



Formation of Sinhala Buddhist Identity in Sri Lanka

From Violent Conflict into the Post War Era

A lecture by **Dr. Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi**

The lecture will be held on **Tuesday 2 May 2017**, 18:15 - 19:45 h at Hamburg
University, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, East Wing (ESA O), Room 123.

In cooperation with the Akademie der Weltreligionen

This lecture explores the ethno-religious, socio-cultural and geo-political impact on the island nation of Sri Lanka, in the formation of an identity that has consistently and persistently claimed to be unique in South Asia. A *language*, a *religion*, an *ethnicity*, and their corresponding cultural strands have historically defined and formed Sri Lanka's Sinhala Buddhist ideology. The post-independence era was at political crossroads, with the Sinhalese feeling that Buddhism should be normative in nation building and redefined as the 'national religion'.

The lecture examines the feelings of the majority Sinhala Buddhist community that their island might be the only place where *their language*, *their ethnic group* and *their religion* are rooted. Any attempt to contest this paradigm of ownership and custodianship, either internally or externally, was and is, abhorred, disowned and defeated. The Sinhala Buddhist ethos has ardently formed and confirms its ethno-religious identity despite all opposition. A rebellion to this politico-ideological legacy has been fought institutionally and otherwise with hostility. The bitter war fought for nearly 30 years, between the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnics, was a battle for identity, language, ethnicity and religion claiming their space and place on the island.

The lecture analyses how the post war reconciliation and social integration remain an uphill task for all communities co-habiting on the island. The operationalization of the claims for separatism, by the Tamil Tigers was dismantled. However, appropriate decentralization of power is a possibility, despite its own campaigners and doubters. Signs of peace building propositions are underway but it is not without resentment, tensions and struggles within the country's natural plurality. The challenge remains on how this tiny nation would decide to deal with the post war scenario of loss, trauma, suspicion and disillusionment that ripped through all ethnic communities

island-wide for three decades. Hopes of renewed energy to rebuild the nation is an imperative, as no compromise is tenable.

Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi is visiting lecturer at the Universities of Colombo and Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, senior resource person for the Oblate Institute of Higher Learning (OIHL), Colombo and senior lecturer at the Asian Theological Academy (ATA). He is a Consultant in Religion, Conflict and Social Adjustment and worked extensively with community groups and social movements in Sri Lanka. His primary research interests are in the diaspora communities – their settlement processes, religious affiliations, political mobilization and identity politics in social and cultural adjustments in the UK, Europe and Australia. His most recent involvement has been in the rehabilitation, de-radicalisation and the community reintegration processes of ex-combatants in Sri Lanka's post conflict period. He is the author of the book *Faithing the Native Soil: Dilemmas and Aspirations of Post-colonial Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka* (CSR, Colombo, 2012) and co-editor of *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Introspection and Future Prospects* (Leiden/Boston, Brill/ Rodopi 2016).

