

R.F. YOUNG, G. P.V. SOMARATNA, *Vain Debates. The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-century Ceylon*. (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, XXIII). Wien: Sammlung de Nobili, 1996. 236 pages, öS 400,-. ISBN 3-900271-28-3

R.F. YOUNG, S. JEBANESAN, *The Bible Trembled. The Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-century Ceylon*. (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, XXII). Wien: Sammlung de Nobili, 1995. 204 pages, öS 400,-. ISBN 3-900271-27-5

In the nineteenth century Sri Lanka saw two socioreligious revival movements. In the (predominantly Tamil) north there was the revival of Shaivite Hinduism, while in the (predominately Sinhalese) south there was the revival of Buddhism. R.F. Young, who is well known for his diligent studies on Hindu/Buddhist-Christian controversies, discusses together with his co-authors, the Buddhist and Hindu revival movements in the two volumes under review.

Originally the revival of Buddhism in Ceylon was associated with the institutional reform of the Sangha (the community of Buddhist monks). Interruption of proper ordination of monks had led to a situation where a sufficient number of properly ordained monks could no longer be convened to preside over the induction of a novice into the higher order of the Sangha, resulting in disruptive departure from the monastic discipline of the Vinaya. In order to revitalize the Sangha, monks were dispatched to the Theravada societies of Southeast Asia to acquire higher ordination. Another important institutional reform was the democratization of higher ordination which had previously been an exclusive domain of the Sinhalese caste of highland *goyigama*. Caste is a distinctive feature of the Sangha in Ceylon that differentiates it from the communities of monks in other Theravada societies. In the first half of the 19th century the lowcountry castes of the Southwest Littoral dispatched their own missions to Southeast Asia to have their caste mates ordained in defiance of the hegemonistic *goyigama*. It was in the Southwest Littoral where European influence was strongest. And it was the lowcountry members of the Buddhist Sangha who became actively involved in the ensuing revival.

The attitude of the Sinhalese toward the increasing Europeanization of the island was at first accommodative. The Buddhist-Christian controversy was primarily initiated by the Christian, mainly Protestant, missionaries. The first time Buddhist revivalism was directed against missionary Christianity was after the publication of a trenchant and provocative critique of Buddhism by the Wesleyan D. Gogerly in 1848. This does not mean that the aggravation of religious tension in Ceylon during the 19th century is to be attributed entirely to the aggressive evangelization of the island by Protestant Christian missionaries. The indignation this aroused in the revivalists was often enough untempered by the Buddhist virtues of detachment and equanimity. In a way, both parties betrayed their own ideals.

In the initial phase of the Buddhist-Christian controversy, the revivalists confined themselves to writing and circulating their arguments on palmleaf manuscripts, while the Christian missionaries could take advantage of printing presses. In 1862 the second phase in the controversy started with the acquisition of the technology of printing and the establishment of Buddhist-owned presses. Whereas palmleaf writing was characteristically substantial in content, the broadsides, tracts, and short pamphlets of the new era of printed apologetics became overtly polemical. Instead of apologetics derived from the Pali Canon, Western anti-Christian and anti-clerical ideologies increasingly found their way into revivalist publications. In other words, the revivalist movement in this phase was characterized by a certain deviation from Buddhist traditional argumentation and by vulgarization. This was also the era of public debates. The missionaries were handicapped from the very beginning, having, after the death of D. Gogerly, no-one capable of sustaining the tradition of informed apologetics current hitherto. These debates provided the laity (who

sometimes found it difficult to follow the discussion in writing) with an opportunity to see their spokesmen in action, and to celebrate their triumph. The era of debates culminated in 1873 with the spectacular triumph of the Buddhist orator Mohottivatte Gunananda, which marks the victory of Buddhist revivalism over Christianity.

What was the outcome of the many years of Buddhist-Christian controversy? As the title "Vain Debates" suggests, there was much ado about nothing. There are several conditions for any discussion to be fertile, namely a terminology understood by both parties, the effort to understand, if not accept, the other's arguments, and the ability to explain one's own position. None of these conditions was fulfilled in the Buddhist-Christian controversy in Ceylon. The Christian missionaries and the Buddhists often enough misunderstood each other. The discussions were conducted in a spirit antagonistic to the best principles in both religions. Instead of teaching their own religious message, both Buddhists and Christians abused their knowledge of the holy scriptures to gain the advantage over others in debate. Serious reasoning was done, if at all, only outside the sphere of religion, in the field of science. Christians and Buddhists fought about artificial problems. Little was to be heard about Jesus the Saviour, little about the liberating power of the Buddhist message. Instead, there were endless debates about the Buddha's lacking omniscience, about the arithmetical incorrectness of biblical measures, about the localisation of Mount Meru and the morally representative behaviour of Jesus. Buddhist argumentation was at its best wherever it chose – unnoticed by the missionaries – traditional forms. The missionaries, on the other hand, were most likely to be listened to when they happened to speak about a subject familiar to Buddhist thinking. Even then there were fatal misunderstandings. When the Christian missionary D. Gogerly studied the Brahmajala-Sutta, he took the word *kattā* "agent" wrongly to mean "creator" in the Christian sense. Buddhists, on the other hand, were sure to interpret the Christian terms *creation* and *creator* from the perspective of the Brahmajala-Sutta. Neither party was able or willing to concentrate its teaching on subjects which would be palatable to the other. Thus, speaking about biblical miracles might have impressed another audience, but in Buddhist surroundings it would simply make Jesus appear as a kind of sorcerer.

The public debates resulted in greater zeal on both sides, Christian and Buddhist, and in communal riots, segregation, and in a generally hostile atmosphere. When a few European missionaries realized that they had chosen the wrong path, it was too late. Ironically, revivalist Buddhism, that showed itself to be so resilient in the face of Christianity, proved extremely vulnerable to the blandishments of Theosophy. At the end of the 19th century, the revivalists were singing Christian hymns in a new idiom under Theosophical influence.

If religious conversion or intellectual development is to be a criterion, the outcome of nearly a century of written and spoken contest is hardly worth mentioning. Socially, however, it is considerable. One effect was the opening of the Buddhist Sangha to activities traditionally reserved to lay people. On the whole the Sangha did maintain its distance from the affairs of this world, but several prominent members no longer felt deterred by their vows from assuming the roles of a public orator or popular author. On the other hand, an enormous importance came to be attached to the unordained laity at the expense of the Sangha and its historic prerogatives in matters pertaining to doctrine, ecclesiastical affairs, and even the pursuit of enlight-

enment itself. The result was the Protestantization of Ceylonese Buddhism. Modern Ceylonese Buddhism evolved, with a marked tendency to reformation in terms of the rectification of erroneous doctrines and unscriptural practices.

The authors have collected and processed a considerable quantity of unknown or little known material from different sources in Sinhala and English. They have succeeded in clarifying the historical record and in contributing to a better understanding of this interesting phenomenon of religious revivalism.

Like the Buddhist revival in the south, the Hindu revival in Jaffna, the predominately Shaivite and Tamil-populated peninsula in the north of Ceylon, emerged over a period of prolonged and often contentious interaction with Christianity. Likewise, it cannot be properly understood apart from the overall colonial milieu of which Christianity was a dominant feature. With respect to their points of origin, general contours, and developmental phases, the Buddhist and Hindu revival movements were parallel responses to nearly identical socioeconomic and religiocultural stresses. But there is no evidence at all of a pan-Lankan Ceylonese reaction to Christianity at any time, and the origin and development of northern Sri Lankan Hindu revivalism is quite different from southern Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalism.

As to the sources, Hindu revivalists in the north were quick to abandon writing on palmleaves in favour of printed pages. Hindu printed works survive to a much greater extent than Buddhist ones, not only because research libraries collected them but also because, while Buddhist printed pamphlets suffered from lack of substance, in the Hindu north brilliant works based on deep reflection came out periodically right from the beginning. Public debates did not play a significant role.

The Hindu-Christian antagonism furthermore was entirely different in character to the Buddhist-Christian antagonism. The missionaries' efforts to discuss with local Hindus typically started with the comparison of traditional astronomy and modern science. When it became obvious that modern science was superior to the brahmins' methods of calculating, there was only one way to neutralize the ambiguous power of missionary schools. This was the distinction between religious and secular, this-worldly and other-worldly realms. With such a dichotomy, one could be a Copernican and still appreciate the sacred Hindu scriptures. Those who thus succeeded in reconciling modernity with tradition around 1840 were not the brahmins (the ritually most high-ranking caste), but mostly Vellala (the dominant, land-owning caste that had power and influence outside the temple) students and teachers. If the danger of being Christianized was averted by the distinction between religious and worldly matters, some Protestant Christian polemics were made harmless by Protestantization of Hinduism itself. A tract condemning the uncontrolled exuberance of Hindu festivals was significant in that it contained almost nothing that was objectionable to the "Protestant" Shaivite revivalists. If Christian polemicists, finally, aimed at ridiculing certain Hindu myths at the most straightforward narrative level of meaning, Hindu apologists became ever more adept at interpreting their own myths in philosophical and allegorical terms.

Contrary to local convention, the dynamic that generated Jaffna revivalism had little or nothing to do with anti-colonial, incipient nationalism. Again contrary to the popular view, the figurehead of the Ceylon Hindu revival, A. Navalar, was, according to the authors' view, less initiatory than remarkably well attuned and responsive

to events and trends in Madras and the rural districts of the Tamil mainland. In fact, there was little in the northern revival that had not already appeared first in South India.

Initially there was no opposition to missionary institutions in Jaffna comparable to that in Madras. This circumstance had less to do with Bible curricula than with the fact that students who were overwhelmingly Vellala were acquiring skills to consolidate their dominion over castes that were traditionally subordinate to them. Tension was aroused after Britain abolished slavery in 1844 and the courts began upholding the rights of "soil slaves" to emancipate themselves from Vellala constraints. The Vellala were now forced to compete with social upstarts for scarce resources, i.e. schooling and salaried jobs. Their success at mission schools in turn reinforced Vellala control over the brahmins whose intellectual weapons acquired by traditional learning came to be regarded as outdated. Therefore the expectation spread that the religion of Lord Shiva would be revived not by brahmins but by staunch believers from among the Vellala. One of those Vellala who studied and worked at missionary institutions was A. Navalar. Navalar, while studying and cooperating with Christian missionaries, became gradually disillusioned with Christianity. At the same time, he became increasingly aware of the changes in the Tamil Hindu society of Madras: Hindu schools for Hindus, Tamil literature for readers offended by missionary productions, and a Protestantized worship for those who were averse to Protestantism itself. Navalar's advantage over other revivalists was that he was intimately acquainted with Christianity and asked questions which the missionaries were not intellectually equipped to answer.

Navalar founded schools and other institutions of prestige both in Jaffna and on the mainland. Looked at from A. Navalar's perspective, Protestant Christianity itself needed reform, having departed from its Judaic norms. It was, moreover, in the missionary institutions that Jaffna's children were learning to despise those same norms in Shaivism. One of the tasks of his newly-founded Shaivite schools was therefore explicitly to reinforce them. He was convinced that Jaffna revivalism could flourish only if its temples were reformed along the lines of ancient ideals. Ironically, what Navalar called the "Shaivite spirit" was something he had learned from the Christian missionaries. That youthful excesses were being justified on the grounds of a pre-marital affair of Shiva's son Murukan told in the sacred text *Kantapuram* was taken by him as shocking confirmation of how far Jaffna had deviated from its own dharmic ideals. Navalar had likewise come to believe that the act of worship ought to be subjectively serious and reverential. Hindu festivals as they were commonly celebrated were in his view hardly the sombre and devotional occasions that derive from genuine piety. In order to establish among his compatriots the kind of pure Shaivism he believed in he did not hesitate to use any means at his disposal. Although his grasp of the Agamas was incommensurate with their actual content, that did not prevent him from adducing their presumed authority in the single-minded pursuit of his own interests. The result was, similar to the revivalist Buddhism described above, the Protestantization of Hinduism/Shaivism, comprising a shift in the meaning of being Shaivite from an ethnic category (being Tamil) to specific beliefs and practices. While the indigenous religion of Jaffna had consisted of a loosely coordinated agglomeration of cults, the new Shaivite had a sharply defined

identity, his religion was clearly demarcated from other religions. Above all, he abhorred folk-religion. A Shaivite now had to avoid all “heathenish ceremonies”, just as the Christian missionaries demanded of their converts. Typically he was not a brahmin, but a Vellala , a conscientious, well informed layman.

Protestant revivalist Hinduism is especially interesting when we compare it to contemporary neo-Hinduism. Contrary to Navalar’s revivalist Hinduism a century ago, the absence of a pivotal centre in Hinduism has been made a virtue by supporters of the neo-Hinduist ideology and is taken as proof of a transcendental unity over and above particular sectarian groupings.

This interesting book on the Hindu-Christian controversies was written between 1980 and 1995. Work on it was at times seriously obstructed by the fratricidal ethnic war between Tamil and Sinhalese inhabitants of Sri Lanka. The authors are to be thanked for their efforts in difficult circumstances.

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