

IDEOLOGY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF STATE CONTROL A CASE STUDY OF BODHISATTVA CULT IN SRI LANKA

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Religion has two functions; one is the pure salvation aspect of it, the other, a socio-political one. These two strands often are intertwined, but for our purpose we will treat them as conceptually separate. The use of religion in the maintenance of a given socio-political system is referred in the sociological sense as ideology. The use of religious beliefs by ideological purposes could often be for maintaining and justifying positions and systems which are against the basic teachings of the religion.

Sri Lanka was a 'feudal' society and perhaps still has characteristics of such a society. In a feudal set up, the society, economy, and polity are divided into particular sections of domination and subordination. It is an unequal society with the masses of peasants producing a surplus and a hereditary royal household and nobility enjoying the fruits there of. To justify such domination, often religious beliefs are made use of by the ruling elements. This has happened in the case of virtually every organised religious system after the initial stage of the founder's personal presence has vanished. Such use to justify inequalities and domination is of particular scientific interest in the case of religions like Christianity and Buddhism which have creeds that affirm the basic equality of man. In the discussion below, I will take the case of Sri Lanka and will attempt to explore how certain ideas associated with Buddhism were used to justify the kingly rule in the country.

At the outset, brief mention should be made of some of the characteristics of Asokan kingship, since it was held as an example of an ideal kingship by Sri Lankan rulers. But this concept of Asoka as an ideal is not necessarily the historical Asoka as depicted in his inscriptions, but an "Asoka" developed by the Sri Lankans (mainly those associated with the Mahāvihāra). As Bechert puts it, "It was of course not the tolerant Asoka who tried to develop a *dharma* generally acceptable in a multi-religious society - that is, the Asoka we know from his inscriptions - that influenced the thinking of later periods. Buddhists in the Theravāda countries only knew Asoka as depicted in Pali commentaries and chronicles, namely, Asoka as follower and partisan of the Theravāda School."¹

1. Bechert, Heinz, "Theravāda Buddhist Saṅgha: Some general observations on historical and political factors on its development," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIX, No. 4, Aug. 1970 pp. 761-768