

Colonel Olcott's reforms of the 19th Century and their Cultural Significance

Professor Gananath Obeyesekera of Princeton University delivered the Ralph Peiris Memorial Lecture at the Mahaweli Centre (Colombo, Sri Lanka) on January 11, 1992. The theme of his talk was: *Colonel Olcott's reforms of the 19th Century and their Cultural Significance*.

Prof. Ralph Pieris whose recent death we are memorialising in this lecture was my colleague at the University of Sri Lanka at Peradeniya during our green years. Much of his life's work has been devoted to the historical sociology of the Kandyan period and early British colonial rule. In more recent times he has focused on the topic of the transfer of technology and knowledge from the West to the colonized nations.

I want to combine these two major interests of Ralph Pieris by dealing with one of the most important transfers of knowledge that occurred in the hey a day of colonialism, namely the Western indological conception of Buddhism and its acceptance by the then emerging elite that, in our own times, has expanded into a large hegemonic middle class.

The main figure or agent in this transfer was Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, a native of the town of Orange, New Jersey, the state in which my own university, Princeton, is located. We all know that Olcott is held in considerable veneration by modern Buddhists and we have a day set aside — Olcott Day — to commemorate the work and genius of this man.

His contributions to Sri Lankan and Buddhist culture have been discussed by scholars like Kitsiri Malalgoda and Smith Amunugama. These scholars know more about Olcott and his times than I do. My intention here is to use the Olcott reforms as a way of talking about some of the profound changes in the devotional life of Buddhism that has gradually occurred from the end of the last century into our own times.

In order to place Olcott's contribution in historical perspective let me begin my account with the final conquest of Sri Lanka by the British in 1815 and their rapid consolidation of imperial power. The traditional spokesmen for Buddhism, the monks, had not only to contend with the demoralization that set in with the disestablishment of Buddhism, but also had to deal with Protestant proselytisation.

According to Malalgoda, the initial response of the Buddhist monks to Christian missionization was not unfriendly. Buddhist monks even gave Christian missionaries permission to preach in their temples and were surprised when this gesture was not reciprocated. Buddhism itself had no clear notion of heresy, and it had always accommodated alien deities into its fold.

Thus, as far as Buddhists were concerned, the Christian god was like the Hindu gods they had appropriated. Many Buddhists had little sympathy for Gad the Father but had considerable feeling for Christ. Gogerly, the foremost Anglican Bishop, noted around 1850:

“Until Christianity assumed a decidedly opposing position, even the priests [monks] looked upon that religion with respect, and upon its founder with reverence. I have seen it stated in a controversial *tract*, written by a Buddhist priest of Matura not fifteen years since, that probably Christ in a former state of existence was a God residing in one of the six heavens (a position which they represented Gotama as having occupied immediately previous to his birth as Buddha); that animated by benevolence he desired and obtained a birth as a man, and taught truth so far as he was acquainted with It.

That his benevolence, his general virtue, and he purity of his doctrine rendered him worthy of

reverence and honour. If, therefore, the supremacy of Buddha and the absolute perfection of his system were conceded, they see nothing inconsistent in respecting both systems — Buddhism as the perfection of wisdom and virtue: Christianity as an approximation to it, though mingled with errors.”

Gogerly was right: it was the decidedly antagonistic posture of the missions that alienated Buddhists, and their spokesmen, the monks. What was striking and totally alien to the Buddhist tradition was the fact that simply being a Buddhist was for the missions something morally and spiritually wrong a position that no Buddhist monk at that time adopted toward Christianity.

The mobilization of Buddhists against the missions was begun by monks from all the fraternities. This began on several fronts. First, Buddhists started their own printing press and tracts as a response to the missionary ones, generally from an organisation started in 1862 known as *The Society for the Propagation of Buddhism*.

This was one of the very first attempts by the Buddhists to take over organisational styles from Christianity — in this case, an imitation of the *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel*.

A second thrust was public debates between Buddhists and Christians, the most famous held in Panadura, in which, by Buddhists accounts, they trounced the Christian representatives.

These confrontations brought to the fore a powerful orator, Mohottivatte Gunananda, who gave up the sedate style of Buddhist sermonizing and adopted instead the active, polemical, vituperative style of the missions.

It was after 1862 with the establishment of the presses and especially in the debates between 1865 and 1873 that the Buddhists for the first time used the European views of Buddhism and aesthetic critiques of Christianity in their attacks on the missions.

Reginald Copleston, Bishop of Colombo, noted in 1879, that the secretary of “an obscure society” was corresponding with monks, “hailing them as brothers in the march of intellect” and praising them for their spirited anti-missionary and anti-Christian challenges.

“This nonsense had a good deal of effect, I think, on the common people, while the more educated, having really become freethinkers, welcome the extravagant encomiums passed on the true, original Buddhism by European writers...”

The “obscure society” that Bishop Copleston referred to was the Theosophical Society, whose secretary was Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Olcott wanted to consolidate these early contacts with Buddhists and on May 17, 1880, he, with Madame Blavatsky and several other Theosophists, arrived in Sri Lanka for this purpose.

Soon after his arrival he founded a local branch of the Theosophical Society but soon became aware of the larger role that Sri Lankan Buddhists expected of him. Olcott enthusiastically accepted this role as a Western champion of Buddhism against the Christian minions.

Thus, wherever he went, he was given an enthusiastic welcome, which Olcott noted with some irony. “The Asiatics have certainly perfected the art of feeding the vanity of public men and their public men seem to like it”. Despite protestations to the contrary, Olcott did too.

As a westerner and an anti-imperialist American who had fought in the civil war Olcott possessed enormous charisma which was reinforced by his discovery of his capacity to heal the paralyzed and the lame. He attributed these skills entirely to “animal magnetism” and “mesmerism” which

for him was a latent capacity in every individual but the thousands who crowded at his door probably thought that he was like one of their own religious specialists, the *Kattadiralas*.

One week after his arrival Olcott, along with Blavatsky, knelt before a Buddha statue and repeated the five precepts administered by a Buddhist monk. Thus, he was formally declared a Buddhist. Yet he makes an important qualifier in his diary:

Speaking for her (Blavatsky) as well as for myself. I can say that, if Buddhism contained a single dogma that we were compelled to accept, we would not have taken the *pansil* nor remained Buddhists ten minutes. Our Buddhism was that of the Master-Adept Gautama Buddha, which was identically the Wisdom Religion of the Aryan Upanishads, and the soul of all ancient world-faiths. Our Buddhism was, in a word, a philosophy, not a creed.

But Olcott was soon to find out that Buddhist monks were hardly interested in Theosophy, though the Theosophical (and consequently “scientific”) interpretations of spiritual powers that *arahants* and other religious virtuosos possessed were accepted by them. This accounts for the virtual demise, shortly thereafter, of the Theosophical Society that he founded in Sri Lanka, whereas the *Buddhist* Theosophical Society (known as the B.T.S.), which he also founded, profoundly influenced the shaping of modern Buddhism.

Olcott’s presumption was that the Buddhist laity of Sri Lanka were ignorant of their own great religion. He also thought that they were addicted to a mass of non-Buddhist rituals and anti-Buddhist institutions like caste, to the extent that even monastic recruitment was often caste based.

Tactfully, he avoided the whole issue of caste by generally ignoring it, but he was overtly critical of popular “superstition”. His charisma was such that he could raise the consciousness of monks and laymen to their responsibilities in fighting the missions, resuscitating Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and attempting to promote interchange and ecumenical unity among the different forms of Buddhism in Asia.

Olcott’s influence on Sri Lankan Buddhism was both immediate and long lasting. He felt it a duty to provide Sri Lankan children with a good knowledge of their religion through Buddhist schools. To do this he started an educational fund and, with the help of Buddhist monks and laity, founded vernacular schools in village areas and English schools in the cities.

By 1898 there were 103 B.T.S. schools in Sri Lanka, many of them modeled on mission schools and some equal to the best of them in providing a modern English education to Buddhist children. These children were trained for administrative, professional, and mercantile positions under the colonial regime. It is primarily through these schools that modern Buddhism (that is, the Western conception of Buddhism) diffused into the society and became the basic religious ideology of the educated Buddhist bourgeoisie.

A key event in the foundation of Buddhism is the publication of Olcott’s *The Buddhist Catechism* in 1881. “*Finding out the shocking ignorance of the Sinhalese about Buddhism,*” Olcott wrote in his diary, “*I began after vainly getting some monk to do it, the compilation of a Buddhist Catechism on the lines of the similar elementary handbooks so effectively used among Christian sects...*”

To do this Olcott read ten thousand pages of Buddhist books from English and French sources and on May 5, 1881, he finished his first draft which he showed to the scholar monk Sumangala and the orator Mohottivatte Gunananda. The role of the monks was to effectively and uncompromisingly

throw out overt or hidden elements of Theosophy that the final version could receive their official imprimatur as being 'Buddhist'.

The fact that no monk could be co-opted into actually drafting the catechism surprised Olcott. But what he did not realize was that the distillation of the 'essence' of Buddhist doctrine in the form of a catechism was to them a totally novel idea. Furthermore, many textual sources, sometimes texts attributed to the Buddha himself, imply that laymen were not qualified to understand the abstract and difficult doctrine.

But Olcott believed that the philosophical essence of Buddhism had to be taught in schools. He was unaware that the main vehicle for communicating the nature of this high religion to the doctrinally unmusical masses was the story and the parable. It is to the credit of the monks that they endorsed the *Catechism*, perhaps anticipating that with the development of an educated lay population, a more doctrinally informed view of Buddhism was both necessary and inevitable.

The *Catechism* contains much that is found in modern Buddhism, though it also excludes much. Insofar as Olcott used French and English translations of texts and expositions of Buddhist doctrine, it was inevitable that the *Catechism* should be oriented to a Western intellectualist view of Buddhism.

Olcott noted that the missions "taught that Buddhism was a dark superstition" and that the few government schools that existed did not teach the religion at all. Consequently, he made a not unusual outsider's inference that "our Buddhist children had but small chance of coming to know anything at all of the real merits of their ancestral faith"!

Olcott was ignorant of the fact that Sinhala children were traditionally educated into Buddhism in a variety of ways. Like many contemporary intellectuals he seemed to accept implicitly the missionary critique of Buddhism. Olcott speaks of *devalas*, or shrines for the Hindu derived gods (*devas*) adjacent to Buddhist temples, as an "excrescence on pure Buddhism, left by the Tamil sovereign of former days ... "This condemnation of popular religion is carried over into the *Catechism*:

Q: What was the Buddha's estimate of ceremonialism?

A: From the beginning, he condemned the observance of ceremonies and other external practices, which only tend to increase our spiritual blindness and our clinging to mere lifeless forms.

Again:

Q: Are charms, incantations, the observance of lucky hours and devil dancing a part of Buddhism?

A: They are positively repugnant to its fundamental principles. They are surviving relics of fetishism and pantheism and other foreign religions. In the *Brahmajala Sutta* the Buddha has categorically described these and other superstitions as Pagan, mean, and spurious.

Q: What striking contrasts are there between Buddhism and what may be properly called "religions"?

A: Among others, these: It teaches the highest goodness without a creating God; a continuity of line without adhering to the superstitions and selfish doctrine of an eternal, metaphysical soul-substance that goes out of the body; a happiness without an objective heaven; a method of

salvation without a vicarious Saviour; redemption by oneself as the Redeemer, and without rites, prayers, penances, priest or intercessory saints; and a *summum bonum*, that is, Nirvana, attainable in this life and in this world by leading a pure, unselfish life of wisdom and of compassion to all beings.

Olcott was a son of a Protestant minister and it shouldn't surprise us that he introduced a Protestant and "purified" form of Buddhism. He also used the words of the missionary lexicon — idolater, pagan, and so forth, a vocabulary further developed later by his 'disciple Dharmapala, to castigate the Christians themselves. He did not concern himself overly with public morality, but he must surely have noted the existence of polyandry and also occasional polygamy:

Q: What does Buddhism teach about marriage?

A: Absolute chastity being a condition of full spiritual development, is most highly commended, but a marriage to one wife and fidelity to her is recognized as a kind of chastity. Polygamy was censured by the Buddha as involving ignorance and promoting lust.

Olcott was living in the hey-day of Victorian morality and, like Dharmapala after him, he tried to retranslate Sinhala-Buddhist values into Victorian terms. Olcott was ignorant of the fact that Buddhism was a non-sacramental religion that did not concern itself with regulating marriage and other rites of passage. As far as I know there is no instance in Buddhist texts where the Buddha condemned polygamy as involving ignorance and promoting lust.

The systematic modernist aspect of the *Catechism* is a justification that the doctrine is not only perfectly compatible with "science" but also in some ways is vindicated by modern science. Early in the *Catechism* he asks:

Q: Is that (karma theory) consistent or inconsistent with commonsense and the teachings of modern science?

A: Perfectly consistent: there can be no doubt about it.

He then developed this theme in a whole section entitled *Buddhism and Science*: Here he justifies Buddhism as a "scientific religion" and notes its support of education and science. Perhaps the most interesting part is where he justifies popular Buddhist ideas pertaining to "Buddha rays" and the power of *arahants* (renouncers).

The former are "auras", their existence had been proved by scientific experiments of Baron Von Reichenbach; "Dr. Baraduc, of Paris, has, quite recently, photographed this light". These auras are therefore not miracles, but products of nature.

If the Buddhas and *arahants* emanate these, this is due to their "superior development". The power of the Buddhist *arahant* to project his image outside himself is also similar and based on hypnosis. These and other accomplishments are not "miracles" but powers cultivated by the Buddhist meditator.

This type of discourse is of course justified by Theosophy and it has gone into the Buddhism of educated people today. It produced in our time a line of pseudo-scientific investigations into the verification of rebirth through hypnosis and into philosophical attempts to legitimize Buddhist thought as a kind of "empiricism" of the British variety.

The whole thrust of Olcott's message exemplified the turn to modern Western writing to justify Buddhism. This thrust produces some startling absurdities:

Q: Where can be found a learned discussion of the word Nirvana and a list of other names by which the old Pali writers attempt to define it?

A: In the famous *Dictionary of the Pali Language*, by the late Mr. R. Childers is a complete list.

Q: In the whole text of the three Pitakas how many words are there?

A: Dr. Rhys Davids estimates them at 1,752,800.

The Buddhist Catechism was, in Olcott's own lifetime, translated into twenty-two languages and went into forty editions. The Sinhala translation was employed in Buddhist schools. The modern Buddhist curriculum, in practically all schools has been influenced, if not by the *Catechism*, at least by the larger tradition of Buddhist modernism that it initiated.

By himself Olcott's influence might have not been as great but for the fact that Anagarika Dharmapala, who had serious disagreements with Olcott, at least agreed with the latter's view of Buddhism as a scientific philosophy. Furthermore Dharmapala, like Olcott, castigated popular religious cults and the belief in gods and demons. "The gods are helpless to help the helpless", he said.

The message of the Buddha that I have tried to bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths. The Buddha taught to the civilized Aryan of India 25 centuries ago a scientific religion containing the highest individualistic altruistic ethics, a philosophy of life built on psychological mysticism and a cosmogony which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity, (sic) and relativity ...

It is interesting to note that Dharmapala, like Olcott, barely dealt with the *jatakas*, or life stories of the Buddha. In the collection of his English writings, edited by A. Guruge, the *jatakas* are discussed in one page and mainly as a storehouse for ethnological and historical information-which is exactly the Western indological conception of the *jataka* tales.

Buddhism as a religion of the heart

In the preceding account I traced the intellectual genealogy that helped effect the transfer into Sri Lanka of the Western conception of Buddhism. Institutionally, this transfer was effected through the Buddhist schools; later, with the expansion of the bourgeoisie by the middle of this century, this form of Buddhism constituted the dominant religious ideology in Sri Lanka.

The Lankan appropriation of the Western conception of Buddhism was perhaps inevitable. Traditionally, Buddhism recognized a clear distinction between the highly literate monkhood and the ordinary laity involved in the world. There are several places in the textual tradition that explicitly recognise that laymen cannot grasp the abstruse and abstract nature of the doctrine, and further, that the whole path of salvation through the discipline and technology of meditation was, for practical purposes, an exclusive preserve of the monks.

With the development of an educated bourgeoisie the monk order as the sole repository of the religion no longer held. Thus, it became possible for laymen to know more about Buddhism and its history than monks did. Their interpretation of Buddhism was however, based on the work of Western scholars.

There was nothing alienating about this since, in the context of the loss of self-worth that colonialism brought in its wake, the Western discovery of Buddhism as a "rational religion"

appealed to the plurality of Sinhala, enhancing their dignity and helping them to recognise their nation as the historic center of Theravada Buddhism.

In this modern conception Buddhism is an atheistic and anti-magical religion of reason, as it were “Atheistic religion” is almost a contradiction in terms yet there are many Buddhists who will say that Buddhism is not a religion at all but a philosophy. It is not that this version of Buddhism is not true; it is, like all half-truths, also half false.

It eliminates ideas of faith, devotion, miracle, story telling, and parables that constitute a good part of the ongoing practical religious life. These elements are not simply excrescences that were superadded to pristine Buddhism.

They existed to some extent in the original doctrinal corpus and were then supplemented historically from other sources such as Hinduism and pre-Buddhist folk beliefs.

The vision of Buddhism that Olcott initiated was one rooted in scientific and philosophical traditions of the West and might be designated as a “rationalist” adaptation of Buddhism, strongly influenced by the thought of the post-18th century Europe known as the Enlightenment.

The period of the European Enlightenment produced an efflorescence of modern science and philosophy including the social sciences. One of the features of Enlightenment thought is the philosophical assumption of a radical split or disjunction between mind and body, head and heart, thought and emotion.

These oppositions were in turn inherited from the thought of Rene Descartes, who could be viewed as -the great founder of modern Western scientific philosophy. Thus for Olcott the philosophical and rational component of Buddhism was primary and the emotional element - faith, miracle and devotion —was not intrinsic to the religion. For him the Buddha was a figure who fitted the thought of the European, Enlightenment.

The Buddha’s own Enlightenment was Europeanized, so as to speak. However contrary to Olcott it is easy to show that the greatest of Buddhist philosophers like Buddhaghosa and Asvaghosa believed in both the abstract philosophical teachings as well as the devotional and so-called miraculous aspects.

In their thinking, unlike Olcott’s, there is no radical disjunction or split between the mind and the heart, between thought and devotion.

For example, these Buddhist thinkers literally believed that the Buddha was born in a miraculous manner unsullied by impurity and that he had the thirty-two signs of a great man or *mahapurusha* —ideas that Olcott would have scoffed at.

I might add that almost all of the Buddhist literature written in Sri Lanka in Sinhala were not primarily philosophical but “devotional”, and dealing with the virtues of the Buddha.

It can also be shown that these devotional and miraculous elements existed in the oldest levels of the canon, but they existed very clearly in the late canonical collection the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, or the “minor collection”. It was called the “minor collection” because it did not deal with the abstract doctrine. However no Buddhist monk or scholar prior to modern times ever believed that these texts of the *KN* were false or unimportant.

To put it differently I want to make the unpopular argument that Buddhism is *not* a philosophy but a religion - that is, a system of cosmological and philosophical thought that coexists with a set of

devotional beliefs and practices. Olcott as well as many Buddhists nowadays assume that Buddhism is a philosophy whereas other religions are not.

This is based on pure ignorance because all of the monotheisms - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - developed extraordinary complex philosophies and some of these have affected practically all the secular philosophies of the modern West, even radical philosophies like Marxism and Freudianism.

Once the religion was defined as an atheistic or scientific philosophy there was little room for recognising that Buddhism, for ordinary people, entailed a devotional cult of worship of the Buddha and insofar as this was the case it was *a faith*. Moreover this Buddhist faith or set of devotional practices was articulated to a variety of institutional forms that had developed in the course of its long history.

Olcott was sometimes ignorant of, sometimes unsympathetic to, this larger tradition of Buddhism. Many modern Buddhists who have inherited Olcott's message have to face certain painful dilemmas in defining Buddhism in this way. Let me highlight some of the areas where Olcott's rationalist religion showed some severe limitations.

The Buddhist nature of village ritual life

Neither Olcott nor Dharmapala has little empathy or understanding of village rituals for gods and demonic beings. Note the pejorative term used by Olcott "devil dancing". This term employed by Western scholars, antiquarians and missionaries of the 19th century is explicitly derogatory and it is pathetic to see Western educated Sinhala-Buddhists use this term to characterize the astonishing variety of complex rituals practised in village society for a variety of important occasions.

In fact, contrary to Olcott and Dharmapala, the so-called "devil dancing" is essentially Buddhist in spirit. Their *origins* might have been non-Buddhist but over a long historical period they have been *ethicized* (i.e. rendered ethically salient) and given Buddhist value and significance.

For example, the *bali* rituals propitiate planetary deities but as *santi karma*, acts of blessing, they deal with the virtues of the Buddha and recite events from his life including his miraculous birth, the four signs, his dispassion with lay life and the final act of renunciation.

Moreover contrary to Olcott, one can argue that the incorporation of gods and demons into the specific Buddhist scheme of things was already effected in the main body of the doctrinal tradition, that is, the *suttas*, or discourses of the Buddha. This was done through the karma theory.

The Buddha himself on numerous occasions discusses how a person is reborn as a god demon or ghost *preta* owing to the working out of his karma. As the Buddhist scholar Marasinghe says, the theory of karma and rebirth then is a kind of mechanism that continually churns out gods and demons! Their karma-bound nature means that they are part of an ethically bound cosmic order, or *samsara*.

Buddhist devotionalism and popular religion

The preceding argument indicates that the relation between doctrinal tradition and the popular religious beliefs and practices of Sinliala villagers was not all that discontinuous. In general Western scholars of Buddhism and educated Sri Lankans seem to agree on one thing, namely, that the ordinary village propitiation of Hindu gods and demons in communal rituals was non-Buddhist or "animistic."

Quite the contrary: village ritual dramas, on one level, are kinds of morality plays, with demons representing Buddhist notions of hate, illusion, desire, and attachment. The whole dramatic interplay between gods, demons, and the Buddha enacted in these rituals concretizes the abstract ethical value of the doctrinal religion.

Gods like Skanda and Visnu worshipped in these rituals are Hindu in a historic sense only: once they are incorporated into popular Buddhism they are transformed into Buddhist deities with their own myths of origin, and then are further converted into Bodhisattvas through the operation of the karma theory

Olcott was no doubt aware that at the time he wrote the *Catechism*, ordinary Buddhists were engaged in the worship of the Buddha in temples. These devotional practices in the temple are intrinsic to the Buddhist faith and require no emphasis to a Sri Lankan audience.

But what is less known, at least today, is that the worship of the Buddha coexisted with a knowledge of his life and the legends of his past births and a variety of stories of heavens and hells and their denizens; and this knowledge was inoculated in children in very early childhood through parental story telling.

Social scientists are becoming increasingly aware of the power of stories in the moulding of the conscience and the perpetuation of religious knowledge and memory. Olcott unfortunately had little place for this body of knowledge in his conception of philosophical Buddhism.

Many of these popular stories and texts were canonical but for the most part they were found in the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, the very text that Indologists and Buddhist scholars had treated as extrinsic to the central tenets of Buddhist thought.

These texts of the *KN* intersect with the lay tradition. Some of these are well known to us as *pirit* (*paritta*) texts, the *jataka* or birth stories of the Buddha, the Dhammapada and a host of texts such as the Peta vattu and Vimana vattu that deal with vivid descriptions of heavens and hells and rebirth into various planes of existence.

To say with Dharmapala and Olcott that Buddhism had no notions of heaven and hell is therefore plain nonsense. Rhys-Davids also points out that the *pirit* texts were influenced by the *raksa mantras* of the popular tradition; these *pirit* texts in turn began to influence the popular traditions, so that our *bali* and *tovil* ceremonies contain Sinhala renderings of *pirit* texts.

In fact, a large number of texts of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* exist in both Pali and Sinhala renditions; they are both in the canon and outside of it. The *Khuddaka Nikaya* also influenced a huge body of vernacular literature that I have labeled “intermediate texts” - “intermediate” because they neither belong to the Pali canon nor the folk literature of villagers.

By “intermediate texts” I refer to such compendia like the *Saddharmaratnavaliya* and *Saddharmalankaraya* (and a so texts that are no longer extant like the *Kesadhatuvamsa*). As most of you know our temple frescoes deal with the stories from these intermediate texts with brief captions in Sinhala to give the viewer’s memory a jolt in order to help him recollect the full story.

These stories are almost exclusively from the *jakas* and the Buddha legend. They are almost entirely non-philosophical and do not concern themselves with abstract issues of doctrine and psychology. They were also widely known and diffused among ordinary people through a wide variety of sources.

Monks used these stories in their sermons to illustrate ethical issues and also to render to the laity

some of the doctrinal ideas important to Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths, and central concepts like *karma*, *anicca* (impermanence) *anatta* (no-soul) and *samsara*. Buddhist ideas, selectively filtered, entered the popular consciousness through the stories of these intermediate texts. It should be remembered that the main body of the Pali Canon was never translated into indigenous languages until very recent times.

These stories were the lifeblood of popular Buddhism in pre-Colonial times. The Buddha is the hero of these stories. They deal with such themes as the self-sacrifice of the Buddha for the welfare of others, the problematic nature of good and evil, the self-destructive nature of violence that can only beget more violence, the paramountcy of renunciation and the ethical dilemmas it entails.

These stories permeated Buddhist cultural practices in a multitude of ways. Indologists and Buddhist scholars however tended to “ethnologize” these stories by viewing them as folk tales or popular superstitions. It is indeed the case that it is difficult for modern educated audiences to treat these stories as *literally* true.

For example, students trained in modern biology or evolutionary theory may not be able to literally believe that the Buddha was born as a leader of a troop of monkeys and that he sacrificed his life for their welfare. But this problem pertaining to the truth value of stories is something that other religious traditions also had to face in modern times.

For example, the modern Protestant theologian Bultmann introduced the key notion of *demythologization* to show that, while Christian stories and miracles might not be literally true, they can be viewed as parables with a profound *symbolic* truth value. I think it possible to demythologize Buddhist stories also in a manner that makes sense to children as well as adults in Buddhist nations.

For example it is possible to treat the Buddha’s births as a monkey or elephant or tiger or a deer as parables illustrating Buddhist notions of self-sacrifice and the profound Buddhist truth of the basic affinity between man and the rest of the sentient world.

In-so-far as the animals is the Buddha himself these parables might help the reader or listener to identify with a being outside of the human community. Such a parabolic exposition fits with Buddhist cosmological conceptions that life and the world *samsara* - embrace every creature.

These type of tales help break the barrier between self and other, such that empathetic communication is rendered possible - something desperately needed in the harsh times we live in.

These stories also show a basic affinity with village “devil dancing” rituals. They too are replete with ogresses and demons. These terrifying beings are ultimately humans who have been reborn in that state through greed and hate, both forms of attachment (*tanha*) and they can also revert to human form and humane ethical living.

The demon is both outside us as a living creature, and one of us as a *samsaric* being, and within us as an anthropomorphisation of Buddhist ideas of attachment, greed and hate. In these texts there is not only a recognition of the futility of vengeance and retaliation, but there is no conception of irremediable evil. In fact in many of the *Jataka* tales ogresses and demons are eventually made to recognise the ethical viewpoint of Buddhism.

Parallel with this is that the hero of these stories -the Buddha - never advocates any form of violence. It is impossible for the Buddha of these texts to say “Vengeance is mine”.

The foregoing discussion leads me to speculate in a tentative manner on a topic that is of central

concern to any religion (though not to any philosophy). This is the formation of a Buddhist conscience that in turn entails the internalisation of the Buddha figure in the consciousness of Buddhists.

We have noted that the stories of the popular tradition enters the consciousness of Buddhists through a variety of sources - childhood story telling by parents, in the sermons of monks, in the songs and dramas enacted in village rituals, in temple frescoes and so forth. The ideas contained in these tales then are internalized in the consciousness and conscience of Buddhists and they affect everyday living.

The figure of the Buddha is internalized in the same manner and this internalization is facilitated by the devotional practices of worship in Buddhist temples. The worship of the Buddha *in conjunction with the traditions of storytelling*, facilitates an internalized image of this Being in the popular consciousness.

Thus in essence the development of conscience in Buddhism is not different from Christianity or Islam except that the Buddhist socialisation of the conscience is much more difficult than that prevailing in the monotheistic religions.

In the monotheisms God is the father and he is a living god affecting the world we live in. The lesson we learn from psychoanalytic theory is that in childhood it is easy for the child to identify with his or her own father and in a further symbolic move identify with God the father. No such situation obtains in Buddhism because the Buddha is no longer alive and no longer affects the world we live in.

How then is the internalization of the non-living Buddha effected? And how is he made to live in the conscience of individuals? This must be through exactly the sources I have referred to earlier — to stories that deal with the Buddha when he was alive, not only in his last birth as Buddha, but in his previous existences. It is these stories, and the devotional practices associated with the Buddha worship, that render the Buddha psychologically alive in the conscience of Buddhists and in turn affect their ethical practices in everyday living as well as in situations of crisis.

Through these sets of devotional practices and beliefs the Buddha is made to live in the conscience of Buddhists. What kind of figure is he though? In the Buddhist imagination he is totally idealized, a fully benevolent being. If the Christian god is isomorphic, on one level with the father, the Buddha is different. To use a Freudian term he represents in a psychological sense the good parental imago, a composite of both the idealized father and mother. This isomorphism appears in Buddhist language use where one wishes a loving parent, irrespective of gender, to achieve future Buddhahood. However, language cannot always express the emotional attitude to the Buddha since he is a male and is so perceived. Yet another level, below consciousness, the Buddha has strong maternal characteristics. He is as the texts say the embodiment of *karuna* (kindness-empathy) and compassion (*maitri*). This attitude to the Buddha was noted very early by Bishop Gogerly:

In morals the Buddhists look on their own religion and that of the Christian as identical, so that without formal hypocrisy they fancy they can find themselves justified in making profession of both. The doctrine of Christ shedding his blood for the redemption of men is not in opposition to their previous habits of thought, for they are taught by their own books that if all the blood lost by Buddha himself in his different transmigrations for the benefit of sentient beings were collected, it would be more than the waters of the ocean.

The Buddhist conscience, in-so-far as it contains a set of internalized norms, is not a punishing one, so that there is little in the literature that deals with a tormented religious conscience. It is impossible to have a Buddhist writer turn out anything like Hopkins's terrible sonnets; there is no Saint Thomas of the Cross; no Saint Theresa with her "wild laments". I am not suggesting that people in Buddhist societies do not suffer the torment of the conscience, but it is rarely expressed in a Buddhist idiom.

Admittedly I have sketched an idealized rather than an empirical picture of the formation and contents of the Buddhist conscience. This idealized picture was implemented in different degrees of efficacy or completeness among different individuals in the multiplicity of villages that constitute Buddhist nations. It is this Buddhist conscience, wherever it existed, that mitigated the dark underside of the political religion as exemplified in such historical texts like the *Mahavamsa*. I am suggesting that this Conscience formation depended heavily on popular religion, especially the stories I have discussed. But this tradition of stories have virtually become defunct today, since they have little place in the new philosophical Buddhism advanced by Olcott and taken over by many educated Buddhists. However Olcott cannot be fully blamed for this situation. The popular religion that I spoke of was also rooted in institutional forms and devotional practices that operated on the village level. With the development of a large middle class, these practices could not be replicated on the urban level. Most of the devotional practices are also viewed by middle class people as those of uneducated peasants.

Moreover, in the last several decades, Buddhism has been subject to an extraordinary level of politicization that has consumed the energies of Buddhists. Yet whatever the reasons, the tradition of stories and the institutional practices associated with it have virtually disappeared from the lives of middle class and urban Buddhists. It is rarely that parents tell Buddhist stories to their children; they are much more comfortable with Western fairy tales. The large repertoire of stories that existed in the Buddhist imagination has shrunk to the few that are found in Buddhist texts for school children. And school texts, which many children hate because they have to study them to pass exams, is simply no way of socializing the conscience.

Conclusion

What I have done in this lecture is to trace the intellectual genealogy of a view of Buddhism that is dominant today, a view widely held by the intelligentsia and fostered by the school system and the media. Olcott was the main figure that introduced this view of Buddhism that I suggested is strongly influenced by the rationalist thought of the European Enlightenment.

I have only briefly dealt with the acceptance and spread of this intellectual Buddhism and the concomitant processes that resulted in the decay of its devotional side and especially the decay of the stories that nurtured that devotional side. The sociological and economic forces that assisted or contributed to these developments are extraordinarily complex and cannot be dealt with in this brief excursus. Equally complex are the various beliefs and practices that have helped to fill the void in the emotional life of Buddhists. I have discussed some of these in the book, *Buddhism Transformed*. Nevertheless let me conclude this lecture with a brief discussion of some of the beliefs and practices that have taken the place of the kind of devotionalism that I sketched here.

The first is what we all know - what one might call the enormous politicization of Buddhism. Like all the other historical religions Buddhism too had had to accommodate itself to the political order and the writing that has dealt with the unfolding of that history is riddled with excessive violence, especially in the quest for succession and the maintenance of power.

This political religion that developed in post-canonical times, as we all know, has become obsession ally violent in recent times in practically every Theravada Buddhist society. In our own, the greatest amount of passion is associated with the political religion since it is locked into issues of cultural, ethnic and personal identity. Moreover one must not forget that nowadays even seemingly simple acts of piety are in effect political.

Take one example: consider the large number of Buddha statues erected everywhere in public places today. The motivation for their construction and proliferation is not devotional: it is primarily political to affirm Buddhist ethnic and political identities.

In recent times there have been other attempts to fill the emotional spaces in Buddhist lives by the development of new forms of devotional religiosity or the redefinition of older forms. Perhaps the most significant are the *bodhi puja* rituals; but they too have succumbed to the politicization of the religious life.

Some Buddhists frustrated by this very politicization have turned to meditational practices to create an inward religiosity that might provide emotional and spiritual satisfaction or consolation. Some have had to adopt an unusual solution by turning to a variety of emotional religious practices from devotional Hinduism.

Perhaps the most striking is the adoration of the Hindu guru Sai Baba who is viewed by many Hindus as an *avatar* of one of the Hindu gods, but seen by some educated Buddhists as a new Bodhisattva. I must confess that I have personally little sympathy for this new turn in Buddhist devotional practice but I can at least understand the need for filling the empty spaces in the emotional or devotional or spiritual lives of Buddhists as we move on to the end of another century.