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A Bibliography on Sinhala Buddhism

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### A Bibliography on Sinhala Buddhism

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## Sinhala Buddhism

Scholars identify the Theravāda form of Buddhism that grew in Sri Lanka as Sinhala Buddhism. The adjective Sinhala is both a reference to an ethnic group: Sinhala people, the majority population in Sri Lanka, and to an Indo-European language: Sinhala spoken by the Sinhala public. Thus, Sinhala Buddhism has two meanings—Buddhism in the Sinhala language and Buddhism practiced by the Sinhala people.

Though Theravāda Buddhism has been the most frequently used identification for Sri Lankan Buddhism, in recent decades, with reference to Buddhism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a new designation called Protestant Buddhism has been created.

Two prominent Sri Lankan anthropologists, Gananath Obeyesekere<sup>1</sup> and Kitsiri Malalgoda,<sup>2</sup> created the phrase Protestant Buddhism to identify a form of Buddhism that appeared in Sri Lanka as a response to Protestant Christian missionaries and their evangelical activities during the British colonial period. Buddhists not only criticized Protestant missionaries, but also adopted their strategies and models in reforming Buddhism. This process of assimilation and incorporation occurred on an ideological level as well as social and cultural levels. The emulation of Protestant models was very much apparent in the establishment of Buddhist schools and Buddhist organizations such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association. Like evangelical Protestant Christians, Buddhists also started to print pamphlets (after June 1862), to hold preaching sessions, and to enter into debates and religious controversies in defending Buddhism. In the history of religious controversies, one important event was the two-day public debate (August 26–27, 1873) that was held in Panadura between a Sinhala Wesleyan clergyman David de Silva and Buddhist monk Mohoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda (1823–90). The arrival of Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in Sri Lanka in 1880 marked another important phase in the shaping process of what anthropologists

have identified as Protestant Buddhism.

Though several alternative expressions are found in the academy for identifying Sri Lankan Buddhism, I have preferred “Sinhala Buddhism” for three reasons. First, Sinhala Buddhism denotes that this form of Buddhism deals with the religious life and practices of Sinhala people. Second, it designates that this form of Buddhism has a strong connection and relationship with vernacular texts written in Sinhala. Third, in contrast to the narrowness of Protestant Buddhism which identifies Buddhism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Sinhala Buddhism can be used to identify Buddhism which grew among the Sri Lankan people after the time of the Pāli commentaries.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon,” *Modern Ceylon Studies* 1/1 (1970): 43–63.

<sup>2</sup> Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750–1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1976).

## Fields of Entries

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