Article

Deconstructing Buddhist Extremism: Lessons from Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This article argues that it is not Buddhism, per se, but rather Buddhist extremism, that is responsible for violence against relevant out-groups. Moreover, it suggests that the causes of Buddhist extremism, rather than being determined solely by textual and scriptural justifications for out-group violence, are rooted instead in the intersection between social psychology and theology, rather than organically arising from the latter, per se. This article unpacks this argument by a deeper exploration of Theravada Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka. It argues that religious extremism, including its Buddhist variant, is best understood as a fundamentalist belief system that justifies structural violence against relevant out-groups. A total of seven of the core characteristics of the religious extremist are identified and employed to better grasp how Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka manifests itself on the ground. These are: the fixation with maintaining identity supremacy; in-group bias; out-group prejudice; emphasis on preserving in-group purity via avoidance of commingling with the out-group; low integrative complexity expressed in binary thinking; dangerous speech in both soft- and hard-modes; and finally, the quest for political power, by force if needed. Future research could, inter alia, explore how these seven characteristics also adequately describe other types of religious extremism.

Amongst the world's religions, Buddhism has generally been seen as relatively peaceful, even "exclusively pacifistic and exotic" (Jerryson 2010). Indeed it has been suggested that the Buddhist tradition is largely "irenic, encapsulated in the practice of meditation and complete withdrawal from worldly affairs (*lokiya*)" (Jerryson 2013). In particular, preserving the sanctity of life has been said to be so "anchored in Buddhism" as to be practically customary (Jerryson 2013). That said, academic research, reinforced by real world experience, suggests that, in the same manner as other religions, within various Buddhist strains there has, in fact, been "a long history of violence" (Jerryson 2010). That this observation certainly retains contemporary pertinence is borne out by evidence of Buddhist extremist violence in South Asia in recent times, where Sri Lankan Buddhist extremists have been implicated in sectarian violence against minority groups, especially including Muslims, who form about 9.7 percent of the Buddhist-majority nation (U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). Indeed, between 1983 and 2009, the country was wracked by a civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This was largely framed as "an ethnic conflict, dividing the population along ethnic—Sinhalese and Tamil—lines" (Ivarsson 2019). Following the end of that conflict, however, observers have suggested that "conflict tensions have shifted from ethnicity to religion"; in particular, lingering anti-Muslim sentiment that has existed since independence has been exploited by contemporary purveyors of "extremist nationalism that now frames the Muslim (Moor) minority as 'another Other' that threatens the Sinhala Buddhist nation, race and culture"(Ibid). In Sri Lanka, sectarian attacks on Muslims have been driven by "desires to consolidate a strong Sinhala-Buddhist nation" against the supposedly rapacious Muslim minority (Ibid).

Those who have been fostering such acute anti-Muslim intolerance include the extreme Buddhist monks, and organizations such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balaya (RB) and

Sihala Ravaya (SR). Of these, the most influential is BBS, led by Galagoda Atte Gnanasara Thero, the founder and the Secretary-General of the BBS (Ibid), as well as co-founder Dilanthe Withanage, the Chief Executive Officer of BBS, who also leads the BBS political arm Bodu Jana Peramuna (Walko 2016). Gnanasara Thero in particular appears to have played a relatively pronounced role; his name appears 18 times in a United Nations Human Rights Committee report that lists violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka from 2013 to 2014 (Secretariat for Muslims 2014). Moreover, his speech on 15 June 2014 in Aluthgama was said to have contributed to an anti-Muslim riot where four people were killed and more than 100 Muslim-owned businesses were destroyed (Gunatilleke 2016; Jerryson 2018).

Just as there has been violence associated with Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, Buddhism seems, therefore, not altogether different. To be precise, this article argues that it is not Buddhism, per se, but rather *Buddhist extremism*, that is responsible for violence against relevant out-groups. This is an important point to note as it suggests that the causes of Buddhist out-group violence are rooted in the intersection between social psychology and theology, rather than organically arising from the latter, per se. This article will unpack this argument by a deeper exploration of Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka. It will achieve this in the following manner. In the first section below, the key tenets of Buddhism will be introduced, with a focus on Theravada Buddhism, which is the form of Buddhism practised in Sri Lanka. The aim would be to unearth any apparent scriptural warrant for out-group violence. The second section will then survey how the much-discussed concept of extremism is usually understood in the theoretical literature, showing that its religious variant is best conceived of as an acute form of fundamentalism. In the process, we shall see how religious extremism is best understood as a fundamentalist belief system that justifies structural violence against relevant out-groups. More than that, it will be argued that rather than textual and scriptural justifications for out-group violence playing deterministic roles, it is social psychology, at times in tandem with elements of theology and tradition, that offers a more holistic explanation for Buddhist extremist-inspired out-group structural violence. In the third and final substantive section, we shall outline seven core characteristics of the religious extremist, culled from a close reading of the various theoretical approaches to the subject, and employ these characteristics to better grasp how Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka manifests itself on the ground.

1. Buddhism and Violence: A Concise Exploration

The academic literature on the links between Buddhism and violence is not particularly extensive when compared to studies on the monotheistic faiths. For instance, an important 2007 four-volume study, *The Destructive Power of Religion*, explored violence in Islam, Judaism and Christianity only (Ellens 2007). Furthermore, data on religious civil wars covering the period of 1940 to 2010 showed that combatants identified mainly with Islam (82 percent), Christianity (52 percent) and Hinduism (7 percent). Buddhism featured "relatively rarely" (Toft et al. 2011). The issue of Buddhist violence has nonetheless been attracting significant academic scrutiny in recent decades. Sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer has studied the Buddhist offshoot Aum Shinrikyo network in Japan, trying to understand how the apocalyptic worldview of its founder Shoko Asahara helped precipitate the Tokyo subway attacks of 1995 (Juergensmeyer 2000). Meanwhile, academic studies of Buddhist violence in Sri Lanka, in the context of the LTTE conflict, have emerged as well. For instance, Stanley Tambiah has examined how Buddhist monks played a key role in both participating in and mobilizing popular support for the long war against the LTTE (Tambiah 1992). James Manor's perspective is that in essence, a combination of weak governance and urbanization contributed to Buddhist mob violence (Almond et al. 2003), while Tessa Bartholemeuz has explored Sri Lankan Buddhist violence via the lens of just war doctrine (Bartholomeusz 2002). More recently, James John Stewart drew attention to the impact of global Islamist extremist developments in generating Buddhist fear of Islam and anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka (Stewart 2014). At the same time, studies comparing the ideological narratives

driving Buddhist–Muslim violence in the Theravada Buddhist countries of Myanmar and Sri Lanka have emerged (Gravers 2015; Schonthal and Walton 2016).

The current study seeks to complement the valuable insights of the aforementioned research in two ways. First, it seeks to situate such analyses against the wider canvas of Buddhist theological views on violence. To this end, since the 2010s, important research by sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer and the religious scholar Michael Jerryson have helped us more systematically explore the links between Buddhist doctrines, traditions, and violence. This article will essentially build upon their insights in the following paragraphs in the current section (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010; Jerryson 2018; Juergensmeyer 2000; Juergensmeyer et al. 2013). Second, and no less importantly, as mentioned earlier, it would be important to underscore that it is not Buddhism, per se, but rather *Buddhist extremism*, that is responsible for violence against relevant out-groups. That is, it cannot be overstated that the causes of Buddhist out-group violence are rooted in the intersection between social psychology and theology, rather than issuing solely from the latter, per se. Hence merely emphasizing the role of Buddhist theological and nationalist narratives, for example, without taking into account the very real influence of inter-group psychological dynamics, would provide at best a partial picture of the causes of Buddhist–Muslim violence in Sri Lanka.[1]

The next section will unpack the concept of religious extremism. At this point though, what can we say about the theological and traditional Buddhist understanding of violence? In general, Buddhists everywhere hew to the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering, there is a cause to this suffering, there is a cessation to this suffering, and there is a pathway to cessation. Buddhists furthermore acknowledge and demonstrate their faith through adherence to the three "jewels": the Buddha, the Dhamma (doctrine) and the Sangha (the community that follows the teachings) (Jerryson 2013). A key tenet of Buddhism is to work towards ridding oneself of carnal cravings, which are the root of all suffering. The Eightfold Path in this regard identifies how believers can gradually die to their baser attachments: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration (Mark 2020). The Eightfold Path hints at the emphasis placed on disciplined individual effort and action in attaining enlightenment. This is not surprising: as these scriptures evolved from South Asian worldviews in the fifth century BCE, an emphasis on proper social action or praxis emerged. Hence in Buddhism, an individual accrues demerit through his or her actions. In this respect, significant demerit is accrued through violent acts, including, even, the desire to commit such acts. Thus, murder accrues severe levels of demerit by this logic (Jerryson 2013). In fact, the principle of *ahimsa*—nonviolence—is very much integral to Buddhist doctrine (Juergensmeyer 2000).

The *ahimsa* ideal is reflected in one of "five moral precepts": abstinence from killing sentient beings, theft, lying, consuming intoxicants that cloud the mind and sexual misconduct (Jerryson 2013). While it has been emphasized by some religious scholars that the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path "do not include the cultivation of intimidation and violence," (Almond et al. 2003) others insist that some traditional Buddhist teachings have sought to "identify exactly when the rule of nonviolence can be broken", as a principled response to certain exceptional circumstances (Juergensmeyer 2000). Religious scholar Michael Jerryson thus identifies three such questions that in general must be answered to decide if a Buddhist justification for violence exists: first, what is the intention of the person who commits the violence? That is, is the violence accidental or deliberate, and if so, is the perpetrator motivated by "hatred and avarice?" Second, what is the nature of the victim? Is he "human, animal, or supernatural?" Third, what is the precise stature of the Buddhist perpetrator? Is "the person a king, soldier, or a butcher?" (Jerryson 2013).

Jerryson adds that while there are some "texts" that "traverse doctrinal boundaries", the scriptural answers to the three questions mentioned above vary to some degree according to the three major Buddhist Schools: Theravada (Path of the Elders), Mahayana (Great Vehicle) and Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle), as well as certain "regional specificities" (Ibid). Mahayana Buddhism is widely believed to be the largest School amongst the

world's approximately 507 million Buddhists (World Population Review 2021), because it is "prevalent in several countries with very large Buddhist populations, particularly China, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam" (Pew Research Center 2012). Vajrayana Buddhism, the smallest of the three major Schools, is concentrated in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia (Ibid). Also known as "*tantric* Buddhism," Vajrayana is seen by some scholars as part of the Mahayana School, though this is debated (Architecture of the Buddhist World 2014). In particular, the "teachings of Theravada" are "predominantly" the norm in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Jerryson 2013). Theravada Buddhism, the "second-largest branch" (Pew Research Center 2012). after Mahayana, because of its geographical distribution, is sometimes called "Southern Buddhism," with an estimated worldwide following in 2014 of more than 100 million (Architecture of the Buddhist World 2014). In addition, while the orthodox language in Mahayana and Vajrayana is Sanskrit, for the Theravada School, it is Pali. Hence the Theravada Buddhist scriptures are also called the Pali Canon (Jerryson 2013). As the focus of this article is on Sri Lanka, the rest of the discussion in this section and beyond should be understood henceforth to be drawing upon Theravada Buddhism's Pali Canon and its related commentaries.

Within the Pali Canon (or *Tipitaka),* murder is clearly identified as one of "four defeats" that results in "permanent expulsion from the Sangha," the others being sex, stealing and scurrilous claims to enlightenment. Indeed, murder is regarded as one of the "greatest sins (*adhamma*)" a person can commit." (Ibid; Britannica n.d.) Nevertheless, in the Theravada Buddhist texts, exceptions to this prohibition on killing are provided for. First, it would be important, as mentioned earlier, that the intention behind such acts was *apropos*. In this regard, a Sri Lankan monk involved in anti-government protests interviewed by sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer justified his actions by arguing that there was no way to avoid violence in a time of "*dukkha*"—an age of suffering—especially when the Buddhist community as a whole was under threat. In such times, "violence naturally begets violence", but the intention—defence of the welfare of the community—rendered such actions justified (Juergensmeyer 2000). Moreover, armed with a defensible just cause, believers—at least in theory—can engage in violent activity with "cool heads" and without "debased thoughts of slaughtering and killing other people" out of sheer bloodlust (Jerryson 2013). Second, tradition calls for careful discrimination in the targets of principled violence. In this respect, one popular mytho-historical Sinhala chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, tells the story of how the Buddhist ruler Dutthagamani, following a brutal war with Tamil invaders led by King Elara, expressed anguish for the high cost of victory in terms of the numerous deaths and destruction. Tradition holds that that eight "enlightened" Buddhist monks comforted Dutthagamani, arguing that his actions were justified. Apart from his personal and sincere religiosity and his right intention in waging a defensive war, the deaths of non-Buddhists were not important. This was because the latter were said to "possess such little virtue they are on par with animals" (Ibid).[2]

Third, tradition stipulates that care must be taken in terms of the status of the perpetrator of violence. In the Theravada Buddhist canon, there seems to be scriptural warrant for violence, especially when sanctioned by legitimate rulers enjoying the support of the Sangha. Indeed, it has been observed that not only do many "Buddhist canonical texts stress the intrinsic relationship between Buddhism and the state", there is "a widespread propensity" amongst States to "adopt Buddhisms as the official religion" and for "Buddhisms to provide the rationalization for the state's sanctioned use of violence" (Jerryson 2010). The organic relationship between the Buddhist-majority State, the Sangha and arguably, the latent potential for violence, is traceable to the background of the founder of the faith himself, Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BCE), born into Hindu royalty in Lumbini in modern-day Nepal (Mark 2020). A member of the warrior caste, prior to his spiritual awakening as the Buddha or "The Awakened One", Siddhartha was "raised to be the ruler of his clan and had an intimate knowledge of statecraft," growing up fully immersed "in an environment imbued with practices of diplomacy and warfare" (Jerryson 2010). Even following his Enlightenment, the Buddha did not withdraw into a private, hermetically sealed-off cocoon of personal

meditation and tranquil spirituality. Rather, as noted Buddhist scholar Alexander Berzin argues, throughout his lifetime, the Buddha often found himself engaged in leading "his ever-growing community of disciples and followers under extremely difficult circumstances" (Berzin n.d.). The latter including coping with internal succession struggles within the Sangha and navigating between the successive ambitious rulers of warring neighbouring kingdoms such as Kosala and Magadha, while also attempting to offer spiritual and even at times political advice to the antagonists (Ibid; Jerryson 2010).

One enduring legacy of this historical symbiotic nexus between the State and the Sangha has not merely been the high societal and political status of leading monks, but their political activism as well. The high status and prestige of Buddhist monks, certainly in Theravada Buddhist countries, speaks to the notion that the State is by definition Buddhist and exists to protect Buddhism (Walton and Jerryson 2016). Hence, if a monk is attacked physically by non-Buddhists, or if the former warns that a non-Buddhist threat to the intrinsically Buddhist State exists, a "catalyst" for out-group violence could be set in motion (Jerryson 2010, 2013). The preceding discussion compels one to aver that a tacitly theologically sanctioned, if often inchoate, sense of Buddhist nationalism permeates Buddhist-majority societies; certainly at least those adhering to the Theravada tradition. In fact, it is precisely such an ethos that is ripe for exploitation by extremists, as we shall see. At this juncture, however, it is first necessary to explicate what is meant by the term "extremism".

2. Religious Extremism Unpacked

There have been several attempts to explain what is meant by "extremism" (Berger 2018; Eatwell and Goodwin 2010; Sunstein 2009; Taylor 1991). This article, building upon an argument first advanced elsewhere, defines *religious extremism* in particular as a fundamentalist belief system that legitimizes the structural violence of an in-group against relevant out-groups (Ramakrishna 2020).[3] This definition requires further elucidation. First, it is held here that religious extremism is an *acute form of fundamentalism*. Fundamentalism, itself a much-discussed concept, can be understood as "a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors" (Almond et al. 2003). Put differently, fundamentalism essentially represents a "religious way of being that manifests itself in a strategy by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identities as individuals or groups in the face of modernity and secularization" (Ruthven 2007). Religious fundamentalism arises not only as a reaction to a "secular state" seeking to "secularize and delimit the domain of the sacred" but also as a response to seemingly more assertive and competing "religions and/or ethnic groups" (Almond et al. 2003). As Almond, Appleby and Sivan emphasize, "defense of religion is the sine qua non of fundamentalism; without it, a movement may not properly be labelled fundamentalist" (Ibid).

Second, it is submitted here that extremism is usefully understood as a belief system that legitimizes *structural violence* against relevant out-groups. Terrorism scholars such as Berger regard extremism as "hostile action" against out-groups, arguing that while physical "violence" is part of the hostile action he mentions, the latter also includes "verbal attacks and diminishment to discriminatory behavior" (Berger 2018). Berger is actually talking about *structural violence*, which has long been understood to encompass more than just physical violence. Johan Galtung argued in 1969 that "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung 1969). From a Galtungian perspective, therefore, out-group members experience violence not just when they are under direct physical attack—"personal violence"—but equally when they subjectively experience the indirect, sustained psychological threat of such attacks—"psychological violence" (Ibid). Hence, apart from "violence that works on the body," there is also "violence that works on the soul; where the latter would include lies, brainwashing, indoctrination of various

kinds, threats, etc. that serve to decrease mental potentialities" (Ibid). Additionally, there does not necessarily have to be any observable individual "subject" inflicting violence on the "objects" or out-group members. A faceless overall political structure itself, that is controlled by a powerful ethnic-religious in-group, through laws and other policies, ensures that "violence is built into the structure" and manifests as "unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances". In short, when access to educational opportunities, employment, public health, and political and legal redress mechanisms is "unevenly distributed" in favor of a dominant in-group, then broader, more insidious structural violence exists (Ibid).

Third, personal out-group physical violence is often "latent". To Galtung, "latent violence is something which is not there, yet might easily come about"; he had in mind "a situation where a little challenge would trigger considerable killing and atrocity" and which exists in "the day, hour, minute, second before the first bomb, shot, fist-fight, cry" (Ibid). In this respect, it is suggested here that policy elites should pay close attention to the structural factors—especially including the role of certain ethnic-religious extremist entrepreneurs—in fostering such a climate of latent violence. Such agitators may not directly incite physical out-group violence themselves, but the background climate of out-group intolerance they encourage through their rhetoric certainly creates an environment that breeds violence from street-level thuggery to more organized out-group attacks. Hence Galtung's observation was that "ethical systems directed against intended violence will easily fail to capture structural violence in their nets—and may hence be catching the small fry and letting the big fish"—the extremist ideologues in the background—"loose" (Ibid). Galtung's insights allow us to shift from an excessive downstream obsession with only the violent manifestations of religious extremism to a much-needed, more upstream analysis of the insidious, latent dangers posed by its ostensibly "nonviolent" manifestations as well. To reiterate, Galtung's analysis potentially helps us shift our preoccupation from the "small fry"—the actual violent perpetrators themselves, from terrorists to rioting mobs— toward the structural impact of the supposedly "nonviolent" ethnic-religious extremist entrepreneurs hovering behind the scenes. These, as argued, are "the big fish," whose inflammatory, if often carefully constructed, plausibly deniable, online or real-world anti-outgroup rhetoric, remains controversial.

Based on our understanding of religious extremism as a fundamentalist in-group belief system legitimizing out-group structural violence, we can now distil seven core characteristics of the religious extremist. At the same time, we shall apply these seven features to illumine the specific case of Buddhist extremism as manifested in the Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka.

3. Seven Core Characteristics of the Buddhist Extremist: Lessons from Sri Lanka

To recapitulate, religious extremism is best understood as an acute form of fundamentalism (Ramakrishna 2020).[4] David M. Terman explains that the fundamentalist–extremist mindset is a gestalt: a "perceptual, affective-cognitive" structure (Terman 2010). It is argued here that within the wider context of a religious in-group perceiving itself to be facing socio-political or economic stresses and strains within a multi-religious polity, the religious extremist—as opposed to mainstream believers within in-group ranks—would likely evince seven core characteristics.

3.1. Identity Supremacism

First, the religious extremist tends to be intensely and emotionally invested in his sectarian religious belief system, regarding the latter as superior to universally recognized international customs, mainstream constitutional, ideological, or theological norms. As Eatwell and Goodwin put it, while the "actions and value systems" of the religious extremist "lie beyond the moral and political centre of society" (Eatwell and Goodwin 2010), he takes his "own wider group identity" to "an extreme" by "intensifying its self-understanding and self-proclamation as representing, or being, the centre" (Pratt 2010). The religious extremist

is in other words an *identity supremacist*, particularly strongly driven by the "pecking order impulse" for in-group "pride, dignity and dominance" (Bloom 1997). The fanatical zeal of the religious extremist to promote and preserve the pecking-order primacy of his religious belief system with respect to competing worldviews often reflects an "obsessive-compulsive flavor" as well as a "rigid structuralist approach" (Ellens 2004). The religious extremist is thus closed-minded and leery of debate and compromise (Taylor 1991). His acute fundamentalist fixation with championing in-group identity supremacy and prestige often compels him to marginalize potentially competing out-group identities and national constitutional provisions stipulating respect for minority rights. We can certainly tease out this first characteristic of religious—in this case, Buddhist—extremism in Sri Lanka.

Since securing independence from the British in 1948, Sri Lanka has constitutionally been a secular state. The 2012 national census listed the population as 70.2 percent Buddhist, 12.6 percent Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim, and 7.4 percent Christian. The Theravada Buddhist community "comprises nearly all the country's Buddhists" (U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). Sri Lanka is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which, inter alia, guarantees minority protections against persecution based on religious or racial grounds (Secretariat for Muslims 2014). While Sri Lankan domestic laws officially recognize Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity, the "constitution and other laws accord Buddhism the 'foremost place' among the country's religious faiths". In short, while the State is constitutionally required to respect the rights of religious minorities, in practice, the special political status of Theravada Buddhism has effectively relegated other religions, such as Islam, to a secondary status in society (U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). Likewise, a political system has emerged that is geared around communal rather than multicultural politics. This sectarian, rather than an overarching Sri Lankan mindset, has been inadvertently enhanced in other ways. The Sinhala-Buddhist majority had historically felt threatened by the English-educated, Tamil-speaking minorities; both the Hindus and the Muslims. Thus, while legislation, such as the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, favoured the Sinhala majority, the introduction of Sinhala as the only official language eight years later further intensified the minorities' sense of not just political but also socio-economic marginalisation. The lack of a unified education system based on a politically neutral lingua franca, such as English, also exacerbated sectarian tendencies, because education and hence employment consequently became harder for minorities, including rural Muslims. While a politically significant business and bureaucratic class of wealthy English-educated urban Muslims eventually emerged, Sinhala-Buddhist identity supremacy has become entrenched (Ramakrishna 2019).

Sinhala-Buddhist extremists appear to be anxious about preserving their political and identity primacy vis-à-vis the religious out-groups—particularly Muslims—in the country. Robin Noel Badone Jones reports that in BBS circles, "Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and the Maldives are all cited as examples of previously Buddhist countries which have now became Muslim". In this context, "Sri Lanka is seen as the next domino that could fall to Islamic domination," and that Sri Lankan Muslims are perceived as trying to transform Sri Lanka into the "next colony in an expanding Muslim empire sought to be established by Wahabbi movement spreading from the Middle East, Pakistan and Malaysia" (Jones 2015). This is particularly resonant as the Buddha himself is said to have ordained Sri Lanka as the last bastion of Buddhism in the world (Nuhman 2016). The BBS narrative of Sinhala-Buddhist identity supremacy under threat by Muslims does have some degree of traction within elements of the wider mainstream community (Senaratne 2014). It is no surprise then, that in October 2019, in a video that went viral, the well-known BBS-aligned singer and politician Madhumadhawa Aravinda, employing "derogatory language to describe the Muslim community at a village meeting," declared that: "You [Muslims] will not be able to practice sharia [Islamic law] for as long as the Sinhalese live in this country". Aravinda cannot be said to have elicited an entirely unsympathetic reaction from the wider Sinhala-Buddhist mainstream; as noted earlier, religious nationalism is a characteristic of

Theravada Buddhist societies (U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019).

3.2. In-Group Bias

Second, and issuing from this intrinsic identity supremacism, the religious extremist is utterly fixated on the assumption that his religious in-group is inherently morally superior to relevant out-groups; this is what we could term in-group bias. In-group bias is actually a facet of human nature. The Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson explained that in-group bias arises from the essential human drive to belong to "any collectivity that can be compared favorably with other, competing groups of the same category," such as a "religious sect" (Wilson 2012). Hence, moving from "categorization to stereotyping and favoritism for one's own group," social psychologist Neil Kressel states, "is not that difficult" (Kressel 2002). In addition, religious in-group members would tacitly assume that other in-group members are "more similar" to themselves than to "out-group members" across a "wide range of thoughts, feelings and behaviors," (Waller 2005) and the in-group as a whole reflects a good, morally pure "essence", which is "the unseen spirit or nature that is endangered by contact or infection" (Chirot and McCauley 2010). What is key to note here is that the in-group bias possessed by mainstream believers would be far more starkly pronounced in the case of the religious extremist. McCauley and Chirot thus warn that the relatively intense in-group "love" of the religious extremist would predispose him to go to astonishing lengths to preserve the "in-group's essence" (Ibid).

In-group bias, it should be said, is pretty much evident in the Sri Lankan case. On the one hand, some monks—unsurprisingly—have reiterated that Buddhism is "a religion of ardent aspiration for the highest good of man", springing from the mind of the Buddha himself, a man of "high aims" (Johansson 2018). At the same time, though, the leading BBS monk Gnanasara Thero—fusing the core Sinhala ethnic identity with Theravada Buddhism—declared that "it is the Sinhalese who built up its civilisation, culture and settlements" and hence Sri Lanka rightfully "belongs to the Sinhalese" (Haviland 2015). In a confrontational June 2014 speech before a crowd at Aluthgama, before anti-Muslim violence broke out there, he portrayed Sinhala-Buddhists as the virtuous population "who nurtured and civilized this earth and soil, and who continued to protect the culture, civilization and values; who built 64,000 lakes" (Jones 2015). Other BBS-aligned extremists, meanwhile, have consistently emphasized the innate generosity of the "kind and loving Sinhala people" who "openly accepted the Muslim people as their own" (Ibid).

3.3. Out-Group Prejudice

As noted earlier, in Theravada Buddhist traditions, such as the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa,* non-Buddhists are portrayed as possessing "such little virtue they are on par with animals" (Jerryson 2013). Such texts should not be regarded as normative and deterministic; but such inchoate cultural mores arguably tend to intersect with contemporary social psychological inter-group processes. In the current discussion, latent cultural prejudice towards non-Buddhists animates the third characteristic of the Buddhist extremist: out-group prejudice. Out-group prejudice goes hand in glove with in-group bias. That is, while the extremist viscerally assumes his in-group can enact no wrong, he is equally fixated with the assumption that the out-group as a whole is evil, posing an urgent, existential threat to the in-group. The "out-group homogeneity effect" predisposes mainstream in-group members to assume that all out-group members are basically alike and "if we know something about one out-group member" we "feel that we know something about all of them" (Waller 2005). At the same time, the "accentuation effect" impels mainstream in-group members to be tacitly biased toward information that amplifies the differences with out-group members, in the process, downplaying intergroup similarities (Ibid). Moreover, within a wider religious in-group facing significant political, economic or social stresses within a multi-religious polity, mainstream believers may well be experiencing various degrees of *mass radicalization*. There are three aspects of mass radicalization:

in-group depluralization, in which all other competing in-group identities are jettisoned; self-deindividuation, in which in-group members' personal identities are purged; and other-deindividuation, in which the personal identities of out-group members are similarly eliminated. *These processes, however, would be significantly more pronounced among in-group religious extremists* (Stahelski 2004). Moreover, the acute fundamentalist impulse driving the religious extremist would furthermore impel him to believe that a battle of "good and evil" is occurring, where "two incompatible essences" are locked in a zero-sum in cosmic war, in which "love of the good means necessarily hate for the threatening out-group" (Chirot and McCauley 2010).

It is evident that in Sri Lanka, anti-Muslim prejudice in Sinhala-Buddhist extremist circles is rife and weaponized by Sinhala-Buddhist extremists. A common BBS trope is that if "Muslims were the top people in Sri Lanka the culture would be very different" in that "we can't even have Buddhist books", as "that is not allowed in Muslim countries, they will whip a person for that" (Ivarsson 2019). Another BBS-encouraged narrative posits that while the generous and kind Sinhala people openly accepted the Muslim people as their own, the Muslims "didn't reciprocate this love and respect to the Sinhala heritage and culture" (Jones 2015). Instead, BBS ideologues claim that "if Sri Lanka is a secular, multicultural state, communally minded Muslims will take advantage of the majority's generosity in order to take over the country" (Ibid). In a similar vein, Gnanasara Thero himself has manifested his deep anti-Muslim prejudice in stark fashion. He proclaimed in June 2014 that because the Muslims "haven't brought women with them from abroad", the "Sinhala women were prepared to tie the knot with them". He argued that even the very existence of a Sri Lankan Muslim community today was thus due to Sinhala-Buddhist generosity in inter-marrying with the former. However, despite owing their "very existence to the Sinhalese," Sri Lankan Muslims, "who were born with Sinhala blood," Gnanasara complained, "are now prepared to destroy us" (Ibid).

3.4. Obssesion with Preserving In-Group "Purity"

A fourth core feature of the religious extremist is an obsession with purity and fear of contamination of the good essence of the in-group through inter-mingling with the out-group. In this respect, what Paul Rozin calls a psychology of disgust, an evolved instinct in human beings, is of relevance. Such a psychology emerged in ancestral environments in which early human groups had to be wary of other warring tribes and predators at one level, and at another, rotting flora and dead fauna, within which unseen, often deadly germs and viruses gestated. Gradually, a powerful, instinctive aversion to dead and rotting flora and fauna evolved as an important evolutionary adaptation. According to Rozin (cited in Boyer 2001), the unconscious, evolved contagion-avoidance instinct in humans predisposes them to assume that "limited contact, however brief," with a potential source of contamination "transmits the whole of the risk". More to the point, other scholars argue that the contagion-avoidance instinct is at play when spiritual contamination-averse religious extremists encounter supposedly "unclean" out-group members. John Teehan in this regard reminds us that in the Old Testament, for example, Israel was commanded by Jehovah to put entire "sinful" cities to the sword, because they were seen as "polluted and so everything in [them] must go" (Teehan 2010). In sum, the religious extremist seeks to "enforce rigid boundaries between" his morally pure in-group and the morally polluting out-group (Berger 2018). In other words, the "out-group's essence must be kept from contaminating the in-group's essence" (Chirot and McCauley 2010).

Obsession with in-group purity and banning commingling certainly characterizes Sinhala-Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka. Muslims residing near Buddhist statues and holy sites have been coerced to move elsewhere as Sinhala-Buddhist extremists argue that the proximity of "sinful Muslims who are killers of cow and eaters of beef" is sacrilegious (Silva 2016). In 2014, moreover, Rev. Wathareka Vijitha Thero, a moderate monk, "was abducted, rendered unconscious, tied up and forcibly circumcised"—he claimed by unidentified Buddhist monks—because he had tried to foster closer cooperation between Bud-

dhists and Muslims. Incidentally, in a separate episode a few weeks earlier, when Vijitha Thero had held a news conference to highlight Muslim grievances, BBS broke it up, with Gnanasara warning him to stop "this type of stupid treachery" (Haviland 2015). Moreover, a 2019 assessment noted "multiple reports of Muslim businesses failing due to anti-Muslim boycotts". In May that year social media footage video revealed Buddhist monks chasing out Sinhalese customers from a Muslim-owned shop in Ampara District, warning the Muslim shopkeeper "not to operate his business in the area" (U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). Such bans are not new. In 2012, BBS had called for the boycott of "Muslim owned companies including clothing stores such as No-Limit and Fashion Bug" (Secretariat for Muslims 2014). BBS monks are also leery of inter-marriages between Sinhala-Buddhists and Muslims. In January 2014, Gnanasara alluded to this in warning of "extremist forces trying to create divisions, buy our lands, marry our wives and recruit our children". Stoking Sinhala-Buddhist fears of an ultimate secret Muslim plan to Islamize Buddhist Sri Lanka from within, he claimed: "The same thing happened in Malaysia, the Maldives and Bangladesh—all now Muslim countries. The same thing may happen in Sri Lanka if we're not careful" (Bangkok Post 2014).

3.5. Low Integrative Complexity and Dualistic Thinking

Fifth, the religious extremist tends to possess, cognitively speaking, a low integrative complexity that results in pronounced categorical or dualistic thinking. That is to say, low integrative complexity that produces dualistic thinking manifested in the extremist's often "simplified view of the world" (Schuurman and Taylor 2018, p. 15; Taylor 1991). Social psychologists suggest that the cognitive exercise of categorizing the social environment into binary oppositions is universal across humankind (Shermer 2003). That said, the fundamentalist mindset of the religious extremist, expressed in dogmatic binary thinking, is a result of the "psychological anxiety" caused by "perceived threat or uncertainty. This compels the extremist to "simplify" and to "eliminate the middle ground, to split, dividing the world into safe and threat, good and evil, life and death" (Strozier and Boyd 2010). To elucidate further, while "integratively complex thinking recognizes the legitimacy of different evaluative viewpoints and is capable of higher order synthesis of these viewpoints," lower integrative complexity "thinks in terms of, for example, binary, black-and white contrasts with little or no integration of the perspectives" (Savage and Liht 2008). Hence religious extremists tend to be "single-minded black-or-white thinkers" (Schmid 2013). To employ an example from Southeast Asia, some Indonesian Islamist extremist leaders display low integrative complexity and dualistic thinking via their "maximalist" interpretation of Islam, which "is couched in terms of an oppositional dialectic that juxtaposes Islam against everything else that is deemed un-Islamic or anti-Islamic [such as] secularism, Western culture and values, democracy, worldly politics," as well as other religions and "all man-made secular ideologies" (Noor 2007).

In this respect, it is telling that in Sinhala-Buddhist extremist circles, a radically simplified us-versus-them narrative, revealing little in the way of integrative complexity, circulates on Facebook and other social media platforms. As one observer puts it:

> The BBS offers a compelling narrative in which the Sinhala nation is at a crucial juncture for its own survival. Islam has swept away the vast stretch of Buddhist countries across Asia, the Sinhalese are constantly under attack from foreign threats, and Muslims are encroaching on Buddhist spaces and threatening to turn the Sinhalese into second-class citizens in their own homeland. Heroism is needed to save the nation. (Jones 2015)

It is worth noting that many times the narrative—in the process of portraying unerringly virtuous Buddhists as under threat from unidimensionally rapacious Muslims—also contains elements of misinformation. For instance, one student monk who appeared to have been influenced by BBS propaganda argued that: "In Tibet, they followed the peaceful way. What happened to them? In Myanmar, they followed the peaceful way. What happened to them? In Thailand, there are Muslims killing monks. Bangladesh also". Certainly,

in relation to the Myanmar reference, such views are radically simplified and not fully reflective of complex ground realities (Ibid).

3.6. Dangerous Speech

Sixth, the religious extremist tends to engage in dangerous speech toward out-group members. Dangerous speech can be understood as "an act of speech [that] has a reasonable chance of catalyzing or amplifying violence by one group against another, given the circumstances in which it was made or disseminated" (Benesch 2013). The possibility for dangerous speech exists in the presence of several key factors: a charismatic extremist ideologue with significant influence over the target audience, extant grievances ripe for weaponization by that ideologue, lack of access to countervailing information and viewpoints, a political and historical context of weak rule of law twinned with past intergroup conflict, and, particularly salient, speech content that linguistically dehumanizes the out-group "as vermin, pests, insects or animals," in the process legitimating supposedly defensive out-group violence as a moral obligation (Ibid). Linguistically dehumanizing speech, it is important to note, activates the aforementioned contagion-avoidance instinct within a religious in-group in the throes of mass radicalization. Hence, even supposedly "nonviolent" rhetoric in the form of speech or online content that does not directly incite violence against members of the out-group, but instead dehumanizes them as "pigs, rats, maggots, cockroaches, and other vermin," establishes an unconscious link between "disgust and genocide" in the minds of radicalized in-group mobs and militants, causing the latter to assume that these "disgusting characteristics" of out-group members "threaten to pollute the environment and must be eliminated" (Chirot and McCauley 2010). Dangerous speech, even when not directly inciting violence, but rather encouraging a climate of latent violence, is akin to what Ed Husain calls "mood music," (Husain 2007) which prepares the ground psychologically for such violence downstream. This is why Hamed Abdul-Samad, referring to Islamist extremist entrepreneurs, warns that authorities who permit such ideologues to spout "antidemocratic, antihuman sermons of hate in public," should not at all "be surprised when, sooner or later, their messages lead to violence" (Abdel-Samad 2016).

It is posited that the dangerous speech of the religious extremist can assume either a "hard" or a "soft" mode. In hard-mode dangerous speech, the extremist explicitly incites out-group violence. The challenge is when the extremist, naturally wishing to avoid attracting legal and law enforcement attention, engages in soft-mode dangerous speech. As an illustration, the British Islamist extremist Anjem Choudary adroitly evaded law enforcement action for years by taking pains to be "careful to avoid being linked to anything actually illegal," while at the same time publicly justifying the actions of Islamist terrorists (Neumann 2016). The notorious Indonesian Islamist extremist ideologue Abu Bakar Ba'asyir has engaged in dangerous speech in both modes. In October 2007, while dehumanizing non-Muslim tourists in Bali as "worms, snakes, maggots," that is, "animals that crawl," he explicitly incited a crowd of young supporters to "just beat up", such foreigners who dared to venture into East Java, and to "not tolerate them" (Robinson 2008). However, Ba'asyir often avoided the hard-mode dangerous speech that would explicitly incite out-group violence, opting instead for the soft-mode approach of fostering a combustible climate of "latent violence", in the Galtungian sense. Hence, he also publicly extolled Indonesian Muslims to "reject the laws of the nation's parliament" because "following state laws" that contradicted "Islamic Shariah law" was an "act of blasphemy," (Ibid) whilst urging followers not to "mingle" with non-Muslims (Behrend 2003). The point is this: even in the absence of a hard-mode, direct incitement to out-group violence, sustained soft-mode dangerous speech, by subtly normalizing "discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or prejudicial attitudes" towards members of out-groups with a view "to injure, dehumanise, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade and victimize" could eventually result in "insensitivity and brutality against them" (Cohen-Almagor 2015). In this respect, it is important to underscore that the religious extremist ideologue can well *shift between soft and hard modes of dangerous speech depending on his tactical appreciation of the situation*. As

Alex Schmid argues perceptively, in extremism, "the non-use of violence is based merely on pragmatic, tactical and/or temporal considerations" (Schmid 2014).

Dangerous speech—in both modes—is clearly observable in the case of Sinhala-Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka. The religious scholar Michael Jerryson met senior BBS figures Gnanasara Thero and Dilanthe Withanage in June 2014 at the BBS Headquarters in Colombo. Jerryson noted that both Gnanasara and Withanage were—in our terms, in soft-mode—not explicitly advocating violence throughout the conversation (Jerryson 2018). Rather, they advocated a subtler, softer narrative emphasizing the importance of ensuring the "protection of Sinhalese Buddhism from Islamification" (Ibid). Nevertheless, Jerryson could see through the façade:

> "[T]here is no explicit use of prima facie in the BBS rhetoric, but there is an implicit prima facie logic within their narrative: something needs to be done, or Sinhalese Buddhism will become obsolete. *Violence is not named, but it is implied*. The Buddhists who listened to Gnanasara Thero's speech understood this. The following day, they attacked the nearby Muslim community" [my italics] (Ibid).

Gnanasara, it is worth noting, has not been averse to engaging in hard-mode dangerous speech as well. On 15 May 2019, he explicitly "called for the stoning to death of Muslims," while propagating an "unfounded allegation that Muslim-owned restaurants put "sterilization medicine" in the food of Sinhala-Buddhist customers "to suppress the majority Sinhalese Buddhist birthrate" (U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). Gnanasara's blending of outright disinformation with dehumanizing language and unmistakably hard-mode, physically threatening rhetoric, comes out clearly in the following excerpt from a 15 June 2014 speech:

> "[In] this country we still have a Sinhala police; we still have a Sinhala army. After today if a single *Marakkalaya* [Muslim, in context used derogatorily] or some other *paraya* [alien, outcast, also a derogatory term] touches a single Sinhalese . . . it will be their end". (Secretariat for Muslims 2014)

Gnanasara's speech above is believed by ground observers to have "contributed to the 2014 anti-Muslim riot in Aluthgama where 4 people were killed and more than 100 Muslim-owned businesses were destroyed," because the riot occurred on 15–17 June 2014, which was right after his speech (Colombo Telegraph 2014a). Facebook has been heavily exploited by Sinhala-Buddhist extremists, in the latter case to disseminate "hate speech and rumours" that were said to have helped foment anti-Muslim violence in the central parts of Sri Lanka in early 2018, prompting an eventual public apology from the social media giant (Al Jazeera 2018).

3.7. Drive for Political Power

Seventh and finally, the religious extremist is characterized by his quest for the political power to transform the wider political and social system in ways that conform to his vision of how a divinely sanctioned order should appear. Importantly, controlling the levers of power would facilitate the desired domination and other forms of structural violence that may be authoritatively imposed upon disbelievers. Fundamentalist–extremists crave power as they "would like everyone to be like them, preferably under theocratic rule" (Herriot 2007). As outlined, possessing low integrative complexity and seeing life in stark zero-sum terms, they are consequently driven by the "desire for certainty," and concomitantly "the power to enforce that certainty on others" (Sim 2004). In this respect, as "power is a political rather than a spiritual issue," the religious extremist can be distinguished from politically active co-believers by his unequivocally more distinct drive for "control, control, control" (Ibid). The quest for power is also related to the extremist belief than the in-group faces an existential "crisis" in its cosmic struggle with the out-group (Berger 2018). This obsession with power and control relatively urgently explains why the religious extremist, as Schmid notes, is "anti-constitutional, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, authoritarian," well capable of "rejecting the rule of law while adhering to an ends-justify-means philosophy",

and, importantly, aims to realize his "goals by any means, including, when the opportunity offers itself, the use of massive political violence against opponents" (Schmid 2013).

We noted earlier that in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, there is a close association between the State and the Sangha and, consequently, senior monks enjoy high social prestige and political influence on national matters, including shaping State policy toward non-Buddhist out-groups. Such traditions have unfortunately been weaponized in the Sinhala-Buddhist extremist case. In Sri Lanka, the Sinhala-Buddhist extremist drive for power permeates the polity. The Berlin-based NGO Democracy Reporting International argues that the failure of the government, especially under former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, to act against Sinhala-Buddhist extremism hints at the tacit acquiescence of the political elites (Democracy Reporting International 2019). Rohan Jayasekera likewise suggests that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother Gotabaya, the current President, have had good relations with the "extremists" (Jayasekera 2013). Thus, when as Defense Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa opened the BBS's new Leadership Academy in Galle in March 2013, he declared that "the Buddhist clergy (BBS) were engaged in a 'nationally important task' and should not be 'feared or doubted by anyone.'" (Ibid) BBS, for its part, is loyal to the Rajapaksas' political party (Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna/SLPP) (Arudpragasam 2019).

Gnanasara Thero and other BBS members had also lobbied hard for Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the latter's successful presidential campaign (Schmall 2019). The Rajapaksas aside, Gnanasara had also been pardoned by the previous Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena, and released from prison on 23 May 2019. Gnanasara had originally been sentenced to imprisonment for six years by the Court of Appeal on 8 August 2018 for four contempt of court charges. Observers expressed dismay at the pardon, arguing that it "specifically signals that some categories of citizens, such as the Buddhist clergy, can expect to enjoy preferential treatment when it comes to obeying the law," and that given Gnanasara's record of "expressing hate speech and inciting violence towards minority communities," especially "Muslim Sri Lankans," the pardon indirectly represented a "worrying endorsement of such anti-minority sentiment, and can only heighten the anxiety and fear being felt by Muslim Sri Lankans today" (Centre for Policy Alternatives Sri Lanka 2019). In Sri Lanka, additionally, Buddhist monks are allowed to "run for political office and are free to establish their own political parties" (Kulabkaew 2019). Hence BBS is linked to a political party named Our People's Power Party (OPPP; in Sinhala: Ape Janabala Pakshaya). In August 2020, Gnanasara Thero was nominated by OPPP party members to fill the National List seat of OPPP party (Ranawana 2020). BBS is one of the "main components of OPPP" (Ibid).

Such strong BBS political influence on the Sri Lankan State and political arena is expressed in structural violence against the Muslim minority in various ways. Despite Sri Lanka's constitutional provisions for individuals to choose the religion of their choice, "the environment has grown increasingly hostile for those wishing to convert to Islam or Christianity from Buddhism," mainly due to such groups as BBS. For example, at a BBS rally in Kandy, on 17 February 2013, Gnanasara read out the names and addresses of individual Sinhala-Buddhists who had reportedly converted to Islam, "thereby placing these persons at risk, and contributing to an overall climate of fear and hate" (Secretariat for Muslims 2014). Furthermore, in 2019 it was reported that local politicians and civil society groups had complained that the construction of Buddhist shrines by Buddhist groups and even the military in the largely Hindu and Muslim Northern and Eastern Provinces was a form of "religious intimidation, as some shrines were built in areas with few, if any, Buddhist residents" (U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). The NGO Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice observed that the "readiness of the police to pursue spurious complaints against artists perceived to have insulted Buddhism", contrasted starkly with "the shocking lack of action against the hate speech of Buddhist extremists", especially those who have "incited physical violence against Muslim communities and other minorities in Sri Lanka in recent times" (Ibid).

Human Rights Watch also asserted in 2019 that public officials "have made little effort to discourage public campaigns by religious figures that put the Muslim community at greater risk" (Human Rights Watch 2019). Furthermore, because Halal certification is regarded by Sinhala-Buddhist extremists as a profit-making enterprise for the Muslim community, empowering the latter to build more mosques, purchase the affections of Buddhist women and thereby eventually outbreed the endangered Buddhist majority (Yusoff and Sarjoon 2017), in March 2013, the BBS forced the All-Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) to abandon the authority to administer Halal certification, though this had been the practice for decades (Silva 2016).

4. Conclusions and a Further Research Agenda

In this essay we have sketched out the key features of Buddhist extremism in the Theravada Buddhist-majority country of Sri Lanka. We have shown that despite its general image of being a non-violent, pacific faith, when one scrutinizes both Buddhist traditions and real-world experience, it is clear that, in the manner of other faiths, such as Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, adherents to Buddhism can and have both justified and engaged in out-group violence. We have seen that rather than being solely and deterministically the product of certain Buddhist scriptures and traditions, Buddhist extremism really emerges from the intersection of tradition and social psychology. In the example used in this study, Sinhala-Buddhist extremism emerged in the context of perceived threats by Muslims to Sinhala-Buddhist political dominance in Sri Lanka. What seems to have fuelled the emergence of fundamentalist–extremist movements, such as BBS in Sri Lanka, was also the notion that Theravada Buddhism itself was under threat from the ostensibly rapacious forces of global Islam and that if urgent action was not taken, Sri Lanka would go the way of the formerly Buddhist countries in Asia that had all since become Muslim. In this sense, we could say that Buddhist extremism is not sui generis. As a type of religious extremism—that is, a fundamentalist belief system that legitimizes out-group violence— Buddhist extremism shares many characteristics with other types of religious extremists fired by in-group anxieties of impending annihilation by some powerful, aggressive Other. It is thus notable that Gnanasara Thero himself alluded to the overlap amongst Buddhist, Hindu and White Supremacist narratives when he asserted in 2019 that his "ideology" was influenced by "Hindu right-wing group Shiv Sena, the British National Party, and French far-right leader Marine Le Pen—all of whom have made incendiary remarks on Islam and Muslims" (Lim 2019).

Thus, the seven core features of Buddhist extremism identified in this study: fixation with maintaining identity supremacy; in-group bias; out-group prejudice; emphasis on preserving in-group purity via avoidance of commingling with the out-group; low integrative complexity expressed in binary thinking; dangerous speech in both soft- and hard-modes; and finally the quest for political power, by force if needed; are all arguably to be found in other religious extremists as well. Hence, going forward, a potentially useful comparative research exercise would be to study to what extent these seven characteristics also adequately describe, say, Islamist, Hindu and White Supremacist extremism (Ramakrishna 2021).

A second possible follow-on exercise would be further exploration of how religious extremist movements network with and influence one another. For instance, it is well known that Theravada Buddhist extremist figures, Sri Lanka's Gnanasara and Myanmar's Ashin Wirathu, have institutionalized ties (Colombo Telegraph 2014b). In September 2014, both of them signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in Colombo to cooperate on three broad issues: first, networking to raise a collective "voice against all forms of political or religious movements that jeopardize Buddhist principles" as well as heritage and archaeological sites worldwide; second, fostering "opportunities to build working and operational relationships" as well as "experience sharing" and finally, to work on a "comprehensive global research agenda" to, as the document phrased it, "stabilize Buddhism" (Burma Library n.d.). This MoU was valid for five years starting from 30 September 2014 (Colombo Telegraph 2014b). It has been argued that while "the future

of these collaborative efforts is still unclear," the signing of the MoU, however tentative and largely symbolic, nonetheless "indicates a stronger recognition of shared Buddhist political interests across the region" (Frydenlund 2015). It may be worth tracking the evolution and effectiveness of such transnational collaboration between these Buddhist extremist entities. Finally, a third element of a further research agenda should be a systematic mapping exercise of the key nodes of the Sinhala-Buddhist extremist ecosystems of interlocking social movements and various institutions, charismatic influencers, political parties, and social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Doing so would be a valuable first step in designing effective counterstrategies, to hopefully degrade the ability of such ecosystems to both sustain Buddhist extremism, as well as to contribute to structural violence against the embattled Muslim minority in Sri Lanka.

Notes

1 For an excellent and concise analysis of the role of psychology in inter-group conflict, see (Waller 2005).
2 It should be noted though that some Buddhist scholars point out that such a conclusion violates the *ahimsa* principle. See (Jerryson 2010, pp. 4–5).
3 The author would like to extend his gratitude to *NEJPP* for permission to draw upon and re-use some material for the current *Religions* article.
4 This section employs concepts first articulated in (Ramakrishna 2020).

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