

Onward Buddhist Soldiers: The Sri Lankan Civil War through the Eyes of Buddhist Military Personnel

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Who are the Buddhist soldiers and how do they deal with the reality of war? This paper deals with the relationship between religion and war as seen from the perspective of Buddhists in the Sri Lankan military. Moving beyond abstract ethical arguments about Buddhist justifications of violence, this study will concentrate on Buddhist practice within a condition of warfare. In the two decades of Sri Lanka's civil war, there has been considerable discourse on the topic of Buddhism and violence. (Kapferer: 1988, Obeyesekere: 1991, Tambiah: 1992) While scholars have made many important contributions to the continuing discussion of ethnic violence and religious identity in Sri Lanka, very little has been written on the topic of Buddhism and the military. Recently, Tessa Bartholomeusz opened up academic discussion of the more specific topic of Buddhism and war in *In Defense of Dharma: Just-war ideology in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (2002). In this work, Bartholomeusz asks two questions: first, how do Sri Lankan Buddhists employ different narratives when they perceive Dharma to be threatened?; and second, is there a Buddhist "just-war" tradition comparable to that found in Christian-inspired ethics?

Using Bartholomeusz's work as a starting point, this study will look beyond the Buddhist ethical questions raised by warfare and concentrate on how soldiers practice their religion during a time of war. Rather than asking how Buddhists justify warfare, this study will ask how Buddhists engage in warfare and deal with its consequences. How do Buddhist soldiers mourn and commemorate fallen comrades? How do military personnel and their families deal with the fear and stress that arises both before and after combat? How do Buddhist religious specialists help soldiers deal with both physical and psychological trauma? The answers to these questions will be sought through ethnographic field work consisting of structured interviews with Sri Lankan military personnel and observation of religious ceremonies commissioned by individual soldiers and the military as an institution. While this study will be presented primarily from the perspective of religious studies, it will also deal more generally with the issues of ethnicity, nationalism and individual identity. In an attempt to get beyond the initial categorical dissonance created by the juxtaposition of 'Buddhism' and 'War', this work seeks to produce a vivid picture of how soldiers in the Sri Lankan military understand and put into practice their national, ethnic, religious identities.

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