certain groups and their activities (see Ahmed 2005). Thus, national resentment against Christians continued even though several commentators, and later also scholars, argued that the tsunami could be a golden moment for peace and reconciliation. But Margo Kleinfeld (2007, p. 169) argues that “Narratives of a

hoped-for 'silver-lining' in Sri Lanka, prominent in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster of December 2004, signify a striking blind spot in readings of Sri Lanka's political landscape and the potential of humanitarian assistance to depoliticize a long-running conflict."

While the tsunami led to renewed vigor in the peace negotiations between the Government of Indonesia and Acehese separatists (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM), the disaster had a quite different impact in Sri Lanka. In the aftermath of the disaster mistrust between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, the two major stakeholders in the prolonged civil war, further deepened. However, the disaster did have some impact on relations between the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and the Christian minority. According to International Christian Concern ([www.persecution.org](http://www.persecution.org)), a US-based Christian advocacy organization, there was a suspension of hostilities and a decrease of attacks against Christian churches and groups in the first few months following the tsunami, but the situation degenerated considerably by the middle of 2005. From the middle of May violence against Christians had resumed once again as reported by the Voice of the Martyrs, a Christian monitoring organization. One of the first instances was against a church in Batticaloa used as a storage site for aid packages that was targeted and burned down on April 27, 2005 after several threats to stop the Christian aid for tsunami victims (The Voice of the Martyrs 2005).<sup>7</sup> A turning point seems to have been the visit of Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur of freedom of religion or belief, from May 2–12, 2005. It appears that Sinhala-Buddhist discontent with a public statement made by Asma Jahangir on May 12, to the effect that the attacks on places of worship was a far greater threat to religious freedom than 'unethical' conversions (The Voice of the Martyrs 2005), incited a new wave of violence against Christians in Sri Lanka. Certainly, the Rapporteur's statements in May 2005 created an avalanche of Buddhist resentment in the Buddhist Times, especially the June edition.

Christianity Today reported in August that "Religious Repression Continues in Sri Lanka After the Tsunami." A Christian pastor has also been quoted as confirming the renewal of church attacks, but he also claimed that the tsunami "has helped Christians gain respect in the Buddhist-dominated country" (The Voice of the Martyrs 2005). However, another perspective is offered in a news article published in the Christian Post entitled "Christian-Buddhist Relations Improve in Sri Lanka after Tsunami" (Riley 2006). The article quotes a Sri Lankan Methodist pastor in the southern port city of Galle who claimed that the relations between religious groups had improved despite earlier misunderstandings. The pastor narrates that his church was contributing to reconstruction work of houses but that local Buddhists had been upset and had organized demonstrations against the building project. When, however, the houses were completed amity prevailed as all were able to see that the construction was neither a church nor solely intended for Christians. One of my Christian informants similarly spoke of the tsunami aftermath as a situation in which their church could prove its worth to the people in Sri Lanka:

The country became more focused on recovery than other things. So much devastation in our country! But the relations became the opposite—people were reaching out to people that were affected. Temples and churches formed bonds locally with their work, with the exception of the foolish Texas-group. It was a period where we forged bonds with different communities and made new relations. In this way it was an amicable time for us.

(Interview, December 13, 2011)

Kleinfeld (2007) argues that humanitarian space should not be thought of as distinct from broader political space, and that the repertoire of humanitarian actions always takes place within this pre-existing political space. Le Billon and Waizenegger (2007) found that disasters usually aggravate political unrest in countries already affected by conflicts, but that natural disasters can alter existing political structures. While the immediate tsunami response transcended identity boundaries, these transformations were to hold only for a limited period of time before these relations again were used for political mobilization. Allegations against Christian aid activities were made almost immediately, but we should keep in mind that this antagonistic humanitarian space was a perpetuation of intense conflict between certain groups that pre-dated the tsunami. Thus, the backdrop was already rife with mistrust, as we can see in some of the news articles about the Christian aid distribution, in that they needed to work hard at clearing away suspicions that their presence served as a cover for proselytizing. But, these lines were also open for negotiations, especially at the local level, and the churches that were able to form a non-political humanitarian space for themselves during the tsunami aftermath seem to have forged stronger bonds within the communities that they were working in. While the national public debate continued as intensely as before and the legal process of the Anti-Conversion Bill made its way through the system, there were opportunities to carve out local configurations of humanitarian spaces and create amicable relations. And, as shown by both national and international media, there were many instances of Buddhist-Christian cooperation in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, which held great potential to be used as a base for further cooperation.

### **‘Unethical Conversions’ on the Ground: Local Trajectories**

In the *People’s Verdict on Tsunami Recovery in Sri Lanka*, Sarvananthan (2007) presented the findings of a questionnaire-based survey from 3,000 tsunami-affected households around Sri Lanka, comprising 1,000 households each in the north, east and south respectively. Religious tension was, among other topics, included in the survey. Due to the “noise made about suspected religious conversions taking place after the tsunami, by some faith-based I/NGOs in certain parts of the country,” a discourse that is regarded as “hearsay”, Sarvananthan sought to investigate the opinions of those directly affected by the disaster. The survey question of interest asked: “Are you aware of any religious conversions in the aftermath of the tsunami?”<sup>8</sup> Analysing the results, Sarvananthan concluded: “an overwhelming majority of the

households (86%) denied that religious conversions took place in the guise of the tsunami relief work. However, the small number who admitted such conversions were largely in the south (20%) and in the east (17%)” (Sarvanathan 2007, pp. 93–94). These findings are interesting in relation to the ongoing national debate on the influx of NGOs and the allegations of ‘unethical conversions’ under the guise of tsunami relief work. An area that was not included in the study, though, is the southwest coast, which, according to Bastin (2010), had been an area of particularly notable tension between Christians and Buddhists.

Some of the strongest testimonies about unethical conversions given to me during my fieldwork (2011–2012) were somewhat surprisingly offered by informants who were strongly against the Anti-Conversion Bill launched by the JHU. One monk called the Bill “a mere device of the fear-psychosis propagated by the JHU-monks” (Interview, December 27, 2011). However, the very same monk claimed that he could point out houses in the Galle area given to tsunami victims in favor of (Christian) conversion, but that he himself did not care much about it (Interview, December 27, 2011). Another informant, from a Hindu charity group, related her experiences as a tsunami aid worker in the east and north: “I have been working with war widows and destitute children. My observation is that unethical conversions is a BIG problem” (Interview, December 6, 2011). She continued her story by adding details about the inequity between local/national NGOs and international NGOs in terms of funds: “Unethical conversions. The Christians give everything free: machines, food, vehicles, jobs. After a while they ask you to come to church. They say: ‘We will pray for you!’ Every household in Jaffna has lost someone to the war. They say: ‘We can pray for you! The temples did not help you. Jesus is here, with his open arms!’ And they will ask: ‘What do you want?’ ‘We want conversion.’” (Interview, December 6, 2011).

Lešnik and Urek (2010) describe the local trajectories of humanitarian aid in a small village along the southern coast, and they recount stories of an American evangelistic congregation with alleged hidden motives. This group did a good job of building nice houses (some said they were too nice) for the tsunami victims, but local people argued that “the real catch was that they also planned to build a church in the complex, in an area with a mainly Buddhist population” (Lešnik and Urek 2010, p. 279). Lešnik and Urek argued that these complaints could not be taken as expressions of religious intolerance on behalf of Sinhala-Buddhists, but that they were “invariably complaints about manipulation” (Lešnik and Urek 2010). Thus, this local debate concerning the hidden motives of the Christian congregation was actively dislocated from the larger national debate on unethical conversions, and it rather portrayed how the dynamics in the village were seen to be threatened by the arrival of the Christian congregation. During my fieldwork, the dynamics of winning the trust of the locals through charity work, and subsequently setting up a church, was one of the most common allegations from Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist interviewees: “Christian organizations come under the guise of NGOs, but will then establish a church along with the village uplifting” (Interview, October 30, 2011). Another stated: “Some organizations came here in disguise. They came to help people affected by the

tsunami, but they started converting people. As such, the tsunami was a blessing in disguise for them [the Christians], as it was a good chance for them to come here. Missionaries were very active before the tsunami. During the tsunami people believed that their intentions were to help. And they did some good work. They built and restored houses, but churches also” (Interview, December 3, 2011).

If we follow the dynamics of gift-giving and aid in Sri Lanka post-tsunami along other trajectories, we find that it involves a set of complex societal inter-relations. As argued by Korf et al. (2010, p. 561), “gifts are not just material transfers of ‘aid’, but also embodiments of cultural symbolism, social power, and political affiliations”. The ‘pure gift’ of aid is contrasted with the interested exchange of patronage politics, yet sometimes the relationship between them was blurred. In Ampara, three different Christian organizations were given the task of allocating and relocating beneficiaries from a local village to their new destination. The organizations were the Methodist Church, Eastern Human Economic Development (EHED), a local development agency of the Catholic Diocese in Batticaloa, and the Smyrna Fellowship, the aid channel of a US-based evangelical church. The organizations were merely to implement the allocations decided upon by the District Secretary, which made these decisions irrespective of ethnicity and religion:

However, the recipients attached significant importance to religious identity and had clear expectations about their religious leaders and the way they handled gifts. While the churches had long abandoned the idea of using gifts for conversion or as a patronage resource for their followers, their constituencies expected them to do just that. Christian respondents wanted their religious patrons to provide assistance to them (Korf et al. 2010, p. 570).

It was reported that this attitude caused some tensions in the community, and some of the respondents swore allegiance to the Smyrna Fellowship for helping them with the housing, unaware that it was the District Secretary that made decisions about the relocations. Both the Catholic and the Methodist church experienced that people came to them and expected help, but that the church groups did not select the recipients of their aid and were therefore unable to address each request. This narrative offers another perspective to the entanglement of the gift-giving dynamic and patronage politics in Sri Lanka in as much as it offers us a clear view of how such allegiances were expected to function. Respective congregations expected their churches to use development aid as a patrimonial resource for their own flock.

Korf et al. (2010, p. 563) argue that this “patrimonial rationale with its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion is a driving force of social conflict, political violence and ethnic antagonism in Sri Lanka”. The ‘pure gift’ of tsunami aid was not able to avoid this ‘patrimonial rationale’, but “reinforced and reshuffled loyalties, group boundaries, and connections” (Korf et al. 2010, p. 563). ‘Unethical conversions’, and the allegations of them taking place, should not be discussed as a isolated phenomenon, but should be seen as operating within the dynamics of the ‘patrimonial rationale’. Attempts of ‘unethical conversions’ did happen in the tsunami aftermath in Sri Lanka (for example, as with the Texas-based Antioch Church community), but there is reason to believe that many of the allegations about

‘unethical conversions’ were based on misunderstandings and mistaken expectations. Some churches may have felt that their post-tsunami efforts entitled them to set up a church in the same areas. Some victims may have found solace in the organizations and groups that came to their assistance, identifying them as patrimonial guardians. Yet other organizations may have actively asserted their non-partisan attitude in their development work (such as the Methodist Church and EHED discussed in Korf et al. 2010). Nevertheless, both churches and temples were accused of favoring their own in terms of how aid was distributed, and, at the local level, debates on post-tsunami relief efforts centered on the issues of patronage, inequity, and the mismanagement of funds (Moonesinghe 2006). The patrimonial rationale of gift-giving in Sri Lanka most certainly made the situation on the ground more difficult for foreign NGOs to understand, while, on the other side, it made affected communities easier to exploit along patrimonial lines. This was not the case solely for religious actors in the post-tsunami recovery, but for the post-tsunami aid scene in general.

### **The Post-Tsunami Aid: Religion, Competitive Humanitarianism, and Patronage Politics**

Research indicates that while the immediate response after disasters often is one of unity and amity, this ‘silver-lining’ is nevertheless prone to be fragmented by subsisting fault-lines of political conflict, or by new conflicts that may emerge (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999, Schlehe 2010). While Gaillard and Texier (2010) claim that religion has been a neglected aspect of disaster studies, we now see an increasing focus on how religion interacts with recovery and reconstruction in post-disaster situations (see also Merli 2012). The effect of religion on post-disaster recovery and reconstruction can be seen on individual and political levels, and within groups and communities.

At the individual level loss, coping, and trauma can find religious consolation, as with the Buddhist ‘counterfeit-funerals’ after the tsunami in Southern Thailand (Lindberg-Falk 2010) or in how the very event of the disaster is explained by religious-moral causation, or theodicies (Chester and Duncan 2009, Merli 2010). Hence, a disaster may reinforce given sentiments, yet it can also bring about a rupture in individual religiosity, and conversion is not an uncommon reaction after disasters of magnitude (see Merli 2005). Conversion, then, offers itself as an existential possibility in the wake of a disaster, not solely due to the immediate material needs, but also the possible change of an existential framework. This double vulnerability of disaster-victims may capture the imagination of both proselytizing agencies, which can see the disaster as an opportunity (see Chester and Duncan 2010), and by religious nationalists, as the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka, whose fears of proselytization is confirmed by the sheer potential for conversions brought about by disasters such as the tsunami.

At the political level, however, we need to take into consideration the simple fact that a disaster is the result of two aspects: natural hazards and a vulnerable society (Wisner et. al. 2004). As Seekins (2009) argues for the case of Cyclone Nargis in

Myanmar in 2008, the capacity to respond to disasters is a complex negotiation between local, national, and international agencies. The response of the government of Sri Lanka was not implemented on the lines of a formal apolitical monolithic body, but followed personal structures of patronage politics, with its logic of exclusion and inclusion (Frerks and Klem 2011). The radical party JVP has by many accounts received praise for their dedication in the post-tsunami reconstruction (Frerks and Klem 2011, Moonesinghe 2006), even though their motives can be seen as seeking to ensure political legitimacy. A wide range of national NGOs, among them both Buddhist and philanthropic (see Ruwanpura and Hollenbach 2014), emerged in order to help address the situation at hand. Some of these tried to articulate 'Buddhist models of social involvement' (Harris 2013), and one organization, called Red Lotus International, voiced their ambitions to create a "global Buddhist humanitarian movement" (Gunasekera, n.d.).

However, the post-tsunami reconstruction in Sri Lanka was particularly characterized by a massive influx of aid organizations, including many faith-based NGOs. Stirrat (2006) views the post-tsunami rehabilitation process within the lens of "competitive humanitarianism." He examines how the dynamics within the aid structure operated in Sri Lanka with the vast influx of diverse range relief organizations. The competition was not so much one of acquiring resources, as much as spending them in highly visible ways. One pertinent observation was that, in addition to the entry of the 'slow dinosaurs' into the relief response, there was "a horde of small, often newly formed, foreign organizations with little if any experience in disaster relief", a feature which only made the whole situation more complex on the ground (Stirrat 2006). In her article "A Double Wounding?", de Alwis (2009) questioned whether the massive influx of relief aid really brought about a positive change to the communities of Sri Lanka, or if their focus on the "empowerment" of the oppressed, exploited, and marginalized only led to a reformation of the lines of dependency towards the new elite of 'motivators' and 'mobilizers'. Frerks (2010) also remarked on the "one-sided representations of disaster victims as passive, traumatized and aid-dependent people" and argued that such media depictions deny those victims both agency and organizational capacity. While Wisner (2010) argues that faith-based NGOs may have an "untapped potential" in contributions to disaster risk reduction, local recipients may perceive disaster intervention by faith-based NGOs as particularly suspicious. Fassin (2007) is critical as to how the notion of humanitarianism shares the logic of intervention, and is in danger of ending up as another component to the "politics of inequality" in the world. Moonesinghe (2006) argues that that the multitudes of NGOs displaced local resources and community-based societies, which could have, if properly mobilized, contributed to the long-term recovery.

Tension, however, arose both from national and international relief instruments. Moonesinghe (2006) argues how local politicians and influential persons were able to use the influx of aid to serve their own constituencies, something that created social tensions in the communities. In the beginning foreign aid organizations were given free access to Sri Lanka and the momentous presence of a huge number of different

and often 'wealthy' aid agencies gave rise to suspicions that this was part of an international conspiracy, and that they were there to undermine both Sri Lanka's sovereignty as well as their Sinhala-Buddhist heritage (Keenan 2010). This led to various accusations against foreign NGOs, ranging from allegations of proselytizing activities to inefficiency and profiteering, yet Frerks (2010) argues that various political parties clearly orchestrated some of these allegations for their own benefit.

However, the influx-of-aid debate that really caught momentum in the post-tsunami recovery was that of the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS). This was presented as a limited arrangement for the disbursement of tsunami aid between the government and the LTTE yet the agreement also contained some political elements that were seen as stepping-stones for a further peace agreement (see Rainford and Satkunanathan 2009; Sørnbø et al. 2011). Both the JVP and the JHU vehemently opposed this 'Joint Mechanism', and JVP filed the case to the Supreme Court, who ruled the agreement unconstitutional. Ven. Omalpe Sobhita from the JHU staged another fast-unto-death in protest to the P-TOMS, an act which generated a lot of public attention. As the upcoming presidential election was already set, the issue of P-TOMS became politically infeasible. In total, JHU and JVP had been able to level greater criticism on the various stages of the peace negotiations, the P-TOMS, and raising suspicion of the role of foreign NGOs. Their claim was that these NGOs occupy vital positions of authority, influencing the government in a disproportionate way (Uyangoda 2010).

The anxieties around conversion and the P-TOMS played upon issues of sovereignty, nationalism and religious purity, and subsequently carved out a salient 'nationalist' political climate in the post-tsunami aftermath (Frerks and Klem 2011). The subsequent president, Mahinda Rajapakse was able to tap into these issues and to capitalize upon this 'nationalist' discourse in the presidential election in the autumn of 2005 (see Keenan 2010; Sørnbø et al. 2011). Thus, the tsunami can be seen to have occurred in a period of 'saffronization', a rise of political Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and the tsunami only accelerated and amplified the lines of antagonism that already existed in the political landscape before the tsunami struck. Whether or not 'unethical conversions' happened on a grand scale during the post-tsunami recovery (or before that), the allegations of them happening in itself effectively contributed to the 'nationalist' political discourse that enabled the nationalist parties to turn the tables on their political rivals in the parliamentary election in 2004 and presidential election in 2005.

### **Conclusion**

While some attempts at 'unethical conversions' undoubtedly happened in the wake of the tsunami, the actual extent of such improper proselytizing is heavily debated. The workings of a 'patrimonial rationale' can explain how loyalties and connections were both reshuffled and reinforced, and how many misunderstandings between the Sri Lankan communities and NGO workers emerged. The debate on 'unethical conversions' first rose to prominence before the parliamentary election in

2004, and the tsunami further fuelled the tensions between the groups, and the nationalist political climate that subsequently arose was tapped into by President Mahinda Rajapakse to ensure his electoral victory. While both journalists and scholars were eager to assert the possibility of a ‘silver lining’ in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, both in terms of the ongoing civil war between LTTE and the Government, but also the conflict over ‘unethical conversions’ between (evangelical) Christians and Buddhist nationalists, we see that the tsunami incident aggravated hitherto existing political tensions in Sri Lanka. However, while the political space was wrought with suspicions, conspiracies and hostilities, we still find that many Christian relief organizations were able to carve out amicable humanitarian spaces locally around the island, which enabled them to deliver humanitarian services. As has been critically examined in other studies, we see that religion may become a topic of heightened sensitivity in the wake of disasters, and pre-existing tensions between groups or over particular issues (such as proselytism) may fuel suspicions and conspiracies both towards operating (faith-based) NGOs and groups affected by the disaster.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article is based upon three fieldtrips to Sri Lanka from April 2011 to July 2012 for a total of 8 months, where I interviewed more than 60 key persons from various organizations, including both Buddhist political formations, Christian umbrella organizations, and various NGOs. The author is not a member of any religious organization.

<sup>2</sup> Ven. Ellawala Medhananda Thero would later become the leader of the Buddhist political party, Jathika Hela Urumaya.

<sup>3</sup> According to Deegalle (2006) Ven. Soma also stated in a speech that there was a conspiracy to murder him, and if that happened, monks still had to contest the forthcoming elections.

<sup>4</sup> March 2 is a significant date, as it was on March 2, 1815 that the Kandyan Convention was signed, which gave the British full territorial control.

<sup>5</sup> Complete lists of attacks and instances have been published online by Christian organizations. See, for example, the reports by International Christian Concern ([www.persecution.org](http://www.persecution.org)), an American organization, and The Voice of the Martyrs ([www.persecution.net](http://www.persecution.net)), a Canadian organization.

<sup>6</sup> In Aceh, there was an estimated 164,000 casualties and over 500,000 people were displaced. Aceh and Sri Lanka combined suffered over 90% of all casualties from the disaster. In contrast to Sri Lanka, political reconciliation was effectively negotiated and implemented in the wake of the tsunami (Le Billon and Waizenegger 2007).

<sup>7</sup> However, International Christian Concern reported that the same attack took place on May 22. Retrieved November 2, 2009 (<http://persecution.org/suffering/country/newssumm.php?country=Sri%20Lanka>).

<sup>8</sup> In total, 2568 of 2988 households surveyed denied that such conversions took place (85.9%), while 420 persons (14.1%) affirmed that there had been such conversions.

These numbers have some interesting local differences: in the north only 5% claimed that religious conversions were taking place, while the subsequent numbers were 17.2% for the east and 20% for the south. The east had a fairly stable score between the cities; Ampara at 18.5%, Batticaloa at 11.8% and Trincomalee at 25%. In the south, on the other hand, the numbers were hugely disproportionate; Galle at 42%, Hambantota 0.7% and Matara at 9.7% (Sarvananthan 2007, Table 41).

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