

## Book Review

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***The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism In Sri Lanka.*** By H. L. Seneviratne.

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***The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism In Sri Lanka.*** By H. L. Seneviratne.  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, xiii + 358 pages, ISBN 0-226-74866-9 (paperback), \$22.00; ISBN 0-226-74865-0 (cloth).

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**W**hen S.J. Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed?* reached Sri Lanka in the early 1990s, the book antagonized citizens as well as scholars. In a country where criticizing the monkhood is tantamount to criticizing Buddhism, monks and lay people took offense at Tambiah's characterization of the growing entanglement of Buddhist monks in national politics. They repaid Tambiah's efforts with vituperation and convinced the Sri Lankan government to ban the book. The Buddhist public has had quite enough Christianity in their lives, invidious comparisons to other religions, and unsympathetic outsiders. Indeed those forces prompted the writing of the original *Buddhism Betrayed?*, the 1956 report of the Buddhist Commission of Inquiry, which called for returning Buddhism to the position it had enjoyed under the traditional Theravāda state.

Tambiah's title was part of the problem. It parodied the earlier book by suggesting that Buddhism had been betrayed not by the British colonial system and its Sri Lankan inheritors (the politicians who held power for the first years after Independence), but by Buddhist monks who failed to live up to the religion's ethical standards. The photo on the paperback cover of a snarling Madoluvave Sobhita — the founder of an organization devoted to saving the motherland did not help either. For Buddhists, the book looked like a hatchet job. Sinhalese were offended from Tambiah's opening comment onwards. In his travels in the United States, Tambiah said he heard one question time and again: "If Buddhism preaches nonviolence, why is there so much political violence in Sri Lanka these days?" Buddhists felt the question was unfair and not Tambiah's place to say. For some Sinhalese, discounting Tambiah's good faith requires merely noting his being a Tamil.

Now H. L. Seneviratne has done a similarly dangerous thing, speaking truth in a public place. Seneviratne does so as a Sinhalese and a Buddhist, identities that make his comments on the monkhood not just an act of critique, but of critique from within. As a consequence, personal characteristics — ones that should bear in no way on the persuasiveness of his words — make his comments both more credible and more objectionable. By my standards, another personal attribute bears directly on the forcefulness of his characterization of the present state of the monkhood. When he analyzes an institution that usually escapes criticism and external control — and responds to both in ungraceful ways — he does so as a scholar who has had some thirty-five years of face-to-face and scholarly experience of the Buddhist monkhood.

Seneviratne's account of developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism since the radical

changes put into motion by Anagarika Dharmapala addresses many of the same issues treated in Tambiah's 1992 book. How has Buddhism become implicated in national politics and ethnic conflict? How has an institution with its center of gravity in villages become entangled with expressions of ethnic chauvinism and violence that usually occur in urban settings? Both anthropologists emphasize the role that Dharmapala played at the beginning of the twentieth century in calling monks to social action, Walpola Rahula's part in providing doctrinal cover for their becoming involved as speakers and party organizers in national elections, and the roles of more recent monastic leaders — Madihe Pannasiha, Henpitagedera Gnanasiha, Murutettuve Ananda — whose careers as newspaper columnists, pamphleteers, founders of informal organizations (in Gnanasiha's case, involvement in a military coup attempt, and in Ananda's, his presidency of a nurses union) suggest the full range of activities that nowadays bring Buddhist monks into public life. And both portray monkly behavior against the background of a national politics marked by the reawakening of Buddhism as a political force and demagoguery on the part of both Sinhalas and Tamils.

Seneviratne's book complements Tambiah's steady focus on political violence and ethnic chauvinism with an account of the many ways in which Buddhist monks interact with the society they have renounced. It begins with Dharmapala and the monks he personally inspired: Kalukondayave Pannasekera, Hinatiyana Dhammaloka, and Hendiyagala Silaratana. As much as Dharmapala was traumatized by exposure to Christian missionaries, he also borrowed from them their high energy, capacity to establish informal organizations for reasons of social uplift, and practice of conveying messages that were fixed on current problems yet justified by scripture. The three monks who became leading figures in Dharmapala's "missionary army" (p. 42) transformed *Dhamma* preaching — performed as ritual and ignored by lay listeners — into the modern practice. An occasion at which lay people made merit became an instrument through which monks spoke thematically and concisely about issues meant to spur lay people to action. This new form of sermonizing also gave these missionary monks a way to reclaim a relationship with urban middle-class Sinhalas who had drifted away from Buddhism.

Dharmapalite monks got their education at two Buddhist institutions in Colombo, Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara *pirivenas*. The former educated missionary monks who devoted themselves to rural development. Kalukondayave established an anti-crime organization, wrote a manifesto for rural development that included a vision of a pastoral role for the village monk, and argued for temperance as a means of regenerating life in a village in Sri Lanka that had been idyllic, Dharmapala imagined, until colonialism and Western religions entered the scene (pp. 65-85). Hinatiyana focused his efforts on crime prevention, fighting a malaria epidemic, teaching, and promoting a variety of self-help programs. Although he was a preacher like Kalukondayave, Hinatiyana drew the Dharmapalite connection between preaching about rural development and his own actions. Throughout the 1930s, he made his village a model of *gramasamvardhana* (village development), while also preaching ten times a week in 65 regular preaching sites, chauffeured about in a car donated by a supporter (p. 87). Like his colleagues, Hendiyagala was an innovative preacher and proponent of village development. Despite an interest in meditation learned from Dharmapala, he eventually denounced it for diverting monks from social service (p. 111).

Although Dharmapala's acolytes threw themselves into development work, rural society failed to absorb their zeal, and when these monks died, they left no lasting impact (p. 335). The Vidyalankara monks who supplanted them as

leading forces in the decades that followed (1940-1970), spent their energies on political causes, and their influence runs to the present. They have taken their inspiration from Walpola Rahula's 1946 *Bhiksuvage Urumaya* (*Heritage of the Bhikkhu* in English translation), which offered doctrinal and historical rationalization for monks engaging themselves in not only social service but also politics. Like Dharmapala, Rahula was hostile to Christian missionaries, although the role he laid out for monks derived from his conception of a monkly shepherd guiding his flock, returning the gift of alms by the monk's own political activity (p. 170). Rahula — and Vidyalkara monks such as Yakkaduve Pragnarama — had a broader vision than Dharmapala of where monks could usefully deploy themselves for the good of the *sasana*, in salaried jobs, teaching, and organizing interest groups.

Where Hendiyagala brought a genuine interest in Tamil culture and language to his work (p. 107), the Vidyalkara monks tended towards jingoism. Their interest in socialism was joined to deep concern for country and nation, justified by their understanding of the role that Buddhist monks had played defending the Sinhala people through their long history. Yakkaduve spoke of Tamils in the same racist terms as Dharmapala (p. 158), and his regard for the nation (*jatiya*) followed the usual reduction of a multi-ethnic society to its majority community. From that point, activist monks have organized their lives around a kind of "social service" devoted to increasing Sinhala Buddhist hegemony in Sri Lankan life. The monk's role in the larger scheme got changed in another way. Rahula replaced Dharmapala's vision of monks as ascetic soldiers with a conception of their functioning as well-paid kingmakers (p. 191). Under these circumstances, the monkhood became a secular interest group, its political interests hidden by invoking the monks' historic role protecting the Sinhala people or elided behind the monks' connection to Buddhism.

Seneviratne's tone is as much that of an outraged *dayaka* (lay supporter) as a scholar, and he makes no pretense over his feelings about the present state of affairs. His sympathies lie with the Vidyodaya monks, and he castigates the "gang of five" that formed around Rahula and the Vidyalkara monks in general. In moving beyond the ritual obligations of chanting protective verses, accepting alms, and performing funerals, Seneviratne says, Vidyalkara monks abandoned concern for lay people in the countryside and the hopes for the rural development that the Vidyodaya monks began. There are large numbers of Buddhist lay people in Sri Lanka who share his revulsion at the prospect of monks who spend their lives being chauffeured about and hobnobbing with foreign supporters. Seneviratne is simply better informed than the average *dayaka*. He cites the example of monks who preside over the local Rotary Club, earn a law degree and try to join the bar, and compose popular music (while having a fan club).

He scorns the modern monkhood for its interest "in land and other forms of booty, monopoly over education, perpetuation of caste and other forms of inequality, and pressure group activity for the maintenance of its privileges by appeal to one or another variation of the chorus 'country, nation, and religion'" (p. 203). But the monks who control the great landed monasteries of the interior are not his primary target. It is the entrepreneurial monks who reside in urban monasteries along the Western seaboard, especially monks who spend their time cultivating foreign patrons in the cause of international travel and self-promotion (p. 212). He even retells the rumor that a well-known Vidyalkara monk was involved in gem smuggling, transforming statues as appropriate places for relics into caches for concealing precious stones (p. 196). In chapter six he draws his argument to a close by collecting lay and monkly

critiques of the world that Rahula has created, rounding up statements of evaluation and criticism from reformist monks (usually young), journalists, Western-educated intellectuals, and a singer and a songwriter, going on in the concluding chapter to offer his own thoughts.

The theoretical model that Seneviratne brings to this project derives from Max Weber, invoking Weber's attention to the relationship between religion and other social variables. But he conceives of this project as a critique of the anthropological notion that categories such as "Sinhala Buddhism" need to be seen as more than the syncretism of doctrine and folk religion. To that extent he replaces a Weberian concern with the way doctrine is brought into this world (because of the needs of lay people and the constraints of "monastic landlordism") with a conception of Sinhala Buddhism as a social formation that incorporates elements such as "fundamentalism" and "ideology."

To elucidate what constitutes that "ideology" he draws on Obeyesekere's notions of Buddhism being "ethnicized" and "Protestantized" as well as Tambiah's insistence that the "fetishization" of Buddhism has played a part in political morass into which Sri Lankan society has fallen. Just as promptly as Tambiah, Seneviratne makes his personal concerns clear: "the movement to modernize Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism in the twentieth century has been detrimental to the happiness and well-being of the people of Sri Lanka" (p. 7).

Notions such as "ancient Buddhism" appear and reappear in Seneviratne's argument both as party to a Weberian approach to Buddhism (which Seneviratne mistrusts) and as a trope invoked by monks such as Rahula and Henpitagedera Gnanavasa when it serves their needs. When Rahula wants to portray Buddhism as the most rationalistic of religions — when he speaks to Westerners and Sri Lankans interested in meditation — he invokes "ancient Buddhism." "Ancient Buddhism" is Buddhism as a "technology of wandering mendicants" without cult or context. When Rahula wants to justify the enlarged role of Buddhist monks in national life, "ancient Buddhism" disappears and is replaced by historical references to monks who were kingmakers, advocated war, and consoled kings such as Dutugemunu — distraught after his slaying millions of beings — with the notorious rationale: "only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken upon himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts" (*Mahavamsa* 25. 109-111).

There is much to be said for Seneviratne's success at sorting out the various ideological elements that shape the way contemporary Buddhist monks and lay people speak about Buddhism. There is less to recommend his inattention to the way similar ideological elements shape the way scholars have approached the Sri Lankan past. For the same kinds of Sri Lankans who read Tambiah today were reading Müller, Rhys Davids, and Coomaraswamy yesterday, and those understandings have become staple knowledge for lay people. Seneviratne minimizes that problem by keeping his attention fixed on the recent past and ignoring the concern that Indianists from Thapar to Chatterjee and Dirks have brought to the same issues that Weber investigated from afar. But the thing that must be emphasized about Seneviratne's book is that it is not a work of theory, for even the engagement with Weber serves more to set the scene than to illuminate the book's assertions. This is a critique of a national life that owes quite a lot to men — from Dharmapala and Rahula to their present-day descendants — who have acquired great power over the social world because

they have abandoned it. *The Work of Kings* is also an act of courage and self-reflection. Sri Lankan life has considerable reserves of the former. It needs more of the latter.