

Ceylon and the Search for an Asianized Church

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by Paul Caspersz, S.J.

If the present writer could have been suspected of megalomania for his earlier article on *The Role of the Church in Asia* (*New Blackfriars*, January 1970), he should at least not be guilty of inconsistency. And so, in this sequel, on the one hand, the minimum view is advanced that the little island of Ceylon is an interesting case-study of the contemporary Church in Asia and, on the other, the maximum view that Ceylon's place is crucial in the role-context of the Church in Asia and the World.

The basic figures of Ceylon's demographic and geographic littleness are quickly enumerated. In the early 1960s, in a total Asian population of nearly 1,800 million, Ceylon had a population of nearly 11 million. In Asia's total Christian population of 73 million, the Catholics numbered a little more than three-quarters of a million, while the other Christians numbered a little more than 100,000. Geographically, Ceylon is a small island, 25,332 square miles in area, situated at the southern tip of the Indian sub-continent and separated from it by a narrow strip of shallow water.

Yet, Ceylon has an importance far greater than its size would warrant. Her people have a higher degree of literacy than in most other countries of Asia. The standard of living, though very low in comparison with Western attainments, is high for Asia. Her educational, political and religious institutions and her tri-lingual press are highly developed. Her systems of easy island communication and her position as a sea and air port of call between Europe and the East have made her important for world trade and have turned her capital city, Colombo, into a large and crowded cosmopolitan and commercial centre.

Ceylon is a land with a long and rich 'multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural' history.¹ This fact vitally affects the life and life-chances of the Christian Church in Ceylon.

The racial origins of the modern Ceylonese people lie obscured in the pre-Christian millennial mists of the advent to India of the Negroids, the Austroloids, the Mongoloids, the Dravidians and the Aryans. From India the descendants of these various races found their way to Ceylon. Each immigrant wave brought into the island its own cultural contribution of symbols and artefacts embodying the symbols. The definitions of the symbols—whether of implements used for agriculture and hunting or objects of ornament and art or of patterns of social organization—were handed down to successive generations, forming cultural traditions which came to be jealously guarded down the centuries.

¹H. W. Tambiah, *Sinhala Laws and Customs*, Colombo, Lake House, 1968, p. 1.

However, it is with the introduction of Buddhism into Ceylon in the third century B.C. that the culture of Ceylon begins to be clearly differentiated from that of the Indian mainland. Buddhism came to Ceylon when the animistic and nature religions of India were being practised in the island and never entirely superseded them. The presence in the island from very early times of groups of people who maintained contacts with India ensured the independent persistence of the earlier beliefs and practices. The Hindu way of life, as distinct from the Buddhist, drew continued strength from repeated incursions from the Indian continent and the successful establishment of Tamil kingdoms at various times until the advent of the Western colonizers.

The multiple facets of the religious life of the people of Ceylon about the third century have been well summarized by a contemporary Ceylonese scholar: '... it becomes clear that the great majority of the people worshipped nature spirits, called the yaksas, who were supposed to dwell in rivers, lakes, mountains, trees, etc. The worship of the sacred trees or groves was also connected with this primitive religion. The heavenly bodies received the adoration of the people, and to a great extent influenced their everyday life. The more intellectual among the people perhaps followed the Brahmanical religion. Ascetics of different kinds lived in the country and each must have had his own following among the masses.'¹

With Hinduism and Buddhism already entrenched in the island, incorporating into their popular practices the older animism and nature worship, in the ninth century Moor traders arrived with the religion of Islam. They married Sinhala or Tamil women and, while maintaining their religious uniqueness, soon merged into the multi-culture of the island.

Finally, in the sixteenth century there began the long period of the white man's domination. With him came organized Christianity. Much earlier, and almost certainly in the sixth century, there was at least one Christian community in Ceylon, but it would appear that this was a community of foreigners, probably from Persia, and that it never exercised a vital impact on the life of the surrounding people. The impact began with the coming of the Portuguese.

The basic facts are again quickly told. The political story has four periods: the Portuguese to 1658, the Dutch to 1796, the British to 1948, independent parliamentary government to the present day. The missionary story has five periods: the Portuguese clergy and missions to 1658, the period without Catholic priests owing to Dutch persecution, and the introduction of Reformed Christianity to 1687, the one-man mission of the Indian Oratorian, Fr Joseph Vaz, followed by the Goan Oratorian mission to 1842, the classic Roman missionary phase and the linkage of Christianity to the British power to 1940, the modern Ceylonizing phase to the present day.

¹S. Paranavitana, 'Pre-Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ceylon', *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 31, No. 82, 1929, p. 327.

The tragedy of the Christian missionary endeavour of the past four centuries is that the Church never achieved naturalization in the way that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam did. The chief reason is the culturally alien character of Christianity. In our minds today it is difficult to re-create the impression made by Portuguese colonizers upon the people of Ceylon, who were alternately awed, annoyed, amused and disgusted by the white man's way of life. His dress, his habits of food, drink and personal cleanliness, his language, his colour, the organization of his social life were all so bizarre that the ground was altogether unfavourable for the people to understand his religion.

It is true that genuine converts were made, even though sometimes by very questionable means. However, a very moderate background paper, submitted to the all-island Pastoral Convention of the Catholic Church in Ceylon in 1968, comments: 'During the Portuguese period the alien political power and the Church were in close relation and Catholics enjoyed political patronage. The Church in Ceylon was a bit of the Church in Portugal in customs, relations and ceremonial styles. Ceylonese converts could not but be loyal subjects of the Portuguese power. They had to divest themselves from anything that appeared to be not consonant with customary Christian practices. They had to take up Christian names and also Portuguese surnames at Baptism . . . (they) were alienated from the rest of the Ceylonese people and from their native culture and customs.'¹ The alienation continues to our own day.

Much is sometimes made by modern Catholic apologists in Ceylon of the missionary enterprise of the Indian Oratorians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So the background paper just cited says: 'Thus it is to India and not a Western country that we owe a debt of gratitude for the second founding of the Catholic Church in Ceylon between 1658 and 1842.'²

Nevertheless, the truth is that even these saintly and zealous Oratorians did not succeed in giving the Church in Ceylon a local habitation and a name. For, though they were Indians, they were brought up in Goan society which had already been Christianized along Western lines. Secondly, any attempts to assimilate the culture in depth would almost certainly have incurred similar ecclesiastical censure as the earlier Indian experiments of de Nobili. Indeed, the use of occasional ritual prayers by layfolk, introduced by Fr Vaz as a measure of adaptation to the deeply ingrained popular practices of spells and magical incantations, received scant guidance from later missionaries and earned official censure. Thirdly, the later successors of the Oratorians in the mission field were Europeans, filled with Roman ideas of missionary organization. They were often good and holy men, but never as in the Asian missions has it been

¹*The Historical Background*, unpublished MS., 1968, p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, p. 4.

better demonstrated that more than holiness is needed to guide the minds of gifted men and women to God.

Redeeming past time is, therefore, a serious responsibility for the contemporary Church in Ceylon. The four greatest religions of the world are uniquely and vitally present in the island.

Population of Ceylon by Religion, 1963¹

Buddhists	..	..	7,003,287	Zoroastrians	..	932
Hindus	..	..	1,958,394	Rationalists	..	908
Muslims	..	..	724,043	Agnostics	..	172
Roman Catholics	..	..	768,833	Others	..	1,428
Other Christians	..	..	116,116	Unspecified	..	8,051
All 10,582,164						

From a suitable vantage point in the cities one sweep of the eye can often take in a Buddhist temple, a Hindu gopuram, a Muslim mosque and a Christian Church. The Ceylonese are a church-loving people. Long-distance buses make special halts at famous shrines where the conductor makes a collection among the passengers for throwing into the invitingly placed tills. Automobile drivers, Buddhist or influenced by a Buddhist love for all beings, take loving care to avoid stray dogs and cattle on the roads. Adherents will make a public act of obeisance when passing their places of worship, in a manner reminiscent of what the present writer has seen in the West only in Ireland.

Are these external manifestations religious, superstitious or merely human-cultural? This fashionable question is sometimes asked but, however it be answered, does not detract from the fact that we have in Ceylon a people conscious of the draw of extra-terrestrial reality and persistently refusing to accept a completely secularist way of life.

To carry out its responsibilities, the Church in Ceylon has a lay intelligentsia more informed, more stoutly independent of ecclesiastical tutelage and more committed than in most other parts of Asia. A group of Catholic radicals runs a bi-monthly called *Outlook*, while Christian periodicals such as *Dialogue*, *Quest* and *Logos* usually make stimulating reading.² All these periodicals are, however, in the English language. The nearly complete absence of vernacular Christian intellectuals is a part of the legacy of deculturization which has been bequeathed to the Church.

Finally, summoning the Church in Ceylon to awake even at this late hour to its role is the openness of some clergy who are in contact with the current reappraisal of the Church in the West and the fair degree of aggiornamento of the two Ceylonese and eighteen foreign congregations of the 1,790 Ceylonese and 537 foreign religious sisters working in Ceylon.³ Incidentally, it would be difficult to

¹From Department of Census and Statistics, yet unpublished figures.

²*Outlook*, § : 1, February 1970, quotes Fr Jan Hemrood, O.M.I., as saying: 'I consider Ceylon to be the Netherlands of Asia'. Fr Hemrood, a Dutchman, was Professor of Scripture at Ceylon's National Seminary and is now in mysterious exile in the West.

³Figures from the typescript of the *Survey of the Society of Jesus in Ceylon*, Phase 1, *The Situation in Ceylon Today* (Ceylon: April 1967), p. 120.

over-estimate the role of the female religious in Asian societies, provided they are ready occasionally to leave the security of habits and cloisters to take the risks of insertion into the maelstrom of contemporary social change in Asia.

In the search for an Asianized Church the major Christian groups in Ceylon have to solve the problems of the narrower in order to answer effectively those of the wider ecumenism. The imperatives of the wider ecumenism, however, serve to increase the pace and seriousness of inter-Christian dialogue. A recent sociology final paper in Oxford asked whether the current ecumenical movement was an illustration of the principle that, when groups become weak, they tend to coalesce. In Ceylon it would seem to illustrate the better documented principle that, when brothers meet after many years, the first thing they do is to kiss.

The encounters have begun in Ceylon. There was a time when Catholics were discouraged from becoming members of the Y.M.C.A. even to play table-tennis. Today both sides positively encourage inter-denominational carol, prayer and Bible (though not yet eucharistic) services, seminars, conferences and preaching in one another's churches (though mixed marriages are only grudgingly tolerated by the Catholic authorities). The Catholic Church is not a member of the National Council of Churches. Co-operation with the Bible Society is accepted in principle, but efforts to secure a common vernacular Bible have so far proved unsuccessful, owing largely to the non-co-operation of some members of the Catholic hierarchy. Indeed, the hierarchical authorities on both sides seem to have profound psychological complexes preventing sincere and uninhibited encounter. The rank and file are much more spontaneous and sincere and have a greater passion for unity. Therein lies the best hope for the future.

In order to be truly Asian in Asia, the Christian message must meet existentially the great non-Christian religions of the land. Buddhism is the most important of these, but Hinduism and Islam have to be met too. The dialogue with Buddhism, though not on official, still on the perhaps more significant back-bencher level, has begun. There is even a danger in a heterogeneous country like Ceylon that the sometimes excessive enthusiasm of Sinhala Christians to encounter Sinhala culture may offend Christian universality, which should be open as well to the Hindus who are Tamils and to the Muslims.

With the non-Christians the Christian Church has often spoken an unintelligible language. Take the fundamental Christian concept of God. To the Buddhist the word 'god' connotes a being inferior to the Buddha and indeed awaiting salvation from the Enlightened One. In encounter it is often discovered that what the Buddhist seeks in nirvanic liberation is what the Christian seeks in divine union. In certain Christian circles it was for a time considered to drop the

word 'God', calling the Being denoted by that name *Nirvāṇayāno* (the honorific, personified form of the noun, *nirvāṇa*, non-attachment, signifying experience of the Transcendent). But the suggestion has probably come too late to be taken kindly by the Buddhists and too early for the worldly wise among the Christians.

The Christians give primacy to love or charity. But the Buddhists too reserve primacy for love, for the two Buddhist concepts of *maitreya* (kindness) and *karuna* (compassion), at least when taken together, exhaust the possibilities of Christian love in its horizontal dimension of love for all created beings.

During the past five years—for several reasons, ranging from the political fact that the new government had fewer suspicions of the Catholics to the theological maturing in the island of the ideas of Pope John and Vatican II—a favourable atmosphere for inter-faith dialogue has developed in Ceylon.

The Christians accepted the transfer of the weekly holiday from Sunday to the *poṇa* or moon-phase day, honoured by the Buddhists. Religious dignitaries visit one another on solemn occasions and the meetings are recorded in the national newspapers. The Christians are moving out of the former ghetto outlook and, less fearful now of faith-contamination, increase their social contacts with non-Christian relatives and friends. Intellectual encounter is fostered by a few Christian centres. The Congress of Religions has representatives from all the major faiths in the island and its Inter-Religious Council functions as an arbitration body in religious disputes. Buddhism is currently being studied in depth by two or three Christian researchers, thus undertaking a task long overdue, and which in India for Hinduism is already at least a generation old.

But, in the search for a Church fully incarnated and therefore fully relevant in Asia, all this should only be a prelude. The Church should proceed fearlessly and confidently, and not only prudently (the official Church is never imprudent in these matters), to speak with Asia at those moments and periods when the Spirit of God is speaking to Asia and when, let us say it deliberately, Asia is most herself.

In a thought-provoking and potentially seminal address to the Dialogue Circle of the Congress of Religions in 1968,¹ Fr Aloysius Pieris, S.J., shows how the Church, in her attitude to non-Christian religions, has passed from the conquest-theory to the theory of adaptation, and from adaptation to fulfilment-theory, but urges that the further step should be taken to the sacramental theory, making the Kingdom-in-fieri which is the Church the sign and instrument of the processes of salvation at work wherever men and women sincerely seek it. The point is that tens of thousands seek it in Ceylon today, as much in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy as in the Christian cathedrals, as much in pilgrimage to the Buddha's

¹'The Church, the Kingdom and other Religions', unpublished MS., 1969.

footprint on Adam's Peak as to Our Lady of Madu, as much at Vesak as at Christmas.

Vesak is the joyous May feast of the birth, enlightenment and attainment of nirvāna of the Buddha. Of this feast Fr Pieris says this: 'The Church must reflect prayerfully on this event, placing it in the context of God's universal salvific plan and incorporate it into her life through her liturgy. . . . A eucharistic celebration of Vesak with relevant passages from Buddhist scriptures . . . would infallibly explicitate the anonymously Christian import of this sacred event. . . . How could the Church be the Sacrament of the Kingdom in these lands except through a liturgical incarnation?'¹

Yet it is the liturgical experiments that have run into really hot Roman water. Probably the most serious of the experiments was the celebration of the eucharist at the Protestant Theological College of Pilimatalawa in the context of Buddhist religious experience by Fr Yohan Devananda (of the Anglican Communion) and Fr Aloysius Pieris.² The former incorporated Buddhist cultural *forms* into the Anglican service. The latter concentrated on the *content* of the liturgy, incorporating into the Mass the Buddhist messianic expectation of salvation. The reaction of the Hierarchy and the Roman authorities was very unfavourable. The lessons of de Nobili and Ricci have not been learnt, and further experiments in this line run the strong risk of being forced into the underground.

There is also the liturgy, more broadly understood, whereby the Church should enter into close communion with the people in order to detect and fulfil the divine purposes of their daily life, aspiration and work. In an effort to lead the spiritual life in a local cultural setting, the Protestants have made some experiments in the line of the Buddhist *ārāmayas* (monasteries) or Hindu *ashram* (hermitages). Fr Selvaratnam opened an *ashram* at Chunnakam in North Ceylon about twenty-five years ago. Fr Yohan Devananda, a Cambridge graduate, has been living in an *ārāmaya* since 1957. There are snippets of news in the air of similar projected Catholic extra-structural experimentations with a view to making religion relevant to contemporary Ceylon. How far they will succeed in allaying the fears of those accustomed to the more traditional forms of Christian presence, how far the old-established criteria will be sufficient for the analysis of the new ventures, how far the language of caution will be ready to meet and understand the language of risk—these are questions that only the future can answer.

What is certain is that the Church in Asia will never become a thing of Asia unless and until it adopts attitudes to non-Christian religions and cultures even more humble and accommodating than the attitudes of the Church in the West to Greco-Roman culture.

¹*Ibid.*, p. 19. Also cf., for instance, Psalm 81, where the celebration of a harvest festival is made the occasion of reflection on God's purposes for His people.

²See Aloysius Pieris, S.J., 'Liturgy and the Dialogue with Buddhism: An Experiment', in *Dialogue*, No. 15, July 1968 (Colombo: Study Centre for Religion and Society).

Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam have moulded the lives of tens of millions and helped millions in Asia to lead good and holy lives. Here, more than anywhere else, Christianity must fulfil, not destroy, the religions of the peoples. Somewhere, somewhen, in his encounter with Buddhists, the Christian in Ceylon must feel that 'the Christ and the Buddha seem to meet on the green hill under the holy tree in their great longing to show the path of salvation to a world that had lost its way. They meet in spirit here. Perhaps if they had met in the flesh they would have shown their followers something that these followers have still to learn.'¹

But the meeting must take place in the here and now of contemporary Ceylon. In a powerful pamphlet the Christian Workers' Fellowship said in 1967 that in Ceylon 'the conditions favourable to social change may be present, but it is human beings who are called upon to effect the change.'² The Fellowship pleads for Christians to respond to the call. Socialism, national economic development, national consciousness, secularization—these are the four dominant themes of secular reality in independent Ceylon. Buddhism today is affronting all four problems, shattering the too facile post-Weberian Western generalizations about the static nature of Eastern religions and their inability to cope with, still less to motivate, social change.

The Christian Church remains very much on the sidelines like an unsure spectator. When its own privileged positions are threatened, as when the schools were taken over by the State in 1960, the Church machinery often goes into noisy action. But where the nation moves forward on its own momentum, the Church takes no sides or betrays complexes of inferiority. This is most noticeable in the early morning five-minute religious broadcasts over the national radio. While the sermons of the Buddhist monks are usually connected with the daily life and household concerns of the listeners, the Christian homilies are usually about the City of God at the expense of the City of Man. By insisting on retaining some private schools, the Church fosters the image of an organization that seeks separate identity from the rest of the nation and is unwilling to share in its joys and travails.

It is not that Buddhism does not experience any tension in its own encounter with the secular. To the traditional Buddhist there are nocturnal spirits hovering around every house, and guarding every river there are gods. The urbanized modern Buddhist prefers the police night patrol to the *pahan pela* (the coconut oil lamp on a stand in the garden meant to propitiate the spirits) and rivers are being diverted in massive hydro-electric and irrigation projects. The modern Ceylonese villager trusts insecticides (the Buddhist precept of non-killing notwithstanding) more than devil dances for the protection of his crops. But the devil has a way of getting his own back. For he may go out in the name of secularization only to return, seven times

¹W. T. Keble, *Ceylon, Beaten Track*, Colombo: Observer Press, p. 137.

²*Social Change in Ceylon*, Colombo: Christian Workers' Fellowship, 1967, p. 85.

stronger, in the name of secularism. And will the new Buddhism know the difference?

Christianity has more experience in this field. In the West it has met both secularization and secularism and has learnt to welcome the one as a liberating force and recognize the other as a debasement of man and his universe. In a spirit of service and common endeavour, therefore, the Christian Church in Ceylon today must enmesh itself with Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam in the work of individual and corporate salvation. And if there must needs be ultimate concern for the absolute uniqueness of Christ, Son of God, this concern must show itself in the resolve of the Church in Asia to be, like Christ, the real and complete assumption into God of the lives of men and their nations.

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