

The White Buddhist: Henry Steel Olcott and the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival

By Stephen Prothero

EACH YEAR on February 17, Buddhists throughout Sri Lanka light brass lamps and offer burning incense to commemorate the anniversary of the death of an American-born Buddhist hero. In Theravadan temples, saffron-robed monks bow down before his photograph, 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.” Disinterested historians describe Henry Steel Olcott as the president-founder of the Theosophical Society, one of America’s first Buddhists, and an important contributor to both the Indian Renaissance in India and the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Less objective observers have allotted Olcott an even more central place in sacred history. A prime minister of Ceylon praised Olcott as “one of the heroes in the struggle for our independence and a pioneer of the present religious, national, and cultural revival.”

In the land of his birth, Olcott has been less graciously received. The *New York Times* denounced him during his lifetime as “an unmitigated rascal”—“a man bereft of reason” whose “insanity, though harmless, is, unfortunately, incurable.” The *Dictionary of American Biography*, noting that Olcott has been considered “a fool, a knave, and a seer,” concludes that he was probably “a little of all three.”

DESCENDED FROM Puritans, Henry Steel Olcott was born in 1832 into a pious Presbyterian household in Orange, New Jersey. After a short stint at what is now New York University, Olcott went west toward the frontier in search of youthful adventures. In Ohio, at the age of twenty, he became a convert to spiritualism. Soon he was championing a host of other causes, including antislavery, agricultural reform, women’s rights, cremation, and temperance. He worked for a time as an experimental fanner, served a stint in the Army, and even worked as an investigator on the special commission charged with scrutinizing President Lincoln’s assassination. But he eventually returned to New York City, where he supported himself as a journalist and insurance lawyer. In 1874, while covering reports of spirits materializing at a farmhouse in Chittenden, Vermont, he struck up a friendship with Russian occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. One year later, he and Blavatsky co-founded the Theosophical Society, an organization that would soon play a major role in introducing Americans to the ancient wisdom of the East.

ATER MOVING THEMSELVES and their society to India in 1879, Olcott and Blavatsky decided it was time to visit Ceylon. They arrived in Colombo on May 16, 1880. Apparently, their reputations had preceded them, since they received what Olcott later described as a royal welcome:

A huge crowd awaited us and rent the air with their united shout of “Sadhu! Sadhu!” A white cloth was spread for us from the jetty steps to the road where carriages were ready, and a thousand flags were frantically waved in welcome.

Shortly after this reception, on May 25, at the Wijananda Monastery in Galle, Olcott and Blavatsky each knelt before a huge image of the Buddha and “took *pansil*” by reciting in broken Pali the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts of Theravada Buddhism, thus becoming the first European-Americans to publicly and formally become lay Buddhists.

Later Olcott underscored the difference between what he termed a “regular Buddhist” and “a debased modern Buddhist sectarian.” “If Buddhism contained a single dogma that we were compelled to accept, we would not have taken the *pansil* nor remained Buddhists ten minutes,”

he explained. “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 the ancient world-faiths.” Even on the day of his conversion to Buddhism, Olcott was discriminating between the “false” Buddhism of the Sinhalese people, which was in his view modem, debased, sectarian, and creedal, and his ostensibly true Buddhism — ancient, pure, nonsectarian, and nondogmatic.

DURING HIS FIRST visit to the island, Olcott founded seven lay branches and one monastic branch of the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS). He was explicit about modeling his Asian work after Christian examples: “As the Christians have their Society for the diffusion of Christian knowledge, so this should be a society for the diffusion of Buddhist knowledge.” Olcott also founded, again on Christian models, Buddhist secondary schools and Sunday schools affiliated with the BTS, thus initiating what would become a long and successful campaign for Western-style Buddhist education in Ceylon.

Thanks to these efforts, Olcott and Blavatsky left Ceylon in July of 1880 as folk heroes. They had met a number of high-ranking monks, chief among them Hikkaduve Sumangala, who would soon become Olcott’s most faithful Sinhalese ally. Equally important, Olcott and Blavatsky had been embraced by a large number of Sinhalese laypeople.

OLCOTT HAD PLANNED upon his arrival in India in 1879 to spend some time learning about Hinduism and Buddhism from Eastern experts, then to return to America, where he would devote the rest of his life to promoting Theosophy and building up the Theosophical Society. But the celebrity status that Olcott achieved during his first Ceylon tour led him to reevaluate his plans. Gradually he was coming to see himself more as a teacher than as a student. He was also coming to view India as his home. But perhaps most important, he was beginning to emerge from behind Blavatsky’s formidable shadow. Because the tour itself highlighted Olcott’s oratorical skills rather than Blavatsky’s parlor-room charisma, Olcott garnered as much influence, if not as much fame, as his traveling companion. Before their departure the Sinhalese people were praising Blavatsky, but they were also hailing Olcott as one of their own — “The White Buddhist.”

OLCOTT SET SAIL for Ceylon in April 1881 for a second tour. Together with Mohottivatte Gunananda, the monk who had spearheaded the first phase of the Sinhalese Buddhist revival, he crisscrossed the western province for eight months in a bullock cart of his own design. Villagers flocked, according to Olcott, to witness the mechanical wonders of this device, complete with lockers for furniture and books, canvas roof to keep out rain, and cushioned central compartment with removable planks that could seat eight for dinner or sleep four. All testified to Olcott’s Yankee ingenuity. When not impressing the Sinhalese with his cleverness and hard work, Olcott looked the part of the anti-Christian missionary. He sold merit cards and solicited subscriptions to support his National Education Fund, wrote and distributed anti-Christian and pro-Buddhist tracts, and secured support for his educational reforms from representatives of the island’s three monastic sects.

Olcott remained disturbed by what he perceived as the shocking ignorance of the Sinhalese about Buddhism.” This was an odd sort of judgment for a recent convert who had purportedly come to Asia not to teach but to learn. It was, however, a judgment that Olcott shared with many nineteenth-century academic Orientalists. Like Olcott, pioneering Buddhologists such as Rhys Davids (whom Olcott eagerly read) tended to reduce the Buddhist tradition to what the Buddha did and what the Buddhist scriptures said. This tendency permitted them to praise the ancient wisdom of the East and to condemn its modern manifestations — to view Asian religious traditions much like Calvin viewed the human race: as fallen from some Edenic past. It was Olcott’s uncritical and unconscious appropriation of this aspect of academic Orientalism

that led him to the rather absurd conclusion that Ceylon's Buddhists knew little, if anything, about "real" Buddhism. Like his hated missionaries and his beloved Orientalists, Olcott assumed the right to define what Buddhism really was. Unlike them, however, he assumed the duty to stir the Sinhalese masses from their ignorance, to instill in them his own creole representation of their Buddhist faith.

IN DEVISING HIS strategy for this didactic mission, Olcott turned yet again to the missionary example. He decided to compile for use in his Buddhist schools a catechism of basic Buddhist principles, "on the lines of the similar elementary handbooks so effectively used among Western Christian sects," both Protestant and Catholic. Olcott's *The Buddhist Catechism*, which would eventually go through more than forty editions and be translated into over twenty languages, is in many ways the defining document of his Buddhism. It first appeared, in both English and Sinhalese, on July 24, 1881. Hugely influential, it is still used today in Sri Lankan schools.

While Olcott himself characterized his *Catechism* as an "antidote to Christianity," a shocking reliance on that tradition was evident in its explicitly Christian questions:

Q. *Was the Buddha God?*

A. No. Buddha Dharma teaches no "divine" incarnation.

Q. *Do Buddhists accept the theory that everything has been formed out of nothing by a Creator?*

A. We do not believe in miracles; hence we deny creation, and cannot conceive of a creation of something out of nothing.

Olcott's ostensibly non-Christian Buddhism sounded like liberal Protestantism. More than an antidote to Christianity, Olcott's *Catechism* was a borneopathic cure, treating the scourge of Christianity with a dose of the same. His critique of Christianity shared many elements with liberal Protestants' critique of Christian orthodoxy, including a distrust of miracles, an emphasis on reason and experience, a tendency toward self-reliance, and a disdain for hell. Like their Jesus, his Buddha was a quintessential Christian gentleman: sweet and convincing, the very personification of "self-culture and universal love."

RETURNING TO COLOMBO on July 18, 1882, for his third Ceylon tour. Olcott discovered that the Buddhist Theosophical Society was "lifeless" and the revival was 'at a standstill.' Of the 13,000 rupees that had been pledged to the National Education Fund, only 100 had been collected. More ominously, a contingent of Roman Catholic missionaries had converted a well near a Buddhist pilgrimage site into a Lourdes-like healing shrine. Olcott feared "a rush of ignorant Buddhists into Catholicism." In an attempt to break the Catholic monopoly over this crucial segment of the religious marketplace, Olcott pleaded for a monk to step forward and perform healings "in the name of lord Buddha." But when no monk came forward, he decided to do the work himself.

Olcott's first healing in Asia occurred on August 29, 1882. When a man said to be totally paralyzed in one arm and partially disabled in one leg approached him after a lecture, Olcott recalled his youthful experiments with mesmerism and made a few perfunctory passes over the man's arm. The next day the man returned with reports of improved health, and Olcott began to treat him systematically. Soon the man could, in Olcott's words, "whirl his bad arm around his head, open and shut his hand,..., jump with both feet, hop on the paralyzed one, kick equally high against the wall with both, and run freely." News of the Co]Qnel's healing powers spread across the island "as a match to loose straw" and his fundraising tour was immediately transformed into a roadshow featuring the miraculous healing hands of the instantly

charismatic “White Buddhist.” Olcott publicly attributed his healings to the Buddha. Privately he credited the German physician Franz Mesmer.

Now that Olcott possessed a gift on a par with Blavatsky’s conjuring abilities, scores of patients lined up outside the Theosophical Society headquarters in Adyar (a suburb of Madras), and on an 1882 tour of Bengal Olcott supposedly treated 2,812 patients. Soon, however, the seemingly insatiable needs of his followers overwhelmed Olcott. His popularity became a burden and when, toward the end of 1883, the Theosophical Masters (adepts with whom Blavatsky is supposed to have communicated telepathically) handed down an order to stop the healings, Olcott happily complied.

Before his healing tours of 1882 and 1883, Olcott had recruited most of his Sinhalese and Indian followers from among the English-speaking middle classes. But his celebrated cures popularized his message, especially in Ceylon, where he may have inspired messianic expectations among Sinhalese peasants.

OLCOTT SOLIDIFIED HIS ROLE as a leader of the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival in the wake of a tragic Buddhist-Christian riot that occurred on March 25, 1883, in Kotahena, a Catholic stronghold of Colombo. On that day a Buddhist procession marched through the streets on the way to Mohottivatte Gunananda’s newly decorated monastery, the Deepaduttama Vihara, where a new Buddha image was to be dedicated. When the procession approached a Roman Catholic cathedral located a few hundred yards from the temple, the cathedral bell sounded, followed almost immediately by bells in other Catholic churches in the area. As if in response to a signal, about a thousand men descended on the procession and a bloody brawl ensued. Authorities summoned eighty policemen, but their batons were no match for the clubs, swords, and stones of the mob. During the three-hour melee, one man was killed and forty others were injured.

As the governor’s Riots Commission investigated the affair, Catholics and Buddhists took each other to court. Numerous cases were filed, but authorities eventually dropped all charges because of a lack of “reliable evidence.” After it had become clear that the Catholics would not be tried, a group of Sinhalese monks and laypeople cabled Olcott urging him to come to Ceylon. Upon his arrival on January 27, 1884, Olcott organized a Buddhist Defense

Committee, which elected him an honorary member and charged him to travel to London as its representative, “to ask for such redress and enter into such engagements as may appear to him judicious.” Thus, for the first time Olcott’s role as an intermediary between East and West became apparent, not only to himself but to Buddhists and colonial administrators alike.

Before he left for London, a group of high-ranking Buddhist monks gave Olcott a solemn farewell ceremony, in which they authorized him “to register as Buddhists persons of any nation who may make to him application, to administer the Three Refuges and Five Precepts and to organize societies for the promotion of Buddhism.” The first person of European descent to be given such an honor, Olcott thus became the first Buddhist missionary to the West.

WHEN OLCOTT ARRIVED in London in April 1884, British colonial officials were already well acquainted with him. In a Woe 26, 1883, letter covering the *Report of the Riots Commission*, Governor Longden discussed Olcott while reviewing the root causes for the brawl. The most important such cause was, in Longden’s view, the revival of Buddhism. There could be, he wrote, “no doubt” about the “genuineness” of the revival. Signs of it were everywhere:

The outer evidence of it is to be seen in the rebuilding of old shrines, . . . the larger offerings made to the Temples. Within the Buddhist Church the revival is signalized by a greater number of ordinations held with greater publicity, the care with which the Buddhist doctrines are being

taught in the Pali language in the Vidyodaya College and in the monasteries, and the preparation of Buddhist Catechisms in the native and even in the English language.

Longden appended to his report a copy of Olcott's *Catechism* and remarked that the Colonel had "very warmly espoused the cause of Buddhism." The creole nature of Olcott's actions was not lost on Longden, who remarked that the Colonel "brought the energy of Western propagandism to [the revival's] aid."

In a subsequent dispatch to Colonial Secretary Derby, Longden again mentioned Olcott, but now in more ominous terms. It was only a matter of time, he wrote, before one or two individuals would arise and take control of Buddhist affairs on the island. Given the "negligent character of the Sinhalese mind," he reasoned, it was likely that non-Asian Buddhists would fill these leadership roles.

In May of 1884, almost a year after Longden had warned his superiors about the Colonel, Olcott arrived in London. Though officials were wary of augmenting his already significant influence, he was able to meet with Lord Derby's assistant undersecretary, R. H. Meade. Shortly thereafter he sent a memo to Lord Derby, demanding: (1) that Catholics accused of instigating the riot be brought to trial; (2) that Buddhists be guaranteed the right to exercise their religion freely; (3) that Wesak — the full moon day on which the Sinhalese commemorate the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death—be declared a public holiday; (4) that all restrictions against the use of tom-toms and other musical instruments in religious processions be removed; (5) that Buddhist registrars be appointed; and (6) that the question of Buddhist temporalities (the supposedly negligent control of Buddhist properties by monks) be resolved. Olcott enclosed with his memo some accompanying documents that testified to the "discontent and despair" that had in his view gripped the island's Buddhists following the Kotahena riots. He hinted that, if ignored, their dissatisfaction might result in a rebellion.

Only two of Olcott's requests were speedily granted. In the fall of 1884, colonial officials agreed to pursue "more of a hands off policy" regarding the use of tom-toms and other musical instruments in religious processions; and on April 28, 1885, Wesak became an official holiday in British Ceylon.

Following the negotiations with Meade, Olcott wrote to the chairman of the Buddhist Defense Committee and informed him, over-optimistically, that his mission had been a complete success. Olcott's Sinhalese supporters concluded that the British proclamation of Wesak as a public holiday was "primarily due to Colonel Olcott's appeal," and on April 28, 1885, during the first government-recognized celebration of the Buddha's birthday', the now-venerable name of Olcott was invoked frequently and with great devotion.

DESPITE CLAIMS THAT Olcott initiated the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival, his connection with the movement was, as he himself recognized, neither as originator (credit Mohottivatte Gunananda) nor as culminator (credit Anagarika Dharmapala) but as organizer and articulator. It was Olcott who agitated for Buddhist civil rights, and who gave the revival its organizational shape by founding voluntary associations, publishing and distributing tracts, and, perhaps most important, establishing schools. It was he who articulated most eloquently the "Protestant Buddhism" synthesis. The most Protestant of all early "Protestant Buddhists," Olcott was a culture broker with one foot planted in traditional Sinhalese Buddhism and the other in liberal American Protestantism. By creatively combining these two sources, along with other influences such as theosophy, academic Orientalism, and metropolitan gentility, he helped to craft a new form of Buddhism that thrives today not only in Sri Lanka but also in the United States.

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