

Religion and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka: Christian Missionaries and Their Critics

A Review Article

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R F Young and S Jebanesan, *The Bible Trembled. The Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, Vienna, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, Vol. XXII, University of Vienna, 1995, pp 1-14; 15-204. No price indicated.

R F Young and G P V Somaratna, *Vain Debates. The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, Vienna, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, Vol. XXIII, University of Vienna, 1996, pp 1-14; 15-236. No price indicated.

Abstract

This review article examines the resistance to Christian missionary enterprise in nineteenth century Sri Lanka. This resistance which emerged in the 1840s and continued thereafter took two different forms in the Hindu areas of the north of the island, and in the Sinhalese areas. The two movements had little in common except an opposition to the missionaries. The Hindu revivalist movement in the north of the island had links with developments in Southern India, the Madras Residency to be precise. The Buddhist revival had no such external links. While the Buddhist resistance was never entirely without nationalist overtones, and became the precursor of a nationalist movement, the Hindu revival in the Tamil areas had no such political or nationalist objectives. Of the two books reviewed the one on the Hindu revival shows sounder scholarship than the one of the encounter between the Christian missionaries and the Buddhists.

Ethnic Studies Report, Vol. XVI, No.1, January 1998

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I Introduction

“Religion: a sixteenth century term for nationalism.” So runs an aphorism attributed to the historian Sir Lewis Namier. A reading of these two volumes shows us that this was as true of the 19th century as it was of the 16th. In the 16th century—and the 17th as well—nationalism in Europe was stimulated by the great ‘civil war’ in the kingdom of Christ, the violent confrontation between the Reformation and the Counter Reformation. In 19th century Sri Lanka the reaction of the indigenous religions against the missionaries acted as a spur to nationalism and it could be truly said that “Religion [was a] nineteenth century term for nationalism.”

Two approaches suggest themselves to the reviewer of these volumes. At one level the two volumes are an important contribution to the literature on one of the great encounters between the occident and the orient, the encounter between an intrusive and aggressive Christianity—Roman Catholic and Protestant—and the indigenous religions, Buddhism and Hinduism in this instance. The second approach is to view them as carefully researched scholarly reconstructions of the intellectual content of the disputes between the missionaries and their indigenous adversaries, Hindu and Buddhist. The authors of these two volumes are more successful at this second level, or approach, that is to say in the reconstruction and analysis of the intellectual content of the disputes, than in their exposition and understanding of the forces at work—political, social and economic—in the encounter between Christianity and the indigenous religions.

It is important to remember that the principal author of the two volumes, R F Young and his two co-authors S Jebanesan in the case of the first of them and G P V Somaratna in the second are all active Christians associated with Christian institutions. While Jebanesan is a Bishop of the Church of South India of which the Jaffna peninsula is treated as a constituent unit, G P V Somaratna is a recent convert to Christianity—the conversion came through the Student Christian Movement when he was a student at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya—and an active lay preacher. A discerning reader will see that Young and his associate Jebanesan write with a greater degree of sympathy for Hindu sensitivities in the Jaffna peninsula than Young in association with Somaratna, in their study of the Buddhist resistance to the missionaries in the Sinhalese areas of the country, do with regard to those of the Buddhists.

The dedications in the front pages of the two books provide a clue to the subtle difference in tone and attitude in the two volumes. Young and

Jebanesan dedicate their book “To the Hindus and Christians of Jaffna, who have always found ample scope in each others’ religion for public discussion and private reflection.” There may be some contemporary—i.e., present day—validity to these sentiments but the contents of their book will show they were not true for the 19th century. Nevertheless the sentiments expressed are more positive and conciliatory than in the dedication to the second book. Its authors dedicate it “To all those involved in the Buddhist-Christian controversies who in the end saw their vanity.” While this may be true of some of the missionaries as they nursed their wounds after the bruising confrontation with the likes of the Buddhist polemicist Migettuwatte Gunananda, it is certainly not true of the Buddhists who picked up the gauntlet thrown by the missionaries and used the debates as opportunities, first of all, to refute the arguments of the missionaries, and more important, to demonstrate a self-confidence they had not shown up to that time in their relations with British missionaries. There was no vanity in that, in the sense—and here we quote the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*—of being “excessively proud or conceited especially about one’s own attributes;” nor were the debates “in vain” that is to say “without result or success,” as we shall see.

II Christianity and Colonialism

Sri Lanka’s experience of colonial rule illustrates much more clearly than the cognate process in many other former colonies the nexus between colonialism and Christianity. The combination of Young and Jebanesan in the first of the two books reviewed here appear to understand this better than the combination Young and Somaratna in the second volume. An understanding of the ramifications of the nexus between colonialism and Christianity is crucial in assessing the merits of these two volumes. In regard to this I intend to summarise here my views on that nexus. Since it is a theme on which I have written previously,¹ inevitably therefore some repetition is likely.

The legacy of that colonial experience, the confrontation between Buddhism and the intrusive Western culture and civilisation and Christian religion, has had a profound influence on the history of this country. In Sri Lanka that intrusion and its inevitable tensions with the indigenous religions began in the middle of the 16th century, with Portuguese influence and, later, Portuguese rule in the littoral. Portuguese colonialism was very much the child of the Counter-Reformation and if its

emphasis on the principle of *cujus regio illius religio* perpetuated a central feature of the Sri Lankan political system—the link between state and religion which had originated as long ago as the 3rd century BC—the zealotry and harsh intolerance which characterised the imposition of Roman Catholicism on Sri Lanka were something new and unfamiliar in a Buddhist society and civilisation that seldom confused the obligation to encourage adherence to the national religion with a discouragement of the public practice of other religions and suppression of other faiths. Neither Young and Jebanesan nor Young and Somaratna recognise this point, or even if they do they make no mention of it in their two volumes.

One of the salient features of the history of Sri Lanka from 16th to the 18th centuries, when parts of the coastal areas were under the control first of the Portuguese, and later the Dutch, was the stark contrast between the religious tolerance in the surviving Sinhalese kingdoms, and the intolerance that prevailed in the areas under colonial rule. Christianity, Roman Catholic and Protestant, came to the island with the three Western powers—Portugal, Holland and Great Britain—who have had control over parts of Sri Lanka, the Portuguese from the mid-16th century and the Dutch from mid-17th century, and the British who gained control over the whole of it from 1815-18. Roman Catholicism, Calvinism and—to a much lesser extent—Anglicanism have each had, in succession, a special relationship with the ruling power and, with this, the prestige and authority of the official religion of the day. Not only were converts to the orthodox version of Christianity—especially under the Portuguese and the Dutch—treated as a privileged group, but severe restrictions if not penalties were imposed on the practice of the traditional religions—Buddhism primarily, and Hinduism and Islam. These were severest under the Portuguese; the Dutch widened the scope of these restrictions to include Roman Catholicism as well. Forced conversions, that is to say conversions induced in this way increased the numbers of adherents of the official religion.² Once again, these were most frequent and the pressure most persistent under the Portuguese, whose record of destruction of places of Hindu worship are—as we shall see—deservedly condemned by Young and Jebanesan.

From the outset the Portuguese treated the Muslims of Sri Lanka's western coast as mortal enemies, and turned on them with a frenzied hostility that is explained in part by commercial rivalry and in part by the Iberian peninsula's opposition to the Moors and, in the case of Spain, the systematic expulsion of the Moors established there. The short extract from a Portuguese historian on that country's rule in Sri Lanka, quoted below, captures the essence of that hostility in the early 16th century.

“I quite understand the pain our arrival will give to the Moors; but as the sword which you see in my hand is one which I have often seen stained with their blood, I do not consider it a novelty to soak in Mohametan [sic] blood, the sword with which I vowed to die, since our conquests in general are more against them than against the heathen, who are excused by their ignorance, while the Moors are condemned by their malice.”

Lopo Soarez Albergaria (1516).³

The Muslims found a refuge in the areas controlled by Sinhalese rulers, where they were encouraged to settle and engage in their traditional trading activities. In time they moved thence to the interior of the Kandyan kingdom, the last of the independent Sinhalese kingdoms. In the early 17th century groups of Moors were permitted to settle on the east coast. They form the nucleus of the Muslim population of Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. Today nearly a third of Sri Lanka's Muslim population lives there.

If there was a special quality in the Portuguese hostility to Muslims engendered by historical memories of European enmity to the Moors in general, the Portuguese attitude to the Buddhists and Hindus was governed by the Christian intolerance of that age. The burning and looting of Buddhist monasteries and Hindu *kovils*, the confiscation of the lands belonging to them, and prohibition of the public practice of those religions—“heathenism” as the Christians of that period saw it—was standard practice.

Young and Jebanesan refer to the Portuguese in Jaffna in a paragraph that is worth quoting in full.

“Insofar as it goes, the traditional interpretation is not far off the mark. Being integral to the European identity during the colonial era, Christianity did get off to a deplorably bad start in Jaffna. As a strategic and interstitial region lying between South Ceylon and the South Indian littoral, the peninsula had immense military and economic value. Not long after the mercantile penetration of the area by Portuguese traders in the early sixteenth century, Jaffna began to experience firsthand the hardships of colonial and ecclesiastical occupation. Contemporary documentation attests that even the aggressors themselves were sometimes shocked at the ferocity of their own “unenlightened zeal.” Retaliatory outrages committed on Christians were likewise not unknown. A community of South Indian Paravas, converted under the influence of Francis Xavier, had emigrated to the island of Mannar (off the

northwest coast of Ceylon) to be near the Pearl Fishery and safe from marauding, predatory chieftains on the mainland. The Paravas soon came to grief at the hands of the Jaffna king, Cekaracakaran VII, who massacred most of them in 1544. There was thus a score to be settled. Portuguese revenge was not spent and the pacification of resistance was incomplete until a vicious and long-postponed conquest by the viceroy of Portuguese India in 1560. Like Canaan after the Israelites, Jaffna experienced periodic outbursts of Portuguese Catholic iconoclasm that resulted in the destruction of Hindu temples. This happened systematically under ecclesiastical or royal warrant but also reflexively in response to rebellion or the harassment of priests or when converted villages transformed their places of worship into churches. That a collective aggravation of conscience festered is hardly surprising.”⁴

The second sentence in this paragraph does point out that Christianity was “integral to the European identity during the colonial era” and points out too that Christianity did get off to a deplorably bad start in Jaffna. As a reviewer I would endorse all that is said in the rest of the paragraph, with reservations only on the third sentence. To argue that the Jaffna peninsula had “immense military and economic value” to the Portuguese is to claim far too much. There was some military value to the Portuguese *estado*, but to claim that it had immense economic value flies in the face of all the evidence we have.

While Young and Jebanesan use Christian, or rather Biblical imagery, “like Canaan after the Israelites” in regard to the Portuguese iconoclasm in Jaffna, Young and Somaratna argue that

“Though many Sri Lankans would like to think so, the Portuguese never enforced on Ceylon[sic] the policy of enforced Christianisation that was euphemistically called “The Rigor of Mercy” in Goa and its environs on the Indian mainland.”⁵

They go further than that and argue that it is false to say that Christianity was imposed on Sri Lanka by any of the European powers.⁶ One would agree with them with regard to the British. Only persons ignorant of the history of the Portuguese and Dutch in Sri Lanka, could make such a statement with regard to rule of these two powers in the island, and more to the point, only those oblivious to or ignorant of the violence associated with the religious conflicts in the schism in Christianity brought about by the Reformation and Counter Reformation would make such an extraordinary assertion.

Young and Somaratna forget that Goa was the headquarters of the Portuguese *estado* in Asia, and that their position was so much stronger on that island than elsewhere. They were thus in a position to impose the so-called “Rigor of Mercy” in Goa with less opposition than in the regions of Sri Lanka which they came to control. There was much less resistance to the Portuguese in Jaffna than in the Sinhalese areas of the country where they were held at bay, first by the kings of Sitavaka and later by the kings of Kandy.

When they came to control large parts of the Sinhalese areas of the southwest coast, they imposed Christianity on the people over whom they ruled, as did the Dutch who succeeded them with the difference that the Dutch were less stringent in regard to this than the Portuguese. There are three integral elements in the concept of forced or induced Christianisation: rigorous impediments placed on the public practice of the indigenous religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam; systematic destruction of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic places of worship; and conferment of privileges on converts. Indeed a fourth one could be added to this—the restriction of public office under the colonial system to converts. As the first of the colonial powers to enter the island, the Portuguese set the pace in all this; the Dutch followed suit but admittedly with less rigour.

The denial of the obvious by some Christians, the Roman Catholic scholars identified by Young and Somaratna (Fr. Don Peter and Fr. V Perniola),⁷ and Young and Somaratna themselves is quite astonishing. The Portuguese and Dutch who came to the island were acting in conformity with the practices of their day. It would have been unnatural if they had not done so. One does not need the sort of public apology that politicians and kings make nowadays in repudiation of the policies of violence and cruelties inflicted on conquered peoples, but the least that scholars could do is to acknowledge the wrongs done in the past when they write of these events, and not assume that Portuguese and Dutch Christians of the period of the Reformation and Counter Reformation acted like the Roman Catholic advocates of liberation theology of the present day or like the members of the World Council of Churches.

The choice before the reader is to accept Young, Jebanesan and Somaratna on this issue, or the British scholar, the late Professor C R Boxer, whose outstanding writings on Portuguese and Dutch colonialism have a greater objectivity on the issue of Christianisation than those others identified by Young and Somaratna in support of their contentions.⁸ We would also have to disregard the sound scholarship of two of Sri Lanka’s finest experts on Portuguese colonialism, Professor C R de Silva and the late Professor T B H Abeyasinghe in the Vol. II of the University of

Peradeniya, *History of Sri Lanka* published in 1995. No doubt this volume was not available to Young and Somaratna at the time their book was written. Had they read the chapters by C R de Silva and Abeyasinghe they may not have reached the conclusion they did, and which we quoted in a previous paragraph.

C R de Silva points out that:

“The defeat of Vidiyē [Bandara] encouraged the Portuguese to prevail on King Dharmapala to announce his conversion to Christianity in early 1557. On embracing his new religion, the eighteen year old monarch not only adopted the Portuguese name Don João, but also took the unprecedented step of confiscating all temple land and gifting them to the Franciscans. The Temple of the Tooth (*Daladāgē*) of Kotte and well-endowed *maha vihara* of Kālaniya were immediately handed over to the missionaries. Such a step did not go unchallenged. In Kotte city itself, a group of *bhikkhus* led by *bhikkhu* Buddhavamsa roused the people, who attacked the king’s bodyguard with sticks and stones. The riot was quelled only after Portuguese reinforcements arrived from Colombo and , in retaliation, thirty *bhikkhus* were seized and put to death. From then on Dharmapala became solely dependent on the Portuguese and a small minority of Christian converts in Kotte.”⁹

The sources C R de Silva cites are all Portuguese, and in particular, the well-known historians of the Portuguese conquest of Sri Lanka’s littoral districts, in particular Fernao de Queyroz. Let us turn next to T B H Abeyasinghe and his views on the Sinhala resistance to the Portuguese. He points out that there were as many as ten rebellions against the Portuguese in the Kālani-Kalu ganga areas within 44 years, from the beginning of 17th century, six major rebellions and four minor rebellions.

“As the religious arm of a colonial power, and as an immigrant religion which sought to supplant the resident religions, the Roman Catholic church was a natural target of attack for the Buddhists and Hindus. The destruction of Buddhist and Hindu places of worship, the transfer of temple lands to the churches and the privileges and tax exemptions which were held out to would-be converts, fanned the flames against the churches and their ministers, and to the rebels they became special and highly visible targets. In this connection it is interesting to note that even Roman Catholics like Edirillē Rāla on becoming rebels “burnt churches, profaned ornaments, hacked sacred images and used the chalices for

shameful purposes.” Obviously, opposition to Portuguese rule made it mandatory to oppose the Roman Catholic religion.”¹⁰

Another extract we provide below gives us the flavour of Portuguese intolerance—it refers to the sacking of one of the most famous religious centres in the south of Sri Lanka, the temple at Devundara, well-known to seafarers of the Indian Ocean because of its location on the southernmost point in Sri Lanka athwart the trade-routes of that period:

“...and the inhabitants, not trusting in the guardianship of their *pagode*, on seeing the Portuguese abandoned the city, and betook themselves inland. Our people proceeded to enter it without encountering any resistance, and reaching the *pagode* broke open the gates, and entered it without meeting with anyone to resist them, and went all round it to see if they found any people; and seeing that all was deserted, Thome de Sousa delivered it over to the soldiers that they might do their duty; and the first thing in which they employed themselves was to destroy the idols, of which there were more than a thousand of divers [sic] forms, some of clay, others of wood, others of copper, and many of them gilt. Having done this, they demolished the whole of that infernal structure of *pagodes*, destroying their vaults and cloisters, knocking them all to pieces, and then proceeded to sack the storehouses, in which they found much ivory, fine clothes, copper, pepper, sandalwood, jewels, precious stones, and ornaments of the *pagodes*, and of everything they took what they liked, and to the rest they set fire, by which the whole was consumed. And for greater insult to the *pagode*, they slaughtered inside several cows, which is the most unclean thing that can be, and for the purification of which are required very great ceremonies. And they also set fire to a wooden car made after the manner of a towered house of seven stories, all large and most beautiful, lacquered in divers [sic] colours and gilt in many parts, a costly and sumptuous work, which served to convey the principal idol on a ride through the city to which likewise they set fire, by which the whole was consumed.”¹¹

In time the Portuguese were expelled from Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese in alliance with the Dutch. The latter soon replaced the Portuguese as *de facto* rulers of parts of the coast. While the Portuguese and the Dutch were engaged in a struggle for control of the spice trade, they also fought the battles of the Reformation and Counter Reformation on Asian soil and Asian waters. It was soon the turn of the Roman Catholics to face the wrath of the Protestants. Roman Catholic worship was prohibited, Roman Catholic clergy were expelled and Roman Catholic places of worship were

reduced to rubble to make way for churches of the Dutch version of Protestant Christianity. The Kandyan rulers provided the harried Roman Catholic clergy with safe havens and the more enterprising of the latter moved to the Kandyan kingdom and used it as a bridgehead from which to reach their flock on the coast. As recently as 1995 Pope John Paul II visited Sri Lanka for the beatification of the one such priest, Fr Joseph Vaz; the visit of the Pope had the blessings of the Sri Lanka government which converted it into an official occasion and spent lavishly to make it a successful public affirmation of Sri Lanka's traditional religious tolerance.

During the period of the Dutch persecution of Roman Catholics, a village in the hills close to Matale near Kandy became a Roman Catholic settlement. This village, Wahakotte, still survives, steadfastly Roman Catholic in a Buddhist environment.

The Sinhalese *penchant* for religious tolerance was identified by Robert Knox, an Englishman who lived as a prisoner in the Kandy kingdom for 20 years in the 17th century, in his celebrated book on the island published in 1681, a book that remains a classic study of the country and its people in the mid and late 17th century. There he explained that:

“as they are not bigoted in their own religion, they care not of what religion strangers dwell among them are of. They do believe there is a plurality of Gods and more than they know of, for all nations have a free liberty to use and enjoy their own religion with all or any manner of ceremonies there to belonging without the lest [sic] opposition or so much as ridiculing.”¹²

And the king, Rajasinha II, who had been educated by Roman Catholic friars, retained a respect for Christianity. As Knox put it:

“...both the king and people do generally like the Christian religion better than their own; and respect and honour the Christians as *Christians*.”¹³

The first part of this extract was clearly an exaggeration; the second, just as clearly, was a statement of fact.

For Knox, it was a grudging compliment to a ruler of whom he was generally very critical. There were other elements of this tolerance. Dr Lorna Dewaraja quoting Knox points out that the Kandyan kings “donated land for the maintenance of mosques on the same basis as they gave land to [Buddhist places of worship]”¹⁴ Hindu shrines were also maintained by the state, not surprising given the syncretism that

prevailed¹⁵ incorporating Hindu deities and practices in Buddhist worship.

The Kandyan rulers and the people at large found themselves at odds with the Christians in Sri Lanka. Partly it was a matter of protecting the interests of the Buddhists living under Dutch rule on the south western coastal areas against the impediments placed by the colonial administration on the peaceful practice of their religion. Generally the Dutch administration was more restrained in this regard than the Portuguese had been. Their own intolerance and bigotry were directed more against the Roman Catholics in their midst than against adherents of Buddhism. Nevertheless when the opportunity came their way they turned against Buddhists with a ferocity that matched anything the Portuguese had done. The demonstration of Protestant intolerance came in 1765 during the Dutch invasion of the Kandyan kingdom, and their sacking of the city of Kandy, with the palace of the king and the famous Temple of the Tooth, the principal Buddhist temple in the island, as special targets of their hostility.

A contemporary record described the sacking of the palace thus:

“The common soldiers turned everything topsy-turvy and entering in carried from a very rich booty till evening, and also the day after. It consisted chiefly of all kinds of the most valuable stuffs and the finest linens, precious stones and silver wares and jewels and even pieces of gold, fine pagodas and ducats... The place was inspected by all, each remarking to the other with great astonishment how it was possible for a black king to have such a palace. Shortly after it was inspected this castle was plundered and everything given up for booty. For three days the men did nothing else but roam and plunder, so that everything has been ruined, both the walls and doors which were plated with silver, and now stripped of everything, it is a most miserable spectacle...”¹⁶

Once they finished with the palace, they turned their attention to the looting of the Temple of the Tooth, of treasure bestowed on it by the rulers and the people alike. The guardians of the temple had taken the precaution of spiriting the tooth relic away for safekeeping elsewhere. They had buried the casket, weighing nearly 100kg, in which it had been encased. Unfortunately they had buried it behind the palace. It was discovered, and since it was made of silver the temptation to melt it down was too much to resist. The Dutch governor, van Eck, shared the spoils with his soldiers.¹⁷ This act of vandalism was both profitable, and a

gesture of disapprobation of what they regarded as “heathen” religious practice.

At the time of the conquest of the Dutch possessions in the island by the English in 1795/96, the majority of the citizens of these territories were classified as Protestant Christians. With the more relaxed outlook of the English, the superficiality of conversions to the Dutch Reformed Church was amply demonstrated when all but a small minority of the people returned to their traditional faiths. And once the legal restrictions on the Roman Catholics were removed between 1806 and 1829, they emerged as the largest of the Christian groups in the island, a position they retained till the end of British rule, and still do today. Conversions to Roman Catholicism under the Portuguese have stood the rigorous test of persecution under the Dutch and the disdain and indifference of British officialdom.¹⁸

If the colonial state under Portuguese rule in Sri Lanka, the *Estado*, was a Roman Catholic one, the role of religion in the state system was no less significant under the Dutch, despite the fact that the maritime regions conquered by them from the Portuguese were administered by a commercial company, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (V.O.C.), or the Dutch East India Company, as it was known. The link between state and Christianity continued in the early years of British rule in the maritime regions of Sri Lanka, although the attitude to the Anglican Church—theoretically the established Church—was ambiguous at best.¹⁹ The problem of relations between state and religion became infinitely more complicated once the British gained control over the whole island between 1815 and 1818 with the conquest of the Kandyan kingdom, the last of the independent Sinhalese kingdoms.

With the absorption in 1815-18 of the Kandyan kingdom within the Crown Colony of Ceylon, the British confronted one of the most perplexing and intricate problems they were called upon to handle in Sri Lanka, the definition of the state’s relations with Buddhism.²⁰ The undertaking given by the British in 1815 through the Kandyan Convention in regard to the status of Buddhism was unambiguous:

“The Religion of Boodhoo [sic] professed by the Chiefs and inhabitants of these Provinces is declared inviolable, and its Rites, Ministers and Places of Worship are to be maintained and protected.”

When he sent a copy of the Convention to the Colonial Office, Governor Sir Robert Brownrigg, the conqueror of the Kandyan kingdom, explained to his superiors in Whitehall that he had been obliged to consent

to “an article of guarantee couched in the most unqualified terms” because it was vitally important to quiet the apprehensions of the Kandyans about their religion. Only by making it clear that the fifth clause of the Convention would be scrupulously observed could the British gain the adherence of the *bhikkhus* (members of the Buddhist order, the *sangha*) and chiefs. When the Proclamation of 21 November 1818 was issued after the suppression of the Kandyan rebellion of 1817/18, these guarantees were not repudiated (clause 16) but it was specifically stated that

“It is in no wise to be understood that the protection of Government is to be denied to the Peaceable exercise by all other Persons of the Religion which they respectively profess or to the erection under License from His Excellency of Places of Worship in proper situations.”

The fact is that these guarantees recognised the strength of the notion—which had become “an essential part of political thinking in Theravada Buddhist countries...” “...that the state has a responsibility for the religious institutions...”²¹

In the early years of British rule, more specifically in the first three decades of it, both the colonial administration in the island and the imperial government had shown little enthusiasm for the establishment and expansion of British religious institutions in Sri Lanka. But given the increasing strength of missionary organisations in Britain in the years after the Napoleonic wars, and the strength of the Evangelical influence in the highest circles of British political life, it was impossible to resist the British missionaries as they set about seeking entry to the island.²²

There was less reluctance to permit them entry to the Jaffna peninsula or the maritime regions conquered from the Dutch, than to the former Kandyan kingdom. As a result the Jaffna peninsula attracted an even greater concentration of missionary enterprise than in other parts of the maritime regions. In addition to the British missionaries—the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Wesleyans—the American missionaries of the American Board of Missions with their headquarters in Boston were soon at work in Jaffna. This was apart from the revival of the Roman Catholic activity there. The Americans were confined to the Jaffna peninsula and were not permitted entry to the Sinhalese areas. While the Americans restricted their activities to the Jaffna peninsula, the British missionaries generally spread themselves to other parts of the island. The Wesleyans and the CMS the most organised of them, observed an administrative division into a North Ceylon (Tamil) mission, and a South Ceylon (Sinhala) mission. The Baptists were unique in having no mission

station in the Tamil areas of the country, while the Wesleyans had no mission station in the Kandyan areas for many years, even after the restrictions on missionary activity there were relaxed. Thus the Jaffna peninsula was saturated by Christian missions in the first four decades of British rule. The mission schools were a much stronger presence than state schools. The Hindu resistance and revival so ably analysed in Young and Jebanesan should be understood in this context.

Surprisingly there is no mention at all in Young and Jebanesan and Young and Somaratna of the radical change in British colonial policy on Christianisation that came in the mid- 1830s and early 1840s. This change in policy could be attributed to the personal influence of James Stephen, the formidable Permanent Under Secretary of State, a distinguished member of the Clapham sect. Evangelical strength was specially noteworthy in the early 1830s when Glenelg, another Evangelical, was Secretary of State for the Colonies. Under the influence of Glenelg and Stephen, the Colonial Office gave its support to the propagation of Christianity in Sri Lanka, and encouraged the colonial government in the island to adopt it as an aspect of its official obligations. The impact of this Evangelical drive in imperial policy was first perceptible with the appointment of Stewart Mackenzie as Governor, and through Glenelg's dispatch to Mackenzie of 2 October 1837, which instructed the governor of the colony not merely to encourage missionary enterprise actively but to treat it as the most important subject to which his attention could be directed.²³

The British missionaries soon came to realise that in countries like Sri Lanka with well-established cultures and civilisations the propagation of Christianity was a more formidable undertaking than they had anticipated. A great many of their disappointments sprang from their over-confidence and their underestimation of the strength of indigenous religions. They came expecting the sort of response the Wesleyans had evoked in the industrial cities of England and the extent of their disappointment was in proportion to the immensity of their expectations.

From this it was but a short step to the conclusion that it was impossible to spread Christianity without reducing the influence of, if not altogether subverting, the indigenous religions by every means at their disposal. This was especially so with regard to the Kandyan region where the hold of Buddhism on the people was much stronger than in the Maritime Provinces, and where moreover the British government, at the accession of the Kandyan kingdom in 1815, had given a solemn undertaking to support and protect Buddhism. The assumption that the severance of this connection between the state and Buddhism would accelerate the decline of Buddhism, was one of the compelling beliefs

behind the efforts of missionaries to force the government to repudiate the obligations assumed in 1815. Indeed in no aspect of policy did the impact of Evangelicalism loom larger than on the question of the severance of the connection of the state with Buddhism, a theme that is reviewed in greater detail later in this article.

We turn next to another decision taken in the early 1840s, while the campaign against the connection of the state with Buddhism was at its height. This was the decision to establish a church just opposite the *Dalada Maligawa*, and between the *Dalada Maligawa* and the four *devalas*. On 29 September 1842 the Legislative Council adopted an ordinance “to provide for a church in Kandy.” The trustees of the church, identified in the deed prepared by Philip Austruther, the Colonial Secretary of the Colombo administration were granted in

“perpetual succession for Ever a piece of ground situated within the town of Kandy and bounded in the North by King’s Street, on the West of Pavilion Street, on the East by lands belonging to the Temple Natte Dewalle and on the South by the North Court Passage Pattiny Dewalle and a spot of ground granted to the Agricultural Society containing by measurement One Acre and one rood and one Perch and thirty six hundredths of a perch as by an authenticated survey thereof dated the first day of February One Thousand eight hundred and forty three...”²⁴

St. Paul’s church became the principal centre of worship of British officials, the British expatriate community in and around Kandy, including the planters, and of course, of Sri Lankan converts.

There is no mention of this church or the decision to establish it in Young and Somaratna. A reading of contemporary newspapers would show that the conspicuous presence of a church virtually within the precincts of the *Maligawa* and palace premises was seen as a deeply symbolic gesture and among the more sanguine missionaries and Christians, it anticipated the decline and eventual collapse of Buddhism which they hoped, would leave the field clear for the emergence of St Paul’s church as one of the principal centres of Christian worship in the island.

From the outset, the attitude of the British rulers towards Buddhism had been an ambiguous one, veering towards reluctant adherence to the letter of the treaty of 1815 rather than to its spirit, and the requirement of positive support. However senior British administrators including successive Governors in the 1840s, strongly opposed the repudiation of the provisions of the Kandyan convention relating to the link between state

and Buddhism. But pressure from the missionaries in the island and in the metropolitan country prevailed over their opposition of the officials here. The historical significance of this could scarcely be exaggerated. Quite apart from being a calculated repudiation of a guarantee given in the most unqualified terms at the cession of the Kandyan kingdom to the British, it also marked the severance of the traditional bond between the state and the national religion that had lasted almost without interruption from the earliest days of the ancient Sinhalese kingdom, which is to say for over 2,000 years.²⁵ The withdrawal of the traditional patronage accorded to Buddhism, and the consequent loss of precedence and prestige, was deeply resented by Sri Lankan Buddhists in general, and not merely by the people of the old Kandyan kingdom, an essential part of the background to understanding the strength of the resistance to Christianity which one saw in the debates described and analysed in the volume by Young and Somaratna, who, however, make no reference to it.

In Sri Lanka, Buddhist opinion generally refused to acquiesce in the decision to sever the link between the colonial state and their “national” religion. Activists regularly urged a reconsideration of this decision and pressed the need for some sort of link between Buddhism and the state. The British would not go back to the *status quo ante* 1840 in restoring the formal link between the state and Buddhism, but by the 1870s they saw advantages in an accommodation with Buddhism.²⁶ This change of attitude and policy associated with the administrations of Governors William Gregory (1872-77) and Arthur Gordon (1883-90) find no mention in Young and Somaratna.

Although the Roman Catholics and the Protestants in Sri Lanka were never more than a tenth of the population during the period of British rule and in the early years of independence, a tenth of the population made them a very significant proportion of the total population in comparison with British India, where the Christians were generally only about one fiftieth of the population. More important—the Sri Lankan Christians—nine-tenths of whom were Roman Catholics—were also, quite unlike their Indian counterparts, a privileged group with a larger number of persons of elite status than every other religious group in the country including the Buddhists.

The peculiar demographic configuration resulting from the overwhelming numerical dominance of the Roman Catholics within the Christian community had a distorting effect on the relationship between the Christian minority and the rest of the Sri Lankan society. For much of the first half of the 19th century, the Roman Catholics had little or no influence on official policies and attitudes which affected that relationship.

There the pace was set by the Protestants in general, and not necessarily the elite Anglican group. But with the passage of time the Roman Catholics asserted themselves, and with numbers very much on their side the interaction between Christianity and the indigenous society was often a complex tripartite one, or where the government entered the picture with interests of its own, very often a quadripartite one.

The proportion of Protestants in the island's Christian population would no doubt have increased by the 1860s. But there was no concealing the fact that Roman Catholicism was still the religion of the vast bulk of the Christian population. The Catholic community was a target of Protestant efforts at conversion, and 'papist' was as much a term of contempt as 'heathen' or 'pagan.' The relaxation of the rigid Dutch laws against Roman Catholicism and the generosity of some of the individual governors of Ceylon towards Roman Catholicism did not mean any consistent and purposeful departure from the anti-Catholicism which was so strong a feature of life in early Victorian Britain and which was echoed in the colonies. In Ceylon there was no doubt that hostility to and prejudice against Catholics was widespread among British officials.

It was against this background of hostility from officials and Protestant clergymen alike that the Catholic revival which was to be a feature of the history of religious development in Ceylon in the latter half of the 19th century took place. For several decades after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 the recovery of Catholicism in Ceylon, and in South Asia in general, had been impeded by the "Goan schism." But one needs to guard against the danger of exaggerating the strife and contentions generated by this "schism." The conflict did not seriously impede the plans of Rome for the regeneration of the church in this region. Indeed by 1859 there were sixteen vicariates in India in addition to one in Ceylon and another in Burma; and the modification of relations with Portugal led to a greater degree of harmony among Roman Catholics in South Asia. But the recovery of Roman Catholicism was greatly facilitated after 1886 when Pope Leo XIII created a regular ecclesiastical hierarchy in India. These developments were not without their repercussions on Ceylon. In 1887 the hierarchy in Ceylon was officially established, by which time there had been a remarkable improvement in the position of the Roman Catholics in Ceylon.

The credit for the recovery of Roman Catholic self-respect and self-esteem in Ceylon was in large measure due to the efforts of the redoubtable apostolic delegate Mgr. C A Bonjean, and these in turn had not a little to do with his work in the sphere of Catholic education. The challenge to the superiority of the Protestant missions in the field of

education was delivered first and most effectively by the Roman Catholics, by the last quarter of the 19th century. They soon came to possess a stake in education which overshadowed that of the Protestant missions. The very effectiveness of their success served to bring them, by the early 20th century to constant conflict with the increasingly militant Buddhist revival. The first of the conflicts, and one which took a violent nature, came in 1883, a conflict which is analysed in some detail by Young and Somaratna.

III

Missionaries Versus *Bhikkhus*: Public Debates, c1860-c1890, and an Episode of Violence

To dwell at length on the consolidation and vigorous expansion of missionary organisations in Ceylon by the middle of the 19th century without reference at the same time to the resistance of the indigenous religions would be quite as unhistorical as to overemphasise the scale and depth of the opposition to the missions at this time. The indigenous religions, and in particular Buddhism, had not declined to the point of becoming moribund as some of the more sanguine estimates of the missionaries and some articulate Sinhalese Christians of the 1850s and 1860s would have us believe. Indeed, one of them, the distinguished Oriental scholar James de Alwis, urged the missionaries in 1852

“to learn Sinhalese to expose the monstrous wickedness and artful sophistry of Buddhism in comparing the doctrines of the religion which we long to uproot with those of Christianity which we desire to disseminate.”²⁷

The more intelligent and realistic of the missionaries did not share this belief. But unfortunately recent writers on the theme of Buddhist recovery appear to have accepted without much scrutiny the more unrestrained expressions of Buddhist decline which were popular in the mid-19th century. To their credit Young and Somaratna avoid this error in their volume.

In a chapter in volume 3 of the University of Ceylon, *History of Ceylon* published in 1973, I pointed out that nobody familiar with the private letters of missionaries working in Ceylon written to the parent societies in Britain would make the mistake of underestimating the very real strength of the resistance to the missions. In the early 1840s it would appear that, so far as the Maritime Provinces were concerned, the reaction of the people was one of indifference rather than positive opposition. Thus, the

Revd. Ebenezer Daniel a Baptist missionary, writing in 1843 about the people of Hanvalla complained:

“They are slumbering in their security, and have no wish to be aroused; perfectly contented with their false and delusive system, they adhere to it, and reject the Saviour. This is indeed their condemnation, that light is come into their world, and they love darkness, rather than light because their deeds are evil...”²⁸

The resistance had emerged in the Kandyan regions in the 1840s—where the missionaries had in fact made little headway. The “rebellion” of 1848 had its religious undertones, to the extent that some members of the rebel leadership articulated the widespread resentment at the British decision to abrogate the traditional association of Buddhism with the state. And at much the same time in the Maritime Provinces people had demonstrated positive commitment to their traditional faith, in regions which were not affected by the “rebellion.” The Wesleyan missionaries in the Kalutara District spoke of the resistance organised by the *bhikkhus* against the missionaries. The centre of opposition had been the village of Waskaduwa and from there it had spread to the neighbouring regions of Panadura and Moratuwa.²⁹ The CMS station at Kotte operating in a region where the majority of the people were “professed Christians” also reported the emergence of resistance. This was led by “a few families and those very influential ones, who are decided Buddhists, and do all in their power to oppose the progress of real Christianity among the people...” The opposition was directed at the attempt of the CMS to build the station church at Etul Kotte. This, the CMS reported, “...seems to have roused the Buddhist party to far greater activity than [we] have ever seen in them before...”³⁰ This opposition which began in 1849 persisted well into 1850. Nor was it confined to Kotte. It existed in other parts of the Western Province as well.

But a word of caution is necessary at this point. There is little evidence to support the assumption that it was systematically organised or very widespread. Nor did it persist over any considerable period of time. The resistance which appeared in the 1860s was remarkable for being more articulate and self-confident than ever before, and this change of mood could very well suggest that its roots went deeper than they had in the 1840s.

Nothing demonstrated the change in mood and spirit better than the Buddhist reaction to missionary challenges to public debates. As a missionary technique of conversion these public disputations were not peculiar to Sri Lanka. In many parts of the tropical world a favourite

technique of the missionaries was to seek to engage *bhikkhus* and others associated with the indigenous religions in public discussion and to steer the disputation so as to convict their opponents of inconsistencies in defence of their faiths, and so make it appear that only the Gospel had all the answers to the apparent contradiction.

In Sri Lanka such public disputations between missionaries and *bhikkhus* and other representatives of the traditional religions had been staged from the mid-1840s. Through these debates the missionaries sought to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity and to convict their opponents of inconsistency and contradictory statements in defence of their religion. The Wesleyans were in the forefront of these campaigns largely because of the experience they had gained and the confidence they had acquired in their debates with *bhikkhus* and *kattadiyas* in the south west of the island in the 1840s and 1850s. Among the Christian groups in Ceylon they were the best equipped for a campaign of this nature. Young and Somaratna quite rightly attribute this to the researches of men like the Revds. D J Gogerly and R Spence Hardy in the field of Buddhism which had provided them with a formidable array of debating points. Gogerly appears—again quite rightly—as one of the major figures in the debates between the missionaries and the Buddhists reviewed so expansively in the volume by Young and Somaratna. Their volume would have been more objective in its analysis had mention been made about the role of the missionaries, and Spence Hardy in particular, in the successful campaign of the 1840s to get the British government to repudiate the obligations to the Buddhists so solemnly promised in 1815.

In August 1852 the Wesleyans had organised a trial of strength with *kattadiyas* (or “devil priests” as the Wesleyans preferred to call them) at four principal towns Colombo, Kandy, Galle and Matara. The Wesleyans’ challenge was not accepted at either Kandy or Colombo. At Galle and Matara where the challenge was apparently accepted, crowds gathered to hear the debate, but the *kattadiyas* did not appear. At Matara the Revd. J Rippon seized this opportunity and addressed the crowd on the “evils of devil-worship,” using what he called “unanswerable arguments.”³¹ The missionaries had received a walkover.

In the 1860s however the technique of the public debate, which the missionaries had used so effectively in the past, only succeeded in providing Buddhist spokesmen with a platform for a vigorous re-assertion of the virtues of their own faith. In Migettuwatte Gunananda the missionaries caught a tartar. Between 1864 and 1890 there were five debates between Christians and Buddhists, each generating more eloquence and emotion than reasoned argument but their real significance

lay in the fact that the Buddhists faced up to their opponents with a vigour and confidence that had seldom been evident before. The Revd. George Parsons of the CMS, the spokesman for the missionaries in the first of these debates which took place at Baddegama, was taken aback by the unexpectedly defiant attitude of his opponents.

“I was slow to believe it would become such a serious matter until urged by our people to prepare for a fierce contest. The result fully justified their anxieties, for never before in Ceylon was there such a marshalling of the enemy against Christianity. The one aim of the fifty priests and their two thousand followers who assembled here on February 8 [1865] was not to defend Buddhism but to overthrow Christianity.”

Of the five debates, the first and second at Baddegama and Varagoda (both in 1865) were conducted in writing. The Udanvita (1866), Gampola (1871) and Panadura (1873) controversies were public debates. The Panadura debate was the most notable of them all. There the Revd. Migettuwatte Gunananda proved himself to be a debater of a very high order, mettlesome, witty and eloquent if not especially erudite. The emotions generated by this debate had lasting effects on the next generation of Buddhist activists. The Anagarika Dharmapala, for instance, came to view the Panadura debate as “the great historical controversy between the Christian missionaries and the Buddhist yellow robed monks..... [where] the Christian party [was] ignominiously defeated. This was the first moral conquest which the Buddhists had gained against the Christians since the latter came to Ceylon.....” In 1873 he was a boy of nine.

One of the merits of the volume by Young and Somaratna is that it provides us with a ball by ball account, to use a metaphor from the world of sports, of the ebb and flow of arguments in these debates, and all this in one single volume. Hitherto one had to search the shelves of several libraries before one could get a record of all the debates, and a sense of the atmosphere surrounding them or the essence of the arguments used by the parties to the debates. This in itself is an important service to scholarship. Nevertheless one needs to remember that the exposition of the arguments of the Buddhist opponents of the missionaries may have been more sympathetically set out by scholars with less of a personal commitment to Christianity. Certainly one is struck by the contrast in the treatment of Migettuwatte Gunananda in this volume, and of Arumuga Navalar in the volume by Young and Jebanesan, the wide range of negative adjectives used in describing him, and the more positive appreciative tones in which

Arumuga Navalar is referred to. Migettuwatte Gunananda is judged harshly and his success as a debater is only grudgingly conceded.

The paragraph quoted below provides a good example of the difficulties Young and Somaratna get themselves into in attempting an assessment of the impact of these debates. They would concede that the missionaries were at fault in the aggravation of religious tensions in the island at this time. Yet they cannot resist the temptation to make moral judgements about what they see was the Buddhist response to the missionaries. More to the point their comments on the contemporary, that is to say, the present day impact of these controversies on the Buddhists, is polemical rather than dispassionate. Indeed they are as offensive in tone as any of the patronising and ungracious remarks of the missionaries of the 1860s and 1870s which they—Young and Somaratna—themselves so rightly criticise.

“In view of the history of the Buddhist-Christian Controversy we have reconstructed here, and apart from socio-political, economic and other grievances in a colonial context, there can be no question but 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 evangelisation of the island by Protestant Christian missionaries. Although their legacy in other respects may, and no doubt ought to be, evaluated differently nowadays, they were themselves so impetuous in condemning what they understood only very imperfectly that one can hardly be surprised at the intensity of the indignation they aroused in Gunananda and many other like-minded revivalists.”

Up to this point one could heartily endorse the sentiments expressed by Young and Somaratna. But in the rest of the paragraph quoted below, they lay themselves open to charges of sophistry. In the paragraph that follows it, they reach conclusions that are at once supercilious and controversial and for which they provide no supporting evidence at all.

“Considering, however, that that indignation was untempered by the virtues of detachment and equanimity to which the Buddha himself referred in the Brahmajala Sutta quoted in the inscription at the head of this chapter, one must also register dismay at the impact the Controversy has had on Sri Lanka insofar as Buddhists have become virtually unable to reflect objectively on the institutionalisation of demagoguery at the expense of the very best in their own principles and traditions.

While it may be true that the posturing and pulpit-thumping preaching style of the Protestant missionaries was the model that influenced Gunananda, the style that he affected was in turn emulated by other impressionable and opportunistic *bhikkhus* in the immediate post-Panadura era. Empty of substance but full of conceit, they, perhaps even more than he, revealed the vanity of debate.”³²

The practice of putting down one’s opponents by accusing them of falling short of the ideals of their creed is nothing less than a resort to cant. And so too the authors’ contention that they “must register dismay at the impact the Controversy has had on Sri Lanka insofar as Buddhists have become virtually unable to reflect objectively on the institutionalising of demagoguery at the very best in their own principles and traditions.” What evidence is their of “an institutionalising of demagoguery?” On even conceding for the moment that such has been the case, what evidence is there of a link between that and the debates of the Buddhist-Christian controversies of 19th century Sri Lanka?

While there is evidence that Gunananda’s style of aggressive debating affected Buddhist activists of the last quarter of the 19th century, we need to ask for identification of these “other impressionable and opportunistic *bhikkhus* in the immediate post-Panadura period,” who Young and Somaratna claim were also affected by Gunananda’s debating style. The term “the immediate post-Panadura period” is deplorably loose writing in what is an otherwise scholarly book. What are the chronological limits of the so-called “post-Panadura period?” Do they stretch to the 1940s and on to the present day or do they stop in the 1920s and 1930s? More important who are these “they” dismissed in harsh language in the last paragraph of the extract we have quoted—“Empty of substance, but full of conceit, they, perhaps even more than he, revealed the vanity of debate.” Since no individuals are identified, the reviewer is unable to frame an appropriate response other than to say that tendentious sentences such as this reveal the difference in the scholarly integrity between the volume by Young and Jebanesan and the volume by Young and Somaratna.

Part of the problem lies with the choice of a co-author that Young has made with regard to the volume on Buddhist-Christian controversies of 19th century Sri Lanka. During his academic career at the University of Colombo, which came to an end in the early 1990s, Somaratna’s own specialisation was in 16th century Sri Lanka and the kingdom of Kotte, and he was never known for any scholarly contribution on 19th century Sri Lanka. It is too much to expect him, therefore, to provide a corrective

to Young's clear lack of familiarity with British policies and British rule in the Sinhalese areas of the country.

Somaratna's one contribution to the study of the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism in Sri Lanka, is a curious volume entitled *Kotahena Riot 1883—A Religious Riot in Sri Lanka* which he published³³ in 1991 where he was less an editor and a discerning scholar than a lazy researcher operating on what I would call the vacuum cleaner principle, i.e. you hold the nozzle of that uncomplicated piece of equipment and it sucks in everything in its path. All he has done in this instance is to bring together within the covers of a single volume some documentary material of which the most substantial is the Riots Commission Report (which had been published as a supplement to the *Ceylon Observer* of 17 July 1883). His introduction, a mere 4 pages of desultory comments—in a volume of 431 pages—provides no critical commentary on the documentary material he has gathered together. If the objective was to provide a cogent rejoinder of sorts to the *Administration Report* of the Government Agent of the Western Province, which was very critical of the Roman Catholic establishment at Kotahena, it fails to do so. The Riots Commission Report which Somaratna prints in full with no attempt at any assessment of his own, was known to be a whitewash, a systematic attempt to shift the blame to Migettuwatte Gunananda for the Kotahena riots by emphasising his allegedly provocative speeches. We shall return to that incident later in this essay. In the meantime we need to examine the theme of the recovery of Buddhism.

Newspaper reports of the Panadura debate reached the United States of America where they attracted the attention of Colonel H S Olcott the founder (in 1875) of the Theosophical Society. Olcott began a regular correspondence with Migettuwatte Gunananda and sent him a mass of pamphlets and tracts all deeply critical of Christianity. The latter in turn translated these letters, as well as extracts from the books, pamphlets and tracts, into Sinhala and distributed them throughout the island. Through these translations the names of Olcott and his Russian associate Madame Blavatsky became familiar to Buddhists. Their arrival in Ceylon in 1880 caused great excitement, and they were received amidst notable scenes of religious fervour. The Anagarika Dharmapala reflecting on this event in later years attributed the "wave of enthusiasm throughout Ceylon about [their] visit..." to the fact that "never before had there been any such visit to Ceylon from European Buddhists, and every European who visited Ceylon knew only to attack Buddhism..."

Olcott and Madame Blavatsky dramatically embraced Buddhism in the presence of an enthusiastic and enormous audience. This was an

astute tactical move. Olcott himself admitted that both he and Madame Blavatsky had already become Buddhists in New York and that the ceremony of accepting Buddhism publicly at Galle in May 1880 was “a mere public avowal of the fact.”

The arrival of the Theosophists in Ceylon was of two-fold significance. Because of their familiarity with the rationalist and “scientific” critique of Christianity they gave a more positive intellectual content to the movement against the Christian forces in Ceylon. More importantly they gave the Buddhists what they lacked most—a lesson in the techniques of modern organisation to match the expertise in this sphere of the missionaries, and in doing so they contributed enormously to strengthening of self-confidence and morale among the Buddhists. With the help of leading *bhikkhus* and laymen, Olcott started the Buddhist education movement; an education fund and a Buddhist national fund (later, and significantly, merged into one) were established; the celebration of the *Vesak* festival was revived and an agitation begun (from 1881) to have it declared an official holiday, and he contributed to the adoption of a Buddhist flag (in 1885). At the time of Olcott’s arrival in Ceylon the Buddhist revival in Ceylon was well under way, the first phase in the recovery of national pride in the island and the first stage also in the long process which culminated in the growth of nationalism in the 20th century.

It has generally been argued that the leadership of the Buddhist revival was largely in the hands of traders who belonged to the rising *non-goyigama* castes of the littoral, the *karava*, *salagama* and *durawa*; and that the Buddhist movement was in part at least the religious expression of the improved economic and social status of the major *non-goyigama* castes in the Maritime districts. But this is true only up to a point. Scholars like Kitsiri Malalgoda point out that there was a substantial *goyigama* element in the leadership of this movement.³⁴

Olcott and the Theosophists played a decisive role in giving this new leadership a confidence in itself and self-assurance. At this stage in the development in the Buddhist movement the ‘charisma’ of a westerner could push it forward more purposefully. For one needs to bear in mind the fact that it was not force alone but the acceptance of the total superiority of European culture that held the non-European in awe and psychological subordination to the western rule in general. The prestigious position of Christianity was an aspect of this. Thus the presence in Sri Lanka of a group of Westerners openly championing Buddhism had a deeply significant psychological effect. For the Buddhists, reliance on the charisma of a westerner counterbalanced the limited vision of the Buddhist leadership of this period.

The Buddhist revival forged ahead in an atmosphere of overt and covert opposition from missionary organisations and government officials—the neutrality of the state did not guarantee the neutrality of its officials. And then on Easter Sunday 1883 came the first outbreak of physical violence directed against the Buddhists—the Kotahena riots referred to earlier. The Government Agent of the Western Province in his *Administration Report for 1883* referring to these riots, remarked that on Easter Sunday

“a large number of unoffending [sic] Buddhists were proceeding in procession to their temple [at Kotahena] when they were set upon by a mob of Roman Catholics, who killed one man, severely beat and injured others, slaughtered the bullocks, burnt the carts and their contents on the public high road and defied the police until the military was called out. For this serious riot committed in broad daylight and attended by murder and bloodshed, not a single person was even put upon his trial.”

Kotahena had long been regarded as a Roman Catholic stronghold, but it had also become the scene of considerable Buddhist activity after Migettuwatte Gunananda took charge of the *vihara* there. The riots were directed at a *pinkama* “organised by him on a scale of unusual significance in honour of the completion of a large reclining figure of [the] Buddha, as well as of other important additions and embellishments.” Because of the proximity of the Buddhist temple to the Roman Catholic cathedral “the anger and jealousy of the Roman Catholics was gradually aroused by the long continuance of the festival, extending as it did to Easter week.”

The fact that the government, for want of reliable testimony to sustain a conviction, dropped charges against a number of Roman Catholics who had been arrested over these riots, exasperated the Buddhists. Governor Longden appointed a Commission of Enquiry; its report was unsatisfactory to the Buddhists; in the sense that while the Commission held that the Catholics had indeed attacked the Buddhists, it was also held that they had been provoked by Gunananda’s fiery speeches, ‘and the fervour with which the Buddhists were conducting their activities.’ Worse still, one result of these events was that the Government placed restrictions on all religious processions. This was especially hard on the Buddhists for whom *peraheras* and *pinkamas* accompanied by music were an essential feature of religious practice. Restrictions of this sort were difficult to impose. Over the next two decades attempts to impose them resulted in frayed tempers and legal challenges, some successful and some unsuccessful. Indeed opposition to

such restrictions provided the background to the outbreak of the Sinhalese-Muslim riots of 1915.

The Buddhists now set their hearts on an inquiry to be conducted under the aegis of the Colonial Office. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky returned to the island for a second visit at the special invitation of the Buddhists to help organise the presentation of their case to be placed before Whitehall. Olcott arrived in Ceylon on 27 January 1884. On the following day a Buddhist Defence Committee was formed and it was decided that Olcott should make representation on behalf of the Ceylon Buddhists at the Colonial Office. But Olcott's visit to the Colonial Office accomplished very little in the way of redressing Buddhist grievances over the riots though it was fruitful in many other ways.

The Buddhist revival continued apace, its energies diverted now to the cause of education. The revival of Buddhism in the last quarter of the 19th century was accomplished by a sustained effort to build up a network of schools, and so close was this connection between educational activity, Buddhist revival and nationalist resurgence that the administration, not to mention missionary organisations, was inclined to be deeply suspicious. And if the Catholics found administrative regulations, such as the two-mile rule, and the rules governing the registration of schools irksome, Buddhists could justly complain that they found them to be a positive hindrance to the progress of their educational activities.

The work of the pioneer Buddhist educationists proved to be more solidly performed than seemed possible at the time. The schools they left for their successors in the 20th century fulfilled an important historical function. They broke the monopoly of the Christian missions in the sphere of education (which was by itself no mean achievement) and built up an enviable tradition and record of service. But above all else they served as the training ground of a new *elite* educated in a Buddhist atmosphere, who in the 20th century made their presence felt in politics, education and in the Civil Service. The emergence of this *elite* helped to quicken the pace of political agitation, to generate more enlightened attitudes in social and economic issues, and to engender a pride in Buddhism, the Sinhala language and the cultural heritage attached to them.

As was pointed out earlier a change in the policies of the British government in the island with regard to Buddhism had begun with Governor Gregory who displayed an active interest in Buddhism, and in Oriental learning. By making a contribution to the repair of the Ruvanveli Dagaba at Anuradhapura, and the gift of two lamps to the *Dalada Maligawa* in Kandy, Gregory demonstrated a courteous regard for Buddhism. This was underscored by the practice which was begun of

making an annual grant to the recently established Vidyodaya *Pirivena*—which became in time one of the principal centres of Oriental learning in the island—to encourage Buddhist studies. The fact that he was at the same time actively engaged in the attempt to dis-establish the Anglican church provided positive proof of the state's neutrality in religion. No wonder then that the Buddhist newspaper *Sarasavi Sandaresa* could claim with obvious relish that “Gregory's works have contributed to the Buddhist revival which has disturbed Christians so much.”

Governor Gordon not only continued this policy but sought consciously to emphasise the new role of the Government. He refused an invitation from Bishop Copleston to attend a public meeting to discuss the future of the disestablished Anglican Church: this he did to underscore the principle of neutrality. Largely because of the influence of Olcott who believed that the Colonial government in the island was as much pledged to the principle of religious neutrality as the Government of India, some at least of the Buddhists were convinced—and sought to convince their co-religionists—that the government was not pro-Christian. They made a distinction between the ‘state’ or ‘government’ and its officials.

Their faith in the government, and in Gordon in particular, had survived the disappointment with the official reaction to the Kotahena riots. This latter was a problem that Gordon had inherited from Longden. When Olcott appeared at Whitehall on behalf of Ceylonese Buddhists on this issue, he made four specific demands: that the restrictions imposed on religious processions was especially hard on Buddhists and should be lifted on that account; he asked for a fresh inquiry into the Kotahena riots, and the punishment of the Roman Catholic offenders; more significant, he asked for a formal declaration of religious neutrality on the lines of the Indian proclamation of 1858, and urged that *Vesak* day be declared a public holiday in Ceylon. At the same time he raised the complex issue of Buddhist temporalities.

Gordon himself eagerly accepted the suggestion that *Vesak* day be made a public holiday. But he balked at the idea of a formal declaration of religious neutrality. For one thing it would create the impression that the government had somehow been partisan in the past. More important, he felt that it would stultify the other related principle in which he believed—that the government had a special obligation towards Buddhism. He concurred warmly in Olcott's view that the British government had too hastily severed its connections with Buddhism. It was on this principle of a special obligation towards Buddhism that Gordon accepted the suggestion that the state should interest itself in taking in hand the problem of Buddhist temporalities. This had become, by Gordon's time, a rather complex issue.

Gordon took the view that as long as the problem of Buddhist temporalities was unsolved, and their administration unreformed, Britain had not fulfilled her obligations to two-thirds of the inhabitants of the country; he argued that as the British themselves had removed all the traditional checks on mal-administration and had put nothing in their place, the Buddhists of Ceylon should be given the opportunity to wipe out abuses in the administration of temporalities. He began work on the problem in 1884 immediately after the Kotahena riots of 1883, and four years later he outlined his solution. Despite Gordon's generosity of outlook, his Ordinance proved to be too complicated and cumbersome in its working; it did not lead to the elimination or even a significant reduction of the abuses it was intended to check.

IV The Revival of Hinduism

Parallel to the revival of Buddhism there was a recovery of the other indigenous religions of Sri Lanka—Hinduism and Islam. Our concern, in this essay, is with Hinduism. While the revivals of these religions had much in common with the processes of Buddhist resurgence, there were features in them which set them apart from the Buddhist experience. While the Islamic revival benefited greatly from the presence in the island of a charismatic Muslim exile, the Hindu recovery was much more self-reliant and self-sufficient than either the Buddhist or the Islamic recovery. But much more important was the fact that neither the Hindu nor the Islamic revival developed any political overtones, in the sense of a potential anti-British or anti-imperialist attitude. Young and Jebanesan point out that “the dynamic that generated Jaffna revivalismhad little or nothing to do with anti-colonial incipient nationalism....”³⁵ The contrast with the Buddhist revival would be obvious, for the Buddhist recovery was never wholly without political overtones. The potential was always there, and before the end of the century there were men who saw the possibilities of exploiting religious (Buddhist) sentiment for political purposes.

The recovery of Hinduism in 19th century Sri Lanka began much earlier than that of Buddhism, and took the form of a brahmanical resistance to Christianity.³⁶ In a sense Hinduism was in a more advantageous position from the point of view of resistance to missionary encroachment in that it was possible to draw on the tremendous resources of Hinduism in India. Nevertheless in the first half century of British rule in the island—and for that matter even later—the missionary

organisations were much stronger in Jaffna and its environs than in most other parts of the island; there were fewer sectarian conflicts among the missions working in the north, and their network of schools was far more efficiently run. The colonial administration believed it had less to fear any potential violent reaction to the processes of Christianisation through missionary activity than with reactions to missionary work among the Buddhists, particularly in the Kandyan areas.

The first phase of the Hindu recovery is associated with the career of Arumuga Navalar, Saivaite scholar and one time translator of the Bible, a man educated in the Saivaite tradition and the modern system of education provided by the mission schools—St. Paul’s Wesleyan school in Jaffna to be precise. The volume by Young and Jebanesan supersedes all the studies on Navalar that have been published up to now. It is, by far, the most comprehensive, and best documented study of the career of Arumuga Navalar, its distinctive features, and its many facets and phrases, that we have and one that is likely to remain the standard work for years to come. One great merit of the volume is that it is a very useful corrective to the general tendency to exaggerate the significance of Arumuga Navalar’s contribution to the Hindu recovery in the Jaffna peninsula. Professor K Kailasapathy had argued in 1982 that Navalar “bestrode like a colossus the Hindu Tamil world of his day.”³⁷ As against assessments of the sort, Young and Jebanesan point out that Navalar was at “the middle of a process that began before he appeared and continued afterwards.”³⁸

From his association with the missionaries he had grasped the fundamental fact that education was the indispensable instrument of religious recovery. Young and Jebanesan claim that Navalar’s career and that of the Methodist Peter Percival were “so intertwined as to become mirror images.”³⁹ They point out further that missionary institutions were not feared in Jaffna to the same extent as in Madras,⁴⁰ “and that education in the Madras presidency was not only always controversial, but was never the monopoly of the Christians that it was in Jaffna before the establishment of revivalist institutions in the late 1840s.” Alternative Hindu scholars had appeared in Madras earlier than in Jaffna. Indeed instead of the conventional view of how much Navalar had achieved in India, Young and Jebanesan emphasise instead the influence of developments in India on him.

On his return to Jaffna from India among his first endeavours was the establishment in 1849-50 of the Vannarponai Saiva Pragasa Vidyasalai; this was followed by a scheme for the establishment of schools in every village where Saivaite education could be imparted in a purely Saivaite

environment with the aid of school text-books specially prepared for the purpose. At the same time he was not unmindful of the values of an English education. In 1872 he founded the Saivangala Vidyasalai where English could be taught along with the religious background necessary for Hindu children; this school was later to become the Jaffna Hindu College.

The printing press was only slightly less important than education in Arumuga Navalar's scheme of Hindu recovery. As early as 1849 he had established a printing press at Vannarponai and from this poured forth a succession of tracts and pamphlets, in language intelligible to the common man, expounding the principles of Hinduism, and defending them against the strictures of the missionaries. Some of these pamphlets, particularly his *Rejoinder to the Calumniators of the Saivaite Religion* earned the respect of his erstwhile missionary colleagues, one of whom commented that "the adroitness with which every possible objection is anticipated and repelled belongs only to a first rate mind. The book is doing much damage."

The contribution he made to the development of modern Tamil studies both in Sri Lanka and South India in his career as pamphleteer and propagandist has often been exaggerated, but was very significant despite that exaggeration. The effectiveness of the missionary techniques of religious propaganda, particularly their open-air lectures delivered in simple language on topics connected with the gospels and the tenets of Christianity, prompted Arumuga Navalar to adopt similar techniques in his campaigns in defence of Hinduism—it has been claimed that he was the originator of platform speaking in Tamil. Besides—once again in imitation of the missionaries—he adopted and popularised a simple and lucid style of Tamil prose writing. But while he was a modernist and a reformer the basis of his success was his profound knowledge of the classical Tamil texts; the publication of his critical editions of these texts helped both Hinduism and Tamil learning.

In addition, he helped in the formation of secular organisations devoted to the propagation of Hindu ideals. As early as 1853 he had established the Saiva Pragasa Sabhai; later on he made skilful use of the assembly hall of the Siva Temple at Vannarponai for his popular lectures on Hinduism delivered every Friday. His influence subsequently led to the formation of the Saiva Paripalana Sabhai (1888) the Society for the Propagation of Saivism. Many members of this Society had been educated in Christian schools, and they were deeply influenced by the Hindu revival then in progress in India.

Young and Somaratna point out that one result of the Hindu revival was the consolidation of the power and influence of the *vellalas* in Jaffna society, in contrast to the Buddhist revival of the Sinhalese areas which manifested intercaste rivalry.⁴¹ In their volume on the Hindu revival

Young and Jebanesan point out that students in the schools of Jaffna peninsula which sprang up in the 19th century were not merely overwhelmingly *vellala*, but were also acquiring skills to consolidate their domination over castes that were traditionally subordinate to them.⁴² Thus Navalar the Hindu revivalist was no social reformer; instead an important feature of his career was his contribution to the consolidation of *vellala* conservatism.

Of the two books reviewed in this essay, the one by Young and Jebanesan displays an empathy for the principal opponent of the missionaries, Arumuga Navalar, which Young and Somaratna do not show for Migettuwatte Gunananda, the fiery Buddhist polemicist. In addition, Young and Jebanesan have a greater awareness of social change—or the lack of it—in the parts of the country affected by Hindu revivalism, than Young and Somaratna have for the Sinhalese areas of the island affected by the Buddhist revivalism. More to the point, British colonial administration, in London and in Colombo, concentrated their attention on the Sinhalese areas of the island in regard to the making of policy on the state's attitude to religion—they virtually ignored the Jaffna peninsula in regard to this. One cannot write on the Buddhist revival without an understanding of the influence of these policies, even if one is writing on the debates between missionaries and *bhikkhus*. Young and Somaratna have made little or no effort to weave British official policies on religion into their analyses of the background to the debates between missionaries and *bhikkhus*. Their failure to do so explains why the volume on the encounter between the missionaries and the Hindu revivalists is superior to their study of the encounter between the missionaries and the *bhikkhus*. While the volume by Young and Jebanesan will be the standard by which future scholarship on Navalar and the Hindu revival will be judged, this is much more than can be said for the volume by Young and Somaratna; it falls well short of the standards set, for instance, by Kitsiri Malalgoda in chapters VI and VII of his excellent study of *Buddhism in Sinhala Society*, which deals with the same subject⁴³ with greater objectivity and a more acute understanding of the historical background.

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Notes

1. See particularly my chapter, "Religion and the State in the Early Nineteenth Century," and "The Government and Religion: Problems and Policies, c1832 to c1910" in K M de Silva (ed.), *The University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon*, Vol. III, Colombo, 1973, pp 66-76 and 187-212 respectively; *Social Policy and Missionary Organisations in Ceylon, 1840-1855*, London, 1965, particularly chapter I, II and III, pp 29-137; "Buddhist Revivalism, Nationalism and Politics in Modern Sri Lanka" in James W Bjorkman (ed.), *Fundamentalism, Revivalists and Violence in South Asia*, Delhi, 1988, pp 107-158.
2. See C R Boxer, "Christians and Spices: Portuguese Missionary Methods in Ceylon, 1518-1658," *History Today*, VIII, 1958, pp 346-354; and "A Note on Portuguese Missionary Methods in the East: 16th-18th Centuries," *Ceylon Historical Journal*, 1960-61, pp 77-90. See also S Arasaratnam, "Oratorian and Predikants: The Catholic Church in Ceylon under Dutch Rule," review article in *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, 1, 1958, pp 216-222.
3. Lopo Soares Albergaria (1516) quoted by Fr. Queyroz in *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, Colombo, 1930, 3 Vols, translated by Fr. S G Perera, cited in L Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony, 900-1915*, Colombo, 1994, p 57.
4. R F Young and S Jebanesan, *The Bible Trembled. The Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon* (hereafter Young and Jebanesan), p 43.
5. R F Young and G P V Somaratna, *Vain Debates. The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon* (hereafter Young and Somaratna), pp 38-39.
6. *ibid.*, p 39.
7. *ibid.*, p 38, see footnote 6.
8. *ibid.*
9. C R de Silva, "The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Sitavaka (1521-1593)" in K M de Silva (ed.), *The University of Peradeniya, History of*

- Sri Lanka*, Vol. II, Peradeniya, 1995, pp 61-104. The quotation is at pp 87-88.
10. T B H Abeyasinghe, "Portuguese Rule in Kotte, 1594-1638" in K M de Silva (ed.), The University of Peradeniya, *History of Sri Lanka*, Vol. II, Peradeniya, 1995, pp 123-137. The quotation is at pp 128-129.
 11. De Barros and Do Couto, "The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Times to 1600 AD" (trns. and ed.) Donald Ferguson, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, hereafter *JRAS(CB)*, XX(60), 1908, p 37.
 12. Robert Knox, *A Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon* (Interleaved edition), Colombo, 1989, Vol. II, p 219.
 13. *ibid.*, p 243.
 14. Lorna Dewaraja, *op.cit.*, pp 6-7.
 15. *ibid.*, p 7.
 16. "Journal of the Expedition of the Year 1765 against the Prince of Kandy" translated from the Dutch by A E Buultjens in *JRAS(CB)*, XVI(50), 1899, pp 44-45.
 17. *ibid.*, p 49.
 18. For a study of these problems see K M de Silva, *Social Policy and Missionary Organisations in Ceylon, 1840-1855*, London, 1985, pp 64-137.
 19. *ibid.*
 20. *ibid.*
 21. Heinz Bechert, "Buddhism in the Modern States of South East Asia" in B Grossman (ed.), *South East Asia in the Modern World*, Wiesbaden, 1972, pp 127-139, see particularly, p 130.
 22. K M de Silva, *Social Policy and Missionary Organisations in Ceylon, 1840-1855*, *op.cit.*, pp 64-137.

23. *ibid.*
24. See Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA) 7/589B for the deed of transfer of land to the trustees of the church. This church was constructed in the years 1843-44 and consecrated by the Bishop of Colombo in 1850.
25. K M de Silva, *Social Policy and Missionary Organisations in Ceylon, 1840-1855*, *op.cit.*, pp 64-137.
26. See K M de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, London, Oxford University Press, 1981, pp 339-349.
27. James de Alwis in the introduction to his translation of the *Sidat Sangarawa*, Colombo, 1852, p cclii, cited in Ananda Wickremeratne, *The Roots of Nationalism: Sri Lanka*, Colombo, 1995, p 116.
28. The Revd. E Daniel, "Reminiscences" in *The Missionary Herald*, London, September 1843, p 158.
29. The Revd. W H A Dickson, letter of 29 April 1848 in Wesleyan Mss Ceylon III.
30. The Revd. J F Haslam, letter of 10 July 1849 in CMS MSS Ceylon C/CE/0.50.
31. The Revd. J Rippon, letter of 16 April 1852 in Wesleyan Mss Ceylon II.
32. Young and Somaratna, pp 179-180.
33. The volume was apparently published by the author himself.
34. K Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study in Revival and Change*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1976, pp 166-169. See also the same author's "Buddhist-Christian Confrontation in Ceylon, 1800-1880," *Social Compass*, 20, 1974, pp 171-200.
35. Young and Jebanesan, p 42.

36. *ibid.*, p 40 and 49-68; see also, a recently published booklet, S Ratnajeewan H Hoole, *C W Thamothersampillai, Tamil Revivalist. The Man Behind the Legend of Tamil Nationalism*, Colombo, ICES, 1997.
37. K Kailasapathy, *The Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness of the Tamil Community of Sri Lanka*, Punitham Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture, Colombo, 1982.
38. Young and Jebanesan, p 144.
39. *ibid.*, p 109.
40. *ibid.*, p 103.
41. Young and Somaratna, p 34.
42. Young and Jebanesan, p 104.
43. K Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900, op.cit.*, pp 191-255.

Friday, 21 July 2000

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