Secularization can be understood in many ways. As an analytical concept it describes the general replacement of religion by means of a process of *Entzauberung* of the world (Weber). In a weaker form the secularization theory refers to a withdrawal of religious semantics from the public sphere in favor of individualized religiosity. In the latter sense, Sri Lanka can hardly be called a secularized society, though a tendency to relocate religiosity to the individual can clearly be detected since the emergence of the so-called Buddhist Modernism in the late nineteenth century and with the rise of meditation centers (*bhāvanā-madhyasthānaya*) in the 1950s.¹ In the sense of a reformulation of religious beliefs and practices in a non-religious, secularized language, David McMahan has dealt with the secularization of Buddhism as an important factor of the “Making of Modern Buddhism”.² In my contribution I will approach secularism and secularization not as a sociological theory, but as modern words in the Sinhala language and their use in re-conceptualizing the relationship between religious institutions and the state.

The traditional concept of a Buddhist protector-king became obsolete in 1815 when the last Sinhalese king of Kandy abdicated and the whole country fell under the regency of the British crown. At this stage the traditional ideal of a functional symbiosis between Buddhist institutions and statecraft became crucial—not for the first time in history, but the social changes fostered during the British colonial phase soon made clear that the relationship between religion and the state had to be re-conceptualized. In the Kandyan Convention of 1815, the British colonial government had consented to respect and protect the Buddhist institutions and practices of the country. However, by the middle of the century the Sinhalese nobility

---

¹ Cf. Bretfeld, “Buddhistische Laien, buddhistische Profis.”
and the religious leaders of the Saṃgha realized that the concept of what that could mean and imply were quite different on the two sides. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the government formally subscribed to a politics of strict religious neutrality. This situation was interpreted by Buddhist intellectuals of independent Sri Lanka as a lack of protection which in reality intensified the Christian domination of society.

Before we deal with the problem of secularism in the political concepts of independent Sri Lanka, it is necessary to take a look at the religio-political ideal of Buddhist kingship as it was promoted by the historical Buddhist kings and in the literature of the Saṃgha. This imagination of an ideal ‘state’ serves as a ‘utopian memory’ against which the present structures and principles of statecraft are measured, especially by the powerful fundamentalist Buddhist forces of modern Sri Lanka.

The Idealized Buddhist Kingship

While Lankan Buddhists had developed and conceptualized a distinct local religious field not later than the emergence of historiographical literature—the so-called vamsas—in the fifth century C.E., overlappings and mutual permeations between the religious and the political field have been strong throughout history. Members of the Saṃgha served as advisors and court historians to the kings. As a religious institution, the monastic community served as a source of religious power and acted as ‘tutelary deity’ to the king, even providing protection for his armies during warfare. The prosperity of the kingdom was closely associated to the measure of royal gratitude enjoyed by the Buddhist institutions. Thus, an important duty of the king was “to bring glory to Sāsana” by protecting and increasing its personal and material installations. Especially the Saṃgha was perceived as a ‘field of merit’ which bears incomparable fruits for the after-life when ‘tilled’ with generous gifts (dāna). It seems that the kings’ efforts of merit-making were recorded since ancient times in so-called merit books (puñña-pota) which, amongst other things, were

---

3 The community of Buddhist monks, divided into several Nikāyas (sections).
4 A good example for the disappointments with the execution of the Kandyan Convention is the fiduciary duty the British government was expected—but in the eyes of the Kandyan nobility completely failed—to assume for the Tooth Relic. Cf. Silva, “The Custody of the Sacred Tooth Relic.”
6 The Buddhist religion and its institutions.