

Pandura Vadaya or Controversy at Panadura

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The controversy at Panadura or Pandura Vadaya, which had its beginnings in 1873, may be considered a cornerstone of the modern society in which we live today. It is not a symbol of fanaticism but a land-mark in the social transition which this island has undergone.¹

Context

The western engagement with Sri Lanka moved from curiosity and trading in the sixteenth century to dominance and exploitation in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries before autonomy and independence in the twentieth century. Portuguese, Dutch and British colonialists brought various forms of Christianity of which the Portuguese Roman Catholicism has proved the most enduring. Inadvertently they revived Buddhism and helped create the religious foundation for the modern state of Sri Lanka.

In the British era Methodist missionaries had a complex relationship with the colonial authorities. At times they received support and encouragement in their activities, but this was often from officials acting in a personal capacity. They also received opposition to their educational and social plans. Buddhism was the state religion and the British authorities acted as the *de facto* guardians of Buddhism and, to some extent, the promoters of the faith. Temples were reorganised, endowed and the sacred Temple of the Tooth, Kandy, was a British 'protectorate'.

The early missionaries found Ceylon's Theravada Buddhism to be in a particularly poor state. Clergy were poorly educated, disorganised and held in low social esteem. Temples were in disrepair and the religion's influence on the nation's social fabric was diminishing. It seemed, to the early missionaries, that the relentless progress of Christianity across the globe might be best illustrated in Ceylon.

It did not happen. As Christian missionaries, including Methodism's Gogerly and Spence Hardy, translated and published Buddhist scriptures, the stories of Buddhism were revived. Missionary schools and Sunday schools were copied. The prestigious, Church Missionary Society founded, Ladies College in Colombo was answered by the establishment of Buddhist Ladies College. The YMCA was mirrored by the Young Men's Buddhist Association (and the Young Men's Muslim Association) and the streams of children heading to Sunday school would be engulfed by the surge of children going to Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim religious classes held on Sunday

¹ Abhayasundara, P., *Controversy at Panadura or Pandura Vadaya*, (Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1990), p. VIII.

mornings.²

Through the unforeseen consequences of missionary work, and through the deliberate activism of western theosophists such as Col. Alcott, Buddhism revived in Sri Lanka so that today it is the state religion; politicians from traditionally Christian families such as the Bandaranaiques and the Wickremesinghes reverted to Buddhism for political expediency and the government is currently sponsoring a bill intended to make it illegal for an individual to change their religion. Within this context the Panadura Controversy stands as a seminal moment.

The specific reasons for the debate in Panadura in 1873 were the publications by Revd Daniel Gogerly and a series of sermons denouncing Buddhism preached by Revd David de Silva in Panadura Methodist Church. The Venerable Migettuwatte Gunananda Thero, a robust spokesman for Buddhism, took exception to the sermons and challenged de Silva to defend his remarks.

The Controversy

Just as St Patrick engaged in power encounters with Druids to prove the authenticity and superiority of Christianity, so a series of disputations was held to settle the ‘contest’ between Buddhism and Christianity.³

‘Before an almost breathless audience, numbering at times from five to seven thousand in attendance,’ the debate lasted two full days.⁴ The Buddhist champion, the Venerable Migettuwatte Gunananda Thero, engaged in five oratorical jousts over a period of several years, of which Panadura was the final. The two days at Panadura involved a series of sermons from the Venerable Migettuwatte Gunananda Thero and Revd David de Silva, a Ceylonese Methodist minister, preached in a temporary cadjan roofed structure. By this time de Silva had been a minister for thirty three years and had been a close associate of the missionary Daniel Gogerly, a noted Pali scholar who worked in Ceylon from 1818 to 1862.

The Buddhist party of approximately two hundred priests occupied one half of a large bungalow whilst the Christian group of several dozen Methodist, Baptist and Anglican clergy occupied the other half. Fourteen police officers and a mounted Inspector were on hand to supervise proceedings.⁵

² When the December 2004 tsunami hit Sri Lanka on a Sunday morning, in some communities almost all children survived because most were at religious instruction classes on high ground near the coast. In other communities the opposite was tragically the case.

³ Baddegama, February 1865; Waragoda, August 1865; Udanwita, February 1866; Gampola January 1871 and Panadura, August 1873. At Waragoda Baptists were involved; elsewhere it was Methodists in dispute with Buddhists.

⁴ Abhayasundara, *Controversy*, p. XI.

⁵ Abhayasundara, *Controversies*, p. 36. Small, WJT (ed), *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, (Colombo: Wesley Press, 1964), p. 222. The Wesleyan missionary Small made his own contribution to transforming society when, as principal of Richmond College, Galle he founded the National Association in 1915 as a forum to discuss the emerging nationalist movement.

After setting out their positions each attempted to refute the arguments of the other in one hour long sermons from 8-10am, resuming again from 3-5pm. De Silva spoke first allowing Migettuwatte to speak last. According to the Buddhist record de Silva, a Pali and Sanskrit scholar, spoke with eloquence but at such a level that few in the crowd could understand his sermons. Migettuwatte's more populist approach appeared to have more impact on the crowd. After each had spoken twice on the first day, at the start of the second day the Methodists brought on a 'substitute' for de Silva. FS Sirimanne, an Anglican lay evangelist, attempted an approach more appropriate to the crowd present. After Migettuwatte's response de Silva came on for the last time with Migettuwatte preaching the final sermon.

At the conclusion of the Disputation the crowd acclaimed Migettuwatte and Buddhism claimed the victory. In 1956 a later generation, keen to maintain the memory of the event, erected a life size statue of Migettuwatte with an accusing finger pointing at the front door of Panadura Methodist Church. It still stands there today. In the present era when Christians are actively persecuted, the statue stands in a prophetic gesture. De Silva died five months after the Disputation.

The Methodist account of the incident differs from the Buddhist. WJT Small, the historian of Sri Lankan Methodism recorded, 'The results of the debate were, from the nature of the case, inconclusive.'⁶ It was conceded that the Buddhists had put the Christians on the defensive but that the Christians had got the opportunity to clearly present the gospel to many thousands of Buddhists. 'But the net result was very small, except that relations were more strained than ever. The Christian Church continued to grow, but not as a result of the controversy.'⁷

Moscrop and Restarick only indirectly refer to the incident, recording 'great pitched battles'.⁸ Panadura is described as 'an intensely Buddhistic centre, where opposition has often become persecution, where controversy has often been bitter'.⁹

That the Disputation had significance is confirmed in the publication of English translations of the sermons in the *Times of Ceylon* as the event unfolded, the publication in book form of a full account of the debate and sermons that year, and the subsequent reprinting of this over the next hundred and thirty years.

Conclusion

Of course, Panadura 1873 was not an isolated incident. It was the culmination of a series of five disputations, the first two of which were held through printed work. Similar events involved

⁶ Small, WJT (ed), *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, (Colombo: Wesley Press, 1964), p. 222. The Wesleyan missionary Small made his own contribution to transforming society when, as principal of Richmond College, Galle he founded the National Association in 1915 as a forum to discuss the emerging nationalist movement.

⁷ Small, *History*, p. 222.

⁸ Moscrop, T. & Restarick, A.E., *Ceylon and its Methodism*, (London: Robert Culley, undated), p. 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Christians and Hindus in Sri Lanka and India in the same era.¹⁰

It is possible to argue that the single event of Panadura completely changed the social and religious context of Sri Lanka. Not because the event in itself was of ultimate significance but it was a printed account of this disputation that attracted Col Alcott to Buddhism, prompted his travel to Ceylon and ‘with his arrival in the island a new phase in the revival of the sacred religion arose’.¹¹ Col Alcott helped re-found Buddhism in Sri Lanka which transformed the nation, increased national awareness and paved the way for independence.

There is a further connection, related to this incident, between Wesleyan missionaries and societal transformation through Alcott’s role in the founding of Ananda College, which is currently the largest and most prestigious Buddhist boys’ school in Sri Lanka. Among early principals of Ananda College were western theosophists including an Irishman, CC Moore, who had a fairly unsuccessful period in charge from 1910-1913. The principal who transformed the school into a major Sri Lankan institution impacting the nation was P de Silva Kalaratne from 1918-1943. Kalaratne had been educated at Richmond College and Wesley College, Colombo, both schools founded and run by Methodist missionaries.¹² Maradana Methodist Church is situated adjacent to Ananda College.¹³

The Panadura incident needs to be read as a symbol of the independence struggle. Western Christians, even if they were fronted by David de Silva, were challenged, engaged with and defeated by Ceylonese Buddhism. At a time when Ceylonese society was unable to challenge the political and military dominance the British held on the island, Buddhism was able to successfully challenge Christianity. The defeat of Christianity in this encounter heralded the resurgence of Ceylonese nationalism and eventual independence in 1948.

The Disputation at Panadura is still ongoing in contemporary Sri Lanka. After generations of relatively peaceful co-existence, a fundamentalist Buddhist movement is challenging the right of Christians to evangelise in Sri Lanka, and, in places, to worship. A bill to outlaw conversion is currently being debated in the Sri Lankan parliament. That a section of Buddhism, in itself a missionary religion, is attempting to outlaw conversion in Sri Lanka today is a denial of the right that Migettuwatte exercised in August 1873. Those who do not know their history are destined to repeat its mistakes.

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¹⁰ See Young, R.F & Jebanesan, S., *The Bible Trembled: The Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1995) and Young, R.F & Somaratna, G.P.V., *Vain Debates: The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996).

¹¹ Abhayasundara, *Controversy*, p. XIV. See also Small, WJT (ed), *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, (Colombo: Wesley Press, 1964), p. 222.

¹² www.anandanet.org/ cited on 10 November 2005

¹³ As the minister of this church from 1998-2000 I had the honour of being woken each day by Buddhist prayers broadcast from Ananda College. The compensation was that my phone bill came in the name of Revd DT Niles.

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