

BOOK REVIEW

Guy Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and Its Western Interpreters*, The University of Chicago Press, 1968. XI+320 pp., \$8.50.

The history of Buddhist studies in the West is a fascinating but rather neglected topic. Scholars have been more inclined to advance Buddhist studies than to trace their history. Windisch's *Geschichte der Sanskrit-Philologie und indischer Altertumskunde* (Berlin und Leipzig, 1917–20) contains relatively little concerning Buddhist studies. Raymond Schwab (*La Renaissance orientale*, Paris, 1950) and Henri de Lubac (*La rencontre du bouddhisme et de l'occident*, Paris, 1952) have made useful contributions but, as is obvious from the titles of their works, they are primarily interested in the reception of Indian and Buddhist ideas in the West. Welbon's study of the interpretation of Nirvāṇa by Western scholars is not only a history of philological and historical studies on Nirvāṇa. The author stresses in his preface his concern with the fact that the interpretations of the meaning of Nirvāṇa reflect the individual scholar's own personal commitment. At the same time his study is intended to be a contribution to the understanding of European intellectual history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially with regard to the encounter of European intellectuals with an alien tradition.

The execution of a programme of this scope presupposes three elements: knowledge of the philological and historical problems studied by Western scholars; understanding of their personal commitment; insight into the intellectual approach to religious studies in general in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If, in addition, like Welbon, one assumes that the response to the question of the meaning of Nirvāṇa is at the same time an answer more or less complete to all questions about Buddhism, it is obvious that it would be too optimistic to expect this study to be entirely satisfactory. Welbon has written this book with great enthusiasm. Many of his remarks are perceptive. Nevertheless, it cannot be recommended without reservations.

The first chapters of Welbon's book are rather disappointing. Buddhist literature has only gradually become accessible to scholars. Even today only part of it has been studied by Western scholars, mainly the Pāli and Sanskrit texts but of the enormous mass of texts, preserved in Tibetan and Chinese translations, very few have been adequately translated and studied. The interpretation of the meaning of Nirvāṇa depends very much on the texts studied. Welbon does not always make this sufficiently clear. He remarks that Colebrooke in his essay on Buddhism does not quote any primary sources. It would have been necessary to pay more attention to the sources used by Colebrooke.¹ His main source is Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II.2.18–32 with the commentaries by Vācaspatimiśra, Govindānanda and Advaitānanda. Careful study of this passage would have prevented Welbon from stating that Colebrooke was not altogether secure as to what beliefs differentiated Buddhists from Jainas, that even today it is not always clear to what sect a given native critique is directed and that the polemicists themselves were by no means always sure of the distinctions which characterize various sects. It would also have been useful to emphasize the importance of Colebrooke's remarks on the 'succession of thought', quoted by Welbon on p. 29, in view of the later discussion of de La Vallée Poussin's study on the *viññānasamāna* theory (pp. 263 sq.). Louis de La Vallée Poussin fully realized the value of the texts, directed against the Buddhists, and he had studied them carefully (cf. *JA* (1902), II, p. 284, n. 3). It is also noteworthy to remark that in his *Le dogme et la philosophie du bouddhisme* (Paris, 1930, p. 51) de La Vallée Poussin quotes with approval the following passage from Colebrooke's essay: "The notion of nirvāṇa as of a happy condition seems to be derived from the experience of ecstasies, or from that of profound sleep, from which a person awakes refreshed."²

In the chapter on Csoma de Kőrös Welbon quotes an article by William Hunter. This article, which seems based on nothing else than Duka's *Life and Works of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös*, has been unhappily revived by an Indian publisher as an introduction to a reprint of two of Csoma's articles (*The Life and Teachings of the Buddha*, Calcutta, 1957). William Hunter, historian of the British raj in the nineteenth century, discusses Csoma's linguistic phantasies and contrasts them with Bopp's achievement. This induces Welbon to mention Bopp and to add a totally superfluous note, listing several publications on Bopp. Without adducing any

proof Welbon states pedantically that "Csoma's methodological poverty does dim his analytical and commentatorial achievements". Anybody who knows Csoma's works and has some knowledge of Tibetan will read this statement with utter astonishment. Welbon quotes a long passage from one of Csoma's articles and adds: "Those compendious statements are so tantalizing!" (p. 48). Those statements would have been less tantalizing if Welbon had taken the trouble to consult Csoma's article 'Notices on the Different Systems of Buddhism, Extracted from the Tibetan Authorities' (*JASB* VII, 1 (1838), pp. 142-7; reprinted in *Tibetan Studies*, Calcutta, 1912, pp. 73-9), and not the extract given by Duka. From Csoma's article he would have learned that this passage is based upon Tsongkhapa's *Lam-rim chen-mo* (for literature on the *Lam-rim chen-mo* see Rudolf Kaschewsky, *Das Leben des lamaistischen Heiligen Tsongkhapa Blo-bzañ-grags-pa*, Bonn, 1967, p. 396, n. 963).³

Welbon seems to admire Jules Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire's knowledge of Sanskrit which, according to him was considerable (p. 71). In a note Welbon remarks that he translated the entire *Sāṃkhyakārikā* in his 'Premier mémoire sur le Sāṅkhyā' (*Mémoires* etc. VIII (1852), pp. 107-560). Probably Welbon has never seen either the Sanskrit text of the *kārikā* or Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire's work which has been well characterized by Richard Garbe (cf. *Die Sāṃkhya-Philosophie*, 2e Auflage, Leipzig, 1917, p. 109). Welbon defends him against Schwab but does not mention de Lubac's pages on him (pp. 157-8). Henri de Lubac, a great Catholic scholar, is obviously even more embarrassed about him than Schwab to judge from his final paragraph: "Enfin dans une brochure de 1880, ce jugement définitif, qui compromet le christianisme plutôt qu'il ne l'exalte: "Le bouddhisme n'a rien de commun avec le christianisme, qui est autant au-dessus de lui que les sociétés européennes sont au-dessus des sociétés asiatiques"."

Welbon devotes a long and welcome chapter on James d'Alwis but it is much to be regretted that he has not tried to obtain more information on him. A note states briefly that "repeated inquiries have failed to disclose sufficient biographical details for even a brief sketch. For me at this writing, D'Alwis is his critical volume." (p. 130, n. 2). However, on the next page Welbon declares that D'Alwis was a long-time resident missionary and student in Ceylon and on p. 144 he becomes 'a distinguished missionary'. A glance in the catalogue of the British Museum would have

been sufficient to bring to the notice of the author a book which contains much information on D'Alwis: *Memoirs and Desultory Writings of the late James d'Alwis* (Colombo, 1939). From it he would have learned that D'Alwis was not a missionary and a Western interpreter of Buddhist Nirvāṇa, but a Sinhalese scholar (1823–1878) who for many years was a member of the Legislative Council. His works on Sinhalese and Pāli grammar are well-known and, as recently as 1966, the long introduction to his translation of the *Sīdat Sangarāva* was reprinted by the Department of National Museums, Ceylon (*A Survey of Sinhala Literature*).

Among the chapters which can be read with profit although not with entire approval, one must mention those dealing with the views of Oldenberg and de La Vallée Poussin, perhaps the most outstanding scholars of all those who have made important contributions to the study of the concept of Nirvāṇa. Welbon is right in maintaining against E. J. Thomas and H. Dumoulin that Oldenberg has not changed his ideas about Nirvāṇa in any essential point. One of the reasons is perhaps the fact that in later years Oldenberg was more occupied with Vedic studies. Nevertheless, he has carefully kept himself informed of the progress of Buddhist studies and each new edition of his famous *Buddha* has been revised by the author. Welbon compares the English translation (based on the first German edition of 1881) with the sixth German edition of 1914. It would have been interesting to compare the changes made by Oldenberg in the editions published during his lifetime, because they contain his reactions to criticisms and to new theories.⁴ His discussion with de La Vallée Poussin is carried through till the seventh German edition of 1920, the last edition revised by Oldenberg. In his chapter on de La Vallée Poussin, Welbon does not mention at all Oldenberg's reactions.

Nobody has written more on Nirvāṇa than de La Vallée Poussin.⁵ It was of course impossible for Welbon to discuss everything written on Nirvāṇa by de La Vallée Poussin. However, it would have been necessary to take into account his latest discussions in 'Une dernière note sur le Nirvāṇa' (*Études d'orientalisme*, publiées par le Musée Guimet à la mémoire de Raymonde Linossier, II, Paris, 1932, 329–54) and in the appendix to the second edition of *Indo-européens et Indo-ariens. L'Inde jusque vers 300 av. J.-C.* (Paris, 1936, 389–92). In his early writings de La Vallée Poussin reacted strongly against the defenders of the orthodoxy of Pāli Buddhism. Although his reaction has certainly been carried too far, the result has

been of great importance to Buddhist studies. In 1902 de La Vallée Poussin concluded the first part of his article on 'Dogmatique bouddhique' (*JA* (1902), II, 237–306) with some methodological remarks on the necessity for a thorough study of Buddhist scholasticism. He stresses the importance of the *Kośa* to which he was to devote many years of study.⁶ He concludes these remarks by pointing out that the dogmatics of the ancient *sūtras* must be studied in the light of the scholastic commentaries. The programme traced by de La Vallée Poussin in these remarks, has consequently been carried out by him. Therefore he was fully entitled to write in 1936 (*Indo-européens*, etc. p. 391) that the exegesis of Nirvāṇa had made decisive progress; "En ce qui concerne l'important problème du Nirvāṇa, notre exégèse a fait des progrès que je crois décisifs. Le point était de distinguer les temps, les écoles, et de lire les textes sans parti-pris" (p. 391). However, as to the doctrines of the old canonical texts almost everything still has to be done: "L'obscurité est encore profonde; l'analyse idéologique et chronologique de Canon est à peine commencée et présente de sérieuses difficultés" (p. 392). One cannot say that since 1936 much progress has been made along the lines indicated by de La Vallée Poussin.

In the above pages no mention has been made of the second and third part of the task which Welbon has set himself: the study of the personal commitment of the scholars discussed and of the relation of the study of Nirvāṇa to the intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Undoubtedly, in most cases, the biographical information available is insufficient for an adequate study of the personal background of the scholars concerned. Welbon has been careful not to extrapolate the personal points of view of the authors from their writings, which, often, are the only sources at our disposal. One would, however, have welcomed a final chapter on the intellectual background, shared by most of the scholars. Only a few remarks can be made here. When one reads the work of such careful and meticulous scholars such as Oldenberg and de La Vallée Poussin, one is forcibly struck with their supercilious attitude towards the Indian mentality. It suffices to refer to the following passage of Oldenberg's *Buddha*: "Dem Inder aber sind die besten der Interessen und Ideale, die gesundes Volksleben in seinen Tiefen ergreifen, fremd (13th ed., 1959, p.15; see also p. 284: "In der schwülen Stille Indiens") and to the passage from de La Vallée Poussin's *The Way to Nirvāṇa*, quoted by Welbon (p. 272): "The historian has not to deal with Latin notions worked out by

sober and clear-sighted thinkers, but with Indian 'philosophumena' concocted by ascetics ... men exhausted by a severe diet and often stupefied by the practice of ecstasy. Indians do not make a clear distinction between facts and ideas, between ideas and words, they never clearly recognized the principle of contradiction." In fairness to de La Vallée Poussin one must, however, draw attention to his confession in the preface of the fifth edition of his *Bouddhisme* (Paris, 1925): "Je dois le dire aussi, j'ai à la longue pris du Bouddhisme une singulière estime C'est faire grand tort au Bouddhisme de le baigner les eaux du Léman, de la Sprée ou de la Tamise" (p. VIII). These opinions of Oldenberg and de La Vallée Poussin are certainly to be explained by the intellectual climate of the second half of the nineteenth century in which they were brought up.

In a few places Welbon mentions the concern of nineteenth century scholars for 'origins'. In his introduction to his *Ausgewählte Kapitel aus der Prasannapadā* (Krakow, 1931, p. IX) Schayer remarks: "Die falsche Suggestion, daß in der Geschichte der Religion nur das Ursprüngliche echt, alles Jüngere dagegen mehr oder weniger eine 'Entartung' sei, hat von Anfang an den Gang der Studien, ihre Richtung und ihre Methode beeinflusst." He adds in a note: "Man errät leicht, woher diese Suggestion stammt: es ist die protestantische Auffassung des 'wahren, evangelischen Christentums' auf das Gebiet des Buddhismus übertragen." Schayer's remarks help us to understand de La Vallée Poussin's reaction to the concepts of the Pāli school. For a Catholic scholar, nurtured in the sacred tradition of the church, a religion is much more than the pure, unadulterated teachings of its founder. However, de La Vallée Poussin was quite aware of the necessity to distinguish older and younger strata in the Buddhist canon (cf. the passage quoted above, p. 400). Welbon states that "the so-called canonical collections in Pāli and Sanskrit Buddhism (*sic*) would not permit a clear distinction between actual statements of the Buddha and later interpretations without making use of the most recent methods of Formgeschichte (*sic*) – methods which, for the most part, are still inaccessible to Buddhist scholars" (p. 116). Here again, one is rather annoyed to find a statement which is not elaborated and substantiated. Many Buddhist scholars are aware of the great problems which complicate the critical study of the Buddhist canon. A careful comparative study of the Buddhist canonical texts in Pāli, Sanskrit and Chinese would be helpful in determining the older layers of the Buddhist canon but one

wonders how one has to proceed from there in order to distinguish between the words of the Buddha and those ascribed to him in later periods. If New Testament scholars have elaborated a method which could be applied to the Buddhist scriptures, Buddhist scholars would only be too glad to make use of it but this has to be shown in some detail. General statements of this kind are not really helpful.

The length of this review, which could easily be extended, is prompted by the interest of the topic studied by Welbon. One has to appreciate the courage of this scholar in undertaking such an ambitious piece of research. It is a pity that the value of Welbon's work is marred not only by many inaccuracies⁷ but also by an insufficient knowledge of the problems inherent in the study of Buddhist literature. Horace's words in his *De arte poetica* have lost nothing of their value: *sumite materiam vestris, qui scribitis, aequam / viribus et versate diu, quid ferre recusent, / quid valeant umeri*. If Welbon heeds Horace's advice, we can look forward with confidence to his future publications.

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NOTES

¹ According to Welbon one of Colebrooke's sources was 'the *Sāṃkhya* (Kapila), one chapter on Bauddhas' (p. 26, n. 8). Colebrooke's essay was published originally in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of London*, volume I. It has been reprinted in the first (London, 1837) and second (London, 1873) editions of his *Miscellaneous Essays*. Only the first edition of his *Miscellaneous Essays* could be consulted by me. It contains the following passage: "The *Sānc'hya* of Capila devotes a whole chapter to controversy; and notices the sect of *Buddha*..." (vol. I, p. 380.).

² On p. 26, n. 9 Welbon writes that he cannot understand that Colebrooke has been overlooked as the scholar who unquestionably established that Buddhism was born in India and refers to de Lubac p. 112 (error for p. 115) and to Renan's 'Premiers travaux sur le bouddhisme'. However, as mentioned by de Lubac this discovery has been made long before 1827 by Ricci (de Lubac, p. 118). In fact, Renan does not say that Hodgson discovered the Indian origin of Buddhism, but that Hodgson by announcing the existence of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts set at rest all doubts which could perhaps be raised: "Tous les doutes furent levés quand M. Hodgson annonça aux Sociétés asiatiques de Calcutta, de Londres et de Paris l'existence dans les monastères du Népal d'une vaste collection de livres bouddhiques écrits en sanscrit et inconnus dans le reste de l'Inde." (*Oeuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, Tome VII (1955), p. 748). One wonders whether Welbon has consulted this passage, referred to by de Lubac.

³ According to Welbon Csoma studied the grammar and dictionary of Giorgi. This description of Giorgi's *Alphabetum Tibetanum* shows clearly that Welbon is not acquainted with the contents of this work (cf. Sylvain Lévi, *Le Népal* I, Paris, 1905, 117-8; L. Petech, *I Missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal* I, Roma, 1952, XCIX-CII).

⁴ On p. 194, n. 1 Welbon states that revised editions of Oldenberg's *Buddha* appeared in 1890, ca. 1894, 1904, 1914 and—just after Oldenberg's death—in 1921. He adds that for much bibliographical assistance, he is indebted here and elsewhere to Shinsho Hanayama, *Bibliography on Buddhism*. Welbon seems not to be aware of the many inaccuracies of Hanayama's work. In his *Nachwort* to the 13th edition of Oldenberg's *Buddha* (Stuttgart, 1959, 457–8) Helmuth von Glasenapp has briefly studied the successive editions. Oldenberg has revised the second (1890), third (1897), fourth (1903), fifth (1906), sixth (1914) and seventh (1920) editions. On p. 209 Welbon mentions Oldenberg's excursus (*sic*) on the term *upādisesa* in the first edition. He makes a few suppositions to explain the fact that it is not reprinted in later editions (p. 213), but has not consulted the preface of the second edition in which Oldenberg explains why he has omitted the three excursus of the first edition (p. VIII).

⁵ For biographical details Welbon seems to have consulted only Paul Masson-Oursel's obituary (*JA* (1938), 287–90). According to this source de La Vallée Poussin attended the University of Liège from 1881 to 1888 (from his twelfth to his nineteenth year). It was there that he was introduced to Sanskrit and Pāli by Charles de Harlez and Philippe Colinet. Ludo Rocher has already drawn attention to the unlikelihood of this information and adds: "We prefer to believe that he attended Liège university from 1888 until he went to Paris at the age of 22" (*JAOS* 90 (1970), p. 590). It is not clear on which source Rocher bases his belief. According to reliable sources of information de La Vallée Poussin studied from 1884 to 1888 at the University of Liège. From 1888 to 1890 he studied Sanskrit, Pāli and Avestan under the direction of Charles de Harlez and Philippe Colinet at the University of Louvain (cf. Marcelle Lalou et Jean Przyluski, 'Notice nécrologique de Louis de La Vallée Poussin', *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* VI (1939), 5–10; Étienne Lamotte, 'Notice sur Louis de La Vallée Poussin', *Annuaire de l'Académie royale de Belgique* (1965), 145–68).

⁶ Curiously enough, Welbon does not mention at all de La Vallée Poussin's translation of the *Kośa*, undoubtedly his greatest contribution to Buddhist studies.

⁷ Welbon is very careless in quoting French and German words, for instance 'trachenden' (p. 207), 'philosophumène' (p. 260, n. 28), 'besoin' for 'soin' (p. 283), 'Révue de l'Histoire des Religions' (p. 309).

Abbreviations:

JA – *Journal Asiatique*, Paris.

JAOS – *Journal of American Oriental Society*, New Haven.

JASB – *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Calcutta.