THE ROLE OF SRI LANKA CHRISTIANS IN A BUDDHIST MAJORITY SYSTEM

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It has often been felt by sociologists of religion that it is unfair to analyze religious groups in terms of sociological categories for the obvious reason that essential aspects of religion have, by the very nature of what religion proposes to be, to elude sociological analysis.[1] How far it eludes such analysis only religionists can tell. In Sri Lanka the difficulties are compounded because of the diversity of religious experiences and traditions; these difficulties must be borne in mind in the course of the analysis that is here attempted.

Furthermore, it would seem rash and presumptuous to explain the role of a group so heterogeneous as the Christians in Sri Lanka—in denominational affiliation, in social status or class, language, caste, direction and degree of politicalization. For there would be as many roles as there have been, are, and will be, Christians. Indeed, to the extent that each Christian acts out his Christian status vis-a-vis a whole array of other social actors, there are as many role-sets as there are Christians. The brief analysis here attempted, therefore, is only a generalization.[2]

The generalisation may be stated in the form of two clear hypotheses: first, that the role of Christians until about a decade ago was to achieve, preserve and confirm the specific identity and distinctness of the minority Christian group.[3] not only in regard to all other religious groups but also in regard to the nation (however difficult the former, and even illogical the latter, enterprise); second, that in very recent years the role is being increasingly viewed as an outward and adaptive one in terms of the achievement of a national socio-cultural equilibrium by means of the

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1. "The sociologist studies religion as one of many socially significant phenomena. This study will often lead him to analyze in detail religious propositions, insofar as they are relevant to the social situation, and will try to understand their social causes and consequences, and the manner in which they relate to the institutional fabric of society. None of this will ever enable him to judge these propositions on their own merits". Peter L. Berger, "Religious Institutions", in N. J. Smelser, ed., *Sociology: An Introduction* (New York: John Wiley, 1967) p. 334.

2. As such, the documentary support of several assertions is often not produced and is sometimes merely indicated.

3. Within the Christian group itself, there have been strong pressures at least until recent times, for sub-group specificity, e.g. among the Catholics vis-a-vis all other Christian groups.

fostering of creative inter-action, on the one hand, of the four main religious groups in a situation of accepted religious pluralism and, on the other, with the ideologies of secularism and Marxist socialism.

Role is the behaviour enactment consequent upon a status. The status of the Christian group is that of a minority in a social system in which the Buddhists are the majority. In the system the percentage of Catholics is 6.9, other Christians 0.8, Buddhists 67.4, Hindus 17.6, Muslims 7.1, and all others 0.1.[4] It is significant— though the fact does not appear to have been noticed by, still less perturbed, the Christian group—that the percentage of Christians has steadily decreased since the census of 1946 when it was 9.1. In 1953 it was 9.0, in 1963 it recorded 8.3, While in the 1971 census it showed a further decrease of 0.6, registering only 7.7 per cent.

One explanation of the decrease is probably the emigration of Christians. The present writer has not been able to secure the religious distribution of postwar emigrants, but it is his impression that the Christians, especially the Burghers, are more than proportionately represented in it (for the reason that they have been more than proportionately dissatisfied with the ongoing changes in the social system since Dominion Status): in the census of 1971 the Burghers who are nearly 100 per cent Christian were only 44,250 or 0.3 per cent of the population.

A second explanation of the decrease is that more than a third of the Christians are urban and their literacy and level of education proportionately to their numbers are higher than in other religious groups: the pressures of urban living, literacy and education seem to have outweighed the classic Catholic resistance to limitation of births, though, in the absence of figures, it is not possible to say whether the limiting factor has been the use of contraceptive devices (in opposition to official ecclesiastical directives) or abstention resulting from the rationalization of procreative processes (itself a result of the greater influence of western culture on the Christian than on other religous groups).

It was earlier suggested that the role of Christians until the 60s was conceived in terms of its minority identity. In the sociological studies of minority groups it has often been found that they manifest a fierce desire to protect the cohesiveness of the group in the face of threats, real or imaginary, of being taken over by the majority. Within the Christian group in Sri Lanka this minority consciousness was strengthened by the presence within it of a large percentage of Tamils, who are themselves a linguistic minority in the social system. The Tamil Christians, therefore, had a double reason to pressurize for a 'hands-off the Christians' attitude: one, because they were Christians, the other, because they were Tamils. This sheds light, incidentally, both on the efficiency of the Christian schools in Tamil areas and on the loyalty of the Tamils to them.

In the first decade and a half after Dominion Status the role of Christians was essentially a continuance of the role as it was played since the establishment of the Christian Church in Portuguese times. It is all too facile to criticize this role in the

4.   *Census of Population* 1971, *Preliminary Release No.* 1.

light of the perceptions of a later period. When the first converts were made—by means fair, dubious or foul—the predominant concern of the pastors, who were Europeans, was to protect their faith from the influence of other faiths. At a time when religion was so deeply imbedded in secular culture as to be wholly indistinguishable from it, the Church set about the establishment of an alternative culture for the Ceylonese who adopted the Christian faith. The search for separate identity from other religious groups and from the rest of the nation had begun.

The dream of the formalization of culture through widespread schools for the people was still far-off in all parts of the world and therefore the first attempts at the building of a specific Christian culture in Lanka were through the medium of stone. Don Peter cites a letter of 1622 about the Jesuit Church in Colombo:

'It is built in Corinthian style, and is well proportioned and handsome. The facade is magnificent, and if it is not the best, it will certainly be the second best in the whole of India'.[5]

The style of all these early stone instruments of culturalization was, so far as we know, western, and was in sharp contrast to the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim styles of architecture. Added to the influence of architecture was the gradual introduction—fostered by the early and the later schools—of western languages, western names and surnames, western music, western dress and habits of eating. It may of course be contended that similar cultural specificity had already made the three existing religious groups inter-distinguishable, and hence that there was nothing strange about the quest for the specificity and distinctness of a fourth group. What was unique, however, was that this fourth group by its Western character soon began to distinguish itself not merely from each of the three existing groups taken separately but from the three of them taken together. The other three were Eastern, Ceylonese; this one Western, Portuguese, and later Dutch or British.

Brought into the country as a new way of life for all takers by the white foreigners, led for four centuries by foreigners sometimes of the same nationality as the foreign rulers or, in later days, by local clergy trained by the foreigners, the Christian Church succeeded in establishing not just a cultural uniqueness for the Christians but a western cultural uniqueness. The westernized and westernizing culture was a social advantage to the Christians when the country was under the western imperial power. As late as 6 January 1887 at a ceremony in Colombo constituting the Catholic hierarchy of Ceylon, Archbishop Bonjean pronounced "an eloquent allocution ending with acclamations to the Pope, to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, to Mgr. Agliardi (Apostolic Delegate to the East Indies) and to Queen Victoria, in which the clergy and people joined".[6] The imperial government could not but take note of such a show of loyalty. In 1948 it was no longer possible to acclaim the foreign overlord. Instead, a directive from the Archibishop exhorted Catholics "to decorate their houses,

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5.   W. L. A. Don Peter, *Studies in Ceylon Church History* (Colombo: The Catholic Press) 1963, p. 45.

6.   *The Ceylon Catholic Messenger*, 5 January 1947, p 4.

churches and schools during the Independence Week, prominence being given to the Papal Flag and the National Flag".[7] Even in independent Ceylon the Church leaders sought to maintain the old cultural specificity.

It could be objected that the westernization of the Christians affected only a minority among them—those in the upper social and income brackets, who lived in Colombo and a few other towns and spoke English—and that the majority of Christians continued to live according to the culture of their forefathers even after they received the water of baptism. Even as late as 1970 the Houtart Survey estimated that the social distribution of Catholics was as follows: upper classes 4 per cent, intermediate classes 28 per cent, lower classes 68 per cent.[8] Numbers, however, did not call the tune during the long period of the search for Christian identity. In both State and Church, society was hierarchically constituted and thus the dominant pressures of the Christian upper classes were felt all down the line of the social stratification of Christians. Indeed, when numbers began to tell after universal franchise was introduced in 1931, it did not take very long for the role to be questioned and a new role to be sought.

If the western character of the specific cultural identity of the Christians caused tensions between them and other religious groups and between them and the nation as a whole, the pro-*status quo* character of the group (certainly of its leaders who exercised an autocratic control over the rank and file) made the Christians liable to a charge of dubious loyalty in the minds of all those who challenged the *status quo*. The challenge came first from the nationalists, then from the socialists.

There is probably in all religious institutions an inbuilt conservatism, an inherent fear of disturbing the existing order. The order may not be the ideal one, but at least the religious institution has learnt to live with it and hence fears its change. When the institution is old, highly organized, well financed, centralized—as in the case of the Christian institution—the pressures to conserve are enhanced. On the eve of independence, the editorial in *The Ceylon Catholic Messenger* could hardly have been more unequivocal:

> 'Let our Independence then be marked by conformity with the established order which it is beyond the right of mere mortals to alter for disturb: let our new Government stand the supreme test—that of fidelity to the moral law which it can violate only at its own peril. And let the chief contribution of the Catholics to the political progress of the country be the realization of this great desideratum'.[9]

According to the accepted interpretations of its phenomenological reality,[10] religion is concerned with the ordering of human life in society in accordance with some ultimate right order. During the colonial and post-independence periods,

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7.   *ibid.*, 1 February 1948, p. 4.

8.   Francois Houtart, *Summary of the Survey of the Catholic Church in Ceylon* (Colombo: Quest No. 43), p. 32.

9.   *The Ceylon Catholic Messenger*, 18 January 1948.

10. e.g. the interpretations of Durkheim, Weber, Mircea Eliade, Berger, van der Leeuw.

the Christian Church defended order, but made insufficient assessment of the rightness of the order. The concept of order is more static than dynamic, and the Church defended it. The concept of the rightness of order is more dynamic than static, and the Church was uncritical about it.

The concern of the Church over its specific identity vis-a-vis the other religious groups and the nation was so over-riding that the Church made no significant attempt at a courageous solution of the contradictions within the Christian group itself. These contradictions were present first for detection and then for resolution in the fields of the integration of social classes and castes within the group, of the rural with the urban Christians. Christian parish priests and vicars in rural areas did not see their role as a socially catalytic one, nor did the chaplains on the estates do anything significant to secure conditions of elementary humanity for the estate labour. An exception in the Christian record of non-initiation of social change would probably be the Social Justice Movement started in Colombo in the late 30s by the Peter Pillai group but "this was a group that was basically reformist within the framework of capitalism and foreign exploitation."[11] Peter Pillai in his later years showed himself to be increasingly uncomfortable with the social and educational policies of the more people-oriented political groups: it was also a period during which he was the chief theoretician of the Christian group.

The concept of the role in terms of an identity search explains the position taken by the Church in the field of education in the contemporary period.[12] Free education was opposed because it would break the bonds that bound the better schools to the Christian managements and thus expose Christian children to the influence of Buddhist and secularist cultures. Swabasha was opposed because more English, better taught, was a characteristic of the urban Christian schools and constituted their chief advantage to the children of the affluent non-Christian patrons. The takeover of schools was violently opposed because it was felt that with the schools would go the last bulwarks of the identity of Christians in the nation. In the Christian school structure Houtart[13] sees the validation of a socio-political order by an educational system resting on religion. The present writer would consider this the latent function or the unintended consequence of the Christian school system. Its manifest function or its intended consequence was the achievement and consolidation of identity. By fulfilling it the Church certainly opened avenues of upward social mobility to many urban working-class and lower middle-class Christian families. That the three major educational reforms mentioned were a similar move towards a levelling of educational opportunity, but over a wider range, the majority of Christian leaders did not or was unwilling to see—until the middle of the last decade.

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11.   Tissa Balasuriya, "The Catholic Approach to Religio-Cultural Integration", *Satyodaya* (Kandy), No. 18, August 1974, p. 5.

12.   In a wide-ranging study, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka* (Bangalore: TPI, 1974), cf. esp. pp. 212-216, 265-297, Francois Houtart presents and evaluates the relevant documentary evidence.

13.   *ibid.*

The change in the perception of the role of Christians was stimulated by several factors. The exogenous factors were first those inducing change in secular society all over the world. "Vastly improved conditions of travel and transport, the growth of the mass communication media, the spread of conflicting ideologies, rising educational standards for increasing numbers of people, higher levels of consumption, the emergence of youth culture, the appearance of a third world: all these factors make it impossible for Lanka not to be a society in transition".[14] Within the Church the greatest single factor promoting change was the Vatican Council, 1963-1965.[15]

The endogenous factors were chiefly the growth of popular participation in government after 1931, the expansion of education through schools and the electoral progress, the dissemination of Marxist ideas and the evolution of a strategy for the socialist development of the country. In the earlier period the Christians did not see their role as being that of initiators of change. Now they were forced to follow the changes in secular society.

The Houtart Survey, seeking a generalized picture as to how Catholics situate themselves in their national social context, from its valid interviews of 1361 persons (responding out of a sample of 1500 persons) selected from 50 parishes situated in the six Catholic dioceses, concluded to two tendencies in the Catholic population. The first, accounting for more than half the Catholic population, was a dynamic and forward one, "characterized by a hope in the future and by an acceptation of the social changes". The second, accounting for about a quarter of the population, was a static and conservative one. The remaining quarter had no convictions in either direction.[16]

In Christian circles much is sometimes made of the fact that the Christian schools nurtured a generation of the elite which led the country to independence from the colonial regime. That the British were largely able to talk to a group of upper and middle-class leaders together—regardless of the fact that the group contained individuals divided according to religion, root language and caste—was, it is alleged, the result of the Christian schools where these leaders were educated together. However, even apart from the fact that some elitist leaders experienced their Christian educational background to be rather an embarrassment, the charge is sometimes heard that it was precisely this background that served to distance the elite from the masses. The Church played its part in the formation of the elite. Its role now is to form them again—without the aid of the schools which have now almost completely been removed from Church control—to work alongside and with the people. A reformed Christian elite will still have a useful role to play in the present phase of the

14. Paul Caspersz, "Sri Lanka. A Society in Transition", *Impact* (Manila), 7:10, October 1972, p. 339.
15. cf. especially "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" in Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Chapman, 1966). The "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*ibid*) is, however, much less satisfactory.
16. *Opinions and Attitudes of Catholics in Ceylon*, Part II (Louvain: Centre de Recherches Socio-Religieuses, mimeograph, 1970), p. 16.

country's development. Part of this role is to understand what the country now requires. The conditions for the successful fulfilment of the role have been well expressed by Zarina Bhatty:

> "Contributions that a minority community will make would therefore depend on how well it can redefine its distinctiveness and mould it into forms which are in harmony with the changing environment and have a creative context".[17]

The greater contact which the Christian group had and still has with the culture of the West, and its greater assimilation of that culture—once a source of suspicion of the group—can now lead it, if it is joined to the sympathetic perception of social change. to contribute vitally to the rationalization and modernization of the country's socio-economic structure. If Sri Lanka. like the rest of the world, is moving into a new technological era. Christians will perhaps be better placed than other religious groups both to understand and to adjust to the demands of the new era.

Will Herberg's thesis that the three main religious groups in America—Protestants. Catholics. Jews—are equi-legitimate expressions of American religion, indeed of American society, is well known. Christians in Sri Lanka have been there long enough to seek to be an equi-legitimate expression of the country's life and character. With the Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims and all who are concerned about society Christians should seek to hammer out a national equilibrium of culture without which it will not be possible to achieve the type of nation which most of the inhabitants of the country probably desire.

17.   Zarina Bhatty "The Role of Minorities in Indian Development", *Religion and Society* (Bangalore), 20:4, December 1973, p. 77.