Review Essays

Buddhism and Modernity
Politics of Religion in South- and Southeast Asia

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The authors of these four monographs share a concern for how Theravada Buddhists, both monastics and lay persons, in colonial Lanka, Cambodia, and Burma as well as contemporary Myanmar rearticulated the legitimacy of the Buddha’s teachings, religious discipline, and the relationship between monastics and their lay supporters under the influence of post-traditional political
regimes and their notions of modernity. The authors, moreover, all integrate a deep understanding of the cultural intricacies involved in their subject with a distinct social science perspective. While Blackburn, Hansen, and Schober masterfully ‘provincialise Europe’ (Chakrabarty 2000) by highlighting the local creativity in the production of Buddhist modernities, Rozenberg’s expressed ‘boredom with the tediousness of Buddhist doctrine’ (p. vii) may unnecessarily predispose his readers against what is otherwise a very astute cultural critique.

Demonstrating the resilience of traditional Buddhism in the face of British colonialism in Lanka, Blackburn cogently argues against the total transformation of local Buddhism into a modern variety supposedly stylised after Christian Protestantism. Blackburn’s book thus offsets the seminal study by Richard Gomrich and Gananath Obeyesekere of religious change in Sri Lanka, in which they had devoted a whole chapter on the development of ‘Protestant Buddhism’ during the colonial period (Gomrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 202–240).

That said, Blackburn’s book is not an easy reading for the non-specialist, due to an extensive use of Pali and Sanskrit terms as well as a biographical narrative replete with a confusing lot of different characters. Nevertheless, her detailed account of the religious career of Hikkaduve Sumangala (1827–1911), one of British Ceylon’s foremost monks in terms of monastic leadership and educational innovation, renders palpable the predicament of the Sinhalese Buddhist orders of not being able to rely on the support of a legitimate Buddhist monarch in dispensing the Buddha’s teachings on the island.

When Christian missionaries and institutions kept pouncing on inconsistencies in local Buddhist scripture, ritual, and tenets, Sinhalese Buddhist monks were roused to vigorous opposition paired to efforts of religious reform, albeit along traditionalist, and not Western, lines. At the same time, Sinhalese monastic orders participated in the development of the new colonial cities, by establishing Buddhist temples and schools in the new urban areas. Their networks connected the rural with the urban areas and provided the potentially displaced with familiar moral geographies. Besides, they supplied an increasingly rapid flow of political and educational ideas as well as contacts for commercial enterprise.

A central means of religious reform had traditionally been the organisation of Buddhist councils dedicated to the purification of scripture from aberrations and dilutions. During Hikkaduve’s lifetime, it was the 1868 council in Pelnadulla, in which he was invited to participate as editor of Pali texts on monastic discipline, the Vinaya, that form part of the Tipitaka canon. The organisation of the council was a response to the need to defend the integrity of Buddhist scripture against Christian attacks, by having monastic scholars expunge textual incoherence and other indications of unreliable transmission.