

**BUDDHISM DURING COLONIAL RULE****Terry C. Muck**

Elizabeth Harris: *Theravada Buddhism and the British encounter: Religious, missionary, and colonial experience in nineteenth century Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge, 2006. 274 pages.

Of all the multifaceted interactions among Buddhists and Christians, the one sure to generate the most heat is mission; Christians spread the gospel, Buddhists spreading the dhamma, Christians preach and Buddhists preach at the same time in the same places. This is the central topic of Elizabeth Harris's *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary, and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka*. By throwing light on this crucial encounter, Harris greatly reduces the heat generated by these competing missions and makes greater understanding possible. At least, that would be one hoped-for outcome.

Harris challenges the standard postcolonial critique (SPC) of what happened to Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism and Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhists when Christian missionaries, riding on the coattails of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonialists, invaded the peaceful and pristine island of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. SPC posits Western colonial missionaries gaining power through their political proxies, shaping Western understandings of Theravada Buddhism to fit their Puritan rationalistic preconceptions, and then attempting to destroy this made-in-the-West Buddhism, using aggressive and triumphalistic mission tactics that not only failed, but generated such a backlash that still, today, Buddhist-Christian relationships in Sri Lanka are poisoned almost beyond remedy.

Harris challenges the SPC not by denying the obvious truths embedded in the various elements of this version of the sad story, but by convincingly showing us that the SPC is only one side of a very complex story. The SPC, Harris argues, needs to be complexified by realizing that not all British in nineteenth century Ceylon fit the stereotypical missionary model, that Sri Lanka Buddhists had agency in shaping what became known as Protestant Buddhism in the twentieth century.

**British Christians**

Harris uses three paradigms to show the diversity of British interlocutors with Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism and Buddhists. The first paradigm is an early (1796-1830), middle (1830-70) and late (1870-1900) periodization that corresponds to parts 1, 2, and 3 of the book. By means of this paradigm Harris shows that development took place in British understanding of Buddhist precept and practice. The earliest observers made mistakes, even when they based their observations on texts and practicing Buddhist informants. As with most such developments, the changes and depth of understanding were uneven, with later commentators sometimes repeating the howlers and biases of the earliest commentators, even as they in some areas went far beyond them in depth of understanding. Later was not always better, but it usually was.

The second paradigm one might call vocational. The British did not all come to Ceylon for the same reason. Some came as political overseers for the colonial government. Some came as merchants, looking for a way to turn the island's abundant natural resources into pounds in their bank accounts back home. Some came simply as "tourists" looking to find out more about what was in the nineteenth century a very exotic culture indeed to European eyes. Some came as missionaries to spread the Christian gospel story. And a trickle of scholars seeking data for research topics gradually turned into a fairly broad stream by the end of the century. Each of these five groups came asking slightly different questions. Because Buddhism was so ubiquitous among the people of Ceylon, Buddhism was always part of the answer to the different questions politicians, business people, travelers, Christians, and professors asked, but the different questions produced different products: statements of public policy vis-à-vis Buddhism, Southeast Asian versions of Weber's observations about religion and economics, diaries and travelogues, theologies of religion and monographs. Harris does a good job of including all these sources in her observations of the British who conquered and commented, each for their own reasons.

Harris's third paradigm, an implicit one, is evaluative. We might call it the good-the-bad-and-the-ugly paradigm.

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Although Harris is a good scholar and does her best to be objective, her preferences show through. She has a great deal more patience with mistakes made by Constance Gordon Cumming than she does with mistakes made by R.S. Copleston. Daniel Gogerly does not fare nearly as well as Allen Bennett, when the only difference in their goals appears to be that Gogerly wanted Buddhists to convert to Christianity and Bennett wanted Christians to convert to Buddhism. As far as their respective understandings of Theravada Buddhism were concerned—well, suffice to say that neither one would receive an A in my world religions course. Harris’s evaluative saw seems to boil down to good-natured respect for those who are religiously different from me. Not a bad bottom line, actually.

### Sri Lankan Agency

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this book has to do with the second complexifying factor Harris detects—the recognition of Sri Lankan agency in shaping twenty-first-century Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism based on what happened in the nineteenth century. SPC blames it all on the British—or more generally on the “West.” While not absolving the British of responsibility for some of what became known as Protestant Buddhism, Harris convincingly shows that much of what others have identified as Western in this movement has its roots in Sri Lankan Buddhism. As evidence, she looks at Protestant Buddhism’s views of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths and meditation. Only in the case of the Buddha can it be shown that the British contribution was significant, and that must be tempered by textual contributions to the view of his historical personage. The Four Noble Truths, although coopted by British missionaries for their use, has strong textual representation, and the changes in the way *vipassana* meditation was viewed had more to do with Burmese influences than Western. In fact, Harris rightly points out that one of the important influences that gets left out in the SPC protocol is the many South-South influences on Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, particularly those from Burma and Thailand.

Harris further differentiates between two important streams of indigenous contributions to Protestant Buddhism, one narrative and one doctrinal. The narrative tradition, as represented by a document prepared by a Sri Lankan, Mulgirigala, probably tended to be the way lay people saw Buddhism, while the more doctrinal tradition, exemplified by a compendium of Buddhist doctrine prepared by a monk, Kitulgama Devamitta, probably was more in line with the way *bhikkus* saw the tradition. Thus, neither can be said

to be the more distinctive way Sri Lankans themselves saw to Buddhism; and both in some form (and as filtered in some cases through British writers) were surely at the root of what became so-called Protestant Buddhism in the twentieth century.

### Reciprocal Missions

Finally, Harris considers the question of what became reciprocal, or dueling, mission efforts in the twentieth century, the back-and-forth between Christian and Buddhist evangelizing. Harris argues that the main influence of the British on the development of Protestant Buddhism was not through the portal of Orientalism, but because of mission: “[T]he key to the development of Buddhist modernism in Sri Lanka was not the stereotypical Western Orientalist but the need of Buddhists on the ground to counter missionary writing and their discovery that the best strategy was to use the arguments of European contesters of Christianity and to counterbalance each mission criticism with alternative material” (187).

Christian critics of Buddhism in Sri Lanka accused Buddhists of being irrational, unscientific and ethically challenged. The instigators of the Buddhist revival then spent an inordinate amount of time attempting to show how rational, scientific and ethical Buddhism was. In choosing to polish these particular facets of the Buddhist doctrinal diamond, the Buddhist reformers were not being unfaithful to their tradition—but it is probably true to say that they were highlighting aspects of Theravada Buddhist teaching that had rarely, if ever, been particularly noticed in the tradition previously.

The Christian mission effort shaped Protestant Buddhism in another way. Christian missionaries introduced mission methodologies not normative to Sinhalese culture. The public debate, for example, was initially seen by Sri Lankan Buddhists as a chance to cooperatively and congenially examine religious ideas from the two traditions in a public forum. It was only after several of these debates that they realized “the attack, belittle, and conquer” character of these presentations. They adapted by learning how to attack, belittle and triumph themselves. Thereafter, these kinds of attacks became standard fare in both traditions’ missional portfolios. Another mission methodology, the publication of polemical tracts and monographs, was also initially a Christian methodology, but the Buddhists quickly realized the power of the written word and began to publish anti-Christian tracts and books of their own.

It is unfortunate that neither Christians nor Buddhists seemed to learn from the best of each other's religious traditions. It is not because such were not represented in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. Harris, in fact, cites men and women representing both. But it is safe to say that the legacy of these reciprocal nineteenth- and twentieth-century mission efforts has been almost totally negative and has created in Sri Lanka today a

very uneasy relationship between the two sides. One could hope that one result of this exceptionally well-done book would be an honest look at what our common history has wrought and the taking of steps to restore a goodwill toward one another that would be more faithful to the best in both traditions than what currently endures. ■

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**Kumari Jayawardena**

