

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Revue internationale de théologie = Internationale theologische Zeitschrift = International theological review
<b>Band:</b>	1 (1893)
<b>Heft:</b>	1
<b>Artikel:</b>	Bp Copleston on Buddhism
<b>Autor:</b>	Wordsworth, John
<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403250">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403250</a>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 12.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## B<sup>P</sup> COPLESTON ON BUDDHISM.

---

**Buddhism, primitive and present, in Magadha and in Ceylon,** by *Reginald Stephen Copleston, D.D., Bishop of Colombo, President of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society; London, Longmans, 1892.*

Among the happy results to which the foundation of this International Theological Review may be expected to lead, two would seem naturally to stand out prominently in the minds of its promoters. The first is that it will enable the scholars of any country to secure immediate recognition in other lands for good work done by their own friends and compatriots, by offering to give some account of it in the pages of this Review. The second is that scholars, who send their books to the Central Direction at Berne, may have an opportunity of receiving criticism upon it from an independent authority, regarding it from a different point of view, and perhaps with wider knowledge, than would be accessible to them in their own homes.

The present review, written in English on an English book, is of course a case under the first head. The author of the volume before us is a Bishop of the Anglican Communion in a distant colonial Diocese; the reviewer is an intimate College friend and former fellow-worker with him in the University of Oxford, especially in the cause of foreign Missions. To the latter it is not only a sincere pleasure, but a grave duty, to commend to all who may read these lines, the mature and well-grounded work of his former companion and present colleague in the ministry of the Church.

There can be no doubt of the importance of the subject to which the Bishop of Colombo has devoted his great powers

of critical insight and masterly exposition, and towards which he has directed his special opportunities of observation during an episcopate of seventeen years. It is one which permits him to exhibit all these powers to great advantage, while his remarkable linguistic attainments enable him to speak with equal authority on the meaning of ancient Pâli documents, and the present condition of the common people, their ways of thought and modes of expression. He preaches with equal fluency in the three modern languages—Sinhalese, Tamul and Portuguese—which, with English, divide the population of the island; and he has at the same time not lightly won the dignified position of President of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

The subject of Buddhism is now universally recognized as one that claims the careful attention of all students of the history and philosophy of religion. It is an imposing and in some respects an attractive phenomenon, and it is one that does not lose its interest after repeated and continued study. The hands of many skilful and sympathetic enquirers have lifted for us recently one by one the veils that shroud the forms of ancient beliefs and religious systems, and amongst others those that envelope the doctrines of the Buddha. None perhaps has proved so worthy of attentive consideration in our own day.

For it combines many qualities and conditions that necessarily interest us, when we investigate the thoughts of man about his own destiny and his relation to the unseen world. Whether we look to the number of persons who profess it, or to the extent of the earth's surface over which it is spread, or to the varying civilisations and characters to which it assimilates itself, or to the vitality which it is found to possess, or to its moral claims, or to its speculative and philosophical affinities, or to its assumed supernatural endowments—in all these respects it is seen to be imposing. I use the word advisedly, since it implies just that sort of admiration which is not very profound or far-reaching. It may be fitly compared to the admiration which a traveller feels when he witnesses some Sphinx or colossal King-God disinterred from the accumulated sands of Egypt. He beholds a grand and majestic figure. It stands by itself and evidently implies some great power in those who created it; it can never be without its place in the

history of religion, strange as it may seem to western eyes—but as for worshipping it or believing that it contains the secret of the universe, that is simply preposterous and out of the question.

We may well speak of Buddhism being disinterred and unveiled. For it was not so long ago since the Buddha was to most western thinkers wholly unknown, and by the rest almost as much misconceived as "Mahound" was by some of our crusading forefathers. Even now there are not a few who speak of Buddhism as if it were really a religion, and of Buddhist "priests" as if they were professed interpreters of God to man and were the recognized instruments of worship. But no reader of this book is likely to fall into these mistakes or to let them pass when made by others in his presence. It is of course of the essence of all intelligent treatment of the subject to remember that Buddhism is not a religion but an atheistic philosophy, accepting indeed the garb and furniture of pagan superstition and vainly attempting to usurp the place of religion in men's hearts. It has no priests, but consists of communities of monks, or single recluses, living in this state for the sake of their own supposed progress in detachment from life, and only in a very limited degree, at any rate at present, attempting to influence the rest of mankind. Laymen indeed there are, but as a secondary matter, useful rather as a kind of shell or protecting envelope to the monks, than as living in a state which can be thoroughly satisfactory to themselves, when they reflect upon it. An orthodox layman is no doubt better off, as well as morally better, in Buddhist eyes, than an heretical ascetic; he may be reborn in heaven for a time; but he can never as a layman attain the "end of sorrow". Life as a monk is the real thing: life as a layman is a possible preparation for the life of a monk in some future stage of being.

Being armed then with these preliminary cautions—that Buddhism is a Philosophy and not a Religion, that it has no Priests but only communities of monks, and that its scheme of "salvation" is in truth confined to them alone—we are able to do justice to its claims, both in the way of admiration and in the way of criticism. It is part of the charm of Bishop Copleston's book that he does seek to do justice, and that he never forgets the true Christian position in dealing with what

must be in practice very painful and trying to the temper. Whatever Buddhists themselves may be, he, at any rate, remembers that he is a Priest and a Bishop, whose duty is to strive to interpret Man to God and God to Man. These poor, sad, misguided monks, with their stolid melancholy and temptations to secret vice, are lost sheep of Christ's fold; and as He surely has not given up caring for them, so His ministers must not offend them or alienate them by sweeping condemnation or lack of sympathy for whatever is good in them.

It is true, the natural spirit of friendly raillery, which all who remember the Bishop at Oxford will recognize as a pleasant feature of his character, cannot wholly be suppressed. It lends life and colour to the book, and is turned to good account for instance in the description of the "Bana pinkamas" (literally "Sacred-book merit-festivals"), a sort of picnics lasting through the night at which the Pitakas are recited, and in that of a visit to a monk's hut or "pansala" in the country and to the temple or "vihara" near it. The chapters in which these and similar descriptions occur, forming the fourth and last division of the book, entitled *the Present*, will no doubt prove interesting to all readers, even to those who have but a superficial acquaintance with the subject. They make the whole of this side of modern life in Ceylon very real and intelligible and are a relief after the somewhat difficult, because necessarily fragmentary, historical portion which immediately precedes.

What then is Bishop Copleston's contribution to a fair estimate of the imposing claims of Buddhism?

The best way of answering this question will be to give a succinct account of the contents of the volume, noticing some of its conclusions in passing, and then to state the Bishop's opinion on the general question of the merits of the system, with reference in particular to the points enumerated in its favour at the commencement of this article.

The volume consists, as we have seen, of four parts. The *First part* is *Introductory* and extends to less than thirty pages. It defines the subject of the book as being "to describe the "primitive stock and one of its existing branches; to shew "what Buddhism was in Magadha, the land of its origin, and "what it is now in Ceylon" (p. 3). The author then goes on to say that he confines himself in this latter part of his work

strictly to Ceylon, and does not even extend his view to other countries of the "Southern School" such as Burma and Siam, and to explain his reasons for so limiting his field of view. Perhaps the most important section of this part is that which deals with the question of the Number of Buddhists, a topic to which we shall recur presently. The general historical sketch is very clear and helpful.

The *Second* part (pp. 30—309) is considerably the longest in the book. It is entitled *Buddhism in Magadha* and contains an admirable account of what may be known or fairly conjectured about the life and teaching of Gotama and his immediate successors, and an equally interesting picture of the greatest figure in Buddhist history, King Asoka or Piyadasi. The critical account of the life of Buddha is very valuable as shewing how little of the legend which is so familiar to us from the *Lalita Vistara* and similar sources, can really be considered even relatively primitive. The following gives all the details of the early life up to the attainment of Buddhahood that can be collected from the earliest Suttas. The part printed in *italics* is from the *Vinaya Pitaka* (Rule of Monastic Training).

In the days of Bimbisara, king of Magadha, or shortly before his time, *Gotama was born, the son of Suddhodana of Kapilavatthu in the Sakyān country. His mother died in his infancy, and he was nursed by his aunt, Pajapati.* The Sakyān clan was a noble and very proud one, and Gotama was of the purest Khattiya race on both father's and mother's side. The knowledge of his birth was made known by rejoicing deities to a hermit named Asita, who thereon repaired to Suddhodana's palace, saw the child in his glory surrounded by deities, etc., and announced to the Sakyans that the child was to be a Buddha. The young man grew up in the midst of wealth and ease: he had (according to the conventional description of luxury) three palaces, one for each of the seasons. But he sometimes considered the sadness and inevitable approach of old age and death, and under the influence of such thoughts, while still in the prime of youth and beauty *he left his home* (as many older than he, but few so young and happy, had done), his father and mother weeping as he went; *his father's heart pierced with excessive grief, leaving his wife and his son Rahula behind.*

*He became the pupil of two wise teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta; and afterwards the companion in austerities of five mendicants in the neighbourhood of Benares.* The details of his austerities are given in conventional descriptions as of unequalled severity: he starved himself, remained in one position, held his breath till his

frame was attenuated to the utmost imaginable degree and his strength was entirely exhausted. *At last he saw the uselessness of such austerities, and, to the indignation of the five mendicants, gave them up.* We are not told what led him to the more successful method; but so it was that *sitting one night under the tree which thenceforth was called the Buddha tree* (of this age, other ages and other Buddhas had other trees), and there practising meditation according to the method which he afterwards taught, or asking himself, as all Buddhas had done before him, whence is death, etc., *he arrived at perfect insight, as he believed, into the nature and cause of sorrow and the way of destroying it.* *He was then Buddha, the Buddha of the age. He had attained, unaided, and by direct insight and conscious realisation, the saving truth for the benefit of gods and men.*

This account is remarkable for its simplicity, and for what it does not say as much as for what it records. Here are none of the peculiar features that have often been quoted as comparable to the narratives of our Saviour's Infancy and Temptation—except the incident of Asita's visit, which is little more than the ordinary visit of an astrologer at a child's birth, coloured highly to suit his after greatness. The familiar details “of the *Great Renunciation*, as Europeans have called it, the “four signs, the sleeping babe, the flying horse and the rest” are all wanting. So is the temptation by Mára “in the shape and meaning which it bears in the later story”. And, what is more, Bishop Copleston is able to show on what casual phrases, occurring in another connection, or in a different sense, some of these later exaggerated tales have apparently been founded.

Some of them may perhaps be comparatively early, while others suggest a considerably later date, after rather than before the Christian era. Thus the belief that Buddha was born of a Virgin mother, known to St. Jerome (*adv. Jovinian.* I. 42), which is said to be prevalent among Mongol Buddhists, was most likely from an Evangelic source of some kind. The ancient tradition, as we have seen, has nothing to tell us on this point. The latter legends of Southern Buddhism are full of marvels, which Spence Hardy compares in one point to the Mahomedan tradition of the Koran in regard to the birth of our Lord—though the resemblance is not really particularly close (*Manual of Buddhism*, p. 142, note). Those of Northern Buddhism, such as are found in the *Lalita Vistara*, are even more extravagant, but they only represent Máyádeví as a married woman, living

for a time an ascetic life apart from her husband. The last stage is that which attempts to rival the gospel narrative of the Virgin birth.

In this connection it may be worth while to notice the obscure mention of Buddha by the Church historian Socrates, in his chapter on Manicheism (I. 22). He first speaks of a Scythian or Scythianus, who married an Egyptian, and thus acquired the learning of the Egyptians, and introduced into Christianity the doctrines of Empedocles and Pythagoras. "Of this Scythian Buddha, who had been previously called "Terebinthus, became a disciple; and he, having proceeded to "Babylon which the Persians inhabit, made many extravagant "statements respecting himself, declaring that he was born of "a Virgin, and brought up in the mountains. The same man "afterwards composed four books; one he entitled *the Mysteries*, "another *the Gospel*, a third *the Treasure*, and the fourth *Heads* "(or *Summaries*); but pretending to perform some mystic rites, "he was hurled down a precipice by a spirit and so perished." His books afterwards are said to have passed into the hands of Manes who gave them out as his own.

What may be at the bottom of this curious piece of precise, but, of course, very distorted history, is not at all clear. It looks like a mythical rationalisation of the fact that elements from other philosophies, especially Egyptian, Greek and Buddhist, were to be found in Manicheism. In reference to the name "Scythian", it is worth noticing that some scholars have supposed the Sakyas from whom Buddha sprung to have actually been a Scythian tribe (cf. Copleston p. 21). "Scythian" is pretty nearly Buddha's common title Sakya-muni. For the name Sakya is apparently identical with the Greek Σάκαι, Σάκαιοι, the proper name of a Scythian people inhabiting the Moschian mountains, in the Caucasus, but sometimes extended to the whole race. The second name of Buddhas, Terebinthus, may possibly be a corruption of Terunnanse-Elder, a common Buddhist term in Ceylon. The bringing up in the mountains corresponds with Buddha's retirement, after leaving his home, to the caves in the hill side, where he was the disciple of the hermits Alara and Udraka. The hints here thrown out may perhaps receive development in the hands of some one with more leisure than the present writer.

To return to the Bishop of Colombo's book. The following passage on the other early hero of Buddhism, in whose reign something like firm historical ground is reached, will give a good idea of the author's style. We need hardly remind our readers that the Rock-cut Edicts and Pillar Edicts of this great monarch, form together one of the most marvellous messages from the past which this age, so powerful in reviving the echo of such voices, has been enabled to draw forth from its long silence.

Two hundred years at least had elapsed since the death of the founder, to whom the organisation of moral effort was attributed. A vast change had passed, since his day, over the face—the political aspect at least—of India. The touch of a strange new civilisation—the civilisation of their distant Aryan brethren of Europe—had been felt by the Aryans of the Ganges. Aided by the Greek invader, a single monarchy had asserted itself, and claimed all India for its own, and had so far succeeded as to give vividness to a new conception—that of a universal monarch. A great man had arisen, representative of that dynasty, who had assimilated much of the new civilisation and felt its stimulating influence. In his person the idea of the world-monarch was embodied. He was a man of vast ambitions and vast designs. And on this man, Piyadasi Asoka, at first a despot as careless as others of the means he used, the teaching of the ascetic community laid its spell. He became much more than its patron: he was its apostle. As his reign went on, he was more and more imbued with its spirit: the desire to serve it and extend it moulded his magnificent enterprise. He was not merely the Constantine of Buddhism; he was an Alexander with Buddhism for his Hellas; an unselfish Napoleon, with "mettam" (loving-kindness) in the place of "gloire".

The world was his that he might protect all lives in it; might teach loving-kindness throughout it; might establish in every part of it the Community of the disciples of the Buddha.

Compared with the solid reality of Asoka, the records which are preserved of the Buddha himself are but a shadowy tradition. And as the great King's history becomes better known, men will be tempted to speculate whether Buddhism owes more to Gotama than to Moggali<sup>1</sup>; to ask how far what is definite in the history of Bimbisára's days is a reflection thrown back on the mist of the past from the greater epoch of Asoka.

The student will probably turn with peculiar eagerness to the chapter (XXI) that follows, entitled *Critical history of the Canonical Literature*; and he will not be disappointed. This is

---

<sup>1</sup> The leader of the Community in Asoka's time.

a section of the book in which the Bishop's faculty of analysis and of subtlety in perceiving and exhibiting the grounds of argument, appears to great advantage. It is not that he is found advancing any very new or startling theories or conclusions, but rather as justifying and expounding, with great felicity and independence, those that are now most generally received. In particular he assigns the well-known and important Mahá-Parinibbána Sutta or *Discourse of the great Decease* to the reign of Asoka; chiefly because of its containing an account of the character of an "universal monarch", which was not realised in any extent before his time (p. 287 foll.). With this date it follows that many other Suttas are as late as at least 200 years after the Buddha's death. The date B. C. 477 has been given as most probable for that event (p. 23). The solemn anointing or consecration of Asoka is fixed at about B. C. 270 (p. 267). His reign may have lasted some thirty years. Between these dates falls the Greek invasion of India, the influence of which on Buddhist literature and tradition it is very difficult to estimate; but we may certainly say that it must have been considerable, at any rate as an impulse and a source of organising power. Following up this train of argument, the Bishop shows that the supposed Council of Rajagaha, which is said to have settled the Buddhist canon immediately after the Buddha's death, never took place, and that the so-called second Council of Vesáli, a hundred years later, was not a Council but the meeting of a local committee to settle some small points. The first real Council was that in Asoka's days, commonly called the Council of Patna (p. 301). Though it is difficult to believe that the Pitakas, as we now have them, were known to Asoka himself in any detail, it is just possible that the collection of books was completed before the end of his reign (p. 303). From that time we have, at any rate in Ceylon, a fairly consecutive tradition and history, the Mahávansa, containing many true details, sometimes of astonishing accuracy (p. 262, 279), though mixed up with much that is fabulous.

(To be concluded in the next number.)

Dr. JOHN WORDSWORTH,  
Bishop of Salisbury.

---