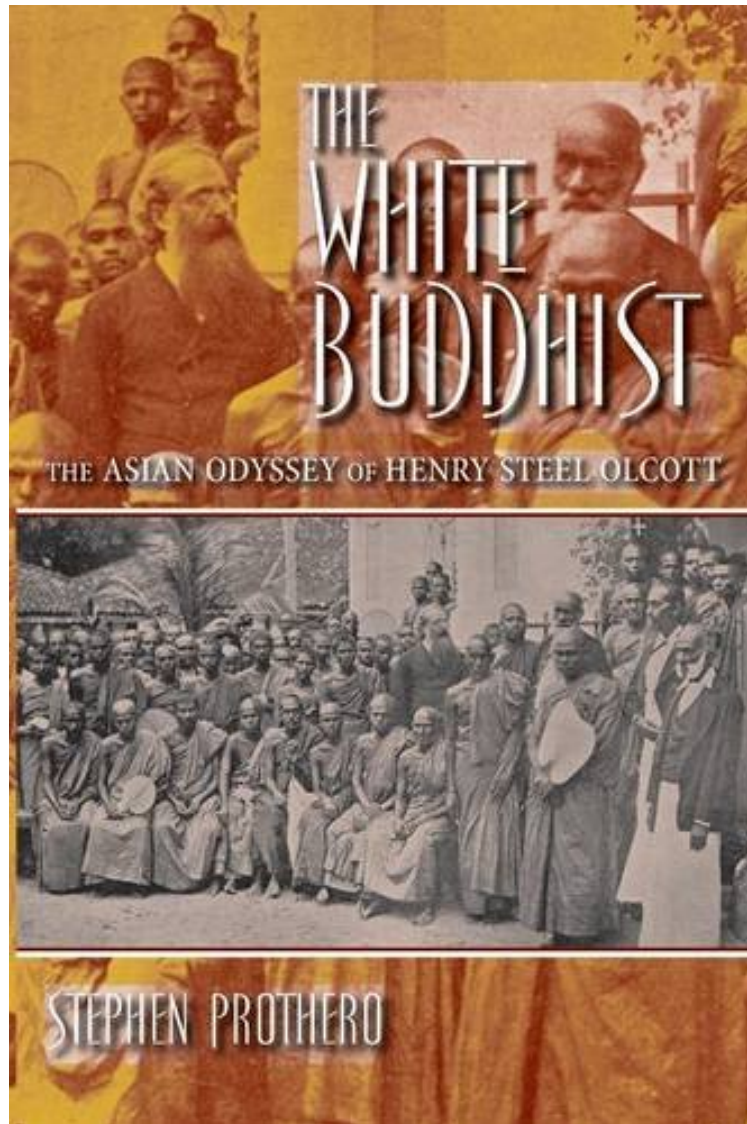


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Stephen Prothero

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#2319594 in Books Stephen R Prothero 2010-11-29 2010-11-29 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.25 x .80 x 6.121, .93 #File Name: 0253222761256 pages The White Buddhist The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott | File size: 49.Mb

Stephen Prothero : The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott (Religion in North America) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott (Religion in North America):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. I enjoyed learning more about this life and adventures By D.

Martin Henry Olcott and Madame Helena B have always been a fascination of mine, I enjoyed learning more about this life and adventures. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. In-depth review of an intriguing Theosophist-Buddhist By John L Murphy Henry Steel Olcott's impact may be better known in Sri Lanka than his native America. It's astonishing that religious scholar Stephen Prothero's Harvard dissertation, transformed into a very smooth style atypical of such origins, is the first critical book-length examination of Olcott's impact. As he notes in the preface to this paperback 2011 edition of his 1996 work, Prothero argues for Olcott as less a Buddhist pioneer firebrand than a restless, driven, dissatisfied freethinker--to a point. The previous review scans Olcott's life, so I will paraphrase Prothero's perspective. Prothero's thesis dominates: Olcott in becoming the first Westerner to accept Buddhism publicly in modern times (1870) could not shake off his liberal Protestant reform of Ceylon's natives. He wanted to replace the ritual-bound Asian version with one oriented closer to Protestant bias: for a founder's "primitivist" message, based on the scriptures closest to the original intent. Prothero distinguishes this from "the tradition of the Buddhists." (69) Olcott invented "a Buddhist lexicon informed by a Protestant grammar and spoken with a theosophical accent." This creolization, Prothero explains, kept Olcott's habitual upbringing aligned with the same underlying Protestant tendency that prevents moderns-- anymore than Theosophists or Harvard Divinity School students-- from fulfilling a reductive admission that all religions are ultimately one and the same. Differences persist, and origins betray efforts of adults to leave behind their childhood beliefs. Even Theosophy became refashioned by Olcott; he revamped it (once he had failed to shake up some of its more gullible adherents sufficiently) to make it look less like "scientific spiritualism" in its mid-19c manifestation and more like "Asian wisdom-religion." As his biographer demonstrates from reading Olcott's propaganda and the responses of Asians (pro or con), he knew little about the faith he chose to preach. Yet he came to Ceylon determined to branch out from the formidable sway of his companion Madame Blavatsky and this began to separate his own catechetical missionizing from the effusions he had shared from Theosophy. He could not escape the deeper language of Christianity in formulating his doctrines, as he promoted his Buddhist lexicon to the Sinhalese. Prothero attended Harvard in the company of two other influential scholars of Western responses to Buddhism. He nods to one, Thomas Tweed, who argues that a framework shifts the convert away from previous views to those of Buddhism, but he departs from his classmate, showing how Olcott failed to overcome his cognitive basis in his Puritan and Protestant past--he excoriated Christianity yet he spoke elsewhere with pride of his Puritan origins and he could not come up with a structural framework other than Protestantism to build up his counter-appeal to revive his invention of a back-to-basics version of Asian Buddhism. Still, many Sinhalese welcomed Olcott, understandably flattered by his decision to live among them and to adapt their religion, to counter Christianization. He wanted to free Buddhism from monks, and to revive its appeal on a scriptural, not ritual, basis. Perhaps inevitably, trying to weaken some Eastern stereotypes, Olcott wound up perpetuating others. He championed Buddhism as a moral philosophy and he disliked the idolatrous perversions of a true doctrine--in this, his influence from Protestant and Theosophical sources speaks for itself. He never shook off Theosophy as his primary outlook. Prothero shows how Olcott's defense of Blavatsky (despite her wearying demands) and his habitual reduction by his "textualist" bias a compulsion that impelled him to treat as if a "sacred canopy" the belief systems of not only Buddhism but Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Hinduism as if recoverable by him if only ritual was abandoned and the primary, earliest scriptures from the founders were restored. He linked "the essence of a religion to the inner meaning of its scriptures," (144) and this "Orientalist" and "academic assumption" marked him as an American liberal Protestant no matter how far he tried to flee its formative impact upon his approach. Prothero concludes with a judicious summary of the strengths and weaknesses of his diligent subject. This study avoids jargon and Prothero as in his later work shows his command of a learned, yet accessible and convincing ability to speak to a wider audience. Like his classmates Richard Hughes Seager and Thomas Tweed, Stephen Prothero emerged as a leading scholar of Western Buddhism in this work. However, unlike his friends he chose to edge back into Protestantism in the American ethos as his subsequent focus. And, Olcott never could leave that ethos behind. As his critic sees it, he chose Buddhism as the farthest field from his Christian background, but he never could reject his Theosophical outlook as its replacement, nor could he overturn his Protestant mentality. He leaves us to ponder Olcott's legacy. He opened this study with his admission of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" at either conservative or liberal pieties which champion a diminishing of religious diversity in the name of zeal or tolerance or equality. "This book is informed, therefore, by a fundamental mistrust of schemes, however well-intentioned, that begin by judging all religious traditions to be true and end by determining that something is gained when the dizzying diversity of religious beliefs and practices is reduced, however imaginatively, to one core tradition." (x) He returns to this challenge of the core and the simplifying of religious expression by Olcott and his ilk, the lesson learned by we who read this. "It may be inevitable that individuals are going to capitalize on the ambiguity that lies at the core of all world religions by bending the texts and rituals of those traditions in their own peculiar direction--by conforming the lexicon of those religions to their own grammar and by speaking the resulting creole language in their own particular accent." (181)(P.S. For comparison, I reviewed Prothero's "Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know" (8/31/11) and his intriguing compilation of our nation's "core texts" from our "de facto public canon" assembled into an "American Talmud," offering speeches, songs, stories, and sayings to spark discussion and debate as primary "books.": "American Bible: How Our Words

Unite, Divide, and Define a Nation" [(5/29/12)] 30 of 30 people found the following review helpful. A rare American export. By A Customer Henry Steel Olcott was an incongruent, eccentric character who on careful analysis was one of the most able and radical free thinkers that the USA produced, responsible for uplifting the cultures of Sri Lanka and India under the yoke of British imperialism. This book tells his story. American books speaking of Buddhism start with Vietnam, the Beat Generation, Hippies and Ajhan Chah as a brief history of the religion in the USA. Actually, this history should be extended all the way back to the 1860s and specifically to Olcott, one of the first converts to Buddhism. The 1880s were very significant. He established the Theosophical Society with Helena Blavatsky and moved from Spiritualism to Egyptian religions before settling on a lifelong affair with Oriental religions after a vision he had. Having moved to India, he established and bolstered movements battling against missionaries, swamping the native cultures and generated an anti missionary toolbox based on their own methods. These succeeded. He also established strings of Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka and empowered Hinduism and native Indian religions including Islam through his Theosophical journals which actually turned a profit. He also attempted to unify the Buddhist world by harbouring links with Japan. What is surprising is that so much of what he put his efforts into bore fruit. This book exposes this little known American hero (to some) and the creolised religious response he initiated. The book is highly critical and well researched. At a time when the USA is exporting Christian Evangelism, Olcott was the exception who exported something else and influenced the European Theosophical movement and seekers in ancient systems of knowledge. An invaluable and rare reference of a little known indomitable figure.

Denounced by the New York Times as an "unmitigated rascal" while simultaneously being lauded as a reincarnation of Gautama Buddha himself, Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) was friend to Madame Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and an indefatigable reformer and culture broker between East and West. Olcott helped bring about a new spiritual creation, Protestant Buddhism, a creative creolization of American Protestantism, traditional Theravada Buddhism, and other influences. Stephen Prothero's portrait of Olcott is an engaging study of spiritual quest and cross-cultural encounters.

.com Largely forgotten in his own country, the first American convert to Buddhism, Henry Steel Olcott, is still revered as a religious hero in Sri Lanka. Having played a key role in the revival of Buddhism there, he also championed Hinduism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism in India and was co-founder of the influential Theosophical Society. In an insightful portrait of the man and his mission, religion scholar Stephen Prothero proposes the concept of religious "creolization" in regard to Olcott's unconscious merging of Indian spirituality with American Protestant methodology. A meticulous story of a very colorful subject. In the process, [Prothero] assists the understanding of religious pluralism in our current age. (Church History) Prothero has succeeded in creating a portrait of Olcott that will shape future scholarship. . . . Engaging and succinct. (Gnosis Magazine) The first scholarly biographical study of [this] influential figure; its use of creolization theory adds to ongoing conversations about how to understand contact, colonialism, and conversion. (Religious Studies) Prothero's study should interest not only scholars in the field but students of Asian religions and American religious history generally. (Journal of American History) An important study of a remarkable 19th-century American. (Choice) From the Back Cover The New York Times denounced him as an "unmitigated rascal". Others described him as a reincarnation of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka or perhaps Gautama Buddha himself. He was Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832 - 1907), friend to Madame Blavatsky and president-founder of the Theosophical Society. This book tells the fascinating story of his spiritual odyssey. Raised a Presbyterian in nineteenth century New York, Olcott embraced spiritualism and then theosophy before becoming the first American of European descent to make a formal conversion to Buddhism. Despite his repudiation of Christianity, Olcott's life was an extension of both the "errand to the wilderness" of his Puritan ancestors and the "errand to the world" of American Protestant missionaries. Olcott viewed himself as a defender of Asian religions against the missionaries, but his actions mirrored theirs. He wrote and distributed tracts and catechisms, promoted the translation of scriptures into vernacular languages, established Sunday schools, founded voluntary associations, and conducted revivals. And he too labored to "uplift" his Asian acquaintances, urging them to embrace social reforms such as temperance and women's rights. However one views his work, his legacy was a lasting one, and today he is revered in Sri Lanka as a leader of the Sinhalese Buddhist Revival and in India as a key contributor to the Indian Renaissance.