Introduction

THE HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

"Only unprogressive nations, to hide the sterility of their souls, seek indigenous or supernatural origins for their institutions and culture. Progressive nations borrow cultural elements from everywhere and assert their virile genius in remoulding and re-creating them."

—Martin Wickramasinghe[1]

In many chapters of the history of religions, there are clear and frequent instances in which the myths, rituals, ethics, gods, metaphysics, or symbolism of one religious culture are assimilated, transformed, and subordinated by the devotees of another. In a previous study published a decade ago, I sought to understand how and why the Mahayana Buddhist bodhisatva Avalokitesvara had been absorbed into the predominantly Theravadan Sinhala Buddhist religious culture of Sri Lanka. In that study, I found that many centuries after Avalokitesvara's Mahayana cult had been introduced into Sri Lanka, the bodhisatva had come to be regarded by Sinhala Buddhists as Natha Deviyo, the tutelary god par excellence of up-country Kandyan Theravada Buddhist kingship. Natha's identity, in turn, was then further transformed. After his original identity as Avalokitesvara had been forgotten, he came to be regarded by many as the next Buddha-in-the-making, the bodhisatva Maitreya.[2] My principal thesis in that study of the shifting identities of Avalokitesvara was this: that migrating forms of religious culture are often assimilated into another if they are perceived as functionally efficacious. Moreover, the staying power of such assimilations depends upon the manner in which they can be legitimated convincingly in relation to the *telos*, or ultimate end, of the incorporating religious culture.

In the present study of how the Hindu deity Visnu was incorporated within Sinhala Buddhist religious culture, I am still interested in examining the nuances of this particular pattern of religious change. Much of what follows in this book aims at determining how Visnu's cult has become religiously mean-

ingful for different types of Sinhala Buddhists at various times historically. However, in this current study, additional issues come into play that extend the nature of the theoretical problem: It is often the case that, once elements of a given religious culture are assimilated, transformed, and legitimated by another, counterrreactions in relation to these assimilations may occur. These counterreactions often stimulate attempts to purge or reject precisely what has been previously assimilated. That is, cultural flows leading to the process of assimilation or adaptation may generate significant waves of resistance or patterns of ambivalence in relation to what has been previously absorbed.

Although such reactions belie the means by which a religious culture is engaged in an ongoing process of redefinition, this process of redefinition is often linked to a realpolitik. That is, many assimilations, transformations, or "purifications" occur not only because they are deemed, in general, to be functionally efficacious and soteriologically congenial, but because they are motivated, more precisely, by considerations of political expediency. Religious change occurs not only for religious reasons or rationales per se, but often in relation to the interests of contemporary political forces. Indeed, it is often difficult to separate religious and political forces within the context of social history or in the minds of individual historical players. They are often embedded in one another. This is especially true in the case of Buddhist Sri Lanka.

In pondering this problem theoretically and comparatively, it becomes apparent that this pattern has surfaced in any number of important historical circumstances in relation to a variety of religious and cultural contexts. Ambivalence in reaction to assimilation is often its by-product. Students of East Asian religions, for instance, know how important conceptions of Mahayana Buddhist thought, including dharma and emptiness (*sunyata*), exercised a profound influence upon neo-Confucian thinkers such as Ch'u Hsi and Wang Yang Ming during the tenth and fifteenth centuries C.E. in China, so that understandings of the principle of order and the nature of self-awareness were fundamentally changed.[3]

Simultaneously, however, Buddhist schools of monasticism and their institutions of practice were regarded warily by many Confucian literati and political officials, and sometimes eyed as an intruding or "foreign" presence, never to be fully considered as genuinely Chinese. In the literary circles of the Confucian Chinese elite, Buddhist ideas and institutions, however creative their impact upon Chinese thought and culture, often evoked just such an ambivalent response. Charles Wei-hsyn Fu has put the matter this way: "The neo-Confucian confrontation with Sinitic Mahayana is perhaps the most interesting and significant case of ideological 'love and hate' in the whole history of Chinese philosophy and religion."[4]

A second example is very familiar to students of Islam. This concerns the problem of how Jesus came to be regarded within the context of the Qur'an and later Sufi traditions. Again, the response is profoundly ambivalent. Although the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God, as well as the doctrine of the Trinity, was emphatically repudiated, the virgin birth or immaculate conception of Jesus was reasserted.[5] Such textual ambivalence contains the seeds of what later developed as a historical theory of Islam in which the religions of Moses and Jesus were enfolded into an understanding of a prophetic tradition that commenced with Abraham, and thus antedated the origins of the two rival religious traditions. Such was Islam's own "totalizing" response to the presence of other religious cultures within the regions that came under Muslim political control. Both Moses and Jesus were perceived as genuine prophets who had experienced divine revelations, but their followers were chastised for misunderstanding the truth of their messages. The ambivalence reflected in this interpretation left room for the possibility of valorizing Jesus in subsequent Sufi traditions. Marshall Hodgson (I:402) has described how a prophetic place was preserved for Jesus, but how he was simultaneously subordinated to Muhammad:

> Indeed, many Sufis allotted a special holy place to Jesus as the prophet of the inward life, of the gospel of Love. For among Sufis, as among other mystics, Love of God, and hence tenderness to all His creatures, came to be seen as the heart of inward life, just as reverence for God and justice to all His creatures was the heart of outward life, of the Shari'ah. There remained no doubt, of course, in most Sufis' minds that the revelation to Muhammad was the greatest and purest of the revelations. Sometimes it was put thus: that Moses revealed the majesty of God, and the Law which we must respect out of respect to Him; Jesus revealed the beauty of God, and the Love which we must bear Him when we catch a glimpse of His Reality; but Muhammad came with both Love and Law together, revealing both His majesty and beauty.

A third example, this one more pertinent to the study that follows, is the sometimes intimate and sometimes antagonistic complex of attitudes obtaining between Hindus and Buddhists in India, specifically in relation to how the figure of the Buddha was to be understood. Because this is a massive topic, I am compelled to look specifically, and yet only very briefly and superficially, within the introductory chapter of this book, at the changing manner in which some Hindus have reluctantly absorbed, cleverly subordinated, and then enthusiastically reclaimed the figure of the Buddha for Hinduism. A consideration of this relevant example of the theoretical problem at hand will also help

to give some symmetry to a study that is primarily concerned with the Sinhala Buddhist incorporation of Visnu, which is the subject of the chapters that follow. A brief overview of how the Buddha has been regarded in India's Hindu religious culture also provides an opportunity to discuss various dimensions of the religious significance of Visnu within the Hindu context, before observing the nature of his assimilation and transformation among the Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka.

In the study which follows, I will also discuss how Visnu's incorporation into Sinhala Buddhist religious culture has met with various degrees of resistance in late medieval and especially in contemporary times. In particular, I will focus on the significance of a contemporary movement in Sri Lanka led by Theravada monks that aims to discourage Buddhists from venerating the now thoroughly "Buddhist" Visnu. I will discuss the religious and political reasons for why this attempt to remove Visnu from veneration by Buddhists is now taking place.

This, then, is my thesis: that the manner in which deities or prominent sacred aspects of one religious culture are appropriated, legitimated, transformed and/or rejected by another may be, in part, the articulation of carefully considered theological or soteriological innovations invoked by reflective and erudite ecclesiastics; but often, however, some assimilations, and the resistances they frequently engender, are a refraction of social and political dynamics occasioned by a heightened awareness of communal, national, or ethnic consciousness. In the most abstract sense, I am suggesting that social, economic, and political conditions are often refracted in the substance and dynamics of movements for religious reform or innovation, even though the ostensible rationales for these reforms and innovations are usually more formally presented within doctrinal frameworks.

To be clear about my contention: I am not arguing that *all* religious assimilations or religious changes are *always* or *purely* politically inspired or politically expedient. But I am suggesting that many of them are at least partially so, and that we need to explore this possibility historically whenever we attempt to determine why it is that assimilations take place. In the case of the Sinhala Buddhist assimilation and transformation of Visnu, it will be seen in what follows that kingship, both Hindu and Buddhist, played a decisive role in making assimilations and purifications occur. In the contemporary context, Buddhist monks, as successors to the Sinhala kings who understood their own roles as the protectors of the Buddha's *sasana* (dispensation), are playing a similarly protective role. What will be seen is that while kings tend to assimilate, monks more often purge.

After the initial discussion in chapter 1 that analyzes how Hindus have incorporated the Buddha—a discussion that also introduces the major parame-

ters of the cult of the "Buddhist Visnu" and the problems inherent in a study of deity veneration within the Theravada tradition—I shall proceed, in chapter 2, to an overview of how and why elements of Hindu religious culture exercised such a profound influence on aspects of Sinhala Buddhist political history, literature, and architecture from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries C.E. This is followed by a discussion, in chapter 3, of how the identity of the Sinhala deity Upulvan, variously interpreted by many previous scholars, has come to constitute one of the major aspects of the transformed "Buddhist Visnu"'s mythic profile. In turn, chapter 4 examines late medieval Sinhala Buddhist liturgical poetry and myth to probe further into the evolution of Visnu's religious valorization.

Thus, part 1 of this book is primarily a study that is loosely diachronic in nature, examining mythic and cultic expressions of Sinhala religious culture as they have been evinced in a variety of literary sources: chronicles, inscriptions, poetry, and folk songs.

Part 2 is an examination of the contemporary cult of Visnu in Sri Lanka at the most important venues of its ritualistic expression; and it is a study of a recent movement to purge Buddhism of deity veneration.