

Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Early British Period

IF we are to understand the place and achievements of the Christian missions in Ceylon correctly it is necessary to remind ourselves of some of the reasons which brought the missionaries to our land and which made them continue to work here. The Christian missionary movement was due to the conviction that as Christians enjoyed the gift of the Gospel it was their inescapable duty to share it with others. It was the highest good they knew and more important than all the material goods they had to share. Then again they learnt from the reports they received that there were in Ceylon a number of Christian people who were unattended and who were in danger of giving up their Christianity because of the lack of pastoral care. Thirdly, they found that there were a large number of people in this country who, whatever religion they professed, were in fact at that time bound by superstitious beliefs and practices which were not assisting in their moral and spiritual growth. And finally the missionaries also felt that in view of the neglect of education by government it was their responsibility to set up schools in both the vernaculars and in English for the good of the people. The Christian missionary cause then was inspired by at least as lofty motives as those which have inspired the proclamation of other great religious faiths in other lands.

(a) **The London Missionary Society¹**

The first of the non-Roman missionaries to come to Ceylon in the British Period were those of the London Missionary Society which from almost its inception hoped to send Missionaries to the "neglected regions of the Eastern World"². In 1804 when their first mission to the East was organized, Ceylon was one of the earliest fields chosen; and of the first six missionaries selected for the Eastern mission three were appointed to work in the island. The Revd. M. C. Vos who had worked in Holland and in the Cape of Good Hope as a minister of the Dutch Church was appointed superintendent of the mission, and Johann Peter Mathias Ehrhardt and John David Palm were appointed to assist him³. Ehrhardt and Palm passed sometime in Holland to learn the Dutch language preparatory to setting sail. Thus their primary purpose appears to have been to minister to the Dutch congregations.

1. The records of the London Missionary Society of their work in Ceylon are scanty. Nearly all the original documents have been lost from the Society's archives and my authorities are the few remaining records of the Society dealing with this period.

2. Report of the Missionary Society, Vol. I, p. 192.

3. Mrs. Vos and Mrs. Palm who accompanied their husbands were expected to assist in the education of women and children. Report of Miss. Soc., Vol. I, p. 193. Mrs. Vos however, died on her way to Ceylon at Tranquebar. p. 232.

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The missionaries seem to have had some difficulties before they left for Ceylon. The historian of the Society records that "no vessel of the East India Company was permitted to grant this company of missionaries a passage, as they went out in face of the open hostility of the government"⁴. And so the missionaries went to Copenhagen in order to leave for Ceylon. All except Mr. and Mrs. Palm sailed from Copenhagen on a Danish boat on April 20th, 1804, arriving at Tranquebar in South India on December 5th of that year. Mr. and Mrs. Palm set sail on October the 18th and arrived at Tranquebar on June 4th, 1805. While at the Cape, Palm had found a young man, William Read, as a further recruit to the Ceylon Mission. From South India, Vos, Ehrhardt and Read set sail in January, reaching Mannar in North Ceylon on the 25th of that month. Mr. and Mrs. Palm followed some months later.

Both the enthusiasm of the leader of the mission and the state of Christianity in Mannar at this time are reflected in a letter Vos wrote to the Society sometime after the arrival of the mission in Ceylon. On reaching Mannar, Vos says, "I directly went on shore and enquired if there was an opportunity to preach there the next day. The commanding officer directly gave order to clean the building which the Dutch people in former times used for their church, and I sent a circular letter to all the Dutch, giving notice, that the next day I should preach in their church and in their language. These poor people who had not heard a sermon at this place during nine years rejoiced and came as many as there were, the next day to the church . . ." Vos found about a hundred Protestants in Mannar—counting military personnel and their children—none of whom had pastoral care after the Dutch ministers left Ceylon. There was not a single schoolmaster in the area. One Protestant father had got three of his children baptized in the Roman Catholic Church and another had baptized two of his children himself as there were no Protestant clergymen to whom they could have gone. From Portuguese times in particular Mannar had been a strong Roman Catholic centre and now it appeared to have had about two thousand Roman Catholics. There were also a few Muslims and a large number of Hindus⁵.

The missionaries arrived in Colombo from Mannar on Monday the 4th February, 1805. They were welcomed by the Chaplain, the Revd. T. J. Twisleton and Governor North and arrangements were made for their work. Vos, with Read to help him was stationed at Galle and Ehrhardt at Matara—both centres of Dutch populations. The missionaries, who were received favourably by the local inhabitants, now set about learning the vernacular while they preached and ministered to the Dutch and instructed their children⁶.

4. R. Lovett: *History of the L.M.S.*, (1899), Vol. II. London, p. 19.

5. *Transactions of the Missionary Society*, Vol. II, p. 264 ff. Letter from Vos to Directors of the Society, February 18th, 1805.

6. *Report of Miss. Soc.*, Vol. I, pp. 232-3.

The London Missionary Society had been ready to finance the missionaries in their work. But North did not think it advisable to leave the missionaries wholly independent of the Government. As he wrote to the then Secretary of State for the Colonies he was convinced of the necessity of keeping the ultimate control of the ecclesiastical establishment in the hands of the government. He did not wish to leave even a part of the control to the discretion of a Society far away in England. As many a government has found, from its own standpoint the financial control of a religion is always advantageous to it, even if in the process the religion itself is harmed. And this thought of the advantage to government seems to have guided North's policy in giving 'legal pastoral authority' to Vos over the district in which he worked, and in the payment of allowances to all three missionaries.⁷

Before the departure of these missionaries to their stations their first impressions of the state of Christianity in Ceylon at this time were confirmed by two Dutch ministers in Colombo. "One hundred thousand of those who are called Christians, because they are baptized, need not go back to heathenism, for they never have been anything but worshippers of Buddha"⁸. The chief enemy of Christianity was again revealed to be none other than nominal Christianity. So Vos wrote to the Directors of the Missionary Society impressing on them the vastness of the opportunities before them and requesting the society to send further missionary aid.

Meanwhile Palm too arrived in Ceylon and was stationed at Tellipallai in Jaffna where, as in Galle and Mannar, there were descendants of the European Colonists. Here he ministered, preached and catechised in the Church in which Philip Baldaeus had formerly ministered. Mrs. Palm assisted in the evangelistic work among the women and children⁹.

The work at the several centres was carried on for some years after which the missionaries began to have some difficulties. Sometime before North left, Vos, who was working in the Galle District, was transferred to Colombo. Here in addition to the two Dutch clergy already ministering to the European congregations Vos worked among the people preaching to a few of the Dutch who attended the church to which he was appointed but to a greater number at his residence and at two or three other private houses during the week. Vos' ministrations, however, seem to have proved over-zealous and offended the Dutch Consistory in Colombo which looked after the spiritual interests of the Dutch congregations. One at least of the reasons for the trouble would

7. C.O. 54, 17, North to Camden, 27th February, 1805. C. Buchanan: "Christian Researches", p. 45. Report of Miss. Soc., Vol. I, p. 233. Transactions of the Miss. Soc., Vol. II, pp. 264-267. Letter of Vos; and *ibid.*, p. 457. letter from Arbuthnot to Palm.

8. Report of Miss. Soc., Vol. I, p. 234

9. Report of Miss. Soc., Vol. I, pp. 291-2. C. Buchanan: *op. cit.* p. 43. Mrs. Palm was perhaps the first Christian woman missionary from the West in Ceylon.

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seem to have been that Vos was marrying young people without parental consent! The Dutch Consistory then made representations to Maitland who on the result of a Supreme Court enquiry first removed Vos from office and later ordered him to quit the island. Vos left for South India and ministered for sometime in a Dutch Church at Negapatam and thence departed to the Cape of Good Hope, his earlier field of work. The removal of this experienced missionary was actually a blow to the London Missionary Society for from this time its work appears to have declined.

The fact that the opposition of the Consistory persisted for a while even after the expulsion of Vos, gives point to the supposition that the Consistory was not very happy at the presence of these clergy. In 1807, Ehrhardt had come to Colombo for a time for purposes of study, but was ordered to return to Matara and after his return he had received a second order directing him not to "interfere" with the Dutch Christians, but to confine his work to the Sinhalese¹⁰.

Later, however the Consistory seems to have been more tolerant. In 1810 Ehrhardt's sphere of work was enlarged "by a warrant from the governor" in Matara and Galle, and Read worked successfully among the soldiers, kept a school for teaching English to Sinhalese and Portuguese boys and "got two approved catechisms translated into Dutch, Portuguese and Cinghalese" which he hoped to get printed at Colombo¹¹.

The work of the missionaries was greatly helped by the interest taken by Alexander Johnstone and other officials and by the revival of educational work after Castlereagh's representations to Maitland. Encouraged by Johnstone, the Directors of the Society wrote to Palm, Ehrhardt and Read to reside in the interior villages and work among the natives, devoting their time specially to the education of the children so that a foundation might be laid for raising Christian Churches among the Sinhalese. By 1813 Ehrhardt had been appointed "to visit the schools in Matara and enquire into the character and conduct of the schoolmasters". Palm did similar work at Tellipallai encouraged by the Honourable (later Lord) Molesworth who had established several schools, one of which was for the children of the sepoy's in the Jaffna garrison and included a number of Hindu, Muslim and Portuguese children, and another, under Christian David's superintendence. Read taught at Ambalangoda and superintended about 28 schools which he had found in a deplorable state in the Galle district, owing partly to the negligence of the schoolmasters, and partly to the reluctance of the villagers to send their children to school¹².

10. Report of Miss. Soc., Vol. I (1809), pp. 291-2. Wills Dixon: The Colonial Administrations of Sir Thomas Maitland (Longmans 1939) pp. 104-5.

11. *Ibid.*, (1810). pp. 337-8.

12. Report of the Miss. Soc., Vol. I, pp. 464-5, 513.

This work of superintending the schools brought the missionaries into a new relationship with the State. They were now fully paid by the Government and considered to be a part of "the establishment". In 1812 Palm was removed from Tellipallai and appointed to a Dutch Church in Colombo on the death of the Dutch minister who had been stationed there; and in the same year Ehrhardt was appointed to a church in Matara¹³. Thus when the missionaries came into financial dependence on the Government, their connexion with the Missionary Society in London gradually ceased.

Palm, Read and Ehrhardt appear to have continued working in Ceylon for some years after this. But from the point of view of the Society its mission to Ceylon was a failure¹⁴. It sent no new missionaries to the island. And the Society ceased to count Ceylon as one of its fields of work after 1818. One of the last records of the connexion of the Society with its agents is a letter in which Read writes of having had some trouble with those among whom he worked. He had been recalled to Colombo and deprived of his salary, and therefore sought the Society's help¹⁵. In a later record, however, we read that he was in charge of a school and that Ehrhardt had been appointed as a missionary to the Dutch inhabitants at Cochin¹⁶.

The historian of the London Missionary Society concludes his survey of the work of the Society's agents in Ceylon by deploring their connexion with the government and says: "That the men did good work is certain: but it is equally certain that as the agents were supported by the government, other considerations than missionary necessities became dominant. The mission became an early example of the unsatisfactory result, during the first twenty-five years of the Society's efforts, of attempting too soon to make missions locally self-supporting"¹⁷. The Society had wrongly thought that dependence on the government would really mean assistance to the missionary cause. But actually it only spelled the severance of the Society's connexion with Ceylon, and of the help it could have given to Evangelism in Ceylon.

(b) Baptist Missions

The first Baptist Mission in Ceylon began its work at the time and in the circumstances it did on account of the difficulties that were experienced first in Bengal and then in Burma by one of the early missionaries sent to the

13. Report of the Miss. Soc., Vol. I, pp. 478-9. Lovett, Vol. II, p. 21.

14. Lovett, Vol. II, p. 21.

15. MSS. letter of Read to the Directors of the Society: Colombo, 10th February, 1814 (L.M.S. Archives).

16. "The Missionary Register: containing the Principal Transactions of the various Institutions for propagating the Gospel" etc. (London: Seeley 1819 ff.), p. 42; Harvard: "A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India (London 1823), p. 164.

17. Lovett, Vol. II, p. 21.

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East by the Baptist Missionary Society in England. James Chater and his wife had been sent to Bengal on missionary work by the Society but after an unwelcome reception by the government in Bengal Chater was sent to Rangoon. Missionary work in Burma, however, was full of difficulties as Burma was in the throes of civil war. And so the Chaters who had gone to Burma in 1807 decided in 1810 that they should seek fresh fields for their work. On his return to Bengal in 1812 Chater was informed that Ceylon would be a possible place for work. The Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society stated: "Brother Chater has pitched upon Columba in the island of Ceylon as the scene of his future labours and is enquiring for a ship to take him thither. Ceylon contains 280,000 nominal Christians"^{17a}. He heard that missionaries would be welcome as the inhabitants of Colombo "generally called Christians" (a phrase used no doubt, because of the vast number of Christians who had been baptized in Portuguese and Dutch times) were "perishing for lack of knowledge". Chater's desire to come to Ceylon was strengthened and approved by "the Fathers and Brethren at Serampore". A circumstance favourable to Chater's plan was "that a fount of Cingalese types, to print an edition of the New Testament in that language, at the expense and under the patronage of the Calcutta Auxiliary Bible Society, was then casting at Serampore, and the President and Secretary of that Society expressed their approbation of his undertaking as tending to bring the version into immediate operation and effect"¹⁸.

James and Ann Chater with their young sons arrived in Ceylon on April 16th, 1812 and were received with much kindness by the Governor, Sir Robert Brownrigg, and by other Government Officials. They were allowed to make their home in Colombo and adopt it as their centre of work¹⁹. With characteristic foresight Chater set himself as his first task the study of the Sinhalese language and the 'customs and prejudices' of the people of the country. Meanwhile he preached in Colombo to those who understood English, and for this he obtained permission to hold services in an empty warehouse which was later converted to a chapel. The population in Colombo at this time was composed of European soldiers and descendants of the Dutch and Portuguese, Moor traders, besides the Sinhalese and Tamils. Chaters' congregation was at first composed of young European civilians and a few Burghers who understood English. Some British soldiers too formed an important section of his hearers²⁰.

17a. The Baptist Missionary Society: Periodical Accounts, Vol. IV, p. 405.

18. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. IV, p. 405 f.; Vol. V, p. 141 ff.

19. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. IV, p. 405 f., Vol. V, p. 141 f., p. 274 f.

20. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, p. 274 ff, B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, p. 604; Vol. VI, pp. 54-5; p. 61; The Baptist Magazine incorporating the Missionary Herald, October, 1819, pp. 452-3. Letter from Chater to the Society: 24th November, 1818.

The results of Chater's labours during the first few years of his ministrations were not very encouraging. Besides the apathy of a large part of the Protestant population in Colombo, Chater also found an obstacle in the suspicion with which his Baptist professions were held by some of the other Christians²¹. Writing to the Society in August, 1813 he said: "Colombo is indeed a valley of dry bones . . . I hope the opposition made to missionary effort will soon cease"²². And again, writing to his fellow missionaries at the Baptist mission station at Serampore in Bengal in October of the same year he complained: "Indeed from among the young men of whom I expected my congregation chiefly to consist, we have scarcely any hearers at all. Still however, some do attend, though but few, very constantly, and others occasionally. One or two, I think, are very serious, and some others give a pleasing hope". Generally, however, he found all classes of Society in Colombo "deeply sunk in earthly vain delights"²³. A school which the Chaters opened in the early stages of their work does not appear to have been very successful²⁴. Three years after Chater began work, although he had a fair congregation, the actual "membership" of his church, i.e. those who had received adult baptism, was only three. One of these was Hendrick Siers, a young government clerk of Dutch descent, and a member of the Dutch Reformed Church who had been attracted to Chater's Church by his preaching and ministrations. Siers was baptized by Chater, resigned his post with the government, and devoted himself to missionary work serving under Chater and ultimately proving of great help to him and to the Baptist mission²⁵.

Chater's main concern, however, was to work among the Ceylonese population. In 1813 he began to minister to the Ceylonese at Grandpass. And as the prospects of his work among the Europeans progressively waned he devoted more time to work in the villages on the outskirts of Colombo. In his efforts at village evangelism he got help not only from Siers who often accompanied him in his itinerations but also from Ceylonese officials. In a village about two miles from Colombo, for instance, Chater held meetings and preached to the villagers in the house of a Muhandiram (i.e. a chief Headman) whose nephew, a translator under the Government, often acted as interpreter to Chater²⁶. At the suggestion of the Muhandiram, Chater visited Jae'a where the people seemed more disposed to listen to him than in any other place he had preached. Chater's first convert from among the Sinhalese appears to

21. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. VI, pp. 60-1; p. 147.

22. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, pp. 391-2; letter from Chater to the Society, August 12th, 1813.

23. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. VI, p. 55.

24. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, pp. 392-3, letter from Chater to the Serampore Brethren, October 30th, 1813.

25. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, p. 483 f., p. 603; Vol. VI, pp. 284-5.

26. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, p. 482.

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have been a Buddhist monk who was later baptized and took the name Theophilus²⁷.

In 1817 Chater took his work among the Ceylonese a step further by building a chapel and a residence at Grandpass. Early in 1815 he visited Galle on missionary work. "Truly the harvest is plenteous", he wrote, "there are many larger villages, in which are good churches (any of which are a good missionary station) in which they have no instruction"²⁸. In 1818 he visited Matara, Bentota and Ambalangoda in the southern districts along the coast and selected Hanwella not very far away from Colombo in the interior as a convenient site for a central station for missionary work²⁹. Here he built a chapel with the help of some government officials³⁰. Chater and his assistant Siers did not always get an encouraging response at these places. In Biagama which he visited in about 1816, for instance he mentions that the people were not disposed to listen to him. Even in places where five to six hundred were nominally Christian and professed "to be of the Reformed Religion" not one responded to him³¹.

At a few of these places in the villages however Chater and Siers were able to open some small schools. By 1819 there appear to have been 3 of these with 150 children³². Some of these students were of help to Chater in his evangelistic tours³³. By the end of the present period a girls' school too had been formed with 17 pupils³⁴.

Although Chater often sought help from the Baptist Missionary Society³⁵ during this period, the only missionary to be sent in response to his requests was the Revd. Thomas Griffiths who arrived with his wife in Ceylon in 1816. He was stationed in Galle but after ministering there and opening some schools in the villages he had to return to England in 1817 on account of failing health³⁶. The lack of sufficient personnel was one of the chief obstacles which the small Baptist Mission, like other missions which came later, had to encounter. But this was relieved to some extent by the co-operation which Chater received

27. The Historical Sketch of the Baptist Mission in Ceylon (Kandy 1850), p. 8.

28. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. VI, p. 57.

29. B.M., M.H., October, 1819, pp. 452-453.

30. The Historical Sketch, op. cit., p. 9.

31. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. VI, p. 60 f. Letter from Chater to Society, February 7th, 1816, p. 147.

32. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. VII, p. 22. Report of the B.M.S. Committee 1813. See also Report of Committee 1823, p. 20.

33. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. VI, p. 57.

34. Missionary Register, 1826, p. 135. By this time girls' schools had been begun by missionaries of other Societies working in Ceylon too. In 1827, two girls schools and in 1828 three were reported. M.R., 1827, pp. 103-4; 1828, p. 118, Historical Sketch, p. 12.

35. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, pp. 603, 605; Vol. VI, pp. 58, 221-5. B.M., M.H., February, 1819, pp. 89-90.

36. Historical Sketch, op. cit., p. 7; B.M., M.H., May, 1819, p. 227. Letter from Griffiths, October 30th, 1818. B.M., M.H., January, 1820, p. 42.

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from missionaries who were now in the field and who often accompanied him in village itinerations. Since Chater arrived the number of missionaries in Ceylon had progressively increased. The Wesleyan Mission, the American Board of Missions, and the Church Missionary Society had all started work in Ceylon. And in these early days there appears to have been far greater co-operation in evangelistic activity between Christian missionaries of various denominations than we see today. Apart from the difficulty of not having adequate missionary help of his own denomination Chater also suffered from the lack of adequate financial support from the Home Society. At one stage the Society held little prospects to Chater of the work of the mission in Ceylon being carried on at all unless the agents would maintain themselves³⁷. Chater's work also suffered from the tragic deaths of his two sons who were shipwrecked in 1815 and of his wife on her way to England in 1820³⁸.

The story of Chater's missionary enterprise in these early days is a story of battling against heavy odds and conquering serious difficulties and speaks a great deal of Chater's faith and energy. By the end of this period, besides Hendrick Siers, Chater had some Ceylonese assistants³⁹. But the main work, was done by Chater and Siers. While still learning the language, Chater compiled a Sinhalese grammar and some school books and took an important share with William Tolfrey, a Civil Servant, and Andrew Armour, the Headmaster of the Colombo Seminary, and later with other missionaries, in the translation of the Bible into Sinhalese. He translated the New Testament into Portuguese with the assistance of Hendrick Siers⁴⁰, and was also appointed the Secretary of the Colombo Auxiliary of the Bible Society which had then been formed⁴¹.

After the tragic deaths of his wife and children Chater planned to return to England but abandoned the idea later as it would have meant a very serious loss to his missionary work in Ceylon. He therefore continued his pastoral work in Colombo, saw the growth of his congregation and continued to do a considerable amount of literary work. He appears to have married again and with the help of his wife superintended a number of schools. In view of ill-health, however, he had ultimately to take a reluctant decision to leave and after a voyage to Bombay for health reasons, he returned and later left for England only to die at sea on January 2nd, 1829⁴².

37. B.M.S., P.A., Vo. VI, p. 59.

38. B.M., M.H., October, 1820, p. 436.

39. B.M., M.H., 1826, pp. 296-297. Letter from Chater to the Secretary, 17th November, 1825. *Ibid.*, June, 1825, p. 273.

40. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, pp. 479-485; p. 649. Historical Sketch, pp. 7, 9-10. B.M., M.H., March, 1824, p. 137; also same January, 1823: Letter from Chater, February 6th, 1822, pp. 41-3.

41. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. V, pp. 141-2; B.M., M.H., June, 1826, pp. 296-7, letter from Chater to the Society, 17th November, 1825. The Historical Sketch, p. 11.

42. B.M.S., P.A., Vol. VIII, Report June 18th, 1829, p. 17. Appendix II, p. 35. cp. E. A. Payne: The First Generation: London, 1936, pp. 97-103.

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Unlike the missionaries of the London Missionary Society, Chater always retained his connexion with his Home Society both directly and through " the Brethren of the Society " in Serampore where the Society had an older, larger and more successful mission able even to found a University in India. Nor did Chater depend on the financial aid of the government in his missionary work.

In the British Period the missionaries of the Roman Church too had no such aid but the Dutch ministers and some of the clergy of the Church of England who arrived in Ceylon to assist in the " Ecclesiastical Establishment " were maintained by the government. Chater was perhaps the first Christian missionary who, not being a member of the Roman Church, retained his independence from government control and adopted the policy of gradually establishing local congregations and building Churches from among the people of the country. After him there were a large number of other missionaries who like the Roman Catholic missionaries were independent of government control or support and to whom, far more than to the comparatively few " Chaplains " supported by the government, the Church in Ceylon owes her real growth.

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