

Searching for Traces of Protestantism among Buddhists in the Panadura Controversy Documents

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The struggle to regain, maintain and practice Buddhism was a continuing theme when Sri Lanka went under European colonial rule in the 16th century. This period witnessed, not only brutal repression, but also equally valiant attempts to regain valuable texts and accompanying practices from within and also outside Sri Lanka. The continuous historical thread which connects together all these struggles is to be seen as but one process. Recent western writers and Sri Lankans scholars located in the west, unaware of primary sources have superficially examined the resurgence that appeared in the late 19th century, and have falsely labeled it as Protestant Buddhism.

It is alleged by them that those monks and laymen who rose to prominence in the new Buddhist movement adopted Protestant themes and rewrote Buddhism. The 19th century Buddhist resurgence begins with the British Christian grip loosening from around the early decades of the 19th century. Key makers of the resurgence were the emergence of the Paramadhammacetiya in Ratmalana (1841) and the re-establishing of key centres of Buddhist learning, Vidyodaya (1873) and Vidyalankara (1875) after the monastic institutions had been burnt down by the Portuguese in the 16th century debates between Buddhists and Christians culminating in the Panadura Controversy (1873). Some of the original documents of the Panadura Controversy still exist, as well as the oral histories.

The present authors examine both documents as well as oral histories to identify areas where traces of Protestantism can be found. It is concluded that the total thrust, not only of the Panadura Controversy, but also of the other debates and the Buddhist resurgence in general were ideologically and organizationally against Protestantism. The theory of Protestant Buddhism is shown to be a complete perverse reading of the factual situation of putting facts on their heads.

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