

Christianity in Ceylon in the British Period

I. Early Government Policy

WHEN the maritime areas held by the Dutch passed into the hands of the British early in 1796,¹ they were first attached to the Madras Presidency and administered by the East India Company through military governors. The Madras Administration lasted from 1796 to 1798 and its general incompetence and the uncertain nature of its policy influenced by the belief that the settlements might at any moment be re-transferred to the Dutch reacted unfavourably on the government of the country.

Among the matters that suffered most were religion and education. At this time of our history Buddhism and Hinduism were not looked upon by those in control of the Government with any degree of favour and even the religion which those in power professed, Christianity, was, in these early years of British rule, not encouraged in the new Colony. The fact was that the East India Company was chiefly concerned with commercial success and the general attitude of the Company was that the preaching of the Christian Gospel in the eastern territories in which the Company traded would be detrimental to its trading interests and when the idea of sending Christian missionaries from Great Britain to the East was mooted in England it was even solemnly declared to be "the maddest, most extravagant, most costly, most indefensible project which has ever been suggested by a moonstruck fanatic. Such a scheme is pernicious, imprudent, useless, harmful, dangerous, profitless, fantastic. It strikes against all reason and sound policy, it brings the peace and safety of our possessions into peril".¹

Far from missionaries being encouraged to come to the island, they were actually prevented from doing so and the military governors even neglected the few religious and educational establishments that existed in Ceylon. When the Dutch clergy in Ceylon became prisoners-of-war no provision was made to continue their work. Parishes and schools were neglected. Catechists and schoolmasters were not paid their salaries. Even when the people made representations to the responsible authorities nothing seems to have been

1. A. Mayhew : *Christianity and the Government of India*. London, 1929, pp. 21-49 ; K. S. Latourette : *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. VI, London, p. 69 ; L. Creighton : *Missions : Their Rise and Development*. London, 1912, p. 58.

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done by the government. A number of old churches and schools which had been neglected by the Dutch towards the end of their rule were now allowed to fall into ruins.²

In 1798, however, the Madras Administration came to an end with the withdrawal of the military Governors. The first civil Governor appointed to the island, the Honourable Frederick North, later Earl of Guilford, assumed office on October 12, 1798. Under him there was a new era of experimentation in British rule in Ceylon. Unlike the military governors before him North was very interested in the moral and spiritual improvement of the people of the country and his rule saw a change in government policy towards the neglected religious and educational establishments.

One of the first steps that North took was to attempt to remove the taint of nominal Christianity. Despite the apathy of the Madras administration the larger number of the inhabitants of the British-occupied provinces still seems to have professed Christianity at this time when North became Governor, and belonged either to the Roman Catholic or to the Dutch Reformed Church. But it is difficult to say how many of these professing Christians were well-instructed and sincere in the Faith. Most of them seem to have been little more than baptized pagans. The new governor was anxious to remedy this state of affairs.³

One of North's first acts affecting religion in Ceylon after he assumed office was the issue of a Proclamation in 1799, in accordance with the behests of the Home Government, permitting freedom of worship.⁴ The policy of toleration which this implied was a particularly happy event in the history of the country and was particularly welcomed by the Roman Catholics who had

2. J. C. Cordiner : A Description of Ceylon, Vol. I, p. 159. London, 1807. Colonial Office Papers : Ceylon Records : Public Record Office London : C.O. 55. 4. Letters from Cordiner to North enclosing reports of state of schools during his visitations : Reports from Galle, 7th July, 1800 ; Tangalle, 28th August, 1800 ; Batticaloa, 12th September, 1800 ; Colombo 22nd December, 1800 ; W. M. Harvard : A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India (London, 1823) p. 338 ff ; M. Winslow ; A Memoir of Mrs. Harriett W. Winslow combining a short sketch of the Ceylon Mission (London, J. F. Shaw, 1838) p. 100 ff.

3. C.O. 51. 1. North's General despatch, 26th February, 1799. C.O. 54. 2. North's despatch to Court of Directors, 30th January, 1800. C.O. 54. 4. Cordiner to North, 18th February, 1801.

4. J. E. Tennent : Christianity in Ceylon (London, 1850) pp. 75-76. Turner, C. A. and L. R., April, 1920, pp. 191-2. White, J.R.A.S.C.B., Vol. XIV, No. 47, pp. 95-101.

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suffered under the Dutch. But its effects ought not to be magnified. For after so long a period in which the people had found that it was advantageous to follow the religion of the government, a mere proclamation would not have been thought necessarily to imply real freedom. Even so it is true that gradually there were some positive results. Roman Catholics who had not openly professed the faith now did so without fear. Their influence was felt increasingly in the country for they alone seem to have had a well-organised system of spiritual ministrations to their people.⁵ So it was that when Dr. Claudius Buchanan, former Vice-Provost of the College of Fort William, in Bengal visited the island first in 1806, and then later in 1808, he noticed the Roman Catholic Church flourishing and remarked that the Roman priests from Goa "perceiving the indifference of the English nation to their own religion" had assumed "quiet and undisturbed possession of the land".⁶

North's main idea was to revive the ecclesiastical and educational system of the Dutch, avoiding its errors and extending its sphere of influence. Early in 1799 he wrote to the Board of Directors of the East India Company suggesting that a chaplain should be sent to the colony in order to direct its ecclesiastical and educational and ecclesiastical work. He also recommended that the ecclesiastical establishment in Ceylon should be headed by an Archdeacon sent from England with the assistance of a Sinhalese and a Tamil Vicar-General resident in Colombo. The Governor thought there should be about 40 parish priests in charge of the parochial work of the colony, and in his eagerness to do his best for the country he even outlined a plan for sending a Sinhalese and a Tamil youth from Ceylon each year to England so as to receive university education and return as parish priests to work among their countrymen.

North's schemes could not be put into operation for lack of support from the British Government. But his scheme for re-organisation was assisted by the arrival in the island of the Rev. James Cordiner, an Anglican priest who had been a military chaplain in Madras. He arrived from Madras as the Chaplain to the garrison at Colombo and was also made Principal of all the schools in the settlement. Until his schemes for a larger establishment could, as he hoped, be effected, North directed that the Dutch clergy who had been made prisoners-of-war should be made to carry on their work. They were

5. E. J. Robinson: *Romanism in Ceylon, India and China* (London: Hope and Company, 1855.) p. 19; S. Casie Chitty: *A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Catholic Church in Ceylon* (Colombo, 1848) p. 18.

6. C. Buchanan: *Christian Researches in Asia, etc.* (London, 1849) pp. 43-4. Cp. J. C. Cordiner: *A Description of Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 155, Vol. II, pp. 31-2.

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re-instated and placed under Cordiner's supervision. Later laymen who were duly qualified were licensed for preaching and trained preachers were brought over from South India mainly from the Coromandel Coast—where they had been instructed under Danish missionaries.⁷ At every principal station in the island one of these preachers was established as an officiating clergyman and each preacher was "instructed to perform divine service in one of the churches within his province, every Sunday; to administer the ordinance of Baptism; to solemnise marriages; to visit all the schools committed to his care, at least, three times in the year; to examine particularly the conduct and ability of the catechists and schoolmasters".⁸ All these new ministers, preachers or proponents and schoolmasters became a charge on the establishment. Thus for all intents and purposes the Presbyterian religion according to the form of the Church of Holland was regarded as the State Religion of the Colony. The Dutch clergy were chiefly concerned with the ministrations to the European Congregations. The South Indian ministers joined in looking after the others. Some of the ministers like Christian David, a pupil of the famous missionary Schwartz, who was appointed to Jaffna in 1801, became well-known in their ministrations and were a great influence on the life of the people among whom they worked.⁹ Under Cordiner education received much attention. Orders were given for the repair of schools which had fallen into decay. Many schools were revived and re-organised and new ones established. The Governor ordered all Protestant parents to send their children to these schools while several Mudaliyars and other Headmen had to see that the order was carried out.¹⁰ In 1801 there were 170 schools in which the vernaculars of the respective regions, Sinhalese and Tamil, were taught. For giving a better education to the sons of native chiefs and of other high officials and to the European (Dutch and Portuguese) youths, three schools, which became departments of an Academy, were established. From this young men were recruited for employment in the Government usually to

7. C.O. 54. 3. North's General Despatch, 18th February, 1801. C.O. 54. 6. North to Hobart, 16th March, 1802. C.O. 54. 7. North to Hobart, 22nd September, 1802.

8. Cordiner; I, pp. 160-1. Cordiner mentions that the clergy were stationed at Colombo, Negombo, Chilaw, Puttalam, Manar, Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Matara, Galle and Kalutara.

9. C.O. 54. 3. North's General Despatch, 18th February, 1801. Arndt: "Memoir of Christian David", *passim*.

10. Gratiaen: C. A. and L. R. July. 1922. pp. 35-44.

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serve as translators, clerks, proponents or teachers. Similar but less ambitious schools were established at Galle, Jaffna and Trincomalee.¹¹

In 1803, North's policy received a severe set-back. In 1801 the Home Government had postponed the consideration of North's Scholarship Scheme and had doubted its wisdom although North's general measures for the religious and educational improvement of the inhabitants were approved. It was pointed out to North that "whatever can be done in the island consistent with its present limited resources to improve the present education of the natives and to inculcate sentiments and habits of Fidelity, Integrity and Industry and gradually to eradicate superstition and prejudice cannot fail to meet with approbation at home ; and at the same time I must add that your proposal to send a few of the natives to be educated in the Universities of this Country and some other parts of your general plan in this respect appear to me to be liable to considerable doubts and I therefore cannot recommend their being adopted at this moment".¹² In 1803 Lord Hobart, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote to North that for reasons of economy the amount spent on the school establishments should be drastically curtailed. The funds available only permitted the support of the European orphanages and the higher seminaries. The salaries of all country schoolmasters were therefore suppressed. Both North and Cordiner were greatly disappointed at the necessity of the measure. And when Cordiner left the island in 1804 he earnestly hoped that the indigent schoolmasters would be re-instated soon.¹³

After Cordiner's departure his work was taken over by the Honourable and Revd. T. J. Twisleton who was appointed Senior Colonial Chaplain to the island and arrived in March, 1804.¹⁴ Soon after Cordiner's departure North's term of office came to an end, and he was succeeded by Sir Thomas Maitland who arrived in the island in July, 1805.

Unlike North, Maitland had no enthusiasm for the propagation of Christianity. What he wanted was efficient government and he did all he could to attain it. In his religious policy he adopted the method of conciliating

11. C.O. 54. 3. North's General Despatch, 18th February, 1801. C.O. 54. 6. North to Hobart, 16th March, 1802. C.O. 54. 7. North to Hobart, 22nd September, 1802. C.O. 54. 13. North to Hobart, 1st January, 1804. Cordiner, 1, pp. 161-2. Gratiaen: C. A. and L. R., January, 1922, pp. 141 ff.

12. C.O. 54. 5. Despatch to North, 13th March, 1801.

13. C.O. 54. 6. Hobart to North, 8th February, 1803. C.O. 54. 13. Arbuthnot to Cordiner, 8th July, 1803. C.O. 54. 14. North to Hobart, 25th September, 1804. Cordiner, 1, p. 165. Cp. Turner, C.A. and L.R., April, 1920, pp. 190-1. Gratiaen, C. A. and L. R., January, 1922, p. 141 ff.

14. Gratiaen: C. A. and L. R., January, 1922, p. 147.

all who could help him in his prime purpose of making them loyal subjects. When the nominal Christians saw that there could be no special gain by professing Christianity they went back to the religion of their fore-fathers.¹⁵ In 1801 it was said that there were no less than 342,000 Protestants and a still greater number of Roman Catholics.¹⁶ The following year in Jaffna alone there appear to have been 136,000 Protestants. But when Dr. Claudius Buchanan visited the island at first in 1806 and later in 1808 the scene had become much more dismal.¹⁷ In Jaffna which in the time of Baldaeus, during the Dutch period, contained 32 churches with several ministers he found only one minister, Palm, who had been sent to Ceylon by the London Missionary Society, and the preacher Christian David.¹⁸ Writing from Jaffna in 1806, Buchanan said: "Most of the handsome churches, of which views are given in the plates of Baldaeus' history, are now in ruins. Even in the town and fort of Jaffna, where there is a spacious edifice for divine worship, and a respectable society of English and Dutch inhabitants, no clergyman has yet been appointed".¹⁹ In other parts of the island the situation was not very different. Reports went to England which resulted in much dissatisfaction at the state of affairs. Buchanan's letters contained severe condemnations of the policy of the British Government in Ceylon. William Wilberforce was one of those keenly critical of Government policy. He had learnt with 'inconceivable sorrow' of the reduction of the educational establishment for reasons of economy. He had interviewed Castlereagh about this and while the latter had agreed with Maitland that conformity to the Christian religion should not be forced upon the natives, the general reaction in England made Castlereagh press Maitland to have a greater concern for the progress of the Christian religion and general education in Ceylon.²⁰

By this time also the necessity of missions was being increasingly felt both in Ceylon and in England. In the Colony there were men like Sir Alexander

15. Willis Dixon: "The Colonial Administrations of Sir Thomas Maitland", pp. 103-4. Tennent: "Christianity in Ceylon", pp. 84-85. C.O. 54. 4. Cordiner to North, 18th February, 1801.

16. Cordiner. I, p. 163.

17. For further information about Buchanan see Article by Sir Alexander John Arbuthnot in the Dictionary of National Biography.

18. Buchanan is here referring to Protestants only.

19. Buchanan: "Christian Researches" (Ed. 1849), p. 13 ff.

20. Wilberforce: "Life of William Wilberforce", Vol. III, p. 378. Tennent: "Christianity in Ceylon", pp. 84-5.

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Johnstone,²¹ who increasingly felt that what was being done by the Dutch ministers, the proponents and schoolmasters was not enough, and that more clergy to superintend and direct the schools and minister to the spiritual needs of the local community should be brought to the island. In England an interest in missionary work overseas was now growing, and Ceylon particularly came into the view of several missionary societies after Dr. Claudius Buchanan's investigations in the island and the reports that were received from others who had returned from the East. The first Missionary Agency from England to work in Ceylon, the London Missionary Society, had already begun its activities before Cordiner left.²² Soon after representatives of other Christian missionary agencies too arrived in the island and addressed themselves to the tasks of evangelism and education.

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21. Johnstone, called "the re-organiser of the Government of Ceylon", contributed greatly to impress on the moral and social improvement of Ceylon. He became Advocate General of Ceylon in 1799 and Chief Justice in 1805. For further information see Article by H. G. Keene, C.I.E. in D.N.B.

22. Cordiner, I, p. 165.