

In addition to a close look at the development of the Hindi Alha Epic, the Rajastani Pabuji Epic, the Tamil Elder Brothers Story, and the Telegu Palnadu Epic, Hildebeitel also examines the Ballad of Raja Desing from the Gingee Fort region. In this interesting collection of essays, Hildebeitel includes an examination of the severed head motif as seen in the folk Mahabharatas around a character known as Barbarika, Aravan, or Kuttantavar in different regions.

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SRI LANKA

YOUNG, F. R. and G. S. B. SENANAYAKA. *The Carpenter-Heretic: A Collection of Buddhist Stories about Christianity from 18th-Century Sri Lanka*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Karunaratne & Sons, Ltd., 1998. ix + 249 pages. Facsimile of text, indexes. Paper Rp500; US\$25.00. Hard cover Rp750; US\$35.00.

This book gives a translation and transliteration of a Sinhala manuscript incised on palm leaves in the eighteenth century (1762), which is presently preserved in the Nevill collection of Sinhala manuscripts at the India Office Library, London. Besides the translation and the transliteration, the book contains a very comprehensive introduction to the manuscript, which provides an analysis and a commentary that greatly helps the reader to correctly interpret the text.

Though subtitled "A Collection of Buddhist Stories on Christianity from 18th-Century Sri Lanka" what the collection contains are actually anti-Christian and antimissionary stories. There are seven stories in all. The story from which the book's title is taken is the last, namely, "The Carpenter-Heretic." To comprehend how Christianity is subjected to ridicule in them, a glance at that last story will suffice. The main character in it is the Son of the Carpenter, a resident of Portugal claiming to be the son of God. It must be remembered here that Portugal is the first European country to colonize Sri Lanka. It was Portugal that first spread Christianity in its Roman Catholic form.

After choosing disciples... the Son of the Carpenter went to Portugal and said, "I used to live in the heavenly world, but I was lent by my Father to save you. I am his Son, but since I was told that I could not save you if I remained in the form of a God, I assumed the form of a man." After uttering lies like this in every country, the Son of the Carpenter settled down in Portugal for good.

"We don't know what kind of food and drink are appropriate for gods like you," said the people of Portugal respectfully. "We know exactly what kind of food and exactly how much a god needs" replied the Son of the Carpenter. "Bring us some liquor, goats, sheep and cattle. If you bring the animals lifeless, you won't incur any sin."

Beginning to believe that the Son of the Carpenter and his disciples were really gods, the people of Portugal brought liquor, goats, sheep and cattle to them in the forest. The outcaste people of that country believed that the Son of the Carpenter and his disciples

were disembodied spirits and that they walked on the wind. That is what those out-castes used to say. (87, no 7.15)

Subsequently, the Son of the Carpenter comes to India during the reign of King Mihingū. The name “Mihingū” would remind a Buddhist of the Greek King Milinda who, according to the well-known Buddhist apologetical treatise *Milīndapanha*, ruled India and was converted to Buddhism. The Son of the Carpenter arrives at Sāgala, the capital of the kingdom and hides himself with his disciples in a forest. They roam about the villages at night and steal goats and cattle.

King Mihingū wanted him arrested, but his hiding place was not easy to find. He was finally caught with the help of a disciple who agreed to betray his master for a gift of “liquor, fried cakes and meat.” The Son of the Carpenter was killed and was securely buried eight feet underground because he was considered an incarnation of Māra, the supreme power of evil.

Māra feared, however, that if the death and burial of the Son of the Carpenter were accepted among the people, diffusing of illusion would be difficult and thus appears to say he is not dead: “Hovering in the sky, the forces of evil shouted three times loudly, I am he who is born from the grave of the dead” (92, No 7.23). In the epilogue with which the story ends, who the Son of the Carpenter represents is indicated without ambiguity.

In the story as the Tamils tell it, the Son of the Carpenter is called the Nazarene; in the story as the Sinhalese tell it, he is called the Heretic-*Preta* [i.e., imp]; and in the story as the Gauras tell it, he is called *Kriṣṇāya*. The Son of the Carpenter was born 485 years after the final emancipation of the Lord Buddha.... [He] was executed and buried in the year 513 of the Buddhist era. (92, No 7.24)

A story such as this, which is nothing but a diatribe on Christianity, is bound to hurt any Christian reader as Jesus is the person they revere most. But the question to be posed here is, “Why did the Sinhala-Buddhists engage in such a diatribe against Christianity?” The reason, I think, is that they viewed Christianity as diffused in a way that hurt them and undermined the stability of their culture. The religion dealt with here, whether Buddhist or Christian, is not religion as a form of spirituality or a vision of higher values to live by, but religion purely as a form of culture found in a clan. In this form, religion and politics are combined in a way that makes religious groups invariably communal. In the way that Christianity was spread in Sri Lanka by the missionaries of conquering countries, conversion and colonization went together. As a result, Christianization was tantamount to Europeanization. The Sinhala community would not have resented Christianity if it stood for a form of spirituality in which “conversion” would mean submission to Christianity’s supreme but difficult to follow commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” But Christianity as Europeanization seemed to destroy Sri Lanka’s long standing culture and the traditions that kept the community linked together.

If Christianity is to have a place in Sri Lanka (or anywhere else in the world), that wrong understanding of missionary work has to be corrected. This is also the conclusion to which the authors of the commentary to the text seem to allude. In their view, if anybody is to “see that Buddhism and Christianity could coexist in a spirit of mutual tolerance, that they may not be cosmically incompatible, and that they might eventually prove to be indispensable to each other, the structures of colonialism that fostered the conditions in which Christianization and Europeanization flourished would first have to be dismantled and expurgated from the collective memory” (36). Quite understandably, the environment for the right harmony between religions did not exist in the era when religion and politics were so

closely combined and thus led to venomous writings such as these. But the authors are optimistic and they boldly affirm that our era has at least begun to create an environment in which harmony among different religions can exist (36).

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