

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 51 (1997)

Heft: 4

Buchbesprechung: Buchbesprechungen = Comptes rendus

Autor: [s.n.]

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 18.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN/COMPTE RENDUS

YOUNG, R.F. and S. JEBANESAN. *The Bible Trembled: the Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*. Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1995, p.205.

YOUNG, R.F. and G.P.V. SOMARATNA. *Vain Debates: the Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon*. Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1996, p. 236.

The strength of these monographs is the meticulous research into primary sources which lies behind them. In the words of the authors, they are studies of history, carried out within an interdisciplinary perspective. The methodology behind each is the same: a critical re-narration of history using primary material, gleaned from a wide spectrum of previously under-used and sometimes little-known sources, for the purpose of clarifying historical record. The monographs do not aim to be theoretical. Yet, their findings challenge a number of popular and scholarly theories in a most effective way. Both should become essential reading for any researcher interested either in nineteenth century Ceylon – now, of course, Sri Lanka – or the dynamics of inter-religious relations.

To an outsider, it might at first seem strange that separate studies are needed for the Hindu-Christian controversy in the predominantly Hindu North of Sri Lanka and the Buddhist-Christian controversy of the predominantly Buddhist South. Both controversies arose at about the same time in response to the same socio-political and religious forces arising from the British Evangelical Revival and imperialism. The Christian missionary catalysts in both the North and the South were moulded by the same assumptions concerning “non-Christian” religions and engaged in very similar activities. Their accusations against Hinduism and Buddhism bore striking resemblances. Yet, here the similarities end. The authors are right to have written two monographs. The religious and social contexts in the North and the South of Sri Lanka were as different in the nineteenth century as they are today. The two controversies ran parallel to one another but with separate dynamics. The Hindu and Buddhist protagonists did

not join forces or even communicate with one another. To have written a unified study would have produced massive methodological problems.

The British gained control over the maritime areas of Sri Lanka from the Dutch in 1796. The newly-formed evangelical missionary societies of Britain were quick to respond. The London Missionary Society was the first. It sent personnel in 1805, but the Society's involvement was short-lived. The second decade of the nineteenth century was more significant. In 1812 the Baptist Missionary Society sent their first representative, James Chater. He was followed in 1814 by a Wesleyan Methodist group. In 1816, it was the turn of American Presbyterian and Congregationalist missionaries who went to Jaffna in the North, and in 1818, that of the Church Missionary Society. It was only later in the century that members of the SPG, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and the Quakers arrived. Both studies start in the second decade of the nineteenth century but embrace not only the indigenous reaction to Protestant missionary activity but also to Roman Catholicism, which had had a firm foothold in the country since the time of Portuguese domination between 1505 and the 1650s.

The Bible Trembled begins with the conflict between brahmin and missionary in Jaffna which led to a widely-accepted triumph of the Copernican cosmological paradigm over the Puranic. The authors describe how the missionaries, seeking to attack Hinduism through its cosmology, eventually outdid local almanac makers, convincing many in Jaffna of the need for accommodation with modern scientific theory. The missionary assumption was that Hinduism would fall as a result. The authors show how wrong such an assumption was. Some Hindus insisted that a distinction could be made between astronomy and religious beliefs and practice. From this lobby came those who were willing to co-operate with the missionaries for educational self-advancement and scientific progress but not when the Saivite faith itself was attacked as polytheistic and idolatrous. Subsequent chapters study the influence on northern Sri Lanka of a short-lived but polemical outbreak of opposition to Christianity in Madras in the 1840s and then chart the rise of a resistance in Jaffna among the dominant Vellāla caste. Much emphasis is placed on Ārumuka Nāvalar, who spent 14 years working with missionaries before spearheading reaction, but he is placed amongst others: the poet Muttukkumārak Kavirāyar; Caṅkara Paṅṅitar; C.W. Tāmōtaram Piḷḷai; Ponnambalam Ramanathan. The response of each to Christianity is shown to be different from Ārumuka's accusation that the

Protestant rejection of Saivist temple devotion was a rejection of its own Jewish roots to Ramanathan's idealistic universalism which led him to theosophy and a "missionary" role in the West. The last part of the study makes the case that the later reformist zeal of Ārumuka set in motion a "Protestant" Hinduism with similarities to what has been termed Protestant Buddhism in the South.

Vain Debates introduces a periodization of the southern controversy with four "benchmarks": the publication of the first part of *Kristiyāni Prajñapti* (Christian Institutes) by Wesleyan missionary and Pali scholar – Revd. Daniel Gogerly in 1848; the acquiring of printing presses by Buddhists in Galle and Colombo in 1862; the Buddhist-Christian Debate in Panadura in 1873; the riots between Roman Catholics and Buddhists in Koṭahēna near Colombo in 1883. The chapters are structured to reflect this. It is clearly shown that reaction to aggressive Christian missionary methods began almost as soon as the missionaries arrived. At first, however, there was a "congeniality", even a "conviviality" about it. Members of the monastic Sangha either avoided confrontation or pressed for a rational and humane ethic to govern it. The *olas* produced exhibited "defensive tolerance". But, if the monks had hoped for a creative interchange of ideas, the authors show that these were dashed. *Ola* began to follow tract and tract to follow *ola* without intellectual interaction. The development is presented as one of ever increasing degeneration as the tendency to demonize the "other" sharpened among both Christians and Buddhists. Among the pre-1862 Buddhist *olas*, the authors detect greater sophistication of argument than in the printed tracts produced after Buddhists gained access to printing presses. As in *The Bible Trembled*, distinctions are made between prominent figures in the controversy: between the moderate Ven. Hikkaduvē Sumamgala in Galle and the flamboyant, almost renegade, Mohoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda in Colombo; between those such as Guṇānanda who could hold together and advocate both kammatic and cognitive Buddhism and Anagārika Dharmapāla, the paradigmatic proponent of what has come to be called Protestant Buddhism.

To pass to the theoretical challenges the monographs pose, the following come under particular scrutiny: popular patterns of hagiography; the link sometimes made between religious controversy in the 19th century and 20th century anti-imperial or chauvinist sentiment; periodizations of the southern Buddhist Revival which give foremost place to the Panadura Debate, Colonel Olcott or Protestant Buddhism.

Ārumuka Nāvalar, Mohoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda and Colonel Olcott have all been objects of hagiography in Sri Lanka. The monographs, in contrast, present Ārumuka Nāvalar as an important but transitional figure within the total pattern of the northern controversy and Colonel Olcott features only as an object of criticism. Rather than follow the Olcott line after 1880 the authors choose to trace the opposition to Olcott by Mohoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda and his followers, who disagreed with Olcott's belittling of what has come to be termed kammatic Buddhism. Yet, Guṇānanda himself emerges as an ambivalent and contradictory figure rather than a saint – champion of Buddhism and terror of the missionaries most surely but one whose methods of grasping the dhamma resulted in “the recoil of the dhamma”. The authors use the powerful *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (Discourse on the parable of the Water Snake) to suggest that some Buddhist revivalists, in adopting the same methods as the missionaries, grasped Buddhism in the wrong way which led to their own hand being bitten, as in the Koṭahēna Riots when Buddhist provocation of Catholics led to an attack on a Buddhist procession which left two dead.

The Panadura Debate of 1873, the arrival of Colonel Olcott in 1880 and the work of Anagārika Dharmapāla enter *Vain Debates* only towards the end. The dominant form of Buddhism in the revivalist period studied was Protestant in that it protested against Christianity but not in the sense used by researchers such as Gananath Obeyesekere in that it did not question traditional patterns of devotion or authority. By opening out the significance of the pre-Panadura period, the authors rightly balance and challenge studies which imply that the history of 19th century Buddhist opposition to Christianity has little to show before 1873.

The authors find no evidence of a link between the controversies and anti-imperialist or ethno-chauvinist sentiment in their textual sources. By implication, therefore, they criticize the use of nineteenth century revivalist material for the political end of claiming an early start to the anti-imperialist movement or inter-ethnic tension. Their research indicates that in the North and South it was humiliation at the level of religious belief and practice which was the catalyst of controversy. The authors therefore plea for religion as metaphysics to be taken seriously in nineteenth century Sri Lankan history. The tools of social science are inadequate alone, they suggest, to explain the religious controversies studied. They are right to do so. Socio-economic factors were important and the authors highlight some of these but they rightly do not lose sight of the importance of religion as

intellectual challenge and metaphysical truth within the Sri Lankan tradition.

In the light of this, what the authors imply about inter-religious relations is most interesting. It is here that the content of the books leaps the boundaries of South Asian studies. An underlying theme of both studies, but especially *Vain Debates*, is what is lost when religions demonize one another. The authors are in no doubt that, "the burden of responsibility for the aggravation of religious tension in Ceylon during the nineteenth century is to be attributed entirely to the aggressive evangelization of the island by Protestant Christian missionaries" (*Vain Debates* p. 179). They expose the conceptual blunders and mistaken assumptions which stood like a steel barrier between the missionaries and any understanding of either Hinduism or Buddhism. Beside this, *Vain Debates* places what the missionary aggravation met within the Sinhala psyche – a Carpenter-pretā myth going back at least to the eighteenth century but possibly to Portuguese times. It is a myth which casts Jesus as an emanation of Mara, the embodiment of evil in Buddhism, and his ongoing risen form as a *prēta*, or hungry ghost, in other words an inhabitant of a realm seen by all Buddhists as pitiable and abhorrent. The result of the encounter between the two is shown to be a search for ever better means by each side to demonize the other.

Behind *Vain Debates*, therefore, is a lament: that the exchange of tracts and the debates fostered no understanding of the other religion on either side. Prejudices were not removed but reinforced. The same arguments were repeatedly laundered. On the Christian side, Gogerly's mistaken annihilationist assumptions about *anatta* were used long after his death. On the Buddhist side, Guṇānanda's arguments tended to remain static. Even in the last-mentioned debate in 1899, the authors are forced to write that it was, "a pathetic verification that little if anything had changed over the years in how each side understood the other." Wholesome inter-religious dialogue has had to wait until the twentieth century and the activities of a new generation of Buddhists, Hindus and indigenous Christians. Demonize another and you will be demonized is the message. Catch the snake in the wrong way, use your own religion in the wrong way, and it will recoil to bite you. It is a lesson which still has to be learnt within inter-faith relations.

As I read both studies, I was unable to fault the primary research which lies behind them. That the wealth of material in Sinhala in temples

such as the Kumāra Mahā Vihāraya in Dodandūve has been sifted is a service to all researchers. But more may lie in wait than the authors are willing to admit. At a number of points, the authors assert that a certain manuscript has been lost. I am not sure that such statements are justified given both the decentralization of Buddhist and Hindu religious structures in Sri Lanka and the numbers of documents which have left Sri Lanka over the decades. There is danger here in making such definitive claims. Occasional errors of fact also slip in. For instance, Kataragama, described as a “renowned centre of folk piety” (*Vain Debates* p. 66) is not at Badulla, a town in the central hill country, but in the Moneragala District in the South-East.

The challenges the authors pose to researchers are timely. The writers are quick to point out academic precedents. The bibliographies of both studies are impressive. Yet, at a couple of significant points due respect is not given to previous research. For instance, in *Vain Debates* the periodization put forward rightly stresses that the 19th century Buddhist opposition to Christianity in Sri Lanka cannot be equated either with Protestant Buddhism or the post-1880 Olcott period. The inclusion of the Buddhist-Roman Catholic dimension is also timely but not surprising given Dr Somaratne’s previous research.¹ Yet, in doing this, some precedents are ignored, such as Kitsiri Malalgoda’s contribution to debate on Gogerly’s *Kristiyāni Prajñapti*² and my own stress that opposition to Christianity began as early as the 1820s.³ What can be said about this is that they fill in with meticulously researched detail points hinted at by others. Yet, these reservations are slight when compared with the impressive primary research presented. I am personally very grateful for the monographs and commend them wholeheartedly.

Elizabeth J. Harris

1 *Koṭahēna Riot 1883*, Deepanee Press, Sri Lanka, 1991.

2 *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900*. University of California Press, 1976, p. 216 ff.

3 For example, in “Crisis and Competition: the Christian Missionary Encounter with Buddhism in the early 19th Century,” in Ulrich EVERDING (ed.), *Buddhism and Christianity: Interactions between East and West*. Goethe Institute, Colombo, 1995, pp. 9-31.