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Fundamentalism and modernity: the case of Theravada

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Abstract The article investigates the possibility of the Theravada fraternity at the Mahavihara monastery of Sri Lanka became a ‘fundamentalist’ movement especially in its quarrel with king Mahasena in the 4th century CE. Beginning with defining the crucial constituents of fundamentalism, the article explores the major organisational and religious conflict lines between the three monastic traditions and highlights the use of Pali as a specific language to encode the canon. Though not all of the aspects of the definition are met, the Mahavihara showed clear signs of an inward-looking, exclusivist and scripturalist movement; features that it shares with ‘fundamentalist’ movements. The article thus questions the relatively fixed connection between fundamentalism and modernity, which is a common feature of current research on fundamentalism.

Keywords Theravada buddhism · Sri Lanka · Mahavihara · History · Fundamentalism

1 Introduction

If the ‘Fundamentalism project’ conducted at the Chicago School of Religions in the 1990s had one result, it was that fundamentalist movements are accompanying and responding to crises caused by modernity. Initiated at a time when the use the term ‘fundamentalism’ was expanded to be applied to forms of Islamic fundamentalism as well, following for instance the revolution in Iran in 1979, virtually all of the papers that were published in the five volumes of the project are firmly located in the 19th and 20th centuries. Some reach back to the 18th century, but there is

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nothing to consider for the period before 1700, let alone the period usually called ‘the middle age’ (Marty and Appleby 1991, 1995; Marty et al. 1993a, b, 1994). In his retrospective of the unit, one of the researchers, Martin Marty, made no secret of this connection between fundamentalism and modernity, calling upon religious science to solve the problem, but did not question the relationship as such (Marty 1996, p. 5–9). In an article written after the project had finished, the sociologist Eisenstadt tried to unify the various forms of fundamentalism among religions by pointing at the “multiple modernities” that they experienced around the world. This approval kept the connection between fundamentalism and modernity intact and rather replaced the relatively clear concept of ‘modernity’ with the less clear adjective of ‘multiple’ that was basically applicable to any time and place around the world (Eisenstadt 2000). Whilst not immediately referring to fundamentalism, this work was relevant for the debate of the subject as well, talking about the impact these modernities can have upon collective identities and social movements (pp. 9–10), among which he mentioned religious fundamentalism as well (p. 17). Indeed, Islamic fundamentalism may be seen as responding to ‘modernity’ alone (p. 20).

However, the connection between fundamentalism and modernity stands, and this paper is not concerned about adding another facet to it. Instead, it will question the very nature of this relationship by asking whether forms of fundamentalism can occur in pre-modern settings as well, or—to put the question in another way—if pre-modern religious developments can be termed ‘fundamentalist’ by the definitions given. This will require first to approach the topic via a definition of what ‘fundamentalism’ actually is (or means), employing a definition that should be operable in both modern and pre-modern contexts. This is what the first part of the paper will deliver. Following this, a case study will be developed that comes clearly from a pre-modern (and non-European) context: the development of Theravada Buddhism in 1st century BCE to 5th century CE Sri Lanka will serve to illustrate certain features. The final discussion will then try to establish whether such a development as the emergence of a new religion can be called “fundamentalist” or, in case if not, which other terminology exists.

2 Definitions

In their “Users Guide”, which opened the first volume of the Chicago project, Marty and Appleby provided a common platform for the contributions they expected, which arranged ‘fundamentalism’ on five criteria that were all presumed to cause the follower of a fundamentalist movement to fight for its cause. These included a set of core beliefs of an identity with great innovative power; an adopted or inherited worldview; a closed repository of resources; a perceived threat to replace the fundamentals; and—to make this form of fundamentalism religious—the fight for and under a god or its equivalent (Marty and Appleby 1991, p. vii–xiii). This set of criteria indeed informed many of the contribution to the volumes even though they are anything but clear: the first and fourth virtually concern the same aspect, and the third one needs much elaboration as to what ‘resources’ can mean here. In part, their formulation seems to have been due to the sentences structure they

were embedded in, highlighting the ‘fighting’ for, with, under etc. fundamentalist connotations. Another aspect certainly was to keep the definition as broad as possible so that none of the potential case studies from around the world would be excluded.

Around the same time, scholars developed finer definitions of the term. The German sociologist Riesebrodt, who identified fundamentalism as a “patriarchic protest movement”, has listed seven criteria, which include the experience of a crisis, anti-modernism, a mystic-religious image of an ‘enemy’, eschatology (but otherwise lacking historical consciousness), a strong distinction between members of an in-group and an out-group, and a tendency towards authoritarianism or dictatorship (Riesebrodt 1990, p. 11–18). The religious scientist Yaveh has included ten criteria in his list, including anti-modernism and the rejection of state structures, a rejection of the religious mainstream, selective use of modern technologies, literal belief in the scriptural foundations and rejection of different interpretations of the scriptures, coupled with the claim to know god’s plan, an expectation of the apocalypse, a traditional view of women, and the fight against other religions (Yaveh 1993, p. 42–55). The American political scientist Denmark, who investigates the relationship between fundamentalism and globalization, has called the phenomenon an “unwavering attachment to a set of irreducible beliefs”, consisting of a strict literalism to dogma or ideologies, a strong distinction between in-group and out-group relations, and the rejection of diversity of opinion in favour of a return to a previous ideal from which society has strayed (Denemark 2010, p. 2553–2572). More recently, Wood and Watt in their comparison of Christian, Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism, have boiled this down to the term to “capture(s) a form of religiously motivated resistance to certain features of modern secularism”, providing thereby the shortest possible definition and putting the emphasis back on modernity (Wood and Watt 2014, p. 4).

These definitions—which represent just a selection from a much wider body of literature that doesn’t add anything substantially new or different to the definition of fundamentalism and is hence ignored here—have a couple of criteria in common and will serve as a foundation for the attempt given below. Fundamentalism can hence be defined: First of all, it is anti-modern(ist), rejecting all forms of modernity and its accompanying transformations of the world. Second comes the belief in a body of texts (or an ideology) considered as sacred and inerrant to an extent that it allows only one way of being read and interpreted. This scripturalism cannot be removed or replaced. It also defines the third feature, the clear distinction between member and non-members of the movement or an in-group and an out-group. It often comes along with a defined enmity or the making of a mythic-religious enemy. Conversions are however possible and are sometimes part of the attempts of the fundamentalist group. The anti-modernism is, fourthly, linked to an idealized past and aims at the restoration of it. This presupposes a certain historical consciousness, the scope of which however needs to be defined. Fifthly, the movement tends to be uncompromising and self-righteous, often descending into militancy or extremism. Violence is usually accepted both in exercising and receiving it, which includes martyrdom. The movement is inherently political and tends to male, authoritarian and sometimes dictatorial powers of a single person or a closed group of leaders. This would be the sixth and last criterion.

It is with this definition in mind that we can now turn towards the case study, the formation of Theravada Buddhism in the first half of the first millennium CE. This will allow us to investigate in greater detail whether there was a religious movement in pre-modern times (and outside the Jewish-Christian-Islamic realm) that can be called ‘fundamentalist’.

3 Pali and the formation of Theravada Buddhism

This article makes two assumptions regarding Theravada Buddhism which radically depart from the traditional image of it: it argues that Theravada Buddhism developed only in the first half of the first millennium CE—say around the 3rd–4th century—and it deliberately used an artificial language, Pali, to encode the canon and make it unintelligible to almost anyone living outside the Mahavihara. Regarding the first point, the tradition is fairly clear. Sri Lankan historiography is embodied by the chronicles *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* including the latter’s continuation *Culavamsa* (Oldenberg 1879; Law 1959; Geiger 1927, 1927, 1930), and they (and virtually all Sri Lanka chronicles of Buddhism that followed) draw a straight line from the Buddha through the Third Council (held at Pataliputra in about 230 BCE) and the sending of prince Mahinda to Lanka, where he became the island’s missionary monk and established the oldest monastery, the Mahavihara. The further history then champions the role of the monastery vis-à-vis kings of the island on the one hand and its monastic competitors dwelling in the Abhayagiri and Jetavana Viharas on the other. The Abhayagiri monastery split off in the 1st century BCE, but more importantly this refers especially to the attempted destruction of the Mahavihara under king Mahasena in the 3rd or 4th century CE and the setting up of the Jetavana Vihara in the immediate vicinity of the Mahavihara (*Mahavamsa*, ch. 37.1–39). The triumph of the latter monastery only came in the 12th century when king Parakkama Bahu I re-united the three monastic traditions under the leadership of the Mahavihara (*Culavamsa* 73.18–22 and 78.5–11).

This history of Theravada as being derived from the Buddha and representing an uninterrupted transmission of his teachings in the correct form through Mahinda and the Mahavihara has been accepted by virtually all scholars in Sri Lanka and the West.¹ But it needs to be set against Indian histories of Buddhism that identify the Buddhist tradition of the Mahasanghikas as the main adversaries of the Theravadins, who split off at a certain point in time (Beal 1880; Rhys Davids 1891). Whilst the Theravadins were forming only one of the eighteen ‘schools’ of Buddhism, they were the first to split from the Mahasanghika group some one hundred years after the death of the Buddha (Prebish and Nattier 1977; Dessein 2009; Guruge 1989, p. 1080–1095). Whatever the reason and circumstance of the split, the Theravadins remained a ‘sect’ within the Buddhist fold that had separated from the majority tradition of Mahasanghikas, and they fully flourished in Lanka rather than on the

¹ See for instance, Bechert (1969); Gombrich (1983); Adikaram (1946). British and American scholars have generally been a bit more careful but accepted the claim as well, see for instance Trainor (1997, p. 25–28), or Collins (1990).

Indian subcontinent (or anywhere else where Buddhism would spread in the course of time).

The question remains when this split became permanent and irreversible, and at this point our second aspect, the use of Pali, has to be brought to mind again.² The Theravada canon and all major commentaries and sub-commentaries are all laid down in the Pali language. This is a Middle Indo-Aryan dialect (or Prakrit) that is basically related to other languages of this group, for instance the language of king Ashoka's inscriptions and had its main development in North India, though it is unclear if Pali has been derived from a north-eastern or the north-western dialect of this group (von Hinüber 1988, p. 1–2; Norman 1991). Another moot point is to determine the point in time when Pali was actually formed, and there is almost no agreement among scholars regarding this question.

The history of Pali is best begun by starting to state what we know about the language. Its earliest grammar by Kaccayana called the *Vyakarana* dates perhaps to the late 5th or early 6th century CE (Norman 1983, p. 163), but it was clearly written after the bulk of the Pali canon had been completed and commented upon by Buddhaghosa. This monk can be dated with some certainty to the middle of the 5th century CE. The Pali canon therefore will have to have been written before this date. The earliest datable book from this body of works—widely defined—is the Pali chronicle *Dipavamsa*, which will have been written shortly after the major event it describes, the attack against the Mahavihara by king Mahasena. There is a 60-year uncertainty here, but very likely the king lived in the first half of the 4th century CE.³ The defective language in which the chronicle is written could be a sign that Pali itself had not been fixed as rigorously as it would be for instance in Kaccayana's grammar. On the other hand, it is also possible that the anonymous author of the chronicle wasn't familiar enough—or had to prepare the text in such a hurry that he could only write it imperfectly—to write the whole work in a correct style.

The written evidence would thus push the origin of the Pali language as we know it into the mid-3rd century CE. Linguistically, this was an interesting period in ancient Lanka as it saw the gradual replacement of the Middle Indo-Aryan Prakrits, which had been in use since the 3rd century BCE, with the earliest form of medieval Sinhalese (Parananvitana 2001, p. iii–xix). This transition was by no means clear-cut or 'organized', but it was well under way during the 2nd–4th centuries CE, and it had taken the first crucial stages around 300 CE. Pali and medieval Sinhalese have similar roots but widely differ in their arrangement of vowels, the omission of the aspirate "h" at the beginning of words and the singularization of double consonants, so they must be considered as two different languages today despite their common roots. And whilst Sinhalese developed as the southern-most dialect of the Indo-Aryan family of languages, the influences on Pali appear to go back to some north-western India on the one hand and north-eastern India on the other (von Hinüber

² I am well aware that 'Pali' initially meant something rather different, but as the word is now commonly accepted in the sense of 'language', I will stick to this usage.

³ Depending on the way the calendar is calculated, he may have ruled 60 years earlier during the second half of the 3rd century CE. However, this calculation has some chronological implications, which is why the later date has been given preference here.

1996, p. 5). Scholars are uncertain both regarding the exact nature of the changes and the time at which they happened. However, according to what has been shown here, the 2nd or 3rd century CE seem to have been crucial for the formation of the medieval Sinhalese on the one side and the emergence (or ‘creation’) of the Pali language on the other.

This linguistic change in Sri Lanka occurred at a time when Buddhist scholars in India had long resorted to Sanskrit (or ‘Buddhist Sanskrit’) as the *lingua franca* for the engagement with other communities. This habit had started around the turn of the century, and by the 4th century CE, the Buddhist philosophers Asanga, Vasubandhu and Dinnaga would write their treatises in Sanskrit (Warder 1992, p. 413–427). The formation of Pali was therefore a purely Sinhalese phenomenon, forcing us to turn our attention to the political and religious events on the island in the early centuries CE.

In this connection, we have to turn to Cousins who delivered the most systematic investigation to date (Cousins 2012). He finds no sign for doctrinal or other discrepancies that would have formed a separate fraternity (*nikaya*) in the Abhayagiri monastery before the time of king Mahasena (Cousins 2012, p. 83), but he also leaves it open whether the canon of this monastery was in Pali (written down in the first century BCE) or in “in a form of Middle Indian close to the inscriptional Prakrit used in most of India before the rise of Sanskrit” (Cousins 2012, p. 85). A look at the very few works attributed to the Abhayagiri monastery hints again at the use of Sanskrit or at a least a mixture of Sanskrit and Pali in the monastery until the fourth-fifth century CE. Only the later texts from the monastery composed in the second half of the millennium, have been composed in Pali. While the evidence Cousins presents is not perfectly clear, he seems to rather link early Abhayagiri writings to the use of some Middle Indian language, and only the later versions to Pali.

4 The fate of the Mahavihara

As said in the introduction, most of our knowledge of early Sri Lankan history is based on a single chronicle, the Mahavamsa, as well as its less elaborate forerunner, the Dipavamsa. Tackling more or less the same events from the time of the Buddha to the 3rd century CE, its major differences are threefold. First, the Dipavamsa’s chapter 19 contains a list of nuns whose names are nowhere else to be found in either epigraphy or a chronicle (Malalasekera 1928, p. 135–137). The second point is the time and deeds of king Dutthagamani, who not only killed the Tamil ruler Elara in a duel but also built the Mahathupa. The Mahavamsa treats both events in what has been called “the epic of Dutthagamani”, adding detail and a much more sympathetic image to the king than the Dipavamsa (Bretfeld 1996; Siriweera 1984). The third point is less obvious but nonetheless discernible at closer look and concerns the treatment of the Mahavihara. The monastery is somewhere “there” in the Dipavamsa, but carries much more weight and importance in the Mahavamsa, where for instance royal support for the monastery or its segregation from the Abhayagiri monastery are described more lively and in greater detail.

But it is exactly this conflict, first with the Abhayagiri monastery and later with the Jetavana monastery, that run as an undercurrent through the whole of the Mahavamsa. The first split came in the 1st century BCE, when king Vattagamani (29–17 BCE) founded the Abhayagiri Vihara. The moment of the king's foundation is exactly dated to the year 217, ten months and ten days after the founding of the Mahavihara. The Mahavihara had been established in the year 237 BCE after the Buddha's death (in 544 BCE), which should take us to the year 454 AB or to the year 90 BCE.⁴ The reason for the separation is rather obscure; the king had apparently quarrelled with the monks who opposed his Tamil advisor. The king reconciled with them but also built a new monastery which he handed over to his advisor, the monk Mahatissa (Mahavamsa 33.73–83). In a sort of post-scriptum to the passage, the monk Mahatissa is later described as having been expelled from the Mahavihara for "frequenting the families of laymen", and his pupil Bahalamassu Tissa therefore went to the Abhayagiri monastery to form a separate lineage (Mahavamsa 33.95–97).⁵ It is also important to note that it is in this context that the Mahavamsa uses the term "Theravada" for the lineage of the Mahavihara for the first time.

In connection with the founding of the Abhayagiri monastery, there is yet one more passage that deserves consideration. Although apparently unconnected, it immediately follows the story of the foundation of the monastery and should be quoted here in full.

"The text of the Three Pitakas and the *atthakatha* thereon did the most wise bhikkhus hand down in former times orally, but since they saw the people were falling away (from religion), the bhikkhus came together, and in order that the doctrine might endure wrote them down in books." (Mahavamsa 33.100–101)

The basic meaning of this passage is clear: the pitakas were for the first time written down—in a rather unimportant monastic cave called the Aluvihara, near Matale—because "the people were falling away". Geiger added "(from religion)" in brackets, indicating that he saw religious change as the reason for the move. Adikaram gave four reasons; the admission of religiously lax people, a recent famine, political unrest, and (probably because of the context) the founding of the Abhayagiri Vihara, without deciding which of the four would be the most influential (Adikaram 1946, p. 79). The last person to talk about this passage was Bechert who saw the "falling away of the people" caused by a famine alone (Bechert 1991). With scholars being uncertain about the event, its cause must remain open; however, whatever the reason for the writing down of the canon, it seems to pose three questions.

The first one concerns the connection between the founding of Abhayagiri Vihara and the writing down of the canon. In the chronicle, the two events are reported in one after another and without hiatus in between, though on the other hand the record is anything but chronological or continuous, and the two events may have been put together just by chance. At any rate, I don't think that the founding of the monastery

⁴ The date takes us back to the 60-year period of uncertainty. The founding of the Mahavihara would have taken place approx. one year after the Third Council of Pataliputra in 236 BCE. The date of the founding of the Abhayagiri monastery is mentioned in Mahavamsa 33.80.

⁵ Frequenting families of lay persons is not forbidden to monks, unless it involves sexual intercourse.

had anything to do with the first copying of the canon. This leads to the second question, which concerns the importance of the event and its somewhat brief and less-than-enthused record in the chronicle. Moreover, the event was held at a rather remote and inauspicious place, far from the capital and its monastic institutions. One would have expected the Mahavihara, for instance, but it seems to have been sidelined and one cannot help but get the impression that the writing down happened without the involvement and perhaps even against the wishes of the Mahavihara. Without too much speculation, it can be said that the account of the Mahavihara is too short and tight-lipped to allow for a positive image of the affair, suggesting that the monks from the Mahavihara may have resisted the exercise rather than support it whole-heartedly. This may be related to the third question the story raises: in which language was the canon written up? Naturally, it should have been Pali, but the chronicle doesn't mention either Pali or any other language. But when Buddhaghosa composed his commentaries some 500 years later, he would extensively quote from the *Sinhalatthakatha* and the *Andhatthakatha*—the Sinhalese and Andhran (South Indian) recension of the canon—but obviously not from a Pali version. We will have to come back to this problem below, but first tackle the second separation of a distinct lineage at the Jetavana monastery.

Chapter 37 of the Mahavamsa and the Culavamsa, where it is continued, is again quite misleading and inconsistent and will have to be read with greater care. The initial actions are clear, however: king Mahasena and the monk Sanghamitta, who had been banned to South India, were convinced that the monks of the Mahavihara did not adhere to the true Vinaya, as found in the books of the Vetulla, so the king put a ban on food offerings to the monastery. This forced its monks to abandon the monastery for nine years (Mahavamsa 37.1–7). Some monks thereupon proceeded to remove the building of the Mahavihara, which were then transferred to the Abhayagiri Vihara. However, the king's minister Meghavannabhaya opposed this demolition and eventually succeeded to persuade the king to stop it. He also helped to slay the monk Sona and began to rebuild the Mahavihara, whose monks returned to the monastery (Mahavamsa 37.17–31).

But that was not the end of the affair as another monk, Tissa, began to establish a separate monastery, the Jetavana, within the boundaries of the Mahavihara. In protest, its monks abandoned the monastery again for nine months, though a few hid inside the Mahavihara until Tissa got expelled from the order on “an offence of the gravest kind” (Mahavamsa 37.36–39). The account of the Mahavihara ends here (what follows is a list of king Mahasena's meritorious works), but the issue is continued by the Culavamsa in seamless fashion. Mahasena's successor Sirimeghavanna enters the Mahavihara, “which Mahasena (...) had destroyed”, and is informed that Mahasena had tried to remove the boundary without being allowed to do so, as seven monks had hidden in an underground cell and thus the monastery had never been fully abandoned. The king accepts this story of the monastery and re-establishes some of the destroyed buildings of the Mahavihara.

The narrative of the Mahavamsa is curious as it states that the Mahavihara was attacked twice and by two different monks, which led to its desertion for nine years the first time and nine months in the second instance. One wonders whether this were indeed two different episodes or just one event told in two versions, the

more so since the later version of the Culavamsa only focusses on the desertion (or rather non-desertion) of the monastery. The emphasis on monks being hidden in an underground room for nine months was obviously enough to paste over the nine-year desertion of the Mahavihara on the first occasion. The importance of this passage for the way a *sima* can be removed can however not be overestimated.⁶

However, the restoration of the Mahavihara took another hit in the 9th year of king Sirimeghavanna when the Buddha's Tooth Relic arrived from India and was not only enshrined in an open temple inside the citadel of Anuradhapura, but also taken to an annual procession to the Abhayagiri monastery (Culavamsa 37.92–98). Whilst the motives of the king for both the keeping of the relic in an open temple (instead of enshrining it in a stupa) and the procession to the Abhayagiri monastery are not stated, both measures transformed the way relics were being treated in Lanka and broke the Mahavihara's virtual monopoly on relics and the Bodhi tree (Frasch 2010). At the end of king Sirimeghavanna's reign, the Mahavihara was not in a good position anymore: it had been partly demolished under king Mahasena, a new monastery (the Jetavana) had been established within its boundaries, and it had lost out to the Abhayagiri in terms of ritual dominance. The struggle between the two monasteries also referred to the material support for the monks, where the Mahavihara seems to have been superseded as well (Frasch 1998). This is also illustrated by the Chinese monk Fa-hsien, who visited Lanka in the early 5th century CE and reported that some 5000 monks lived at the Abhayagiri monastery and only 3000 at the Mahavihara (Legge 1886, p. 102 and 107). The relatively precarious situation of the Mahavihara, which lasted practically till Parakkama Bahu's I unification of the three lineages around 1165 CE, will now enable us to return to the topic of fundamentalism and assess if the Mahavihara's lineage can be seen as an early case of fundamentalism.

5 The “Mahavihara movement”—an early case of fundamentalism?

Taking the list of criteria above to define ‘fundamentalism’, the most complicated issue appears to be the one first mentioned, its anti-modernist stance. Sri Lanka in the first century BCE or the 3rd century CE certainly wasn't “modern” by any stretch of the term, even though the island's irrigation system since the reign of king Mahasena could have claimed world leadership (Brohier 1934). But even this ‘modern’ irrigation system would have been within the imagination of the Lankan peasant or engineer who'd only be required to do the things they were used to like digging, removing earth and the like. Similarly, there was no religious modernisation beyond the splits into which the sangha had fallen and would fall. The only real change to arrive with the coming and going of religious ceremonies and festivals was the Tooth Relic. Before its arrival, people could and would go to the religious sites such as the Mahathupa, which contained some bones and ashes of the Buddha's funeral

⁶ The issue is not mentioned in Kieffer-Pülz (1989, p. 81–82 and 321–327). The hiding of monks from the monastery in an underground room seems to have been an important feature, see Guruge (1989, p. 1039–1040).

(as a ‘relic’), or the compound of the Bodhi tree, but the Tooth Relic established an annual festival that involved a procession and its display at the Abhayagiri Vihara. This was fundamental transformation of the relic cult and relic veneration in ancient Lanka, although it certainly wasn’t ‘modern’ in any sense of the word.⁷ In short, no matter if we look at society, religion, economy or technology, no ‘modern’ movements or processes are visible at any state of the period under consideration.

The second point of distinguishing between “in” and “out” by drawing a clear boundary between what is deemed acceptable and what not is easier to outline. The Mahavamsa is clear that the exit of the monk Bahalamassu Tissa from the Mahavihara to the Abhayagiri Vihara marked a point of no return: “Thus did the bhikkhus of the Abhayagiri secede from the Theravada” (Mahavamsa 33.97). This is evidence for a second ordination lineage (*upasampada*) to be formed by a monk, and the Mahavihara’s rejection of it is equally clear. The second schism, that of the Jetavana, is less pronounced in both the Mahavamsa and the Culavamsa; in fact, it appears that the Jetavana monastery was more or less ignored by the monks of the Mahavihara after the initial conflict about the violation of the boundary had been resolved. Only with Parakkama Bahu’s I reform in the 12th century were the three fraternities emphasized at the time of their reunification. However, even the more neutral attitude of the Culavamsa, which is less inclined towards the Mahavihara than the Mahavamsa, leaves no doubt that the monks of the Mahavihara possessed the “correct” view of dos and don’ts, of who is a member of the right belief and who is not. This becomes especially obvious when further Buddhist traditions such as the Vetullas, Dhammarucikas or Sagalikas formed or were introduced from India. These were always associated with the Abhayagiri Vihara but never accepted by the Mahavihara.⁸ If nothing else, the depiction of a separate, non-majority tradition by the chronicles demonstrates the Mahavihara’s view of their own tradition, which was to be preserved and spread, and any other view—be it “Abhayagiri”, “Jetavana” or anything else—that was to be overcome or at least sidelined (Gunawardana 1979, p. 24).

An emphasis on the history and historical traditions to illustrate one’s own supremacy over competing traditions is probably easiest to prove by pointing at the two chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa, of which the former was possibly

⁷ Though not modern, the cult of the tooth relic certainly put the relic map of Anuradhapura upside down, as before its arrival people would have to go *to* the temple, whereas now the relic open, visible and on the move. See Frasch (2010, p. 649–651).

⁸ The Vetullas took root around the 3rd century CE, though they were suppressed by king Voharika Tissa (Culavamsa 36.41). They remained prominent in the 4th century CE (Culavamsa 41.37) but eventually were defeated in a public debate by the monk *Jotipala* (Culavamsa 42.35). For their history, see Rahula (1956, p. 87–90). The Dhammarucikas probably formed around 50 BCE (Mahavamsa 33.95–98) and dwelt in the Mahavihara, but obviously in opposition to its monks (Culavamsa 38. 75–76) as they later moved into separate monasteries associated with the Abhayagiri Vihara. The Sagalika tradition formed in the 7th century CE and resided at the Dakkhinavihara, which had split off from the Abhayagiri Vihara. They seem to have existed only for a short time, disappearing in the 9th or 10th century CE (Culavamsa 52.17).

written in the 4th century.⁹ More than this, it shows in what is said in these chronicles: the Mahavihara was a tradition referring right back to the Buddha and its sacred texts reached the island after they had been approved on the Third Council. Also, they were submitted by the second-highest person in the world, the son of the emperor Ashoka. A second tie is constituted by the transfer of the sapling from the Bodhi tree through Mahinda's sister Sanghamitta, which established the material basis of the Mahavihara.¹⁰ The chronicles themselves became part of the ceremonies carried out by the Mahavihara, for instance they were read out aloud on festival days or, more importantly, they were continued through the centuries until the advent of the British.¹¹ All taken together, this displays a remarkable historical consciousness which draws upon an unblemished past, records the meritorious deeds of the presence and makes the memorialization of historical events part of the religious structure.

The monks of the Mahavihara were self-righteous, at least in times of conflict. The language used to describe their enemies, especially the Abhayagiriviharins and even more so the monks of the Jetavana monastery, reveal a clear distinction between their own beliefs and that of their opponents. This begins with the "Five Points" that led to the split on the Second Council (Dipavamsa 4.47; Mahavamsa 4.9–11), and ends with the allegation that the Abhayagiri Vihara nurtured monks who advocated doctrines of the Vetulla sect or other non-conformist (or "heretical") teachings.¹² But while offering resistance to these teachings and accusing the monks of the Abhayagiri monastery of complicity in their spread, the Mahaviharins do not seem to have used violence in defending or spreading their own teachings. That may have been due to the number of monks they could muster compared to their opponents, and if violence existed at all, it was embedded in the experience of victimhood (or even martyrdom) that the monks took especially in the way they encountered the attack by king Mahasena and the subsequent sharing of the material resources between the two or even three monastic establishments. It may have been this discrepancy that existed between the self-image of representing the 'pure' lineage and teachings on the one hand and the constant conflict with the other two monasteries over recognition and material support that put the Mahaviharins into their special position.

The militant rejection also becomes visible in the language used to describe the opponents, both monks of rival monasteries and kings. Already the dissenting monks

⁹ The historiography of ancient Sri Lanka cannot be further explored here. Suffice it to say that Geiger's assumption of the Mahavamsa and the Culavamsa being written by four monks only needs to be revised. Both the lives of kings Vijaya Bahu I and Parakkama Bahu I, for instance, are almost contemporary to their careers and were completed towards the end of their lives or soon afterwards.

¹⁰ Part of this strategy has been to declare the Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura as "the oldest historical tree in the world", see Nissanka (1994).

¹¹ Interpretation of the chronicle: Culavamsa 38.59. The text of the Culavamsa was written up by the British conquerors to the beginning of their rule in the late 18th century (Culavamsa, 101.29), and then continued at least once in the 20th century to cover the period until of president Jayawardene's term in office.

¹² For the teaching of the Vetullas, see footnote 8 above. The exact nature of these teachings is not stated (which is another incidence of the hostile attitude towards them) and we can only guess that they originated in India but found proponents in Lanka over time.

on the Second Council, which led to the first great division of the sangha, are called “shameless”, “heretical” and “adherents of the false doctrine”, and in the aftermath of the council “the other sects arose like thorns on a tree”.¹³ Tissa, the monk who instigated king Mahasena to his attack on the Mahavihara, is called “lawless” and an “evil friend” (Mahavamsa 37.32).

This takes us to the final point of this paper, which addresses the Pali canon as a form of ‘scripturalism’ that informed the actions of the Mahaviharins. The Pali canon, including Buddhaghosa’s commentaries, forms a closed and coherent body of monastic discipline, the Buddha’s teachings and Buddhist philosophy that the monks of the Mahavihara drew upon in all conflicts. It was a ‘fundament’ of their lineage as a whole. But one crucial question that arises next concerns the time when it was created. According to the findings presented above, the canon existed when Buddhaghosa wrote his commentaries in the mid-5th century CE. This date provides us with a *terminus ante quem*. At the other end, the writing down of the canon in the 1st century BCE seems to provide a *terminus post quem*, if there really was no written canon before. It is however unlikely that the monks used Pali for this purpose: none of the Prakrits current in India or Lanka at the time bears more than a rudimentary resemblance to Pali, and it is more likely that the emerging Elu-Sinhala language has been used, although this is a mere speculation. When writing his comments, Buddhaghosa referred on numerous occasions to versions written in Sinhalese or Andhra languages (*Sinhala-* and *Andhatthakatha*) in discussing certain passages and giving his explanations (Buddhaghosa 1947, p. 2.3–10; cp. Kieffer-Puelz 1993). The chronicle confirms that “he rendered into the language of the Magadhas (i.e. Pali) all the Sinhalese commentaries”, which were accepted by the monks of the Mahavihara as the original texts.¹⁴ This asserts that still by the time of Buddhaghosa the commentarial literature would have been in languages other than Pali. Modern scholars also agree to the relative lateness of the Pali language, although their dates vary grossly and indeed cover the full 500 years between the 1st century BCE and the mid-5th century CE.¹⁵ This evidence all seems to point at king Mahasena’s attack on the Mahavihara as the crucial event that triggered the isolation of the monastery and the compilation of the Pali canon as we know it.

Even though the circumstances of this compilation remain debatable, Mahasena’s attack singled out the monks of the Mahavihara as a distinct group of victims, whose only reliance was upon themselves. This made them a discernible “in-group” that stood against everyone else in Anuradhapura as the “out-group”. This group identity

¹³ Mahavamsa 4.9, 4.55, and 5.271, The Dipavamsa is less clear, speaking of “wicked monks” and “schismatics”: Dipavamsa 5.27–28 and 5.39.

¹⁴ Culavamsa 37.242–243. The Sutta-Pitaka has been transferred into the “Sinhala tongue” (Culavamsa 37.175). The *Samantapasadika* asserts that the commentaries were “brought to Sihaladipa by Maha Mahinda (...) and were made to remain in the Sihala Bhasa [language] for the benefit of the inhabitants of the island.” (Buddhaghosa 1947, p. 7, 16).

¹⁵ Rahula (1956, p. xix) (“growth of Pali was arrested (...) and the text finally fixed in the 5th century A.C.”); Collins (1990, p. 77) (“canon in the time of Buddhaghosa”). Different Norman (1978, p. 34), who said that “the canon was written down in Pali in the 1st century BCE”. The latest work in the field, by Gornall, dodges the question but claims a natural evolution of Pali between the 3rd century BCE and the 1200s: Gornall (2022, unpaginated preview).

was forced upon them through a boycott of material resources—the king forbade donations being made to the monastery (Mahavamsa 37.5)—and the attack on the physical integrity of the monastery by removing its boundaries. The Mahaviharins fought a legal battle to prove the continuous inhabitation of their monastery, but they had a much more intensive and longer-lasting fight in the field of religion: which of the various versions of the canon was the most truthful one? As a result, they began to compile their own version of the text, but more importantly, they agreed on a language that was restricted to their own group. This protected the text and made it distinct from any other version, be it (Buddhist) Sanskrit,¹⁶ early-medieval Sinhalese or Telugu, the dialect of Andhra Pradesh. In fact, the Pali language could potentially encode any communication among the monks of the Mahavihara and keep it “hidden” from the languages outside monastery, especially during the months or years the monks of the Mahavihara had to stay outside the compound of their home monastery.

The use of Pali as the language of the scriptures and possibly communication in a way embodies the fundamentalism taken by the Mahavihara. The monks had been singled out by the king and fell upon themselves for their survival, which included not to depart from their inherited belief. Writing down their teaching in a distinct language safeguarded them as it formed a marker of identity that could be used to identify the members of the Mahavihara across the island. The language insulated the canon against alterations and modifications alike and provided a standard version for everybody who subscribed to its originality and correctness. In this way, the canon became inerrant and authoritative to those who took it. Its historicity was historically construed, together with the tradition of the Mahavihara. Pali again served as the language to record these historical traditions in the chronicles. The fixing of the canon at the same time put an end to all additions and other innovation that had kept the monks busy over the centuries, Buddhaghosa and all later scholars could write their summaries, commentaries and sub-commentaries, but the actual body of the Buddha’s teachings, the code of conduct for the monks and the philosophical deliberations were determined. And this attitude towards the canon was anti-modernist insofar as no new material would be allowed to be added.

But whilst the Mahaviharins can be seen as anti-modernist in this sense, their attitude towards violence is less clear. Initially, they had been at the receiving end of royal violence, to which they responded with a mixture acceptance and resistance. The slaying of the king and his minister is depicted as a natural consequence (Mahavamsa 37.27–28; Culavamsa 37.51). After re-occupying the Mahavihara, they tried to improve relations to the kings whilst at the same time their attitude towards the monks of the Abhayagiri monastery were marked by economic competition and religious rivalry. Certain leanings towards ‘heretic’ traditions by the monks of the Abhayagiri Vihara were however critically highlighted in the chronicle.

¹⁶ Again, among the few inscriptions using Sanskrit, probably to address monks coming from India and other places abroad, is to be found in the precinct of the Abhayagiri Vihara: *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, ed. by Don Martino de Zilva Wickremasinghe (1912, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1–9).

6 Conclusion

Coming back to the theoretical outline issued at the beginning of this essay, there are good reasons to see the formation of the Theravada movement as an early ‘fundamentalist’ movement, though not without making adaptations. Some of the points are fairly obvious. The Mahaviharins were not only singled out as a group by king Mahasena, but also earmarked for extermination. Their monastery had to be abandoned and it was partly stripped of its buildings that were transferred to the rival monasteries of the city. This clearly cornered the monks of the Mahavihara and probably reduced them in number, but at the same time made them stand together to defend against the danger. On the one hand, they started the legal fight to regain (or retain) their monastery, on the other hand they developed a set of markers that distinguished them from the rest of the Sinhalese society. Most of all, they compiled a canon of Buddhist scriptures written up in a language, Pali, that was best understood amongst themselves.

This canon, to which later a set of major commentaries by Buddhaghosa was added, formed the source of their movement; it could neither be altered nor changed in any way. The canon was believed to contain the Buddha’s teachings, which had been handed down over the centuries undiluted and unchanged, and to support this claim they created a historical tradition by way of the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa. The two chronicles indeed trace the history of the canon as well as the history of the Mahavihara tradition down to the time of the Buddha without interruption or deviation. They underpin the claim of the Mahavihara at least to the time of Mahasena, and whilst mostly ‘objective’ in their language, they express their disregard of the teachings of the Vetullas, Sagalikas and other monastic groups who stuck to views different from the Mahavihara. The Mahaviharins were quite uncompromising towards these groups, though on the other hand their attitude towards their two main rivals, the monks at the Abhayagiri and the Jetavana monasteries, was rather tight-lipped and for the most part of the story even silent. But overall, there was no militancy in the writing on the two monasteries, and as far as we can tell from the records, no aggression beyond the rejection of the ‘heretical’ beliefs, becomes visible in the attitude of the Mahaviharins.

Whilst the scripturalism, group-thinking and historical consciousness are all hallmarks of the monks of the Mahavihara monastery and characterise it as a fundamentalist movement, other features defining ‘fundamentalism’ look less clear. This holds especially for the anti-modernism and anti-secularism, which are the core components of any definition of “fundamentalism”. The people of ancient Lanka would experience religious change by way of new doctrines and their proponents, and they saw how an improved irrigation system dramatically altered the relation between society, state and the monasteries at the capital. But this was not “modernity” as we know it; at best, the insulation of the canon and its commentaries as a closed body of scriptures can be taken as a sort of anti-modernism in regard of doctrinal and philosophical matters. It however responded to the religious start-ups only, which made their occurrence every now and then.

It is important to stress here again the relevance of the Pali language in which the canon was encoded. On the hand, the use of this language put the scriptures

out of reach of anybody unfamiliar with the language, and thus sealed is off against any change, modification or alteration. On the other hand, this gives us a rather precise dating for the formation and introduction of the Pali language, no matter where it did come from: from northwestern or northeastern India, Andhra Pradesh or from Lanka itself. Very likely, the origins of the language are to be seen in the context of king Mahasena's attack of the Mahavihara, the flight of the monks and the partial destruction of the monastery. The source of identity of the Mahaviharins were the teachings of the Buddha transmitted in its 'purest' form, and to protect and preserve this tradition the texts were kept—or rather translated—in a language incomprehensible to the vast majority of Lankan (in fact, South Asian) society of the day. A century and half later, by the time the time of Buddhaghosa, the Pali canon had become one of the numerous bodies of the Buddha's teachings, but one that was equipped with the hallmarks of excellence of being the true word of the Buddha. Pali was not a natural evolution in language nor Buddhaghosa's predilection, but a deliberate, structural response of the monks to the Mahavihara to the greatest crisis they could experience in their lives.

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