

## **Adam Clarke: Wesleyan syncretist?**

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### ABSTRACT

Had he been born ten years sooner, Adam Clarke (c.1762-1832) might have been the natural successor to Mr. Wesley. As it is, this towering, multi-lingual polymath ('saint and savant', according to Benjamin Gregory) is one of the most overly neglected leaders of Wesleyan Methodism. There has been no serious full-length biography since the mid-nineteenth century; little critical consideration of his theology and no editions of his correspondence, writings or other papers.

The son of a rural Irish schoolmaster, Clarke rapidly rose to prominence within the Wesleyan body, thrice becoming President of the conference. Yet in some lights he seems to have remained an outsider, partly because of his intellectual (and financial) independence. Although based in London during a key part of his ministry, he preferred the periphery, serving in circuits in the Channel Islands, Cornwall and Shetland (where he was the founder of the Methodist work). He championed mission with the poor and marginalized, supported the abolition of African slavery, and helped to found Strangers' Friend Societies. His theological views verged on the heterodox, partly influenced by his extensive reading of Eastern texts in the original tongues. Yet he steered a middle course between being sympathetic to radicals and loyal to the Wesleyanism where he had found his salvation.

This paper will explore Clarke's engagement with other religions through his academic work, and seek to make links with his practical and personal life. It will focus particularly upon his Christian instruction in 1818 of two Buddhist priests from Ceylon [Sri Lanka], at a time when he was publishing his 8-volume Bible commentary and under severe theological censure from Wesleyans for his denial of the eternal Sonship of Christ. It will also map wider links between him and the emerging missionary movement.

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For a synopsis of Adam Clarke's career and personality, Ian Sellers' entry in the OxfordDNB is as helpful as any:

**Clarke, Adam** (1762–1832), Wesleyan Methodist minister and scholar, was born in Moybeg, Kilcronaghan parish, co. Londonderry. His father, an Anglican, was a village schoolmaster and farmer; his mother was a Presbyterian. His childhood consisted of a series of life-threatening mishaps. He was educated locally, fell under the influence of the Methodists in 1778, and met John Wesley who, after the young Clarke had spent an unhappy month at Kingswood School, Bristol, laid hands on him and sent him out into the work of the ministry. He was appointed to the Bradford (Wiltshire) circuit in 1782 and was received into full connexion the following year. From that date onwards he began to play a prominent and singular role in the evolution of the Wesleyan body. On the one hand he displayed an outsider's aversion to fashionable pulpits and denominational politics and, though compelled for professional reasons to reside almost permanently in London from 1805 to 1815, was always happiest evangelizing literally on the periphery of Wesleyanism: the Channel Islands, Cornwall, Ireland, rural Lancashire, and the Shetlands (where he was the effective planter of Methodism in the 1820s). On the other hand his erudition and academic reputation led to his being thrice elected president of conference (1806, 1814, 1822), and he was also Methodism's principal link with the Anglican evangelicals, enjoying contacts with bishops, universities, prominent laymen, and, through his friendship with the duke of Sussex, with the royal family itself. Close connections with the establishment did not, however, undermine an innate radicalism: he was ever a friend of the poor and the African slave, founding Strangers' Friend societies in several cities and at least six poor schools in his beloved Ireland, thus attacking the influence of the aristocracy and the poor law alike.

Within Wesleyanism Clarke's status ensured that he was above party strife: none the less the anti-Bunting faction claimed him as one of their own. Certainly, as one who had been an admirer of the French revolutionary experiment, he sympathized with the critics of conference 'despotism', favouring a larger role for the laity, Sunday schools, local preachers, small churches, and revivalism, and also promoting the status of women in spiritual leadership. One of the leaders of protest within Wesleyan Methodism, Samuel Dunn (1798–1882), tried in vain to draw Clarke into the liberal camp in 1827; another, James Everett (1784–1872), was later to be his biographer and editor of his literary works. Theologically Clarke was advanced, well beyond the norms of Wesleyan orthodoxy, though he professed absolute loyalty to the spirit of Wesley himself. He assigned an unusually prominent role to reason in matters spiritual, eventually reducing his personal credo to love for God and for man. He entertained certain theological peculiarities, one of which, his denial of the eternal sonship of Christ in favour of a form of adoptionism, led to a spirited controversy during the years 1815–19, when the whole weight of Wesleyan theological disapproval fell upon him. Later, in 1825, Clarke's son, Joseph, who shared his father's liberalism, left Wesleyanism for the Anglican ministry in pursuit of greater theological freedom.

As a scholar Clarke, a late developer and autodidact, plunged eagerly into a whole range of disciplines, folk tales, and romances, as well as Persian, Arabic, Ethiopian, Hindu, Coptic and Sanskrit texts, and subjects including alchemy and the occult, witchcraft, medical curiosities, astronomy, mineralogy, and conchology, while maintaining an overriding interest in the classics and the scriptures. Some saw him as a polymath rather than a scholar, delving into too many subjects for his own good and loving novelty for novelty's sake. However, his literary achievements were very real, as the Wesleyan conference recognized when, for a time, it seconded him to pursue his studies in the public records. He translated C. C. Sturm's *Reflections* (1804) and Claude Fleury's *Manners of the Israelites* (1805). He compiled a six-volume survey of the most important books in ten ancient tongues, and another multi-volume work of English translations of the classics (1803–6), which displays Clarke's considerable skills as a linguist, translator, and critic. He wrote the *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* (2 vols., 1822), commissioned by conference as a reply to Southey's strictures on John Wesley, as well as sundry tracts, including *The Use and Misuse of Tobacco* (1797). A royal commission on the public records, envisaging a new edition of Rymer's *Foedera*, appointed Clarke as editor of the project in 1808. The Methodist scholar, diligent as ever, first reported on the dispersed character of the state records (then to be found in seven different places) before embarking on his assignment. Only volume one and the first part of volume two (1818) of the *Foedera* appeared under his editorial direction: exhausted by the vastness of the task he was compelled to resign. Another important work was his *Commentary on the Whole of Scripture* (8 vols., 1810–24; reprinted in 6 vols., 1861). Once again the temper of the work is a warm, evangelical Arminianism: the one outstanding peculiarity of the Old Testament section (the serpent which tempted Eve is identified as an ape or orang-utan) and the one marked prejudice of the New (the critic's intense anti-Calvinism) should not obscure the fact that the *Commentary* was the original and pioneering work of an expert philologist. One modern scholar described it as displaying 'amazing openness', another as almost 'proto-critical'. His *Discourses on Various Subjects* (3 vols., 1828–30) are wide-ranging, but point to another singularity: Clarke was reaching out beyond the conventional Wesleyan doctrine of perfect love to foreshadow the main thrust of later nineteenth-century holiness teaching.

Clarke's scholarly labours received appropriate recognition from Aberdeen University (MA 1807; LLD 1808) and in his election as a fellow of the Antiquarian Society. Thanks to his literary earnings and his marriage in 1788 to Mary Cooke, the daughter and heiress of a Trowbridge clothier, Clarke in his later years enjoyed an affluent and superior lifestyle. He went in 1815 to reside at Millbrook near St Helens, and in 1824 to Haydon Hall, near Pinner, where he turned the coach house into a chapel and raised a congregation. He died there from cholera, a victim of the great national epidemic, on 26 August 1832, and was buried in the City Road cemetery, London.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clarke, Adam (1762–1832), in [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com) accessed 12 June 2013.

This nicely illustrates two contrasting factors: Clarke's early links with Wesley and his loyal service to the Wesleyans for the rest of his life, but also his independence of mind and career. It is those two contrasting, almost conflicting, elements which may characterize something of the tensions which arose particularly after 1815, in the 'eternal Sonship' theological controversy and Clarke's instructing two 'Buddhist priests' from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).<sup>2</sup>

But it might first be worthwhile considering Clarke's early years, which may help in understanding something of what passed in later life. While accounts of Wesley's early life passed into the Methodist creation myth in some detail, little is generally given of Clarke's background: Ian Sellers' brief snatch is not untypical.

In fact, in the autobiographical 'Account' of his life, written in the third person and edited for publication by his son, Clarke gave extensive detail of his early years.<sup>3</sup> Born in Ireland in an underpopulated area of the Protestant six counties, just within living memory of the Boyne and from plantation stock<sup>4</sup> – English and Anglican on his father's side, Scottish and Presbyterian on his mother's – Clarke's family had not been poor and had certainly been educated. Yet Clarke's childhood was spent in poverty. His father, who had attended Edinburgh and Glasgow universities, had planned to migrate to America, before Clarke was born. He was persuaded otherwise, by which time he had sold or given up all, and had to start from scratch, reduced to being a public parish schoolmaster.

As a young schoolboy Clarke seems to have been something of a dunce. In his autobiographical notes he stated that 'he was a very inapt [sic] scholar ... [he] began to despair of ever being able to acquire any knowledge by means of letters.'<sup>5</sup> However, about the age of eight came a sudden experience of educational enlightenment – a revolution, in his own terms – from which he dated his facility in learning (and particularly in language – he averred that he was no mathematician), although he always had difficulty in grasping initial concepts.

While Clarke's parents 'belonged to different Christian communities, they never had animosities on religious subjects. The parish clergyman, and the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Ceylon' is used throughout to refer to Sri Lanka prior to independence in 1948.

<sup>3</sup> J.B.B. Clarke (ed.), *An Account of the Infancy, Religious and Literary Life of Adam Clarke, LL.D., F.A.S.* [London:T.S.Clarke,1833, 3 vols.]. Clarke's autobiographical notes comprise the substance of vol. i.

<sup>4</sup> See James Everett, *Adam Clarke Portrayed* [London:Reed,1866 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), ii, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Clarke, *Account*, i, 30.

Presbyterian parson, were equally welcome at the house.’<sup>6</sup> He chiefly attended Anglican services, occasionally the Presbyterian meeting, and had a conventional religious upbringing. However, about 1777, Methodist preachers came into the area and he started to attend meetings and classes. His conversion experience, apparently in a shippon, followed. His early years were thus characterized by two points of enlightenment, one educational, the other religious.

John Bredin, then in the Coleraine and Londonderry circuit, wrote to Wesley, who offered the young Adam Clarke a place at Kingswood ‘where he might increase his classical knowledge [and] have the opportunity of exercising his ministerial talents...’<sup>7</sup> However, having made the long journey he was ill received at Kingswood, and when Wesley returned to Bristol he immediately stationed Clarke to Bradford on Avon, and so he started his ministerial career. In his early appointments he experienced privations and hardship, the memory of which remained with him, and always influenced his consideration for other, younger preachers, although he became affluent.

This preamble serves to illustrate some key factors which ran through his life. The first must be an experience of religious pluralism. Then, as now, the nuances of religious affiliation in Ulster were keenly felt, so Clarke’s mixed upbringing, coupled with his Methodist conversion, has a weight of currency. Methodism captured him in his teenage years and his loyalty was ever unswerving. However, it was a loyalty to Wesley’s Methodism: the growing institutionalisation of the nineteenth century shook his affinity, though he was not quite a ‘church Methodist’. Perhaps he might most accurately be considered a ‘primitive Wesleyan’? It should be said that throughout this paper ‘Wesleyan’ indicates the rump denomination, not a body of theology.

The poverty of his early years, coupled with his autodidact learning, and a dose of natural inquisitiveness, led to both a leaning towards those on the margins of society and doctrinal views sometimes on the margins of orthodoxy. This surfaced in the 1810s, a disrupted decade which saw the end of the Napoleonic wars, with subsequent social hardship but also the emergence of Britain as the leading colonizing (and commercial) nation in Europe. Alongside this came the emergence of overseas missions as a priority for transatlantic anglophone and Western Christendom.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 121. Also letters of John Wesley to John Bredin, [John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of John Wesley* [London:Epworth,1931],vii, 86, 128].

<sup>8</sup> See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity, the first three thousand years* [London:Penguin,2010], 873-879.

In the Wesleyan microcosm this saw not only the formal inception of the Missionary Society but also a serious dogmatic spat about the nature of the Christ which the church's mission proclaimed. In Clarke's own life the decade was occupied by the writing of his Commentary on the Bible, which drew heavily on his extensive philological understanding of near-Eastern texts. In his commentary of Genesis, his translation of the *nachash* which tempted Eve as a kind of ape, not a serpent, predictably caused both outrage and amusement.

But it was the 1817 publication of the first of his volumes on the New Testament that sparked the 'eternal sonship' controversy. Forty years previously, in the process of his evangelical experience, Clarke had overheard a (Socinian) remark that the Methodists were in error since they prayed to Jesus and not to God. When, a little later, the light broke in upon Clarke, it was with a conviction of the centrality of Christ, although not His eternal pre-existence. This conviction, for better or for worse, remained with him to his dying day.

Although the controversy, which continued to erupt periodically over subsequent decades, has now largely passed into obscurity, it has been thoroughly described and analysed,<sup>9</sup> and it is not the purpose of this paper to add to that literature. Its intention is to set it contemporaneously alongside Clarke's support for the missionary movement, and his adoption of the Christian instruction of two 'Buddhist priests' from Ceylon.

In defending the young foreign missionary movement in the Conference, Clarke stated that 'at present we have comparatively little more to do, especially in this nation, than to maintain the conquest we have gained, conduct the rising generation into the fold of Christ, and continue to sow and water a seed which, through the mercy of God, is almost every place, falling into good ground.'<sup>10</sup> A mission in Ceylon had been one of that other prominent Wesleyan, Thomas Coke's dreams, although he died on the voyage there in 1814. It was successfully established, under British Methodism until the 1960s, and the Sri Lankan Methodist Church will celebrate the jubilee of its independence in 2014.

When in 1815 the British gained control of Kandy, they achieved supremacy over the whole island and promised that 'The Religion of Budhoo professed by the Chiefs and Inhabitants of these Provinces is declared inviolable and its rites, Ministers and Places of Worship are to be maintained and protected.'<sup>11</sup> Such

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<sup>9</sup> Apart from biographies of Clarke, see Ian Sellers, *Adam Clarke, Controversialist* (unpublished Wesley Historical Society lecture, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* [London:Heinemann,1974], 168

<sup>11</sup> quoted Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism* [London/New York:Routledge,1988], 175

toleration was roundly denounced by politicians such as Wilberforce and other Evangelicals, with whom Clarke was closely associated, although it was not until 1824, with the death of John D'Oyly, who had brokered the treaty, that the official position shifted. By 1830 or so missionaries like Gogerly were using militantly aggressive language and methods.<sup>12</sup> So initially relationships with the Buddhists – who had formed the vast Sinhalese majority for centuries – seem to have been moderately tolerant.

In 1818 the returning Chief Justice, Sir Alexander Johnston (1775-1849), brought with him two 'High Priests of Budhoo'<sup>13</sup> who had come at their own request to be instructed in Christianity. These two young men in their mid-20s should be identified as members of the Buddhist monastic order, the Sangha. A comparison between that mendicant monastic group and the early Methodist preachers might be an interesting topic – especially if Adam Clarke's early experience of poverty and hardship was typical. The two had travelled 'before the mast', possibly at their own request, given their preference for simplicity and poverty.

During this period Buddhism in Ceylon was in transition, and the position of the Sangha in particular was under some threat. The eirenic disposition of Buddhism, with its capacity to understand other religions peaceably, meant that it absorbed some of the features of Christianity. Further, the relative peace and prosperity which the island experienced led to the emergence of a middle class which, like free churches in Britain, tended to generate a stronger role for the laity.

By contrast, the incoming missionaries brought an implicit conversionist approach, with a negative view of the beliefs and culture they encountered. Elizabeth Harris discusses how 'the early British visitors' considered the Buddhism they experienced. Much hinged upon the (perceived) rationality of their religious beliefs and customs; and not infrequently there was thought to be little reason in them. Clarke differed. In his eyes, referring to the two 'priests':

These men cannot be treated as common heathens; they are both Philosophers – men of profound erudition in their way; with as far as I can judge, a powerful command of Eloquence. They are deeply read in the most speculative, most refined and purest ethics of the braham and Budhoo systems. In these respects their acquirements are immense.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> see Gombrich, 179.

<sup>13</sup> Clarke, *Account*, ii, 350.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Harris, *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka* [London:Routledge, 2009], 34.

Clarke was in London in May 1818 to preach two fundraising sermons for the Wesleyan Missionary Society, around the time of its inception. While in the pulpit he received a note from Johnston, from the ship then approaching land, and later met the two Buddhists with a view to educating them as they sought. Why Johnston, a Scot with no immediate Methodist connections, should have contacted Clarke is unclear. Johnston's enlightened administration in Ceylon had been much applauded: Lord Grey declared in the House of Lords that his 'conduct in the island of Ceylon alone had immortalised his name.'<sup>15</sup>

Not only were the 'Buddhist priests' admired for their learning, by Clarke and others, but also their looks.

They are cousins-german,<sup>16</sup> and are about five feet six inches, and quite black: they have fine eyes, particularly the elder, regular features, and the younger has a remarkably fine nose: there is a gentleness and intelligence in their faces which has greatly impressed me in their favor; in short they are lovely youths.<sup>17</sup>

This physiognomic analysis was clearly significant in assessing their personalities and their intellectual capacity,<sup>18</sup> and Clarke willingly agreed to instruct them in the basics of the Christian religion. As he saw it, the 'two members of the Sri Lankan monastic Sangha ... possessed a 'false theology and philosophy'. But this was not through a lack of reason but a lack of revelation.'<sup>19</sup>

They travelled first to Bristol then onwards to Dr. Clarke's home at Millbrook, near Liverpool, where they remained for two years. Evidently there was an initial phase of learning English, although Clarke's facilities with languages (he was reputedly fluent in some 15 tongues, particularly 'oriental') probably enabled him to understand them. A summary of the basics of Christian doctrine which he taught them was published in 1820 as *Clavis Biblica, or a Compendium of Biblical Knowledge*.

Clarke's own spread of knowledge was extraordinarily wide, given his thirst for learning in all sectors, which made him a gifted tutor for a general education. As well as doctrinal studies, mention is made that 'Munhi also manifested a considerable taste for the study of history and jurisprudence, and on all occasions they loved and thirsted for instruction.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 'Johnston, Sir Alexander (1775–1849)' in [www.oxforddnb.com](http://www.oxforddnb.com), accessed 15 June 2013.

<sup>16</sup> First cousins.

<sup>17</sup> Clarke, *Account*, ii, 351.

<sup>18</sup> They had started to grow their hair during the voyage, perhaps a sign of their adaptation to Christianity.

<sup>19</sup> Clarke, *Account*, ii, 351.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 354.



'Among other objects which excited their anxious curiosity, was that of frost and snow; believing the accounts they had heard respecting these, to be mere fictions of the fancy...' <sup>21</sup> Their incredulity on their first experience, a heavy overnight snowfall, is told at length. Clarke's son skated on the frozen pond, and it took them some convincing that he was not flying.

They were viewed to some extent as spectacles for exhibition, though perhaps not as much as might have been. In August 1819, the Earl and Countess of Derby visited, with their retinue, partly to invite 'the Doctor' <sup>22</sup> to their nearby ancestral seat, Knowsley Park, but clearly the two exotic young men were a central source of attention. <sup>23</sup> In 1820 the Liverpool artist Alexander Mosses painted them in Clarke's study at Millbrook: Mosses' only successful submission for the Royal Academy. This is probably the painting 'Dr. Adam Clarke and the Priests of Buddha' later engraved. <sup>24</sup>

However, times when individuals from distant lands were viewed as prodigies was passing following the explorations of Bankes, Cook and others. The two monks had practical purposes: they apparently translated a Singhalese text for Sir Joseph Bankes. Also an anti-slavery poem (from English) which had been written by Hannah More – given their proximity to Liverpool, the prosperity of which owed a great deal to the triangular trade, this may have been somewhat contentious. <sup>25</sup>

Possibly partly relating to that issue, Clarke resisted their wish to be formally initiated into Christianity, but he eventually acceded and in early May 1720 they underwent baptism at Portland Chapel, Liverpool, taking Christian names as Adam and Alexander. It may be that Mosses' painting is linked to the occasion. Soon afterwards they asked to return to their own country, and Clarke arranged for them to travel out with Sir Richard Otteley, judge and later successor to Sir Alexander Johnston as head of the judiciary for the colony. By the end of May

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> This is how Clarke was generally known: as well as his honorary D.D. he had taken some medical courses at Trinity College, Dublin in 1790-1 [Clarke, *Account*, i, 282].

<sup>23</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> Earl (1752-1834), Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire 1776-1834, known for politics and racing – originator of the Oaks and the Derby.

<sup>24</sup> Painting now at the Museum of Methodism, City Road, London [LDWMM 1992/496]. Line and stipple engraving by John Henry Robinson, published 1844 by Fisher Son & Co.. An image of the picture is at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/adam-clarke-and-two-former-buddhists-133601>

<sup>25</sup> Clarke, *Account*, ii, 358.

they had sailed. Writing to Clarke ('My dear Father') from their ship, off Deal on 22 May 1820, the younger, Alexander Dherma Rama stated 'Sir, I will try to be Englishman long as I live; and if any try to make me Singhalese man, that I not like'.<sup>26</sup>

From Columbo in December 1820, having arrived back home, Adam Munhi Rat'hana avowed 'I wish to have some power to preach the Gospel to Heathen people.'<sup>27</sup> The durability of the Evangelical Protestant attitude, once they were back within their own culture, is not wholly clear. 'Problems arose in Ceylon after their return, where missionary attitudes towards Buddhism did not match his. [Clarke's]'<sup>28</sup> It seems that to some extent they reverted to a more typically Buddhist view of both/and rather than either/or. The question is – to what extent did Clarke share that perspective?

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How to conclude? I first properly encountered Adam Clarke in reading a letter of 21 December 1830, from him to James Everett. Reflecting that he was now passing '3score years & 10', and that 'this day is the shortest I may ever see', he reflected that he 'never fell out with life. I have borne many of its rude blasts & I have been [privileged?] with not a few of its finest breezes'.<sup>29</sup> In fact he lived for over two more years although 'the last two years of his life were perhaps the least happy in all his eventful career.'<sup>30</sup> Certainly that was the mood of his letter to Everett, which continued for four sides. 'O my Everett,' he concluded, 'When I sat down to write not one word of what is written was designed.' Everett, who was becoming the most vocal opponent to the increasing autocracy of the Wesleyan leadership, and would twenty years later be expelled from the Wesleyans, was Clarke's protégé and in some ways inherited Clarke's mantle. A number of Clarke's papers seem to have passed to him.

'The whole of our plan is, I believe, utterly dissolved...' he wrote that dark midwinter day.<sup>31</sup> Clarke had known Wesley, had held a candle to his hymn book and whispered the words into his ear when the frail old man could not see to read.<sup>32</sup> But more than that, he comprehended Wesley; he shared Wesley's

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<sup>26</sup> Clarke, *Account*, ii, 377.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>28</sup> 'Clarke, Dr. Adam', <http://www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk/dmbi> (accessed 13 June 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Adam Clarke – James Everett, 21 December 1830, in United Library, Garrett Evangelical Seminary, Evanston, Ill. U.S.A..

<sup>30</sup> Gallagher, (1963), 85.

<sup>31</sup> Clarke – Everett, 21 December 1830, *op.cit.*.

<sup>32</sup> William Pollard, notes of conversations with Dr. Adam Clarke, 1827, ms. in W.H.S. library, Oxford Brookes University [B/CLA/POL].

emphasis on the primacy for religious experience, over and above dogma, churchmanship, education. Moreover, he shared some of Wesley's ambiguities, a complex personality with a depth of learning yet adhering to simplicity. Clarke's 'Wesleyanism' was continuation of the man's mission, forward-looking and flexible, not the defence of an institution.

But years before I visited Evanston and read this letter, I had seen the painting of Clarke and the two Buddhists when surveying the artworks at Wesley's Chapel in London. I wondered then, what was the story behind this picture? The composition uses a distinctly classical pose, redolent of Reynolds, Van Dyck or Titian, in which the learned magister instructs his pupils. They look to him while he gazes into the beyond; they are in the shadows while he is outlined against the light shade of his library bindings. The classical allusion is echoed by the wall decoration behind Munhi and Dherma. But is this paternalistic energy the actuality of the episode?

Buddhists generally would not have an exclusivist view of religion, and the position of Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon at that time suggests that it enjoyed at least a relationship of acceptance of incoming Protestantism, which was to some extent reciprocated. It would seem that the two 'priests' were essentially wanting to know more, to immerse themselves in Christian culture, and even once baptized still regarded themselves, in some sense, as Buddhists. Mosses' picture shows them in their saffron robes, though their heads are not shaven.

Given a number of factors in Clarke's background which can be seen as reflected in his writings, and must have been prevalent of his very extensive reading of middle-eastern and eastern texts, certainly a tolerance of other views, including creedal positions, can be recognized. While he was a lifelong devotee of John Wesley, his optimistic Whiggism sits in contrast to Wesley's (albeit characteristically ambiguous) Toryism, a position which brought him into direct confrontation with Jabez Bunting and his faction.

Against the Buntingites 'hard' Methodism, anti-democratic and dogmatic, Clarke stood in contrast. Not only the breadth of his learning, but accusations of its lack of depth, told against him. Like Wesley, he was more concerned with experiential faith than right doctrine or church loyalty. To quote Ian Sellars; 'Bodies of divinity he regarded as dangerous, filling heads with systematic knowledge instead of hearts with experimental truth'.<sup>33</sup> He had, in Reg Ward's words describing the 'missionary church' impetus of the early nineteenth century, 'a

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<sup>33</sup> Sellars, 1975, 5.

veritable passion ... against systematic divinity, as the illicit offspring of metaphysics, Platonic or scholastic'.<sup>34</sup>

This suggests something of a divided personality which I have observed elsewhere: 'that Methodism is in essence characterized by tensions; like the Wesley family itself, there is a tendency towards the bipolar.'<sup>35</sup> While this can be recognised in John Wesley (indeed, it accounts for much of that elusiveness which generates continuing scholarship), it is also clear about Clarke's times, when Wesleyan Methodism was in the between, evolving into a free church. In July 1820, on the accession of George IV, the conference 'voted unanimously, a most Loyal, Dutiful and Affectionate Address to His Majesty'. However, as Clarke had to explain to Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary:

'a deputation from the three denominations of Dissenters, has been condescendingly received by His Majesty...[the Wesleyans] standing nearer to the established church, than any of the others, holding without exception, all her doctrines, venerating her authority, and using her religious service...'<sup>36</sup>

suggests they were in a position of being neither fish nor fowl.

Clarke would have had immense difficulty with the notion that there was a 'world beyond Christianity'. In his 1820 *Clavis Biblica*, which set out the precepts he had taught them, he 'affirmed that the Holy Spirit was present in the hearts of all people...[having] an inclusivist stance rooted in natural theology, reinforced, perhaps, by his dialogue with the two monks.'<sup>37</sup> Was he a syncretist? This assumes a view of Christianity as an exclusive religion, which Clarke would probably not have held. Certainly he considered Christianity (as articulated by Wesleyan Methodism) to be the height and depth and *raison d'être* of his entire existence. But his knowledge of Eastern texts, his Ulster upbringing, and his generosity of spirit make it seem unlikely that he would have taken an absolutist position. It depends, in the end, on just what is meant by 'syncretism'.

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<sup>34</sup> W.R. Ward, *Baptist Quarterly*, XXV/4 (Oct 1973), 172.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Forsaith, 'Methodism and its images', in (ed.) Charles Yrigoyen Jr., *T&T Clark Companion to Methodism* [London, New York: T&T Clark: 2010], 367.

<sup>36</sup> Clarke, *Account*, ii, 379.

<sup>37</sup> Harris, 2009, 34.