

Zeitschrift: Revue internationale de théologie = Internationale theologische Zeitschrift = International theological review
Band: 1 (1893)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Bp Copeston on Buddhism [Schluss]
Autor: Wordsworth, John
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403257>

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: 15.01.2026

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

B^P 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.*

(Conclusion.)

The *Third* part, *Buddhism in Ceylon* (pp. 310—413), is naturally much occupied with Mahinda, called the son of Asoka, the apostle of Ceylon, and the commentator Buddhaghosha, the second founder of the sect in the island, who lived about 420 A. D., and deals incidentally with the valuable semi-Socratic book called the *Questions of Milinda* (i. e. Menander), called after the Greek Bactrian king who reigned in the latter half of the second century B. C. Then follows a *general sketch of Ceylon history from Buddhaghosha to Parakrama*, the romantic hero of the 12th century A. D., whose gigantic works still remain, “works which it has taxed the resources of the English government even partly to restore (p. 381)”.

The following chapter *from Parakrama to the arrival of the Dutch*, concludes with an interesting note giving an account of the *Relation of the Island of Ceylon* by Robert Knox, an Englishman who was detained in the island from 1660—1680 A. D., in the reign of Rajasinha II^d, full of curious and evidently accurate observations and showing a fine character in the observer.

The last chapter of this part, entitled *Later revivals of the Community*, is important as bringing out the fact that it has been indebted frequently to foreign help for its renewal, when

the succession of monks had practically ceased, especially from Arakan and Siam. The revival which has been introduced in the last twenty years has been also under foreign influence, partly negative, that is to say the removal of hindrances and disabilities under English rule, partly positive in its alliance with western scepticism and so-called theosophy.

This last revival is naturally described in the *fourth* part, to which we have already called attention. The Bishop has surely done well to be reticent as to the outsiders concerned in it, for it would be difficult to speak of them with patience, and anything like a full treatment of their distasteful proceedings might be a dangerous advertisement to what is probably merely a passing tide of Gnosticism, that will soon drift into other channels, and leave Ceylon, as far as Buddhism is concerned, much where it was before. Nevertheless he frankly allows that the revival may have done some good to the native monks touched by it, in firing them with a certain enthusiasm and making them sensitive to criticism. We may quote a short passage giving some of the external features of this revival. After describing the old-fashioned country Buddhism, in which demon-worship is the real religion of the people, the Bishop proceeds (pp. 465—466):

That is one extreme. Return to Colombo, and go into the Oriental Library at the Museum, and you will see yellow-robed students at work with pen and note-book on Pali manuscripts in Sinhalese or Burmese characters; they are students at the Buddhist College. On the table you may find a copy of *The Buddhist*, an English newspaper as modern in tone as the *Daily News*; full of reports of Buddhist schools, meetings, and lists of subscriptions, cremations, and conversions, mingled here and there with a paragraph of abuse of Christianity. If it is the "Birthday of our Lord Buddha", you will find decorations and lamps in half the streets of the city, and meet gay processions and hear "carols" half the night. In the prison you may find a monk preaching to the criminals, or in a hospital visiting the sick; or you will see him holding forth at the corner of the street, exactly imitating, while he denounces, the Christian missionary.

What is clearly fabulous or superstitious in the old system is boldly thrown overboard, and Buddhism claims to be in alliance with modern discoveries and the philosophy of the West. New dagabas are being built, and old ones being repaired, — books and tracts being printed. The reform of abuses and improvement of the lives of the "priests" are loudly called for: the Buddhist "schoolmaster is abroad".

The book ends with an Appendix dealing with the site of Sirivaddhanapura, the birthplace of the Sinhalese king Parakrama II, and proving that it was not Kandy but probably a place in the low-land between Kandy and the sea. Then follows an Index of Pali and Sinhalese proper names, and an Index of Subjects and European proper names. A third index or glossary of Pali and Sinhalese technical terms, with the Sanskrit equivalents, would be very useful to the reader. Some are scattered about the second index, but we do not find, for instance, bhikku, iddhi, maitreya or mettam, pansala, terunnanse, or vihara, to name only a few which have apparently as much right to be indexed as karma, pinkama, pirit and others.

We must now say a few words on the special claims of Buddhism.

1. As to *numbers* the Bishop has a useful note (p. 5—7) which may be compared with an article by himself in the *Nineteenth Century*, July 1888. He points out that the statement which used to be frequently made that there are “five hundred millions” of Buddhists, rests upon an absurd assumption which at one stroke classes four hundred millions of Chinese under this denomination. Dr. Legge who knows China well places Buddhism only fifth in the series of the religions (so-called) of the world, “below Christianity, Confucianism, Brahmanism and Mahomedanism, and followed, at some distance off, by “Taoism”. But it is really impossible to class it as a separate religion. It is rather a parasite, allying itself readily to any other faith without displacing or excluding others. This is a criticism which may be applied to its pretensions one after the other, and will be found to dissolve many of its claims.

2. As to the *extent* of the Earth covered by it. This is of course considerable, but, with the grand exception of China, the peoples and countries now affected by Buddhism are not very important in the developement of the human race. India has thrown off this incubus at least on thought and religion. China suffers from it very seriously, in the opinion of Confucianist critics, to whom it appears as foolishly and fatally destructive of what is natural and useful, as it would to ourselves. In any case the conservative strength and the external influence of China is not due to its Buddhism, but to other causes.

3. This leads on to the claim of *adaptability*. In truth it might say with Horace in his Epicurean mood "nec mihi res, "sed me rebus, subiungere conor". In adapting itself it loses its distinctive character; it assimilates and tolerates the grossest superstition; it ceases to protest against abuses. It is probably at its best in Ceylon. We have seen to some extent what that amounts to and shall say a few more words upon it presently.

4. Again, the *vitality* of Buddhism has been already shown to depend much upon foreign revivals, at any rate in Ceylon. The Bishop however frankly admits that there has been an undercurrent of conservative tradition in the island, which has preserved the old moral and religious doctrines more correctly than might have been anticipated, considering the ignorance of the Pitakas which prevailed until recent years (see esp. p. 414—421 and cp. *Preface* p. X, XI). There is in fact an element of will in Buddhism, which entitles it, morally speaking, to be termed, as I have elsewhere ventured to term it, "Pelagianism run mad". This gives it, side by side with Brahmanism, an appreciation of history, and, in some persons at any rate, an individuality and independence of character, which helps it to revive even when it seems to have fallen into the depths of decacy and degeneracy. Of course it is far inferior to Mahomedanism in this matter, as well as to Confucianism; but in weak races a little will goes a long way.

5. *The moral claims* of Buddhism are no doubt its strongest point. It exhibits certain definite noble features such as "a high ideal of purity, kindness, and moral earnestness". These claims are however overbalanced by an observation, not only of "the qualifications which apply to those points in the which the Buddhist theory of morality excels, but also (of) those regions of feeling and action in which it is almost entirely defective". The Bishop has an admirable, though very short, chapter (XV), of which this is the text. He shews that the emotions, such as "good desires, righteous anger, holy sorrow, reasonable fear or just hatred", are as nearly as possible discarded, and their exercise restrained. He shews that the only motive recognized is wholly selfish and individual, and that not a noble selfishness, like the Greek, but "to escape from pain and the burdens of life". He points out the entire absence of the idea of duty,

and the defect of enthusiasm. He points out that Buddhism does in effect deny the high capacities of man, by exalting him to a ridiculous pitch of supposed greatness. "Buddhism degrades man by denying that there is any being above him." The goal of Nirvana he would of course indignantly protest against as a "dreary calumny". But he admits, with other observers, that it plays a very slight part in the actual life either of layman or monk; and that the Buddhist system in this and other things is logically better than it ought to be. This Chapter is perhaps the best in a good book. It ends with a note shewing that the notion of "absorption" or "union with deity" is erroneously ascribed to Buddhism (p. 216 foll.).

6. The claims of Buddhism on the side of *speculative philosophy or metaphysics* are of course chiefly interesting to western thinkers in so far as it is, in some respects, a precursor of Positivism. But few however will think that it has done anything more than point to some of the difficulties of life and thought—without giving much help to their solution.

The whole system is vitiated by its being based upon the fanciful notion of transmigration, a belief which is not found in the Vedas, and which may be conjectured to have been taken up by the post-Vedic Brahmans from some of the non-Aryan races of India. Instead of criticizing this notion, which a little study of the ancient literature of India might have taught Gotama to neglect, Buddhism simply accepts it as a terrible and monstrous fact which has to be rationalized and dealt with as best may be. This was the *πρῶτον ψεῦδος* of the system. For if there had been no doctrine of transmigration, there would have been nothing for Buddhism to react from, or to protest and rebel against. It would have lost its *raison d'être*.

I wish that Bishop Copleston had turned his great powers to this point and had given us a conjectural history of this idea in Hinduism, and of its acceptance in a modified form in Buddhism. It deserves, I think, more attention than seems usually to have been given to it, and I cannot doubt that a controversial pamphlet or book on the subject might be of advantage in the Mission field. Very possibly some such book exists as yet unknown to me.

My conjecture is that the idea of transmigration was first suggested by the observation of the likeness between men and

animals, and by the curious feeling which we sometimes have, when we come to a new place or set of circumstances, that we have been through it all before. But I believe that, when it became a popular opinion, it was taken up by philosophers and theorists as giving a convenient explanation of the origin of evil, especially of the undeserved calamities which fall upon the innocent, and as supplying a picturesque reality to the imagination in regard to future rewards and punishments. Job's comforters, or rather critics, if they had been Hindus, would have answered him by explaining to him that he had sinned grievously in a previous birth and was suffering on that account for something which he had forgotten.

Why then, we may ask, does Buddhism weight itself with the extra difficulty of denying the continuity and identity of the soul in different and successive births? That this is the fact is well-known. The orthodox Buddhist knows nothing of a soul, but of a sentient being who is born as the spiritual heir of the accumulated action or "karma" of a whole train of distinct predecessors. On his death the succession will continue with all his added merit or demerit; but *he* will be no longer. I conjecture that the reason of this denial of the soul was partly due to the rationalistic element which is so strong in Buddhism, but was also in part connected with the wish to raise the importance of the present life as a sphere of moral action. We sometimes hear agnostics and positivists speak, with apparent sincerity, of their superiority, in moral earnestness, to those who look forward to the possibilities of a boundless future. Buddhism no doubt is strongest in its practical stimulus to good works in the present life and in its proclamation of the power of the will to effect a man's deliverance from bondage, selfish as the motive undoubtedly is.

Here, however, as elsewhere, it is very inconsistent. The Jātakas all speak of Buddha's previous births as if they were clearly those of an identical person. So does the Akankheyya Sutta ("If he should desire"—) of the various temporary states of a Bhikku or mendicant in days gone by—using such phrases as "such was my name", "such my caste", "I passed from thence", "I took form", with perfect freedom. The philosophical doctrine in fact struggles in vain with human instinct. (See *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XI, p. 215 foll., Oxford 1881.)

The doctrine of transmigration must die out whenever the more rational doctrine of heredity asserts itself. Buddhists no doubt will be tempted to take up Darwinism in its place, but it is difficult to see how it could be an efficient substitute. Nor is the fanciful theory of the French spiritualist Allan Kardec († 1869) likely to be more effective. Clearly this is a case where a wise teaching on the subject of heredity, shewing how it is able to explain some of the difficulties which transmigration so imperfectly and superficially meets, and that it is consistent with the Christian idea of personal individuality and responsibility, would be very much in place. For to a believer in heredity, even to the fullest extent, there can be no imaginary fiction of death preceding immediate rebirth, since father and son, grandfather and grandson, are so often living side by side. Concurrently with this we should of course teach the power of divine grace assisting human freewill to counteract the karma of heredity, not by destroying the personality, but by ennobling it and raising it to fellowship with the Divinity.

Even such an imperfect and Pelagian a theory as Björnson has enunciated in his vigorous though somewhat repulsive story (the House of Kurt), might be a stepping-stone to better things. The power of education and the power of will to destroy the evil tendencies of heredity, is a truth as far as it goes, and a truth very much needed in Buddhist lands. Buddhists have an inkling, a conception, that there is such a thing as human will, and we ought to try and work upon this basis.

With regard to the doctrine of God we cannot suppose that in countries open to the influence of European scepticism the inconsistent elements will long survive in those who profess to lead Buddhism. The adoption of the whole current mythology of Brahmanism is, like its acceptance of the doctrine of transmigration, a proof of the inherent weakness, the parasitism of Buddhism. For this system makes a man, Buddha, superior to the Gods, and makes Nature independent of and superior to both. Evidently the idea of an "adequate cause" has never yet presented itself to the Buddhist mind—but some day it will be apprehended and produce a great shaking of belief. Buddhism clearly cannot remain in its present inconsistent position. The doctrine of the Incarnation can alone satisfy those who are really seekers after truth in it. The rest will probably fall into Posi-

tivism or Pantheism. It is interesting however as a case of the "testimonium animae naturaliter christianae" that (amongst other evidences) the motto or text "God bless our Lord Buddha" is constantly exhibited in Colombo on the day called "Buddha's birthday" (p. 478).

7. The *supernatural claims* of Buddhism have attracted a certain number of half-educated persons, but as regards Ceylon they are things of the past. Bishop Copleston says (p. 455) "there is no reason to believe thatrahat-ship and the possession of "supernatural powers (iddhi) was ever, in the Southern Buddhism "at least, believed to be possible among contemporaries. The "pretence to supernatural powers is one of the things that make "the more genuine Buddhists despise the Theosophists. It is "possible that, under the influence of these foreigners, the claim "to a revival of *iddhi* may be put forward in Ceylon. If so it "will be a spurious revival and will be condemned by more "intelligent Buddhists as an instance of the fourth Paccitiya "offence, that of falsely pretending to supernatural attainments." Those who are interested in modern "Theosophy" should procure and study Part IX of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (19 Buckingham Street, Adelphi, London WC) published in 1885, which contains an instructive exposure of a well-known person who is described in the report as "one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting impostors in history". The plan of the occult room and shrine at Adyar, Madras, is particularly enlightening; and the story of the saucer ought to convince the most hardened credulity.

Dr. JOHN WORDSWORTH,
Bishop of Salisbury.