

KLEINE BEITRÄGE

CONTEXTUALIZING THEOLOGY IN SRI LANKA – SOME REFLECTIONS

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Sri Lanka is a privileged land for a student of Religion. The four great religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam – are found here. It is only in recent times that this great wealth of material is beginning to be exploited by sociologists of religion. In Sri Lanka, those belonging to the Roman Catholic communion account for about 6.8 % of the total population. The Buddhists, on the contrary, make up the major portion of the population of the country.

Sri Lanka received her Christianity from the Portuguese in the sixteenth century (1505–1656). Many conversions were made by them. In 1656 the Dutch replaced the Portuguese in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and became our rulers. They too, were anxious to make converts, but to their reformed communion. There followed persecution of those who had embraced the new Faith (Roman Catholicism). The Catholics, who were under very great pressure, from the Dutch, succumbed to the religious rites of the Dutch Reformed Church. However, it must be mentioned, that quite a few, held on to the original Faith they had received. At this critical juncture in the history of Christianity in Ceylon, the Catholics did not have the regular ministry of priests for 30 years (1658–1687). This was something unique in the history of Christianity in Ceylon.

CHRISTIANITY IN CEYLON – INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM

The type of Christianity that existed during this period is recorded for us by an Englishman, ROBERT KNOX, who was a prisoner in Ceylon from 1660–1679. He says that the Christians had no proper churches and no priests. They were not organized. Nevertheless, they baptized their children with water and commemorated the Lord's day, by abstaining from work and praying in their houses. Most of them wore beads and crucifixes. He also mentions that their knowledge of Christ had become vague and their ideas mingled with Buddhist beliefs and practices. In spite of this, they still considered themselves a group apart because they had a distinct religion.¹

It was at this time, that the Christians in Ceylon began to discard certain elements in the Christianity they had received. In the process, they also came under the influence of many Buddhist practices. This is still evident in especially the coastal areas, where the great portion of Catholics live. For instance, in time of sickness or trouble, to go to a sorcerer, to dabble in witchcraft, engage in light reading, to wear a talisman is quite a common practice among a good number of Catholics. The result was a faith which adopted a sort of 'Religious Syncretism'. This is something which cannot be fully comprehended, namely this readiness among the Christians to adapt, without making too many close distinctions. They seemed to have been satisfied with approximations of the truth, while at the same time holding on to their basic loyalty. This was the period where could be seen the signs of a blossoming forth of a peculiar brand of Christianity in Ceylon. This is a key fact to be taken note of by anyone attempting to theologize within the Sri Lanka context. It is this 'Religious Syncretism' that has had a historical evolution in Sri Lanka for well over four centuries. It is this reality, reflected on, in Faith, that should be the starting point of any effort to contextualize Theology; in this case, in Sri Lanka.

¹ Cf. R. BOUDENS, *The Catholic Church in Ceylon under Dutch Rule* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1957), pp. 76, 86–87.

FR. JOSEPH VAZ found himself in this situation, when he arrived from India in 1687. In his work, he seems to have been concerned in building a church less alien to the oriental mentality.² In 1796, the Dutch were succeeded by the British (1796–1948). The policy of the British was one of tolerance and religious pluralism. The different churches were allowed to carry on their work without interference. Till about the beginning of the nineteenth century therefore, the Church in Ceylon was ‘uninstitutionalised’.³ During this time ‘Religious Syncretism’ was growing. It could be mentioned here in passing, that FR. JOSEPH VAZ, in his approach to the Christians in Sri Lanka, seems to have taken this fact of ‘Religious Syncretism’ as an accepted reality. Instead of confronting or condemning this reality, we see him rather christianising these Buddhist beliefs and practices; for example, in the aspect of prayers for various occasions and needs.

When a re-thinking is done on the Mission of the Church in Sri Lanka, these facts must be taken into account. A mere technical grasp of a country is not enough. One has also to see it (Christianity) lived and the reaction to it, of the common man. This is the silent language which every theologian must be attentive to. This lived experience of the people should form the backdrop for anyone attempting to contextualize Theology in Sri Lanka.

A RE-THINKING OF MISSIONARY ENDEAVOUR

FR. JOSEPH VAZ came at a time of crisis in the Church in Sri Lanka. It is this crisis situation in a sense that made him grasp the essentials of the Christian Message. Besides grasping the essentials, we could also go so far as to say, that it made him conscious of the peculiarities of the lived faith of the Christians in Sri Lanka. Similarly,

Recent events in the past have made us reflect on the status quo and re-think the Mission of the Church in Sri Lanka. The first was the takeover of the schools in 1961. Through this, we began to rediscover the gospel. “The schools’ takeover helped us to see that we were not really teaching the Faith so effectively. We had mistaken buildings for communities, ownership for environment, management for motivation and instruction for education.”⁴

Secondly, Vatican II (1962–1965) added impetus to this rethinking. In 1968 we had the first National Synod in Sri Lanka. In 1969–1970, a Socio-Religious survey was conducted by Canon FRANCOIS HOUTART, at the invitation of the Catholic Hierarchy in Sri Lanka.

In the events that have taken place and the rethinking that they gave rise to, the Church in Sri Lanka has slowly begun to realize that rather than hankering for power, she should be the fearless herald of the Good News of Total Liberation, with the power of the Word, which she has at her disposal. The Church in Sri Lanka is being gradually stripped of her instruments of power. She has been left only with the Word of God. In the future, this Word will have to be proclaimed more and more. It should be the duty of priests, to be concerned about the real problems of the people and show them how to relate the message of the Gospel to their lives. The Word is still powerful and efficacious (Is. 55: 10–11) if it is proclaimed in a way suited to the local situation and the culture of the people.⁵

² Cf. R. BOUDENS, *The Catholic Church* . . . , p. 174.

³ TISSA BALASURIYA, *Reflections on the Nationalization of the Catholics Schools in Sri Lanka*, gestetnered notes, published by the Centre for Society and Religion, Maradana, Colombo – 10, 11th. Oct. 1972, p. 1.

⁴ TISSA BALASURIYA, *Reflections* . . . , pp. 12–13.

⁵ Cf. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (GS), art. 44, para. 3.

the recent events that have taken place in Sri Lanka, have made the Church realize the need for a rethinking of her approach.

WITHIN THIS CONTEXT A NEW PROCLAMATION IS CALLED FOR

We in Sri Lanka cannot be complacent about the situation of the Church here. The Socio-Religious survey of Canon FRANCOIS HOUTART shows that a good 40 % of Catholics still attend Mass on Sunday. This should not make us rest on our laurels. For he affirms quite definitely, that there is a process of erosion in the religious behavioural patterns of Sri Lanka, very similar to that of the Industrial countries.⁶

In his conclusion to the survey, Houtart calls for a new proclamation. "We are facing", he says, "a profound transformation of society, in mentalities and in social organization (in culture and society). And this is an irreversible pattern. It affects the Catholic group as much as the other religious groups. Internally and in the whole of Ceylonse society the Catholic group is changing. A new situation needs a new evangelization. Something which was not existing before and could not be met before either. Hence the need for a new approach which is not at all a criticism of the former approaches. But it is equally clear that with the former approaches it will be impossible to meet the new situations."⁷

WORKING TOWARDS A NEW PROCLAMATION

To work towards a new proclamation, within the Sri Lanka context, should, I feel, be the concern of all. This is a challenge we have to accept. Religion, which was studied purely from sacred texts, has now to be learnt also from the people who practise it. If a rethinking is not done soon, then I am afraid, we will be still in the static old vision of the world. We have to get on with it. We have to enter this new dynamic, forward looking, future oriented world of ours.

In this re-thinking prudent risks will definitely have to be taken. There would have to be a change of attitude, a change of approach, a change of method, a change of heart. But it should not be change for the sake of change. Rather, every step we take will have to be reflected upon by the whole community. It is this first step, reflected upon, that will clarify the second step that we will take, and so on. This action-reflection will have to be an ongoing process. This will make Christianity, not something which uproots a man from his traditional culture, but rather which makes him part of that culture which he himself actively helps to create.⁸ Each culture, is a complex reality which Christianity will have to purify, to harness them to humanization and development. Only then will Christianity be a movement rooted in the country. If this does not take place, Christianity will always be thought of as something alien to the culture of the country. This would be somewhat of a contradiction, since Christianity had its birth in the East.

It may not be possible, however, to cause a major change in the whole pattern of a nation like Sri Lanka immediately; especially because her culture has been permeated by Buddhism from about 200 years before Christ. Western Colonization too, has for the better part of four and a half centuries left its mark on Sri Lanka. However, it is a start well worth making. The life experience of the people should be taken seriously. This lived experience is itself an incipient theology. This gives theology its specificity within a particular context.

⁶ Cf. F. HOUTART, *Catholic Church in Ceylon*, in: *Quest* 43, 2nd. edition (1971), pp. 9-10, 32-33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸ Cf. PAULO FREIRE, *Education: the practice of freedom* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1974), pp. 46, 67, and also pp. 71 and 75.