



ISSN 1076-9005

Volume 4 1997: 329-335

Publication date: 5 December 1997

The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott. By Stephen Prothero. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996. Pp. 242. ISBN 0-253-33014-9 (cloth), \$35.00.

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This excellent scholarly account of the Buddhist work of Colonel Olcott begins, unhappily, in a rather horrendous fashion: “Each year on February 17, Buddhists throughout the South Asian island of Sri Lanka light brass lamps and offer burning incense to commemorate the anniversary of an American-born Buddhist hero. In Theravāda temples, saffron-robed monks bow before his photographs, and boys and girls in schoolhouses across the country offer gifts in his memory. ‘May the merit we have gained by these good deeds,’ they meditate, ‘pass on to Colonel Olcott, and may he gain happiness and peace’” (p. 1).

I have worked in Sri Lanka for over forty years and have not once come across the devotional phenomenon noted by Prothero. It would be quite extraordinary for monks to bow before photographs of layfolk. When Olcott was in Sri Lanka, he was photographed with monks; and while monks were seated, Olcott, like any other layman, always stood in their presence.

Equally problematic is for schoolchildren across the country to offer gifts in Olcott’s memory (in what manner?) when no such custom prevails in Sri Lanka. I rubbed my eyes to wake me from a *deja vu* experience. I had recently written “The Apotheosis of Captain Cook” where I show that, contrary to accepted scholarship, the myth of the deification of Cook was not something invented in Polynesia but constructed in London, and was a refraction of a European myth of the white civilizer as a god to savages. Now another scholar tells me the same thing about natives of my homeland worshipping the American hero Colonel Olcott. Fortunately, the Indian worship of Olcott is not as extreme: poor Hindu children in and around Adyar, the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, celebrate Olcott’s birthday on February 2nd, carrying icons of Olcott “draped with garlands” while “the morning air they breathe is filled with hymns praising his auspicious name” (p. 1).

Ethnographers can be notoriously mistaken, and I myself am much given to folly. I also cannot speak on behalf of poor Hindu children. Therefore, to be doubly sure of Sri Lankans worshipping “the white Buddhist,” I checked a major English newspaper about possible celebrations for Olcott in my South Asian island home last February 17th, (Olcott’s day in Sri Lanka) and, sure enough, there was a reference to it. Tucked away in a small corner there was a notice that some person was giving a lecture on Olcott in an obscure lane in Colombo where, presumably, the Theosophical Society resided. As for bells, gifts, meditation, incense and bowing monks—Prothero could not possibly have been to Sri Lanka or talked to anyone there.

This ghastly piece of orientalism is compounded by Prothero’s accusing others of being “orientalist.” Following some current academic fads,

he lists Rhys Davids, Emil Burnouf, and Max Muller as practitioners of “academic orientalism” (pp. 100, 143). I do not want to whitewash these early Indologists; they had their prejudices but they are not as bad as Prothero’s! I wonder what the study of Indian religions would have been but for the pioneering work of these scholars. Poor Rhys Davids was almost persecuted by the British colonial establishment for his sympathy for Buddhism and dedication to Buddhist scholarship.

And there is the final Prothero touch: the name of the “untouchable” South Indian reformer, Ayothi Das, is spelled “Ayothee Doss” as Olcott’s own bad pronunciation is left uncorrected, an unforgivable lapse in our day and age. I am puzzled why these passages were not detected by press readers, one of whom surely ought to have been a Sri Lankan specialist.

Nevertheless, aside from these obtrusive and offensive statements, Prothero has furnished us with a much-needed account of Olcott’s life and work. I had imagined that Olcott’s father was a Protestant minister; this apparently was not so, though he came from a strong Calvinist background which is nicely sketched in the book. Prothero is strongest when he discusses Olcott as an American pragmatist, his antecedents in thinkers like Emerson, and his place among the newly-emerged, New York-educated gentry. Olcott had an extraordinarily complex career. He became a spiritualist at age twenty following a propensity on his mother’s side. He served in the Union army during the Civil War and excelled in investigating corruption and suggesting means for its prevention. He was a journalist, a lawyer, and he founded an agricultural school in Mt. Vernon, New York for teaching young men that “the practical application of scientific truths have (sic) a direct bearing on agriculture” (p. 26). Prothero convincingly shows Olcott’s pragmatically scientific and experimental thrust in his early commitment to spiritualism. He was a kind of scientific *bricoleur* intent on proving “the existence of life beyond the grave” (p. 26). In 1860 he married the daughter of an Episcopal minister and had two children, but he was also apparently involved in sexual liaisons, something not uncharacteristic of the male Calvinist temperament. Unfortunately, Olcott himself does not provide evidence for Prothero to deal with his disordered familial and sexual life and the psychological reasons that led him to reject his father’s faith.

The critical event was, of course, Olcott’s meeting with Blavatsky in 1873 and their living together in a beautiful Platonic relationship that unfortunately eventuated in Olcott’s own divorce. He also moved away from spiritualism to Blavatsky’s own form of “wisdom religion” that had at its basis the belief in “mahātmas” (masters) or adepts, spiritually advanced beings who could appear before the devotee in apparitional form and convey religious truths. Olcott himself had visions of these masters. They helped

Blavatsky to materialize objects from space and perform other miracles. As a team, Olcott was the organizing genius obsessed with order, whereas Blavatsky was the thinker, creating in effect a new religion for intellectuals, combining in a crazy and brilliant fashion ideas from the hermetic philosophy of the West, ancient near Eastern myth and mystery religions, and (after 1875) employing Indian thought and Vajrayāna Buddhism.

The year 1875 saw the formation of the Theosophical Society of New York. Prior to that, Prothero points out, Olcott publicly attacked spiritualism on moral grounds, proving that his Protestant values were still strong underneath his avowed repudiation of them. For Olcott spiritualists were “whiskey-drinking and immoral men and women” with “puerile, absurd, and often repulsive character” and given to “disgusting fallacies of free-love” and other very Protestant evils (p. 45). This language was occasionally employed in his later writings, but it must have been part of his ordinary discourse (at least in his early days in South Asia) because it went into the discourse of his important Buddhist disciple *Dharmapāla*. “I repudiate all connection with American spiritualism in its present form,” Olcott tells us in 1875 (*ibid.*). With the repudiation of spiritualism and the formation of the Theosophical Society Blavatsky (HPB, as she was called), Olcott moved into a different phase of their lives. The team seemed well suited to each other, yet there were inherent character and ideological differences from the very start. Prothero puts this well: Olcott was very much interested in the “discovery” of occult laws through scientific experiments, Blavatsky with the “unveiling” of occult knowledge and power through esoteric channels. Olcott’s deep commitment to Protestant values was expressed in social reform, but HPB was indifferent to it. Neither was interested in mass religiosity, though Olcott envisaged an open society of interested intellectuals, whereas HPB was more attuned to a closed esoteric circle of kindred souls (p. 52).

HPB’s orientation was expressed in her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, which Prothero dismisses as “hodge-podge,” though it is no more hodge-podge than many well-known sects like Mormonism or Christian Science. In spite of HPB’s early interest in the Near East (expressed also in the title of the book), *Isis Unveiled* looked to South Asia for its spiritual charter—“Pre-Vedic Brahmanism and Buddhism are the double source from which all religions sprang” and “Nirvana is the ocean to which all tend” (p. 58). With this declaration it is no wonder that the two leaders started a correspondence with Buddhists and Hindus and planned the passage to India which became a reality when they landed in the “sacred soil” of that nation on February 16, 1879.

From then on Prothero’s study mostly deals with Olcott’s contribu-

tion to the development of Buddhism, most of it conducted from the headquarters in Adyar, Madras and followed by visits to Buddhist nations, particularly Sri Lanka where his influence was profound. We are given a very useful though well-known historical account of this Buddhist “renaissance” to which Olcott contributed.

Briefly stated, British rule in Sri Lanka commenced in 1815, and soon monks started to recover from the dis-establishment of Buddhism and began to contest the claims of Christianity by producing their own polemical literature. It is into this scene that Olcott emerged when he (along with HPB) arrived in Sri Lanka in 1880 and officially embraced Buddhism. Later he put his organizational skills to good use by inaugurating Buddhist schools modeled on the Protestant ones. Along with this he introduced a modernist form of Buddhism which culminated in the production of the profoundly influential “Buddhist Catechism” in 1881 (pp. 101-106).

His visits to Burma and his Buddhist work there are described nicely in chapter 5, which also deals with his extraordinary success in creating a Buddhist ecumenical movement that tried (not very successfully) to bridge the differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna. The symbol of this newfound unity was the Buddhist flag. Though not invented by Olcott, he probably encouraged its formation. It was perhaps invented by the new class of Buddhist merchants (Prothero’s account is not clear on this). Olcott’s own skills as a white American were successful when he acted as an emissary for Buddhist monks and persuaded the British authorities in London to make Vesak (the birthday of the Buddha) a national holiday. The flag itself was hoisted on the first Vesak national holiday in 1883 at the temple of the famous monk Miguttuwatte Gunananda, the arch-enemy of the Protestant establishment who had invited Olcott to Sri Lanka (p. 116). The Buddhist flag thus stood for national unity. (It was also hoisted in Japan in 1889, though Prothero does not mention this.) From then onwards, the flag also became a symbol of Buddhist ecumenical unity and of Buddhism as a universal faith.

While in Sri Lanka, Olcott discovered his capacity to cure the sick and the maimed, and he put this to good use wherever he went. In Sri Lanka crowds thronged to his door, no doubt seeing him as a white healer analogous to their own exorcists. While Olcott put prodigious energy into whatever he did, his lasting influence was in the development of Buddhist schools and his capacity to delegate responsibility to local citizens who carried on his work. Prothero describes this Buddhist work in great detail.

In chapter 7 he shows its eventual takeover by nationalist leaders in Sri Lanka who transformed his message in an anti-Christian and anti-imperialist direction, something that Olcott, given his view of the British as a

civilizing force, probably could not countenance.

Though Prothero gives an account of Olcott's contribution to the Indian renaissance, his impact there was minimal. That was the legacy of Annie Besant, the disciple of HPB. Prothero however, sketches the differences between HPB and Olcott that increased over time and led to considerable tension and estrangement between them.

This excellent account of the "white Buddhist" is vitiated by Prothero's lack of knowledge of the region and the confinement of his investigation to the Adyar archives. For example, he thinks that with the arrival of the Portuguese, the state patronage of Buddhism ended (p. 85), without realizing that it only ended in the areas where the Portuguese had effective control, a very small part of the nation. Most Sri Lankan Buddhists continued to see the Kandyan kingdom as their spiritual home; and even in Dutch times Kandyan kings supported Buddhist temples in areas which were under Dutch control. As far as Olcott's contribution to Sri Lankan Buddhism is concerned, Prothero has missed two of my papers which deal explicitly and in great detail with this very topic.¹ There is also significant Sri Lankan literature on the nineteenth century which would have added considerable depth to chapter 7, dealing with the partial failure of Olcott's mission.

Prothero's theoretical examination of Olcott's Buddhism as "Creolization" has to be developed further if it is to make sense, perhaps in the direction of scholars like Ulf Hannerz who has dealt perceptively with this very issue. Prothero makes the point that the vocabulary of Olcott's Creole faith was Buddhist but its "grammar" was Protestant. I am not sure that this is an easy distinction to make in cultural studies. By this logic one could designate virtually every religious innovator as "Creole." Is the vocabulary of Gautama a Buddhist one and his grammar Vedic? Are the beliefs of early Christian Church fathers a Creole combination of Christian vocabularies and Platonic grammars or vice-versa? How far is Creolization as developed by Prothero different from the post-modern notion of hybridity? Statements like "Olcott's Buddhism was a Creolized sub-species of religious liberalism" seem meaningless to me (p. 67). Moreover, Olcott's own Creolized Buddhism tells us very little of the Buddhism he introduced into Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Olcott derived his knowledge of Buddhism from Indological scholars like Rhys Davids. Is Rhys Davids' Buddhism a Creolized one? It seems to me that Prothero ought to develop these ideas further in order to make them theoretically meaningful.

Finally, Prothero's splitting of Olcott into the early scientific spiritualist and later exponent of "Asian wisdom" is simply not true. Olcott's role was to bring Asian wisdom within the frame of a rationalizing science, itself an indispensable component of modernity. These caveats aside, I think

Prothero's book should be read by students interested in Theosophy, in American Studies, and in the formation of Buddhist modernism.

Notes

¹“Buddhism and Conscience: An Exploratory Study.” *Daedalus* 220 (1991): 219-239. “The Two Faces of Colonel Olcott: Buddhism and Eurorationality in the Nineteenth Century” in *Buddhism and Christianity: Interactions Between East and West*, edited by U. Everding. Colombo: Goethe Institute, 1994.