

CHRISTIANITY IN A BUDDHIST
ENVIRONMENT

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN A CATHOLIC VILLAGE IN
RURAL SRI LANKA

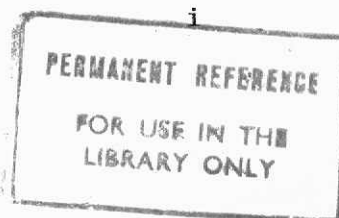
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SYNOPSIS OF THE STUDY

This study is about the social and religious events of a poor Catholic village called Wahacotte (dry zone agricultural village with rice and tobacco cultivation) surrounded by Buddhist villages. The empirical study focussed on a limited period of 25 years from 1958 to 1984. What has happened to the social and religious spheres during these 25 years and what is the real situation today are examined.

Catholicism began at Wahacotte (situated in the Matale district, 20 miles from Matale and 4 miles from Galewela - (refer the maps on xiii and xiv) following the advent of Portuguese rule in the country during the 16th century. The inhabitants of Wahacotte consider themselves direct descendants of the Portuguese. But one could clearly notice the Sri Lankan cultural and Buddhist influence in their social life. It often happens that in poor villages the Church becomes the social and cultural centre. On the other hand, development and the accompanying dependence on technically advanced countries, and the impact of mass-media have at least indirectly influenced village life. This has created an atmosphere of indifference to religion going by the traditional or conventional standards. But the majority do frequent the church, participate in religious activities, and honour the clergy. However, this mode of religiosity does not appear to be linked to a deep moral conviction on the part of the laity.

Buddhism has been the main ideological force shaping the outlook of the vast majority of people in Sri Lanka. It was not merely a set of religious ideas, but was for them, a way of life, a design for living. The inter linkages between religion, culture, language and national identity exert a powerful influence on the people as a whole.

Although Catholicism existed in Sri Lanka from the time of the Portuguese, only recently has the church begun to adjust itself to local conditions and aspirations. The Church, which always thought along western lines and in non-indigenous concepts has begun to respond to the new situation by accepting the need to minimise her westernness. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the relationship of Christians and Buddhists has improved considerably, as the church accepted the fact of religious pluralism. In a way, inculturation of Christianity had already begun at Wahacotte, even before the Second Vatican Council.

This study of the village, mainly through participant observation necessitated the adoption of the theoretical nuances of functionalism, in spite of its short-comings. In order to supplement functional analysis, other sociological methods together with an opinion and attitudes survey were used. As the concern of the study was continuity of Catholicism at Wahacotte, it favoured a historical bias from the very beginning. The more the study dealt with the idea of continuity, the more did their marginality or isolation appear as one of the main reasons for their survival as Christians in a Buddhist environment.

In order to justify this study of continuity, the changes in the village had to be looked into in some way. Thus the economic, family and marriage life at Wahacotte had to be examined in some detail and to a lesser degree, leadership, education and morality of the village. These aspects of social life are somewhat directly influenced by their religion, and are relevant to this sociological study of religion in a particular society. The Wahacotte peoples' religious beliefs and rituals are examined as basic factors of this study. The study is concluded with some theoretical generalizations and proposals for further study in sociology of religion.