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RETHINKING EARLY WESTERN BUDDHISTS: BEACHCOMBERS, 'GOING NATIVE' AND DISSIDENT ORIENTALISM

Laurence Cox

Recent research on the life of U Dhammaloka and other early western Buddhists in Asia has interesting implications in relation to class, ethnicity and politics. 'Beachcomber Buddhists' highlight the wider situation of 'poor whites' in Asia—needed by empire but prone to defect from elite standards of behaviour designed to maintain imperial and racial power. 'Going native', exemplified by the European bhikkhu, highlights the difficulties faced by empire in policing these racial boundaries and the role of Asian agency in early 'western' Buddhism. Finally, such 'dissident Orientalism' has political implications, as with specifically Irish forms of solidarity with Asian anti-colonial movements. Within the limits imposed by the data, this article rethinks 'early western Buddhism' in Asia as a creative response to colonialism, shaped by Asian actors, marked by cross-racial solidarity and oriented to alternative possible futures beyond empire.

Introduction

Phr'a Kow-Tow and Marco Polo

We will almost certainly never know who the first western Buddhist monks were. One of the first *attested* cases is an Austrian jokingly known as 'Phr'a Kow-Tow', ordained in Bangkok on 8 July 1878.¹ This ordination was said to be partly for the requirements of work in the Siamese state² (Khantipalo 1979, 167–168) and partly to learn Pali (thus the *Straits Times*).

'Phr'a Kow-Tow' was hardly the first European to find himself in this situation: Colley (2000, 181) estimates that in the early *seventeenth* century as many as 5000 Europeans had been in the service of native rulers in South Asia alone—soldiers, technicians and the like. Obviously, many South and Southeast Asian rulers were not Buddhist and 'Kow-Tow's' situation was probably unusual (Alicia Turner, pers. comm.), but these numbers alone make it very likely that the first such ordination will not now be recoverable.

2 LAURENCE COX

Conversion, of course, is not identical to ordination; and Europeans had long been present in Asia, not only as state employees:

45 Economic disaster, poverty, religious bigotry, intolerance, oppression and lack of opportunity at home drove ambitious or disgruntled Europeans not only to Asia but to flee from their mother countries to neighbouring states. . . . But no call was stronger or more insistent than that of the Orient. (Scammell 1992, 645)

Indeed, when Marco Polo arrived at the court of the Great Khan in 1275, he found Europeans from many countries already present (Hudson 1954, 300). No doubt such people, changing culture and starting families, sometimes transferred their religious loyalties in one form or another, while their children or grandchildren must sometimes have been brought up in local religions. Indeed, as Sutin (2000) notes, from one perspective the first western Buddhists were Bactrian Greeks; at which point perhaps the concept appears as an artificial separation which rules out many everyday conversions or transitions of this kind.

50 [Q1] If it is nonetheless worth paying attention to late nineteenth and early twentieth century *ordinations* in particular—and if we can follow them to some extent through newspaper reports—this is for two reasons. Firstly, European colonial presence in Buddhist Asia was increasingly extensive, and in the aftermath of the 1857 Revolt increasingly direct; in the imperial areas, racial boundaries (including those of intermarriage and religious affiliation) were increasingly tightly policed; and the colonizing mission was increasingly justified in religious terms (not least to secure popular support at home). Secondly, European Buddhist monks were increasingly visible, and perhaps increasingly problematic, within reforming and more centralized sanghas (Choompolpaisal 2013). The figures discussed here, then, are significant not so much for chronological reasons, but because as Buddhist monks in a time of increasing *boundaries* between Europeans and Asians they posed particular challenges to political and cultural power relations.

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U Dhammaloka: a window into wider worlds

In most cases such figures are recorded only in the moment of their transition. U Dhammaloka's career is particularly well-attested because his Buddhist activism continued to thematize the challenge. In this sense, he is a window into wider worlds: unusual by definition, but indicating broader power relations which remain less visible in other western Buddhist experiences.

75 If the invisible and unrecoverable Europeans who settled down and perhaps converted to Buddhism in parts of early modern Asia were part of the 'flow that followed western penetration of the maritime economy of the East' (Scammell 1992, 641), the far more visible western Buddhists of this later period can be seen in a world-systems perspective (Hall 2000) as being thrown into sharp relief (and the historical record) by the construction of a new kind of global capitalism which brought them to Asia, tightened the boundaries which they nevertheless crossed

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and perhaps also provoked them to resist, in one way or another, this same process (Cox 2013). This article discusses three dimensions of this later experience.

85 Firstly, it looks at social *class*, and ‘beachcomber Buddhists’ (Turner, Cox and Bocking 2010) such as Dhammaloka. It proposes that we should see such conversions as the result of personal encounters and situations in plebeian Asia rather than, as has often been assumed, textually-grounded convictions or purely individual religious crisis.

90 Secondly, it explores *racial* boundaries, and the process of ‘going native’. As against the relationships of western power/knowledge often thematized (Almond 1988) in interpretations of early western Buddhism, it argues that Asian agency has to be understood as central in enabling Europeans to become monks in the first place, and—for those who left significant historical traces—in creating the contexts within which they could make a public impact.

95 Thirdly, it discusses the politics of empire and the particular role of *Irish* Buddhists’ cultural or political resistance. Following Clarke (1997), it argues that such figures should be seen as embodying *dissident* Orientalisms, deploying Buddhism against empire, whether as insider critique in western circuits of communication or as outsider challenge.

100 These were significant challenges to the late nineteenth century colonial order in which, following the Indian Revolt, it was a matter of official policy that British settlers should be only civil servants, officers, capitalists, professionals, missionaries and philanthropists (Mizutani 2006, 3). Furthermore, from a social movements perspective (Diani and Della Porta 1999), we can ask after the position of early western Buddhists within the movements of *Asian* Buddhist revival which were to prove central in the construction of successful nationalisms from Japan to Ceylon.

110 As members of plebeian classes who were needed for the construction of empires and discarded when the job was done, who crossed the racial barriers which separated ‘white’ from ‘native’ and ‘Christian’ from ‘heathen’, and who challenged the imperial logic of *western* (scholarly, upper-class) power/knowledge, their public visibility was no accident and enabled them to play creative and, at times, significant roles in the Buddhist revival.

115 ‘Pauper lunatics and beachcombers’

The colonies... are always having to repatriate pauper lunatics and beachcombers, the white men who have got into distress in Singapore and Colombo. (House of Commons 1910, 1)

120 When Buddhist Studies was establishing itself as a discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, it sought academic respectability by dissociating itself from widespread representations of Buddhism as hippie (eg Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*) or what would later be called New Age (eg T. Lobsang Rampa’s *The Third Eye*) (Turner, Cox and Bocking 2010; Lopez 1998; Tonkinson 1996). However, as the example of

4 LAURENCE COX

125 Dhammaloka suggests, Gary Snyder (fictionalized in *The Dharma Bums*; see also Snyder 2000) is not that far off the ‘main sequence’ of western Buddhists; migrant workers, with experience of sailing and other trades like logging (Snyder) or fruit picking (Dhammaloka), with backgrounds in the anarchist IWW trade union (Snyder) or other forms of radical politics (Dhammaloka). Many Buddhist organizations in the west pursued a similar path from marginality to would-be mainstream (Cox 2013).

130 In this, contemporary scholars and western Buddhists repeat the gesture of respectability which was strategically central in our period. If a figure like Dhammaloka attracted the hostility of Christian missionaries, colonial authorities and white journalists, their number one charge against him was that he was no gentleman—in his birth, education, clothing or behaviour. Although, as we now know, he was able to ordain between 13 and 15 western monks³—a figure considerably higher than Ananda Metteyya and comparable with Nyanatiloka in this period—one of the factors in Dhammaloka’s later disappearance from histories of western Buddhism was not simply that his lineage apparently died out, but equally importantly that he made no attempt to claim the scholarly and gentlemanly credentials which the other two sought.

140 Nor was this solely a western concern: as Bocking (2010) has shown, part of his failure in Japan (compared to Singapore or Burma) was due to his inability to compete on the terms then becoming common in the more sophisticated environment there; while his later erasure from Burmese nationalist histories is no doubt conditioned by his not being Burmese and thus not suiting the narratives of later nationalist historiography (Turner 2011a).

145 It is for precisely these same reasons, of course, that Dhammaloka is interesting to research, as someone whose (unusually well-attested) existence fills in much of what is left blank by the more powerful accounts of Asian and western Buddhist organizational and scholarly genealogies. To rephrase E. P. Thompson (1963), the pauper lunatics and beachcombers may have more to say than the vantage point of respectability allows.

150 The Dhammaloka project has found that hobos (migrant workers), beachcombers or loafers (white members of the Asian lumpenproletariat) and drifters were well-represented among the first early European Buddhist *monastics* (and not simply converts as might be thought). Given the disparity in access to the ‘intellectual means of production’ of such figures, and the persistent attempts by those who did have access to present even such popular and visible figures as Dhammaloka as being barely worth a mention (while nonetheless having to mention them), it would be foolhardy to assume that there were not more such beachcomber Buddhists who have not had the dubious good fortune to be recorded by travel writers, criticized in the colonial and missionary press or (in Dhammaloka’s case) tried for sedition.

160 In fact, beachcombers as such (let alone the Buddhists among them) are an under-studied group in Buddhist Asia, unlike the situation in the South Pacific where the key intermediary role they played between island societies and traders,

colonizers and missionaries is better studied (Elleray 2005). For mainland Asia as a whole, more seems to have been written on the moral panics and legislation that accompanied the rise of European poverty in the later nineteenth century (see Ganachari 2002) than on the beachcombers themselves. The responses of a
 165 concerned middle-class public or a modernizing colonial administration are apparently of greater interest than the victims of this disciplinary activity (Foucault 1991), despite the large volume of data generated by the workhouses which were its practical expression (see Fischer-Tiné 2005).

170 *The many-headed hydra*

[The white loafer] is generally of the lower middle or labouring class; sometimes a ci-devant soldier, sailor, or man-servant; occasionally a skilled artisan, or a
 175 whilom subordinate Government official; and rarer still, a *sahib* or gentleman, born and bred. (Hervey 1913, 95)

The major sources of the later nineteenth century European poor in India (where some research has been done) were according to Fischer-Tiné (2005) ex-sailors and ex-soldiers—together with ex-railway employees and ex-telegraph workers
 180 those who made imperial power and colonial trade and migration possible—Australian horse grooms (!) along with ‘domiciled Europeans’ and ‘Eurasians’ (Mizutani 2006) and women, who were a particular target of anxiety. If poor whites in general might transgress racial hierarchies by taking on menial work or indeed adopting Asian dress, the prospect that poor white women might marry Asians or
 185 turn to prostitution was on a par with European conversion to ‘native’ religion in its threat to the colonial moral order. Finally, Ghosh (2011, 498) mentions India as a traditional destination of escaped Australian convicts.

These and similar groups—increasingly large as the century wore on, ultimately representing nearly half of all whites in a country like India (Mizutani
 190 2006, 6) were created by the normal processes of colonialism, including, in particular, the creation of groups of people who had not been able (or not wanted) to return ‘home’ once retired or demobbed, who did not have the resources to send their children ‘back’ to ensure their continued position at the top of the racial ladder, or who failed to make marriages that would keep them
 195 within polite society. In turn they represented what Siddiqi rightly calls ‘an imperial lumpenproletariat’ (2008, 75). A problem when it was surplus to requirements, as in the period following the Indian Revolt (Fischer-Tiné 2005, 304ff), while at other times of economic boom this class could be drawn on as a ‘reserve army of labour’ willing to work at cheap rates.

200 *One migrant worker’s trajectory*

It often, very often, happens, that men who declare themselves [enter workhouses] do not give a correct history of themselves, and we have no means

6 LAURENCE COX

of testing the truth of their stories. (Madras workhouse governor, 1876, cited in Fischer-Tiné 2005, 319)

205 In the nature both of record-keeping then and research now, such lives are hard to recover in anything like a qualitative or continuous way. Dhammaloka's reported biography is valuable in this sense. If correctly identified, he was the youngest son of lower-middle class parents from Booterstown, then a village in South County Dublin; leaving school by 14 to work in his father's provisions shop, he subsequently sought and failed to find work in Liverpool and worked his way across the Atlantic at 16 in a ship's pantry (see Tweed 2010).

210 In the US he claimed to have been a sailor, kitchen porter, hobo, shepherd, fruit-picker, truckman [transporting goods], docker and, finally, the watch officer on a trans-Pacific ship. In Asia he is variously said to have been a sailor, tally-clerk, soldier, beachcomber, pearl-diver or member of the Salvation Army. He is also said to have been a Catholic priest; together with the equally implausible lay name William Colvin, this seems to have been part of the later Dhammaloka's 'cover identity' used in particular when dealing with the authorities.

215 Research on all this is currently underway. At present it seems likely that he did indeed travel via Liverpool and New York on the dates given (although he may have been born three years earlier in Dublin's working-class inner city), and that the basic outline of his time as a hobo in the States stands up. He may have remained in the US for longer than he suggests, particularly if it was here that he acquired the reasons for later changing identities, faking his death and so on. In Asia, arriving at an uncertain date between c. 1874–1900, a role as beachcomber in Ceylon seems among the more probable pasts on the information available to date.

225 Alternatively, he may have remained a sailor for longer than he suggests and shared in the experience of a later contributor to the MahaBodhi Society's *British Buddhist*:

230 I got a ship that was bound for the East, and at last we reached Colombo, Ceylon, as nice a little harbour as you could wish to see. I went ashore one morning early before the heat of the day began, and there I saw passing along in between the green trees a procession of yellow-dressed men. A strange sort of thrill of pleasure passed through as I watched them pass along the road... I thought them and their yellow robes the most beautiful thing I had ever seen...

235 I have had many a talk since my first one, with Buddhist monks, and have always enjoyed learning more about their religion from their own lips; it somehow comes more freshly to me that way, than by reading about it in books... And when I am away in the west again, I feel as if I am away from home; and begin to feel bright and cheered again, as soon as I have passed Aden, and know I am getting nearer again to the home of Buddhism, Ceylon, where I now have among the Buddhists of this Island all the best, most real friends, I have in this world. ('A Sailor' 1928, 7–8)

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245 Whatever Dhammaloka's personal history, it is clear from 'A sailor' and other accounts and encounters that this kind of plebeian life, for those who came to call Asia home and in some cases came to identify with local culture and religion, was far from unusual. In a period so obsessed by respectability it is unclear why Dhammaloka should tell his beachcomber tales unless they were moderately plausible or, in other words, representative of other people's experience.

Loafers and bhikkhus

250 There's a bunch of one-time beachcombers scattered among the Burmese monasteries. (Dublin-born beachcomber John Askins, 1905 [Franck 1910, 272–3])

255 'A sailor' is unusual not only as a firsthand account by a plebeian Buddhist, but also as an account of a beachcomber Buddhist who did *not* become a monk; in the nature of things yellow-robed European monastics were more likely to attract attention and to have opportunities to speak, write or publish.

260 In previous work (Turner, Cox and Bocking 2010) we have given some illustrative examples of beachcomber Buddhists. As part of that same project we began to encounter other, previously unknown early western Buddhists.⁴ Much as Deslippe notes (2013), once we start looking we bump into them everywhere. Here I want to make some general comments on what can now be said about the class background of early western Buddhists.

265 Some, of course, *do* fit the existing 'gentleman scholar' model—although Harris (2013) argues that this is not as true of Ananda Metteyya as later scholarship (and perhaps the man himself) claimed. For others we have no details whatsoever. Given how gossipy the colonial press of the day was, there may well be class implications to this silence—that these were figures unknown to the club-frequenting writers who acted as journalists in such contexts. In my own attempts to find early *Irish* Buddhists (Cox 2013), I found a similar picture. Many are simply noted as 'Irish', with no further information, on the basis of once-off encounters with a colonial author; only a handful were writers and so able to speak for themselves in any detail. A few were in the middle ground, having less control of the intellectual means of production themselves but nevertheless chronicled in something more than their 'bare life'.

270 Other monks are more definitely plebeian, at various levels. Thus, for example, we find an unnamed ex-sailor at the Tavoy monastery in Rangoon, the disgraced Alois Fuehrer (who had faked the discovery of relics of the Buddha) seeking ordination in Ceylon, an Englishman M. T. de la Courneuve (ordained by Dhammaloka in Singapore) who gave a false background but was fleeing debts, and two American beachcomber bhikkhus recorded on a Burmese train. Dhammaloka was not alone.

280 In newspaper accounts, respectability appears as constantly problematic for western Buddhist monks. While there was no doubt an element of the class

8 LAURENCE COX

prejudice mentioned above, the details are often telling. Disrobings are relatively frequently recorded, particularly in relation to issues around alcohol and money. Colonial observers, of course, delighted in reporting western bhikkhus drinking; but it seems clear that they often did. (Whether, as Dhammaloka's own
 285 autobiography suggests, some became Buddhist *in response* to the bottle, is something that cannot at present be established.) Ritual poverty and renunciation, of course, could follow from actual poverty and perhaps make it bearable—or give a new status among Asian Buddhists which would not attach to a western ex-alcoholic.

290 Western Buddhists, monastics or otherwise, then, often inhabited an uncertain borderland in which the inherent challenge to respectable white behaviour entailed in adopting a 'native' religion (and, for bhikkhus, native dress, bare feet, shaved head and begging) was often compounded in the eyes of their
 295 betters by previous social failings of various kinds. Of course, this very class issue may have meant that in many cases there was nothing left to lose. Either way, this situation renders them harder to research. Those whose voices had the status to be published at the time, preserved subsequently and digitized or otherwise made
 300 available today (three filters in which class, power, race and location played and still play a central role) tended at best to trivialize and at worst to ignore those who fell short of respectable whiteness in both these dimensions, of class and religion.

'Going native', race, and Asian agency

305 It is not desirable in the interests of the British Government to have distressed white men on the beach in these colonies. It brings the white race into discredit. (House of Commons 1910, 3)

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was in many ways a highpoint in the colonial policing of boundaries of colour and religion. *Colour* because the
 310 imperial high tide had drastically reduced the number of native states and so the need even to pretend to equality; but also because the direct administration of so much of the world's population (as opposed to working through local comprador elites) placed a premium on cultural tools of deference, aspiration and so on to enforce a social order where the number of soldiers available was always far less
 315 than the number of those who might conceivably object to imperial power. *Religion* because the rise of popular movements in Europe, in particular after 1848, had led to an increased need to justify imperial adventures and expenditures. Christian missionising provided one widely-accepted justification, which found its practical expression in the often unwilling opening-up by colonial officials to
 320 religious missions of various kinds, despite the risk of 'disturbing the natives'.

In this world where boundaries increasingly had to be constructed and enforced rather than arising automatically from people's own background and socioeconomic position, poor whites were a source of deep anxiety because of their mobility, propensity to drink in unacceptable ways, begging, crime and

promiscuity. In other words, they represented a classed threat to white superiority which could be, and at times was, escalated into a personal transgression of establishment efforts to create barriers.

325 'Going native', then, was from a colonial point of view the ultimate expression
of a trajectory of behaviour unworthy of a European in Asia. However, while there is
a substantial literature on 'going native' in North America and the Caribbean (Colley
2000, 173–174), there is relatively little on Asia except in relation to *imagined*
330 transitions in fiction (*Kim*, *The road to Mandalay*, etc.). In this literature, which
represents the process from the viewpoint of white elites, the class aspect is largely
assumed and what is particularly thematized is loyalty to Asia or England, religious
affiliation and gender and sexuality. 'Going native', for those who did not, was
understood not only as a fascinating and reprehensible form of sexual and family
335 transgression, but also as the adoption of new religious identities which in turn
implied an abandonment of one's national loyalties. In both *Kim* and *Mandalay*, Irish
characters have to resolve the tension between their Buddhist loyalties and British
military authority, which is represented as without easy solution.

In the first instance, however, 'going native' was of course a practical matter,
dependent on the ability to learn the new language effectively. As Colley notes,
340 'European plebeians stationed in different parts of the world during the course of
military or naval service had the opportunity to acquire a variety of spoken
languages; and this accomplishment could be the essential passport and
temptation to changing who and what they were' (2000, 186).

Dhammaloka, for example, claimed to be able to speak eight languages;
although standards were different to those of the present day, Harry Franck
345 witnessed him concluding a theological argument in Hindustani (Hindi-Urdu),
indicating that this went well beyond knowing how to say hello (Franck 1910, 366).
Franck also records Dhammaloka's friend Askins as being fluent 'in half the dialects
of the East, from the clicking Kaffir to the guttural tongue of Kabul' (1910, 254). As a
350 sailor or migrant worker, of course, a good ear for languages was always helpful—
and in turn made it possible to 'go native' in ways that were not purely rhetorical.

*'... white men who have got into distress in Singapore and
Colombo...'*

355 In the early modern period, the key focus of European worries about 'going
native' was brutally practical: Europeans working for native rulers transmitted
technical and military expertise as well as an understanding of how western power
structures worked, all of which could be used against western interests.

360 By the late nineteenth century, however, the primary meanings of 'going
native' were on the one hand having too much sympathy for 'natives' as a western
civil servant, or issues related to sex and above all kinship (marrying Asians, or in
the case of men, failing to abandon their Asian relationships when the opportunity
came to return 'home'). In both cases these represented threats to the elite
solidarity of colonial whites.

10 LAURENCE COX

Going native was proportionately more attractive for plebeians, who had fewer opportunities to return home and for whom white solidarity had less to offer. If, like *Kim's* fictional father, a retired sergeant working on the railways (not an uncommon Irish fate: Cook 1987, 509), such whites married local women and started families, their children would slip down the social scale. Racial categories were shifting, but children whose parents could not afford to send them 'home' for their education or who had one Asian parent might become respectively 'domiciled Europeans' or 'Eurasians' (Mizutani 2006) and would have fewer or no opportunities in the white world. The role of religion in such families has not yet been studied but might throw up more *lay* Buddhists:

Unlike the middle-class whites who desperately remained in touch with the metropolitan centre, the domiciled were characterised for their immersion in the social and cultural influences of the colonial periphery. (Mizutani 2006, 7)

European bhikkhus and colour lines

It was often mentioned with indignation in the Police reports that the vagrants wore 'native dress' or 'went about barefooted.' (Fischer-Tiné 2005, 315)

...any representation of the 'other' within the missionary discourse of civilising ... was to some degree racialised and classed *simultaneously*. (Mizutani 2006, 12)

Poor whites and Eurasians had fewer reasons (and resources) for maintaining the cultural barriers separating them from local culture, and clothing was one crucial marker of the attempt to do so. Dhammaloka's 'shoe incident' (Turner 2010, 154–156) highlights this boundary in reverse, and the particular role which religion played. In the shoe incident, he challenged an off-duty Indian police officer who entered the ritual boundaries of the symbolically important Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon, wearing shoes. The white gentry were not expected to take their shoes off, but they were expected to use the European mode of removing one's hat as a sign of respect. Some Asians wore shoes, but the point of challenging an Indian (other than the general resentment felt towards their role as police) was that Indians might wear shoes, but would remove them on entering *Indian* temples, so that this was a clear sign of disrespect towards Burmese Buddhism.

Western bhikkhus were at the opposite end of this spectrum, travelling barefoot, shaven-headed and wearing distinctly 'native dress' even at a period when some Asian middle classes were adopting western clothing, shoes and hairstyle. This of course had roots in a ritual poverty marked out on the body (the loss of hair), clothing (symbolically associated with graveyards) and ritualized begging which stood counter to everything white solidarity expected and meant.⁵ The latter, in its equally ritualized aspects ('proper' clothing, Christian religious observance, socializing only with Europeans) was intended to mark out a cultural superiority which in this period of direct rule and the need to justify empire 'at

home' also entailed claims to a civilising mission, whether spoken in terms of modernization or Christianity (Siddiqi 2008, 76).

Fischer-Tiné notes that alongside the many other sins against empire committed by European loafers—mobility, drinking, begging, crime—conversion was a particularly serious offence. He discusses a series of cases of conversion to Islam in our period (1870–1917) and notes

A shifting of religious camps was outright provocation [to authorities]. (Fischer-Tiné 2005, 314)

In the European bhikkhu, then, all the problematic aspects of the poor white 'loafer', the 'domiciled European' and 'going native' came together in a highly symbolic challenge to a social order which itself depended massively on the symbolism of racial and cultural oppositions.

415 *Asian agency and Buddhist revival*

We should mention one final way in which European bhikkhus challenged the power relations of empire, namely in relation to *Asian* agency. The sangha was, of course, a local institution and ordination required subordination to a series of demanding relationships, even if some latitude was often granted to western monks. Nonetheless, just like Charles Pfoundes as an officer in the Siamese navy (Bocking 2013), Dhammaloka as European bhikkhu was ultimately responsible to Asian superiors.

Ordination was a complex matter, and subjected European bhikkhus to local considerations which they may not have understood or in some cases even been aware of. For example, in our research on Dhammaloka we have found evidence of a series of Europeans refused ordination in Ceylon (presumably because of the caste affiliations of the different nikayas) and who were apparently directed to Burma.

Conversely, if Dhammaloka was not respectable as European, he had a different status as bhikkhu. Thus, in Burma, he was ordained by a number of senior monks; in Japan he was given a robe and an honorary title, apparently by a Shingon dignitary; and his monastic superiors tolerated or turned a blind eye not only to his institutions such as the Buddhist Tract Society, operated from the Tavoy monastery in Rangoon, or the bilingual school which he operated from Wat Ban Thawai in Bangkok—but also to his ordination of over a dozen westerners as monks, only a few years after his own ordination.

Patronage was another important matter: even 'gentleman scholars' like Ananda Metteyya required Asian patrons, but poorer western monks were completely dependent on those who were willing to fund their activities. Thus Turner's (2011b) research on Dhammaloka's patron networks, Bocking's (2010) discussion of the relative Japanese reluctance to work with Dhammaloka, or Choompolpaisal's research (2013) on the ethnic politics of Wat Ban Thawai all point to agendas, opportunities and constraints which must have weighed heavily on western monks.

12 LAURENCE COX

An unusually clear example is given by the contested politics of Dhammaloka's 1909 Ceylon tour. This was promoted by Anagarika Dharmapala, who brought out a special issue of his *Sinhala Bauddhaya* devoted to Dhammaloka's talks, while the local YMBA dissociated itself publicly from the tour, for reasons which are as yet unclear.⁶

Thus, whether we are discussing ordination itself, sangha discipline, financial support or the organizing of tours, to operate as a western bhikkhu meant securing the support of Asian actors. No doubt in many cases—where a bhikkhu lacked either linguistic competence or local political understanding—the agency and strategy was primarily on the Asian side, and the western bhikkhu was little more than a front man. In other cases, relations may have been more equal.

In other words, crossing colour lines submerged European monks more fully within the politics of Buddhist revival, and raises wider questions about Asian agency and power relations in early 'western' Buddhism. As this issue shows, early Buddhist modernists (Asian or European) were very often relatively marginal to begin with, and sometimes 'ahead of their time'. For example, it was to take another 15 years before the shoe question raised by Dhammaloka became a strategic issue for the young Burmese nationalists. (On his recent visit to Burma, US President Barack Obama was photographed on the Shwedagon, barefoot and of course hatless.)⁷

Another way of phrasing this is to say that the Buddhist revival, and Buddhist modernism, *became* central when sangha hierarchies and lay organizations started to adopt themes, strategies and methods which had often been experimented, put on the agenda or discussed by the early networks discussed in this issue. For early *western* bhikkhus, then, it was a question of either convincing local sanghas, sponsors and organizers to take a risk on them—or of being selected as likely candidates for locally-determined roles.

Observing Dhammaloka's Burmese careers between 1900—1902, for example, it is hard to avoid the impression that elements of the Burmese sangha thought it would be useful to have a white bhikkhu who might raise the flag of opposition to Christianity. Such a figure might perhaps be given more leeway within the sangha than could have been allowed to a Burmese-born bhikkhu; if things went wrong, he could more easily be disavowed or disrobe; and he might be expected to have a better sense of how to engage in the new form of religious conflict—as indeed Dhammaloka did, importing for the purpose perhaps both an atheist repertoire of anti-Christian arguments and an *Irish* repertoire of contention, to which I now turn.

480

Dissident Orientalisms and Irish identifications

Can you bear to see sacrilegious hands deface or destroy our holy inheritance?
The star-like Buddhas are calling upon you . . . (U Dhammaloka, 1900)⁸

It is commonly held, following Said (2003), that Orientalism is a gesture of power/knowledge and of course this is often true, including some forms of western Buddhism and Buddhology. It is not, however, the full story. As Clarke (1997) observes, we can also speak of *dissident* Orientalisms—those which, in his accounts, use Asian vantage points to critique their own society or, in the cases we are exploring, feature westerners who converted to a pan-Asian religion in opposition to key elements (Christianity, racial hierarchies) of European society.

Lennon's (2004) text highlights the particular situation here of Irish Orientalism as a form of fantasy identification with other colonized nations, enabling long-distance relationships with Sinhala, Burmese, Indian and Japanese nationalisms. These were often reciprocated in Asian interest in the Irish experience of anti-colonial activism, reaching a highpoint between Irish independence in the 1920s and independence in South and Southeast Asian countries in the 1940s and 1950s.

Thus western or Irish Buddhisms were not only (or mainly) power grabs over Asian knowledge but also (or mostly) arguments against Christianity, (British) empire, and indeed local colonial power holders, as in the case of Dhammaloka, a 'terror to evil-doers' who among many other things sought to bring corrupt officials to book.⁹

If missionaries appraise you that they have brought to you what they call western civilization . . . do not hesitate a moment to reply that you would rather call it . . . religion of bloodshed. (U Dhammaloka, 1901¹⁰)

As in Ireland, so in Asia?

'Ireland?' he cried, tremulously. 'Then you are not a Buddhist! Irishmen are Christians. All sahibs are Christians,' and he glanced nervously at the grinning Burmese about us. (Indian Christian convert, 1905 [cited in Franck 1910, 365])

It was a feature of imperial power that both colonial officials and nationalists drew on analogies between different colonial situations (Nagai 2006). For their part, Irish people in Asia routinely interpreted imperial and colonial relationships through their own varied interpretation of *Irish* situations (Cox 2013). Thus the British consul in Tokyo, an Irishman, saw the Irish Buddhist sympathiser Lafcadio Hearn as a nationalist 'in the most extreme sense of the term' (Murray 1993, 285–286), and indeed Hearn supported the Boers against the British and the Japanese against the Russians.

Just as Irish figures in India such as Annie Besant, James and Margaret Cousins or Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble) combined conversion to Hinduism with active engagement in Indian-led organizations, so too Irish Buddhists often found themselves employed by Asian organizations, Buddhist and otherwise

14 LAURENCE COX

(Cox 2010, 2013). Often (not always) they pursued wider visions of a future without empire, whether these were framed in a universalist language or in terms of mutual respect between different cultures. A few examples can show the variety involved.

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Some early Irish Buddhist strategies¹¹

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The ex-Anglican priest John Bowles Daly, principal of a Buddhist school in Ceylon in the early 1890s, pursued his long-standing belief in modernization through secular education in the Buddhist Theosophical Society school movement which aimed at challenging missionary-run schools, not by a revival of traditional temple-based education but by lay-controlled Buddhist schools following a modern curriculum.

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Lafcadio Hearn, working in the modernizing Japanese education system, adopted a Yeatsian celebration of peasant life and legend as being the true repositories of national authenticity. This seeming paradox is one that would have been familiar to the many Irish teachers and academics of the period who adopted romantic forms of cultural nationalism that valorized the far west.

[\[Q10\]](#)

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Captain Pfoundes (Bocking 2013) held in the 1890s an official position as a representative of the Buddhist Propagation Society in London and, subsequently, served as an anti-missionary agitator in Japan; his talks were translated and published in Japan. Like Hearn he stressed the value of Japanese culture against that of the West.

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Another Irish Buddhist monk, U Visuddha, working with the Tamil nationalist Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras, carried out at least one mass conversion ceremony among the dalit goldminers of Marikuppam in 1907, in a strategy which much later became widely popular under B. S. Ambedkar (Jhondale and Beltz 2004).

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Dhammaloka, for his part, followed what seems in one respect a straightforward translation or importation of the long-standing Irish nationalist repertoire of contention to Buddhist Asia. Since the Catholic Emancipation movement under Daniel O'Connell in the 1820s and 1830s, Irish national identity had been increasingly identified with a politicized Catholicism. This strategy had the major advantage—following the bloody suppression of the 1798 uprising—that there were limits by the nineteenth century (and even more so following the Indian Revolt of 1857) to exactly how far the colonial power could repress 'native religion', and it is not hard to interpret Dhammaloka's early adoption of this strategy in Burma as a translation from the Irish.

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Conclusion: early western Buddhists and the limits of empire

U Dhammaloka's particularly dramatic—and, for this reason, relatively well-documented—experience is in some ways paradigmatic of that of wider groups, created and needed by the new capitalist world-system, who defected from its

class, racial and religious hierarchies to ‘go native’ in ways that were deeply problematic to those whose cultural power depended on maintaining those same hierarchies. If we recall that within half a century of Dhammaloka’s ordination most of those empires had been dramatically overthrown in Asia, we can see that the sneers and alarm calls of missionaries, journalists and colonial officials perhaps had substance as responses to the real threat implied by challenges to white superiority.

In the Asian context, conversion to Buddhism and ordination could be acts of solidarity across racial/ethnic boundaries and pioneering, creative responses to these classed and raced structures. Outsider converts were able both to transmit ‘repertoires of contention’ from one context to another—Irish religious nationalism, Anglophone freethinking arguments, the culture of radical plebeian publishing—but also to bolster new strategies evolved by local actors.

This Asian agency of sangha, sponsors and organizers cannot be ignored in understanding early western Buddhists, who necessarily depended on these structures for practical purposes, although the purposes intended by the former are often harder to recover than those overtly proclaimed by western activists and the power relationships are not always obvious. Here too, Dhammaloka is perhaps paradigmatic: we know him to have been active in Burma, Singapore and other Straits Settlements, Siam, Ceylon and Japan, along with less well-researched activities in Nepal, India and Cambodia (leaving aside Australia, China and Tibet where the situation is too unclear to make confident statements.) As Bocking (2010) shows, and Dhammaloka’s unexpected collaboration with Christians in Siam indicates (Choompolpaisal 2013), he adopted different strategies with varying degrees of success in different Asian contexts.

Another way of putting this is to say that, as an ex-migrant worker and ex-sailor, Dhammaloka was happy to arrive in a new country, try to identify a possible sangha context and potential lay sponsors and/or organizations, and see what tasks (preaching, education, publishing, public debate etc.) he could pursue along what lines. At times, as evidently in Burma, Singapore and Siam, there was a meeting of minds or at least of agendas, and he flourished. Elsewhere, as in Japan and perhaps Ceylon, the relationship was not so successful.

If Dhammaloka provides a window into other worlds, those worlds include that of poor whites, loafers and beachcombers; of those who ‘went native’, including Buddhist converts and western bhikkhus; and of the emerging *Asian* Buddhist networks which employed, resisted, collaborated with, invited or distanced themselves from this highly visible figure in their attempts to shape the future of Buddhist Asia.

Like his older contemporary Hearn—who similarly started out as an Irish migrant worker, adopted strongly anti-Christian and anti-western views and was attracted to local Buddhist culture rather than philosophy or meditation—Dhammaloka’s early and public identification with Asian culture *mattered*. As the Irish civil servant and Burmese nationalist Maurice Collis wrote of his friend Gordon Luce, who ‘went native’ by marrying a Burmese woman,

16 LAURENCE COX

In point of fact, Luce was one of the sanest men in Burma. What he nourished and advanced, has prospered; what his detractors upheld has withered away. (Collis 1953, 44)

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NOTES

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1. The conversion of a European to Buddhism in Bangkok, *Straits Times*, August 10, 1878.
2. Alicia Turner (pers. comm.) notes that the implication here is that the Thai king had restricted certain positions to former monks because of their assumed education and status.
3. *Times of Burma*, July 19, 1905; *Ceylon Observer*, September 4, 1909.
4. See also <http://www.payer.de/budlink.htm> under ‘Materialien zum Neobuddhismus’ for some ground-breaking work in this direction.
5. See also Elleray (2005, 169) on European clothing as a visible and controllable index of less tangible aspects of ‘metropolitan orders of being’.
6. The Irish Buddhist priest, *Ceylon Observer*, September 11, 1909; Correspondence, *Ceylon Observer* September 14, 1909.
7. <http://buddhism.about.com/b/2012/11/22/the-president-and-the-buddha.htm>
8. Warning to Buddhists, *Times of Burma*, January 9, 1901.
9. From Catholic priest to Buddhist monk, *Englishman* (Calcutta), April 11, 1912.
10. ‘Christianity’ in Burma, *Deseret Evening News*, August 24, 1901.
11. The cases mentioned here are discussed in greater detail in Cox (2013).

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