



ISSN 1076-9005  
Volume 5 1998:116–119  
Publication date: 1 May 1998

*The Religious World of Kiirti Srii: Buddhism, Art, and Politics in Late Medieval Sri Lanka.* By John Clifford Holt. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Pp.x + 147. ISBN 0-19-510757-8, \$26.95.

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*The Religious World of Kīrti Srī* discusses an important transition period in late medieval Sri Lankan Buddhism; it documents scholarly and religious practices of Sri Lankan Buddhists at the crossroads of encountering Western influences. This is an important work both as an account of temple paintings and as an analysis of political implications of religious works.

Holt analyses extensively the profile of Kīrti Srī Rājasinha (1751-1782 CE), a late medieval Sri Lankan king who had great influence on the development and the preservation of Buddhist religious practices in the Kandyan kingdom. When Sri Lankan monastic Buddhism was at a point of disappearance due to the fact of not having higher-ordained (*upasampadā*) monks to perform Buddhist ecclesiastical (Vinaya) acts, this king saved Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition by inviting Thai Buddhist monks. By providing facilities to restart higher-ordination rites (*upasampadā*) in Kandy in 1753, Kīrti Srī renewed Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Monastic continuity through *upasampadā* is crucial for Theravāda traditions in South and South-east Asia, which emphasize the presence of active higher-ordination lineage. In the reign of Kīrti Srī, Buddhism was at the point of extinction since monastic communities lacked any fully-ordained members, and also, most members did not possess the seriousness that is required for proper religious practices. It had the Buddhism of *Ga.ninnānsee*, a group of half-monastic and half-lay practitioners. (For further information, see *The Ga.ninnānsee: A Peculiar Development of the Sangha in Eighteenth Century Sri Lanka*. By K. N. O. Dharmadasa. Studies in Buddhism and Culture: In Honour of Professor Dr. Egaku Mayeda. Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin, 1991. Pp. 161-174). Through royal patronage, Kīrti Srī revived Buddhism and most religious practices that survive even today after a long process of appropriation and revision, which some have dubbed as Protestant Buddhism, and which have their origins at the time of Kīrti Srī.

Holt's primary purpose has been to illustrate the importance of temple paintings in understanding Sri Lankan Theravāda and arts and crafts in the Kandyan kingdom. Through an analysis of temple paintings, Holt wants to see the way Sri Lankans became and lived as Buddhists. He emphasizes paintings as the most easily understood expressions of Buddhist religiosity (p. 95). According to Holt, paintings functioned as the most important didactic devices to instill the classical Buddhist world view among Sinhala Buddhists and, as cultic religious expressions, paintings clearly illustrate not only the fundamental mythic history of Theravāda but also the basic behavioral actions and cognitive tenets (p. 93).

*The Religious World of Kīrti Srī* contains six chapters, entitled “Kīrti Srī’s Predicament,” “Discourses of a Buddhist King,” “A Visual Liturgy,” “Royalty Reborn,” “Implications for Theory and Method,” and “Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Alienation.” The appendix presents material evidence from two famous temples—Gangārāma and Ridī Vihāra—to demonstrate the generous religious activities of Kīrti Srī. In addition, this text includes fifty plates in total, sixteen in color! They depict a variety of themes: sixteen sacred places in Sri Lanka (*Soḷosmsthāna*), Gotama’s meeting of twenty-four previous Buddhas (*Sūvisi Vivaraṇa*), several *jātaka* stories exemplifying the ten perfections (*Vessantara*, *Sutasoma*, *Uruga*, *Khantivāda*), scenes from Buddha’s biography such as defeating *Māra*, seven weeks of contemplation (*sat sati*), his renunciation of worldly happiness and preaching the first sermon, scenes from the *Mahāvamsa* (plate 20-22), illustrations of thousand Buddhas and Bodhisattva Metteyya (plate 43), and two illustrations of Kīrti Srī himself (plate 1-2).

According to Holt, *The Religious World of Kīrti Srī* is neither concerned primarily with philosophical ideas or philological issues nor concerned solely with social history, but comprises an interdisciplinary study of what it meant to be Buddhist in the midst of European colonialism (p. v). It is written primarily for undergraduate and graduate students of religion to explain classical Buddhist world views (p.v) and to show the substance and patterns of classical Buddhism in its late medieval Sinhalese cultural guise (p. vī).

Why did Holt choose Kīrti Srī? The answer is simple. According to Holt, Kīrti Srī was the paradigmatic model of the Sinhalese cultural guise of classical Buddhism. Kīrti Srī not only expressed a classical understanding of Buddhism but also appealed to various paradigmatic discourses of kingship (p. 3). Holt believes that the kingship of Kīrti Srī is formally framed in Asokan, Sakran, Manu, and Mahāsammatan terms (p. 37). This assertion of royal models, however, raises one problem. How can one king, Kīrti Srī, fit into all these models which are mutually incompatible? At least, an Asokan model seems to be historical; however, all other three models (Sakran, Manu, and Mahāsammatan) are ahistorical. These latter three models work on mythical level. Treating three mythical models with a more realistic and historical Asokan model on an equal basis seems to be methodologically somewhat problematic. This rhetoric of kingship models seems to astray the reader in knowing real Kīrti Srī.

The concluding chapter, “Postscript: Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Alienation,” associates some events of modern ethnic struggle between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils with historical events which occurred in the eighteenth century. In terms of scholarly contribution to the study of the issue of religion and politics, this brings out new dimensions. Holt is

right in pointing out that the current ethnic problem in Sri Lanka is based less on religious grounds but more on economic factors. Holt asserts that the role of religion in Sri Lankan ethnic conflict has been somewhat overemphasized and the deep-seated causes of ethnic alienation are more economic in nature than religious (p. 98). As Holt rightly points out, this aspect has been neglected in previous scholarship.

On the whole, *The Religious World of Kīrti Srī* is easy to read and accessible to average students of history of religions and Buddhism. This work could be easily combined with two previous works—*The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara* by Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977; and *Peintures murales du Sri Lanka: École Kandyan XVI-XIX siècles* by Marie Gatellier. 2 vols. Paris: École Française de l'Extrême Orient, 1991—which help in understanding temple paintings in Sri Lanka and their relationship to Buddhism and various methods used in explicating its doctrines.

Holt's *The Religious World of Kīrti Srī* is an important contribution to the study of Theravāda in the eighteenth century Sri Lanka. However, finally, I should note that a few diacritical mistakes here and there (e.g., Kīrti 4ri [p. vī], Khāntivāda [p. 79, plate 49], Buddhavācana [p. 92], Buddhacārita [p. 69, plate 12]) disturb the reader. In addition, the readers would have been benefited if complete citations, including the page numbers of original Sinhala prose texts such as the *Pūjāvaliya* (p.69) were given.