

Some Aspects of Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Early British Period (1796-1830)¹ VI.

DURING the first thirty years of the nineteenth century the majority of the people of Ceylon were as they are today Buddhists and Hindus. There were many temples scattered throughout the land and much temple-worship. In certain places the ancient religions were undoubtedly influential. In Kandy the priests had immense power over the people and here as in other places there were centres of Buddhist learning. In Bishop Heber's Journal reference is made to a Buddhist "College" in Kandy adjoining the lake "where forty priests live under strict discipline, chiefly occupied in religious duties and in teaching".^{1a} The Christians could not hope to outnumber the Buddhists and Hindus at the pace they were working. But they were making an important contribution to the religious and social history of the island.

The work of the Christian missionaries bore fruit chiefly in the coastal districts where they had their main centres of Evangelism. The statistics available, however, vary considerably with regard to the number of Christians in the island. The Revd. James Cordiner in his *Description of Ceylon* stated that in 1801 there were 342,000 Christians other than Roman Catholics who were still more numerous. Dr. Claudius Buchanan in his *Christian Researches* stated that the total Christians amounted to about 500,000. In an early report of the Calcutta Auxiliary Bible Society a letter quoted from the Hon. and Revd. T. J. Twisleton, dated May 1st, 1811 says that the Christians numbered about 250,000 while the Roman Catholics, who were counted separately, were about 85,000. In a letter dated April 22nd, 1813 from the Revd. George Bisset to the Revd. Thomas Thompson of Calcutta he states that, according to a census of Christians apparently conducted by the various churches in respect of their own members, 'the Protestants are about 146,000 and the Roman Catholics about 84,000'^{1b}. There were many who having professed the Reformed faith for material advantage in the earlier period now went back to Roman Catholicism, Buddhism or Hinduism. The Roman Catholics had their own organisation to look

1. See also *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VI, No. 2, pp. 135-141.

1a. Bp. Reginald Heber: *Narrative of a Journey etc.*, Vol. II, (London: John Murray, 1873), p. 165.

1b. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 14. See also *A History of the Diocese of Colombo*, Ed. by F. L. Beven (Colombo: Times) pp. 377-381.

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after their members. The government appears to have neither interfered with nor helped them. The Revd. James Cordiner, an Anglican priest, had the general oversight of the pastoral ministrations of other Christians as Chaplain to the Colombo garrison and of the educational work in the Colony as Principal of Schools² and he was succeeded in 1804 by the Hon. and Revd. T. J. Twisleton and called Senior Colonial Chaplain³. Both Cordiner and Twisleton had been appointed when the Hon. Frederick North was Governor. After the arrival of Sir Robert Brownrigg as Governor (1812), the Revd. George Bisset, the Governor's brother-in-law, was appointed an additional Chaplain. The British Colonial Chaplains ministered mainly to the European congregations and the Ceylonese Chaplains, appointed later, assisted them in ministering to Ceylonese Christians and in superintending the work of the proponents, catechists and schoolmasters. One of the earliest of these Ceylonese Chaplains was the Revd. Christian David⁴ who had come from India and had worked for a time as a proponent and another was the Revd. Johan Henricus de Saram who had been educated at Oxford⁵. Other proponents were Johannes Perera, John Isaac Perera, W. M. Franciscus, W. M. Malleappah, Brian Ribeira, Peter Pandittasekera and Frederick David.

The first Bishop of the Anglican Communion to visit Ceylon was the Rt. Revd. Dr. Thomas Fanshaw Middleton who became the first Bishop of Calcutta in 1814. During his visit in 1816 Sir Robert Brownrigg had expressed a desire to see the island under the Bishop's ecclesiastical jurisdiction as up to that time it was under the care of the Bishop of London. With the approval of the British Government the Anglican ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Ceylon was therefore placed in Bishop Middleton's charge and raised to the status of an Archdeaconry when the Bishop paid his second visitation in 1821 during the temporary administration of Sir Edward Barnes. At the same time the Bishop appointed the Hon. and Revd. T. J. Twisleton as first Archdeacon of Colombo⁶. The letters patent appointing the first Archdeacon of Colombo state: "Whereas no sufficient provision has been made for the supply of persons duly ordained to officiate as Ministers of the United Church of England and Ireland, within the said Territories, and there is no competent authority for the care and direction of ecclesiastical affairs, and our aforesaid subjects are deprived of some offices prescribed by the Liturgy and usage of the Church as

2. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 137.

3. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 139.

4. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 138.

5. He was at Exeter College as a Gentleman Commoner from 1818. *Oxford University Calendar*, 1818, p. 162; 1819, p. 164; 1820, p. 167. Bp. Heber refers to him in his Journal and says that he was married to an English lady. Heber: *Narrative*, Vol. II, p. 152.

6. Le Bas, C.W.: *The Life of the Rt. Revd. T. F. Middleton*, (London: Rivington: 1831), Vol. I, pp. 330-341, 345-350; 355-6; 360-1; 394-6; 471-3; II, pp. 207-219.

aforesaid, by reason that there is no Bishop or Archdeacon residing or exercising jurisdiction and canonical functions within the same :

For remedy of the said inconvenience and defects, we have determined to constitute within the aforesaid Territories an Archdeaconry subject during our pleasure to the jurisdiction, spiritual and ecclesiastical, of the Bishop of Calcutta for the time being. And we do hereby erect, found, and constitute one Archdeaconry in and over the British Territories within the said Island of Ceylon, to be styled the Archdeaconry of Colombo, such Archdeaconry to be subject and subordinate during our pleasure to the jurisdiction of the said Bishop of Calcutta as aforesaid. The Archdeacon is to be instituted by the Bishop of Calcutta in the exercise of his episcopal jurisdiction and functions, according to the duty of an Archdeacon by the ecclesiastical laws of the Realm of England. The Archdeacon shall be Commissary of the Bishop and his successors, and shall exercise jurisdiction in all matters according to the duty and function of a Commissary, and during a vacancy of the Archdeaconry the duties shall be performed by some discreet minister in priest's orders, who shall be nominated by the Governor of Ceylon".

Besides his ecclesiastical duties, Archdeacon Twisleton also had the responsibility of officiating as the First Member and President of the Court of Justices of the Peace and Sitting Magistrate for the Town, Fort and District of Colombo. Since it was stated later that ' he executed for many years the laborious office of Sitting Magistrate of Colombo with the greatest assiduity and to the general advantage of the people ' it appears that this office was not exactly a sinecure. Bishop Middleton was succeeded at Calcutta in 1823 by Bishop Reginald Heber and in 1825 he made a visitation to Ceylon an informative account of which he has left in his Journals⁷.

The government ecclesiastical establishment was not composed of the Anglican Chaplains ministering to their people alone but also included the clergy of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Dutch Consistory which was the governing body of the Church continued to function under the Revd. J. D. Palm formerly of the London Missionary Society and latterly appointed to the Dutch Church at Colombo⁸. But even with all the Anglican and Reformed Chaplains available there were still many more evangelists needed.

Bishop Heber wrote to Sir Wilmot Horton, of this scarcity of chaplains considering the needs of the island^{8a}. More chaplains were slow in coming

7. Bp. R. Heber : *op. cit.* : Vol. II, pp. 148-171 ; 243-246 ; George Smith : *Bishop Heber*, (London : Murray, 1895), pp. 275-291 : *C.M.S.R.* : 1826, p. 109. *Dictionary of National Biography*, article on Bp. Heber by Canon Overton.

8. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 138.

8a. Mrs. R. Heber : *Life of Reginald Heber*, (London : Murray, 1830), Vol. II, p. 181.

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but in the meanwhile missionaries helped very much with their services⁹. The proponents who worked directly under the chaplains were also of real assistance although sometimes they were a hindrance to genuine missionary work when they lost a sense of their calling and acted merely to get quick results and encomiums from their superiors.

The missionaries received help and encouragement in their work from several British residents who were Christians. Sir Alexander Johnstone, who had already played an important part in encouraging the missionary societies in England to send workers to Ceylon assisted the missionaries considerably in the early days. He was described by the Revd. Dr. Claudius Buchanan, who met him in Ceylon, as "a man of large and liberal views, the friend of learning and of Christianity". Sir Alexander's contribution to the social and moral welfare of the island is an interesting subject for research and should throw a great deal of light on the history of this period¹⁰. Besides Sir Alexander, there were other prominent residents like Lord Molesworth¹¹ who is mentioned as one who helped the Wesleyan mission by the Revd. W. M. Harvard. Harvard also refers to Sir Ambrose H. Gifford who was like Sir Alexander, first an Attorney-General and later Chief Justice of the island¹² and to T. N. Mooyart, the sub-collector of Jaffna who aided their work¹³. William Tolfrey, a civil servant and no mean scholar, was among the first to help in the translation of the Scriptures into Sinhalese¹⁴. Some of the highest government officials supported the work of the Auxiliary of the Bible Society which was founded in 1812¹⁵. Lady Brownrigg helped educational work by establishing a school for Tamil girls in Colombo where the children were taught by a Ceylonese clergyman¹⁶ and Mrs. W. C. Gibson organised an orphanage with facilities for industrial training in Galle¹⁷.

9. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 140; Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 198-207; Vol. VII, No. 4, pp. 260-271.

10. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, pp. 140-1; The Revd. Dr. C. Buchanan: *Christian Researches in Asia*: (London, 1849), pp. 43, 47; *C.M.S.R.*, 1815, p. 574; W. M. Harvard: *A Narrative*, pp. 258, 278, 373, 385.

11. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VII, No. 4; W. M. Harvard: *op cit*: pp. 148-150, 229-231.

12. *Dictionary of National Biography*: article on Sir Ambrose Hardinge Gifford, by G. Barnett Smith; *Ceylon Calendar*, 1815, p. 40.

13. W. M. Harvard: *op. cit*: pp. 161-2; *Ceylon Calendar*, 1815, p. 61; *Methodist Magazine*, 1815, p. 315.

14. Le Bas: Vol. I, pp. 367-9; W. M. Harvard: *op. cit*: p. xlvi; p. 294; C. Buchanan, *op. cit*: p. 46; Le Bussche: *op cit*: p. 113; *B.M.S.P.A.*, Vol. VI, pp. 223-4.

15. *The Ceylon Calendar*, 1815, pp. 56-7 contains a list of officers and members of the Bible Society Committee. W. M. Harvard: *op. cit*: p. 386; De Bussche, *op. cit*: p. 113; *S.P.C.K.R.*, 1816, p. 52.

16. Le Bas, Vol. I, p. 333; De Bussche, pp. 112-3.

17. Le Bas, Vol. II, p. 219; J. Selkirk, p. 488; Mrs. Harvard: *Memoirs*, p. 78; Bp. Heber: *Narrative*, Vol. II, p. 149; T. Robinson: *The Last Days of Bp. Heber*: (London: Jennings, 1830), pp. 52-58.

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Ceylonese headmen too helped the work of the missionaries. It was a chief headman who welcomed the Revd. Robert Mayor to Baddegama and invited him to establish a mission station. Mayor wrote: "The Mudaliyar is desirous that I should reside there, and offers to raise a subscription for the erection of a Church and School"¹⁸. Other missionaries too speak of the help given by the headmen. Some of the headmen were Christians but there were many who were so only nominally. The Revd. James Cordiner writing to the Hon. Frederick North on August 28th, 1800, refers to a place where "the Mudaliyars and Muhandiramms were all under the name of Christian, but they do not send their children to school nor do they teach them anything at home nor do they attend [church] on Sundays to hear the scriptures"¹⁹.

There is no doubt that some of these people still hoped by professing Christianity to gain the favour of government and the benefit of education for their children in Christian schools but had little interest in Christianity as a religion. The missionaries as a rule discouraged easy baptism specially at a time when they knew that the people would be willing to be nominal adherents of 'the faith of the government' for selfish reasons. The Revd. Joseph Knight reported once: "These people (i.e. those among whom he worked in Jaffna) are, at any time, ready to be whatever government may wish them to be. A government order and government agents employed for this purpose (i.e. getting congregations) would be as likely to collect 2,000 or 3,000 persons together in the present day as in the time of Baldaeus²⁰ and a law to require the natives to conform to Christian Baptism in order to secure the right of inheritance would prove as effective now as then; while they would still adhere to their superstitions and retain all their prejudices of idolatry"²¹. The Revd. Benjamin Ward of the same society also commenting on the people's frame of mind, said: "I might get an order from the Modeliar or Headman for them to attend, in which case the church would be filled"²². But no such orders were, of course, obtained nor would they have been sanctioned by the British Government although there were Ceylonese proponents under government employment who, for their personal gain, treated church membership lightly and in order to provide statistics for their superiors employed strange methods of 'baptism' which the missionaries condemned.

The Revd. James Selkirk, another missionary of the Church Missionary Society, complained of the particular system of mass baptism adopted by

18. The Revd. J. W. Balding: *One Hundred Years in Ceylon*, (Madras Diocesan Press, 1922), p. 108.

19. Colonial Office Papers, C.O. 54.4: Cordiner to North, Aug. 28, 1800. De Bussche, p. 107: *C.M.S.R.*, 1819, pp. 193-4.

20. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VI, No. 4, p. 284.

21. *C.M.S.R.*, 1820, p. 200.

22. *C.M.S.R.*, 1819, pp. 193-4.

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some of the proponents: "I refused today to baptize some children that were brought to the school on a wedding occasion, and took the opportunity, when the party were all assembled, to tell them whom we, as ministers, are willing to baptize, and what kind of persons we shall invariably require as sponsors for children, and witnesses for adults. The system that has been pursued by the government native preachers, called Proponents, has been a very bad one, and has tended more than anything else to lower Christianity in the eyes of the natives. The Proponents have sometimes baptized two or three hundred infants and elder children at a time, while making the circuit of their district, and have taken anyone they might find as sponsors. Persons going along the road, and never seen by the parties bringing the children till that moment, have often been called in to be godfathers and godmothers; persons as ignorant of Christianity as if there were no such religion in the world, and who perhaps have never been baptized themselves. Indeed, almost all the Buddhist priests in the maritime provinces are persons who have been baptized in their infancy. Now, when the people of Cotta and all the surrounding villages are beginning, since the death of the late government proponent, under whom they were placed, to come to us for the baptism of their children, we think it right to be cautious whom we admit as sponsors, and I am always in the habit of talking to parties at christenings on the duty of godfathers and godmothers, and by this means our determination will become better known among them, and we may hope that a more correct knowledge of what baptism is will be spread around us, and that we shall by-and-by become connected with these villagers in the relation of ministers and people, more than has hitherto been the case. I have also drawn up a small tract on the subject, entitled "Plain instructions to the Sinhalese People on Christian Baptism". It is now in the printer's hands, and will be ready soon, when I hope and trust it may be extensively useful"²³. This was written on July 4th in 1838. That the problem was faced by the missionaries even earlier than this is seen from Bishop Heber's Journal wherein mention is made that, when replying to his clergy on various matters on which his advice had been sought, he gave careful instructions on the strict terms on which baptism should be administered²⁴.

The policy of the British Government at this time is revealed not only by the fact that it maintained a religious establishment through which it ensured ministrations to the Christians and superintended educational work but also by the fact that it supported the Buddhist hierarchy and their work in the Kandyan districts. The terms of the Kandyan Convention of March 2nd, 1815 were such that "the religion of Budhoo . . . is declared inviolable and its

23. The Revd. James Selkirk: *Recollections of Ceylon*, (London: Hatchard, 1844), p. 515 f. *cp.* also *The Baptism of an Adult*, p. 513 f.

24. Bp. R. Heber: *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 156-7.

rights, ministers and places of worship are to be maintained and protected". The Proclamation of November 21st, 1818 stated that "all the ceremonies and processions of the Budhoo religion shall receive the respect which in former times was shown them" but that "the peaceable exercise of all other religions and the erection of places of worship would also be permitted".

Several questions with regard to the connection of the State both with Buddhism and with Christianity were to arise later and cause the government much embarrassment but during this period this policy was adopted as the most expedient probably for its own preservation. There were some who felt that the government's connection with one religion or other was wrong. William Wilberforce, over-enthusiastic for his own religion and forgetting that Ceylon was not England, wrote: "I have been shocked by a Proclamation by the Governor wherein he vindicated publicly his rights, privileges, revenues, presidencies for the priests of the temple of Candy, whom *we* appoint, having the greatest confidence in his eminent qualities, fidelity and ability. The object is to secure the attachment of the priests of Budhoo and to pull down the Modeliars, who are chiefly Christians; doing away a rule which has always been adhered to from the first European possessions of the island that natives are only capable of holding office, if Christians"²⁵. But Wilberforce's point of view did not prevail. The government policy was to protect religion since it was advantageous to do so. The real cause of conflict came when it was later realised that the government was indeed partial; and its particular methods of protecting some religious interests caused serious injustice to others.

A source of weakness in Christian Evangelism seen even in this period was the disunited witness of the Christian Community. But some efforts were made at least by some of the mission societies to co-operate where possible. The antagonism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church which was first seen in the Dutch Period still continued. Although there were personal friendships formed between individual Roman Catholic priests and missionaries of other denominations, the relations between their Churches were not very cordial. The Roman Catholics refused to associate with the other denominations in any religious activity despite their worship of a common Lord. In accordance with their theology they claimed to be the only true Church. They had suffered in the Dutch Period²⁶. They found that the government, although professing religious toleration, assisted only some of the Christian denominations in their religious and educational work.

25. R. I. and S. Wilberforce: *Life of William Wilberforce*, (London: Murray: 1838), Vol. III, pp. 379-80. See for a summary of the *History of Government's Connection with Buddhism*, L. A. Mills: *Ceylon Under British Rule*, (O.U.P. 1933), pp. 124-130.

26. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. VI, No. 4, pp. 274 ff.

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As the Revd. Fr. S. G. Perera has pointed out : " The educational policy of the government . . . benefited only the Protestant Christians. Catholics were not helped at all by the government. Their schools were built and maintained without any assistance from the public revenue "27. These reasons were enough to keep them apart but there was also prejudice on both sides. Many Christian missionaries held Roman Catholic ceremonial and other practices in abhorrence and De Bussche probably reflected a sentiment not uncommon in his time when he deplored the amount of money " the Popish clergy were draining out of the country "28. The Christian missionaries of the various societies in Ceylon, on the other hand, had more in common with each other and associated together in certain missionary enterprises. The government Chaplains and the missionaries were generally very friendly with each other and co-operated in educational work, in building churches and in evangelistic undertakings. The missionaries sometimes acted for the chaplains and the superintendents of schools29. Missionaries of different denominations preached in each other's churches and undertook evangelistic tours of villages together30. All the Churches except the Roman Catholics co-operated in the establishment of the Ceylon Auxiliary of the Bible Society and their work of translation and dissemination of the scriptures31. They were, despite their differences, conscious that they were engaged in a common enterprise and formed a Missionary Union which met periodically for prayer and conference to discuss their common problems and plans for evangelism32. Such co-operation was integral to the Christian missionary enterprise and wherever it was in evidence it strengthened the claims of the new way of life which the missionaries proclaimed in the Christian Gospel.

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27. The Revd. Fr. S. G. Perera on *History of Policy in Education, Ceylon Daily News*, August 13th, 1938.

28. De Bussche : *Letters on Ceylon* (London : Stockdale, 1817), pp. 109-110.

29. W. M. Harvard, pp. 156, 158 ; 160-1 ; 250-1 ; 261 ; 271 ; 381 ; 401 ; *B.M.S.P.A.*, Vol. VI, p. 223.

30. W. M. Harvard, pp. 242, 252, 257, 260, 322-3 ; *B.M.S.P.A.* Vol. VI, p. 223.

31. W. M. Harvard : *Introd.* p. xlvii. See note 15 above

32. W. M. Harvard : p. 161 ; *M.R.* 1822, p. 522 ; J. Selkirk : pp. 436-437 ; Bp. R. Heber : *Narrative*, Vol. II, p. 155 ff.