

VAIN DEBATES: THE BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSIES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY CEYLON. By R. F. YOUNG and G. P. V. SOMARATNA (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, XXIII.) pp. 236. Vienna, Sammlung De Nobili, 1996. THE BIBLE TREMBLED. THE HINDU-CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSIES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY CEYLON. By R. F. YOUNG and S. JEBANESAN (Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, XXII.) pp. 204. Vienna, Sammlung De Nobili, 1995.

These two valuable books fill a large lacuna in accounts of nineteenth-century Ceylon. The first book discourses on Hindu-Christian controversies, and in particular on the revivalist Ārumuka Nāvalar (1822-1879), a figure often spoken of but about whom little detail is known to most Lanka specialists today. The second book concerns Buddhist-Christian controversies, and in particular the Wesleyan missionary scholar Daniel Gogerly (1792-1862) and the controversial monk Mohoṭṭivatte Guṇānanda 1823-1890 – also known as Migeṭṭuvatte, which form appears once or twice in the text, without any further explanation). “Christian” in both cases refers to Protestant missionaries; Roman Catholicism, which was already well established in Ceylon, is only of marginal relevance.

It seems curious today, and also rather lamentable, that Christian missionary enterprise has been so much bound up with the introduction of western lifestyles. It would also seem curious, and even absurd, to most people today that Christian missionary enterprise involved so much fundamentalist belief. Accounts of the creation of this world must be all, to a greater or lesser extent, myths or allegories. But such was not the belief of early nineteenth-century western missionaries, and neither, surprisingly, was it the view of the non-Christians with whom they argued. Venerable figures such as Hikkaḍuve Sṛī Sumangala (1826-1911) originally suspected that it might invalidate Buddhism to accept that the earth was spherical, just as early missionaries thought that the literal truth of the book of Genesis was an essential part of Christianity. It is astonishing that R. S. Hardy (1803-1868) should think the powers of flight attributed to arhats in more need of justification than the powers of Christ to walk upon water. It is only to be expected that a rhetorical question about the geographical site of Mount Meru should be answered by a rhetorical question about the geographical site of the Garden of Eden. The Jaffna *paṇṭārams* of 1833 seem to have been more sensible than most of their fellows in stating “There is no connexion between the Native systems of Astronomy and Religion, and though the former should be overthrown, the latter would remain for ever unimpaired.” In general, the authors’ conclusions regarding the controversies is suggested by their dedications “To the Hindus and Christians of Jaffna, who have always found ample scope in each other’s religion for public discussion and private reflection” and “To all those involved in the Buddhist-Christian Controversies who in the end saw their vanity.”

In *Vain Debates*, Young & Somaratna point out that the earliest nineteenth-century missionaries (the first of whom arrived in 1804) were both surprised and irritated that the Buddhist monks seemed to consider them unimportant from a religious standpoint. Two eminent monks were in fact happy to assist the missionaries in translating parts of the Bible – this is of a piece with the respect of the sangha for the written word – but it is more remarkable to find that a number of Buddhist monks converted to Christianity before 1830. The authors attribute this largely to the influence of Paley’s *Evidences*. The missionaries considered it their duty “to destroy Buddhism and place Christianity in its stead”, but the monks did not realize this for some time. When they did, after the publication of Gogerly’s *Kristiyāni Prajñāpti* in 1848, they not only responded in kind to the missionaries’ wish for public confrontations, but appeared to their audiences usually to win the arguments. The *Prajñāpti* only cites the Bible once, and is mostly concerned to show that common Ceylon Buddhism of the time was uncanonical.

Where the Bible is mentioned, the missionaries usually confined themselves to the Old Testament, and were more accustomed to refer to “Jehovah” than to Jesus. (This is more or less the opposite of

modern missionary methods.) As the Old Testament stories of Jehovah are usually far from edifying, it is not unnatural to find that Jehovah became identified in the Sinhalese mind as a kind of bloodthirsty *preta*. The authors introduce a fascinating story which they call “The carpenter-*prēta*”, found among the Nevill manuscripts in the British Library (vol. 2, p. 65 in Somadasa’s *Catalogue*) dated 1762, in which Māra sends to Jambudvīpa an emanation born as a carpenter to vanquish king Milinda (here also called Mihingu) and set Buddhism aside. Milinda plays the part of the biblical king Herod.

The missionary insistence finally provoked a backlash, largely under the leadership of Mohoṭṭivatte Guṇānanda (probably a disrobed *thera* re-ordained as a *sāmaṇera*), who also drew on the writings of Bishop Colenso of Natal for support. Colenso intended to draw attention to the New Testament as containing the essential values of the Bible, but the effect of his writings in Ceylon was to help to discredit the Old Testament. Mohoṭṭivatte played a major part in the famous debate at Pānadurē in 1873. It was after this that a Christian catechist used the phrase to which the title of Young & Somaratna’s book refers. He wrote “I find from this last experience the vanity of holding religious discussions, for none of these discussions hitherto held at various places on various occasions have brought any good upon either party; and therefore I am determined not to encourage any such thing in these villages for the future.” As their general conclusion, the authors say “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 evangelization of the island by Protestant Christian missionaries”, though they also register dismay at the effect of the impact on Lankan Buddhism in general. The final chapter makes brief mention of theosophy, and of the *Anagārika Dharmapāla* (1864–1933).

*The Bible Trembled* is almost exclusively concerned with the Jaffna peninsula. Here the early missionaries (mostly American) at first expected to dispute with brahmins, but soon realized that these were insignificant in Ceylon and that the main disputes would be with members of the dominant *vellāla* caste. This led sometimes to the intrusion of caste politics into religion in a way which hardly bothered the Wesleyans in the south. Disputes began, as in the south, about astronomical matters; but the main part of this book concerns Ārumuka Nāvalar, who also, like some of the Buddhist monks, started as a collaborator in translations of the Bible. But after a visit to Madras with the Wesleyan minister Peter Percival (who remained in Madras and eventually became an Anglican) Ārumuka was able to publish in 1854 his book *Caiva tūṣana parikāram*, in which he sought to show that Saivism was more Jewish than Christianity, a view supported by an interesting quotation from John Callaway who was a Wesleyan missionary in the south. This view is called by Young & Jebanesan “the Dravidianization of Moses”, though such an appellation would suggest linguistic affinities rather than philosophical ones. There is a full exposition of Ārumuka’s life and of the views he came to hold; these are described, quite suitably, as a protestantization. The book is rounded up with short notes on his followers such as C. W. Tamotaram Pillai and Ponnambalam Ramanatan.

Both books are well and clearly written, and not weighted with jargon. Local words and names are usually accurately transcribed (though in *The Bible Trembled* the words “Kanta” and “mudaliyar” are often written wrongly). Some spellings are curious, and the words “reification” and “xenological” are used rather strangely. A few details may be noticed from *Vain Debates*: p. 58 line 4 for “shorter” read “longer”; p. 80 for “Tourner” read “Turnour”; pp. 123, 197 Kegalle is not “on the south-west littoral”; a capital city is quaintly called “capitol” throughout, and the name Dipaduttamārāma is written throughout with a long *ī*, in the normal Lankan style, and is doubtless felt – wrongly – to be connected with the Pali word *dīpa*, “island”. The place name Koṭahēna should not be connected with either “cotton” or “china”. It is most admirable to find all the footnotes in their rightful place, so that they can actually be used.

The authors' sympathies on the whole appear to be evenly balanced in both books between disapproval of missionary methods and disapproval of the reactions they produced, and were indeed designed to produce. In both cases a disputable question is involved regarding the "genuineness" or otherwise of the religious views normally accepted at the time. Scholar missionaries such as Gogerly sought to show that Sinhalese Buddhism was a deviation from the tripitaka; reformers such as Ārumuka supposedly sought to return to the āgamas. (Ārumuka's arguments are sometimes less dubious than seems to be implied, e.g. Psalm 99.1 with reference to the Ark of the Covenant, [p. 116]). Incidentally, it is rather surprising to find monks engaging so freely in lawsuits. The general conclusion for today can only be that missionaries often produce effects they never intend, and often do not understand what they are arguing against. This applies, no doubt, to *dharmadūtas* as well as to Christians.

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