

The Portuguese Reign of Terror against Buddhists and other non – Christians in Sri Lanka

Senaka Weeraratna ¹

All three western colonial powers namely the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British that governed Sri Lanka in varying degrees during the period 1505 – 1948, had as the cornerstone of their imperial policy the conversion of the Sinhala Buddhists and the Tamil Hindus into Christianity. This enterprise had the blessings of the highest strata of populace of the imperial countries including the Crown, the State and the Church. The avowed political objective in converting the colonized was to transfer their allegiance from the local sovereign to the foreign sovereign, and alienate the converted from identification with their traditional religion, culture, language and sense of self - determination. This plan invariably required the use of manipulative methods of conversion and the repression of indigenous religions i.e. Buddhism and Hinduism, by both overt and covert means.

This paper will examine as illustrative of Western colonial policy on religion, some aspects of the measures adopted during the first phase of Western Colonialism in Sri Lanka i.e. the Portuguese period (1505 – 1658), to forbid the practice of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam in territories under Portuguese control. This paper will refer to repressive proclamations, decrees and laws enacted by the Portuguese authorities in both Goa and Sri Lanka, and cite as examples various instances of acts of persecution, discrimination, and destruction of places of worship of the Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.

An underlying theme of this paper is cognizance of the irony that some of the Western countries that champion human rights in the modern era and lecture on religious liberty to descendants of the persecuted victims in the Third World, are the very same countries that had in the past systematically violated the human rights of the colonised in non – Christian societies. In particular the latter's inalienable rights to freedom of religious worship.

This paper is based on research and examination of the writings of historians and commentators, including both Portuguese and Sri Lankan, and Sinhalese historical chronicles such as the Culavamsa and Rajavaliya.

Key Words: The Portuguese; Buddhists; non – Christians; Sri Lanka

¹ E-mail: senakawe@sltnet.lk