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0521026504 - Power and Religiosity in a Post-Colonial Setting: Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka

R. L. Stirrat

Excerpt

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Introduction

On the first Friday of each month, Rita leaves her home in Pallansena, a suburb about fifteen miles north of Colombo, and travels for more than three hours in a crowded bus to the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in a village called Kudagama. Rita has been making this journey almost every month for the last ten years: at one time she was going every week. She goes because she considers this shrine to be the most sacred spot in the whole of Sri Lanka, a place chosen by the Virgin Mary to make her powers known to humanity.

Rita can vividly remember her first visit to Kudagama. She had come with her sister, who was having problems with her daughter. The girl was refusing to go to school and sat around the house doing nothing. Rita's sister had heard of Kudagama and Father Jayamanne, the parish priest. He was said to have remarkable powers and to be able to cure the sick and the distressed. So she asked Rita to come along and keep them company, even though Rita didn't have much faith in such places. 'I was ignorant in those days', says Rita. 'I had no idea of the power of Our Lady or of Father Jayamanne.'

The first time they went to Kudagama, Rita travelled by the regular state-run bus service to Kurunegala and then changed to a smaller bus which ran to Kudagama. She says she first realised how popular the shrine was when they had to fight to get on the Kudagama bus. It was already getting dark, and as the bus climbed the narrow twisting road into the foothills of the central highlands, Rita began to wonder where on earth she was going.

They arrived at Kudagama just after dusk and she could see little of the place. Already a large crowd of men, women and children had gathered close to the bus stop at what she soon realised was the first station of a

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Way of the Cross which led up a huge rock past the church of Our Lady of Lourdes to a group of statues representing the Crucifixion. The people were all kneeling, praying with lit candles in their hands. Rita, her sister and niece, bought candles from some small boys and joined the group. Then Father Jayamanne appeared, coming down the hill to join the throng. As the priest began to recite the prayers, Rita began to feel a power going through her body. 'It was like electricity. I had never felt anything like it before. Then I felt a wave of joy. I started crying with love for the Virgin and pity for our dear Lord who died for us.' Then, as if that wasn't enough, something even more dramatic happened. Rita's niece suddenly collapsed and started screaming and wailing. Rita and her sister didn't know what to do, but some other women and a man restrained the girl and told them that she must be possessed by a demon. 'I had never seen anything like it before', said Rita. 'I didn't believe in such things. After all, our priest at home said that such things were all lies.'

Over the weekend Rita saw many more possessed people. She watched them being blessed by Father Jayamanne and the demons being expelled. She saw pins being produced out of people's bodies, pins which had been sent by sorcerers. She met people who had recovered from cancer, who had obtained jobs and had passed exams through the intervention of Father Jayamanne and the Virgin Mary. She heard stories of how Father Jayamanne fought demons and sorcerers; of how the Virgin Mary appeared to him in dreams, and of how she was going to appear at Kudagama as she had appeared at Fatima and Garabandal. She met people who assured her that it was from Kudagama that the Virgin would lead true Catholics in the last battle against the forces of Satan. She also met 'a wise old Italian priest' called Father Paolicci who told her that the reason so many people were possessed by demons, and Catholics suffered so many problems, was because the Church was corrupt and priests were breaking their vows. He told Rita that Father Jayamanne was the only good priest in the whole of Sri Lanka and had been chosen by the Virgin herself to lead the people back to the true religion.

Rita returned to Pallansena full of enthusiasm for the shrine. 'I felt a new person. I now realised that my life had been a sin. I had been ignoring Our Lady. I had forgotten about Christ and his sacrifice.' She began to organise a bus to go to Kudagama each week from Pallansena. The local priest objected. 'He didn't understand. He was afraid of the power of Father Jayamanne', but Rita continued to spread the news of the shrine. She still went to her own parish church but would only take communion from Father Jayamanne. She also stopped going on pilgrimages to the

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great national shrines of Sri Lankan Catholics, Madhu and Talawila, dismissing them as ‘carnivals’.

Over the years Rita has received all sorts of help from Our Lady: she discovered that one of her own children was possessed by a demon which was exorcised at Kudagama; another of her children managed to get a job in Dubai, again with the Virgin’s help; when her husband nearly lost his job the Virgin intervened; and when she was ill some holy water from the shrine restored her health. Today she is one of the staunchest supporters of the shrine and claims it changed her life. ‘Before I came here’, she says, ‘I didn’t realise what true religion was. I didn’t realise why I was unhappy. But now I have peace. Now I know what true religion is.’ She points to the miracles which take place each week at the shrine. They are the proof of its sacred power.

The first time I heard about Kudagama was in the summer of 1974 when I was doing fieldwork in a fishing village called Ambakandawila, about twenty miles north of Pallansena. At the time my main preoccupations were with kinship and the economy of small-scale fishing. Although Ambakandawila was a Catholic village I was uninterested in religion. It appeared to me that there was little of significance to say about the religiosity of the fishing families in this village: they simply went to church each Sunday, celebrated the feasts of the Catholic calendar and the sacralised life-cycle rituals, attended the feasts of parishes where they had relations or friends, and went to some of the larger and more famous national shrines. It seemed to me that religion played a minor role in their lives except as an identity marking them off from the Sinhala Buddhists who form the bulk of the population of Sri Lanka.

I was first told about Kudagama by a young priest who had previously been in charge of Ambakandawila but by 1974 had been transferred to the nearby town of Chilaw. For him and for many other priests, the sort of religiosity found at Kudagama was a threat to the changes they were trying to introduce into the post-Vatican II Church in Sri Lanka. They viewed what was happening at Kudagama as a manifestation of idle superstition, the result of priests’ failure to educate the laity in the meaning of ‘true’ Catholicism. But what he had to say about Kudagama, partly based on a visit he had made to the shrine and partly based on what his parishioners had told him about it, made me want to go there. After all, compared with what I had previously seen of Sinhala Catholics, Kudagama promised exotic behaviour and bizarre events. So like Rita, the next Friday I took the crowded bus up from the coast to

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Kurunegala, and then an even more crowded bus for the last few miles to Kudagama.

What I saw at Kudagama quickly began to fascinate me. At first what struck me most were the demonically possessed. In over two years in Ambakandawila I had only come across one such case, and that was tame stuff compared with the twenty or thirty cases a day which I saw at Kudagama. I began to be interested in why there were so many demonically possessed people at the shrine, what such possession signified, and how to go about understanding it. Soon, however, my interests widened. In the mid-seventies, Kudagama was attracting thousands of pilgrims each weekend, by no means all in search of relief from demonic possession. Many were coming to the shrine in search of much more mundane goals: jobs, financial success, recovery from sickness and so on, whilst others came simply because they considered Kudagama to be imbued with the divine. Demonic possession was only one aspect of the shrine and, I began to realise, could only be understood in terms of the wider forces which had led to the rise in its popularity. Finally, I became fascinated by the emotional intensity of those who came to Kudagama, a far cry from the restrained forms of religious behaviour I was familiar with from Ambakandawila. The more time I spent there, what had at first seemed exotic became the ordinary, everyday life of Kudagama.

At various points over the next ten years I carried out further pieces of fieldwork in Sri Lanka, all in one way or another concerned with the rise of Kudagama. It rapidly became clear that understanding the shrine and what went on there could not be based on fieldwork at Kudagama alone. Simply in practical terms, the sheer numbers of people at the shrine made fieldwork difficult, but more importantly, by working only at the shrine it proved impossible to situate what was happening at Kudagama within the wider context, not just of Catholic Sri Lanka but also of Sri Lanka as a whole. And so the fieldwork expanded.

I soon discovered that Kudagama was not the only shrine to develop in the 1970s. Rather there was a whole series of such shrines, some flourishing for only a few months before falling from favour, whilst others attracted a regular group of devotees for many years. Although such shrines varied from one to another, the same themes continually recurred: a stress on exorcism of the demonically possessed, a stress on direct contact with the divine through the central figures at these shrines, and a stress on what the devotees saw as a return to traditional Catholicism. Kudagama, although by far the most famous of these shrines, was not a 'one off': rather it was one element of a more general phenomenon.

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Whilst continuing to work in the shrines, I also visited the homes of the pilgrims, in part because it was often easier to talk to them away from the hurly-burly of the shrines, and in part to try to understand the backgrounds from which they came. At first this was simply a matter of pursuing individual pilgrims or family groups back to their homes, as disparate as the mansions of middle-class Colombo, the slums of north Colombo and impoverished rural huts. Yet even this was too shrine orientated: such dips into a variety of social milieux told me little of the forces which encouraged some, but not others, towards the sort of religiosity found at Kudagama or the other shrines. And so I decided to focus on three villages, all very different from each other, in an attempt to understand these wider processes.

The first of these, not surprisingly, was Ambakandawila. Here what interested me was why so few people from the village had ever been to Kudagama or any of the other shrines, and why they treated the claims of these shrines with a marked degree of scepticism. Throughout the seventies no more than a handful of people from Ambakandawila went to any of these shrines, and of them only two or three had much credence in the miracles that devotees claimed to take place there. More generally, people in Ambakandawila rejected the forms of religiosity manifest at these shrines, preferring instead much less emotional forms of religious expression.

The second village I concentrated on was Pallansena, Rita's home village. Although only twenty miles from Ambakandawila, Pallansena is a very different sort of community. Situated at the northern end of the periurban area which stretches north along the coast from Colombo, Pallansena is more of a suburb than a village. In the 1970s it consisted of a couple of thousand households, mostly Catholic. Unlike Ambakandawila, where most households depended directly on fishing for their livelihoods, people in Pallansena made a living from a vast range of occupations mainly in the towns and factories between there and Colombo. Although by no means typical of all the villages and towns from which shrines such as Kudagama drew their pilgrims, it did stand in marked contrast to Ambakandawila, for here around half of all households had been to one or other of the shrines, and there was little of the scepticism over the miracles which took place at these shrines that characterised religiosity in Ambakandawila.

Ambakandawila and Pallansena are both on the coast, firmly within the main area of Catholic concentration in Sri Lanka. The third village I worked in, Vahacotte, is situated almost in the centre of Sri Lanka, a

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Catholic enclave surrounded by a predominantly Sinhala Buddhist population. Vahacotte was founded in the eighteenth century by Catholic refugees fleeing Dutch persecution and today is a fairly important Catholic pilgrimage centre. Unlike both Ambakandawila and Pallansena, the economic basis of the village is paddy and tobacco growing. Compared with Pallansena, relatively few people from Vahacotte visited Kudagama or any of the other new shrines, yet at the same time there was not the same degree of rejection of them as in Ambakandawila.

Most of what follows is based on my fieldwork in these various shrines and villages, although I should add that it does not consist of three contrasting village studies and I do not attempt to discuss fully religious practice in any of these three villages. Furthermore, just as understanding the rise of Kudagama involved moving out of the shrine into the homes of the devotees, so understanding the present involved at least some attempt to understand the past and the ways in which contemporary Sinhala Catholicism has developed over the last two centuries. Over and over again, people at Kudagama would invoke the past. As far as they were concerned what was going on at the shrine was an attempt to regain the past, to return to what they saw as traditional Catholicism. Just as Kudagama cannot be understood in itself, so the contemporary Catholic community cannot be understood in a timeless present. What was happening in the 1970s was only a series of episodes in the history of the Catholic population in Sri Lanka, and to comprehend these episodes I had also to investigate what had happened in the past and how views of the past had become critical elements in the construction of the present. Thus as well as the fieldwork, I also had to investigate what records of the past were available to me.

There are around one million Roman Catholics in Sri Lanka today. Of these, probably 300,000 are Tamils, either 'Sri Lankan Tamils' or 'Indian Tamils', and I will have very little to say about these groups in this book.¹ Of the rest, except for a small number of Burghers who claim descent from Portuguese and Dutch colonists, all claim to be Sinhala. Excluding some minor inland concentrations such as Vahacotte and groups of Catholics in towns such as Kandy and Nuwara Eliya, most Sinhala Catholics are concentrated in a narrow coastal belt stretching from Panadura south of Colombo to Puttalam in the north. The present distribution of Catholics in Sri Lanka is at least in part a result of the history of the Church in Sri Lanka. The Church first came to Sri Lanka with the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the coastal areas were those they most firmly

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controlled. During the Dutch period Catholics were frequently subject to persecution, the Dutch fearing that the Catholics could form a threat to their control over the coasts of the island. However, after the establishment of British rule in the last years of the eighteenth century, Catholics began to enjoy religious toleration, and in the coastal belt the Church regained control over local Catholics.

The minority status of the Catholic community in Sri Lanka is one of the fundamental themes running through this book – and one of the major analytical problems which has to be addressed from the beginning. Writings on religion in Sri Lanka, both anthropological and historical, are both voluminous and excellent. Most have been concerned with Sinhala Buddhists and concentrate on a number of interrelated themes: the nature of ‘orthodoxy’ in contemporary Sinhala Buddhism, the relationship between Buddhism and the spirit cults, the relationship between Buddhism and Sinhala national identity and the transformation of ‘traditional’ Sinhala Buddhism over the last century.² Yet running through all the work on Sinhala Buddhism has been the close identity between what might be called ‘Sinhala Buddhism’ and ‘Sinhala culture’. Buddhism in itself has been seen as a formative factor on the development of Sinhala culture, and thus recourse is frequently made to implicit ideas of a common Buddhist culture of which Sinhala culture is only one variant, a ‘little tradition’ within the broader and more inclusive ‘great tradition’ of the Theravada Buddhist cultures of Southeast Asia.³

In many ways, such an approach is not illegitimate. After all, the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ is at base one which developed in the particular historical circumstances of Christian Western Europe after the Reformation, and in pre-colonial Sri Lanka it did not exist. The Sinhala term *agama* which is now used to denote ‘religion’ only took on such a specific meaning in the nineteenth century, and even today the boundaries of what constitutes *agama* are still open to doubt, not simply amongst academics but also amongst non-academic Sinhala Buddhists. Yet in the case of Sinhala *Catholics*, the problem becomes particularly acute for whilst they are Sinhala people, speaking the same language as their Buddhist counterparts, a language imbued with Buddhist significance, and sharing much of the same culture with other Sinhala people, they lack one crucial element of what can be seen as central to Sinhala culture: they are not Buddhist.

Put in different terms, Sinhala Catholics exist at the intersection of two analytically separable historical streams. On the one hand they are heirs to a Eurocentric Catholic stream of history, the result of the two great

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missionary movements of modern times, the first associated with Iberian imperial expansion in the sixteenth century, the second with nineteenth-century colonialism. Sinhala Catholics today are well aware of their Catholic heritage and see themselves as part of the universal Church. From this point of view, the shrines which I shall be discussing in this book and the types of religiosity which they manifest have to be seen in this wider context, the local equivalents to European shrines of the twentieth century such as Fatima in Portugal, Garabandal in Spain or, most recently, Medjugorje in Yugoslavia (Bax 1990). In this sense, the discussion in this book has a relevance far outside the narrow confines of Sri Lanka: at its most general level, it is concerned with the vicissitudes of the Catholic Church in the post-colonial, post-imperial and post-Vatican II world. It is concerned with the ways in which religious activities have retained and even regained a significance which modernisation and secularisation theorists would have appeared to ignore.

Yet at the same time, to view the rise of these shrines as no more than the local manifestation of processes emanating from Rome or Catholic Europe would be to tell only half the story, and the other half is very much Sri Lankan. As I shall show in later chapters, despite all the attempts by the missionaries to create a self-enclosed, hermetically sealed group of Catholics in Sri Lanka, there were always close connections between Sinhala Catholics and members of the majority community. In part this manifested itself in the continuing arguments as to where the proper boundaries of religion lay: what was Catholicism, what was dangerous 'superstition' or 'paganism', and what was simply 'culture' and thus outside the domain of the Church. Yet of equal or perhaps greater importance was that Sinhala Catholics were always members of the Sri Lankan polity, and even if they did have some autonomy under colonial rule, with Independence they were pulled more and more into the main-streams of political and economic developments in Sri Lanka. Thus whilst the shrines discussed in this book can be seen in terms of the wider history of the universal Catholic Church, at the same time they have to be seen in terms of local factors, in terms of what Sinhala Catholics share with their Buddhist neighbours rather than in terms of what sets them apart, as well as in terms of the tension between them.

This tension, this dialectic interplay between Sri Lankan particulars and global generalities, runs through all the chapters which follow, although for purposes of presentation one chapter may stress one theme rather than another. Yet at a more abstract level there is a unifying theme: the importance of power in the analysis of religious thought and behaviour.

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As I mentioned earlier, the creation of a separate domain of the 'religious' is a relatively recent phenomenon which developed in a particular historical context. One only needs to reflect on the recent history of the Islamic Middle East to recognise that the sort of division between 'religion' and 'politics' beloved of Western sociologists and politicians is scarcely tenable, whilst even in Britain the continuing arguments between churchmen and politicians make this distinction extremely questionable. In a sense, the fragility of such a distinction is not surprising: after all, both religion and politics are centrally concerned with the nature and practice of power and authority despite all attempts to limit the religious to matters of spirituality, theology, soteriology or whatever. Ultimately, the distinction between 'religion' and 'politics', whether made by churchmen, politicians or academics, is itself ideological.

As far as this book is concerned, the central argument is that understanding the nature of contemporary Catholicism in Sri Lanka, and indeed throughout the world, requires relations of domination to be placed at the centre of the analysis. At the most obvious level, the Catholic Church arrived in Sri Lanka as part of the ideological baggage of the Portuguese invaders. From the beginning, the Church in Sri Lanka was associated with a particular form of colonial intervention. More recently, the rise of Sinhala nationalism has been closely linked to the resurgence of Buddhism and various attempts at the construction of particular Buddhist conceptions of the state, authority and legitimacy. Sinhala Catholics have had little choice but to react to the changing situation. As will become clear in later chapters, the attempts by various Catholics to affirm the distinction between religion and politics have been a failure. Within the Sri Lankan polity which emerged in the years after Independence there was simply no space for such a distinction to emerge.

Yet there is more to the relationship than simply colonial domination and nationalist reaction. Conceptions of power and authority are crucial elements within both the Catholic and Buddhist traditions. In the history of the Buddhist states of Southeast Asia, kingship and the state have been conceptualised in a particular Buddhist form. These images continue to play an important part in the ways in which such states are constituted today and the forms which the grammar of political struggle take.⁴ Similarly, ever since the Emperor Constantine's victory at the battle of Milvan Bridge, the Catholic Church has been centrally concerned with attempting to define the nature of political authority and legitimate domination. Indeed, if the distinction between 'religion' and 'politics' is to be used in any analytical sense, the historical picture in both traditions is

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of religion encompassing politics rather than existing as a separate domain which only rarely interacts with the political.

Such preoccupations with authority and domination are not restricted to the level of the state but also encompass other aspects of social life. Both the Buddhist and Catholic traditions are concerned, to a greater or lesser extent, with regulating moral and ethical conduct. In the Catholic tradition, relations between clergy and laity, the nature of economic relations and relations within the family have all been of critical concern. These areas are also crucially concerned with domination: the relative spheres of authority of clergy and laity; what count as legitimate and illegitimate economic activities; relations of authority within the family. In becoming involved in such matters, the Church has attempted to clothe what is ultimately arbitrary with transcendental reality and significance. The result has been that almost all aspects of life can become imbued with supra-mundane significance. As we shall see in later chapters, a young girl failing her exams, a middle aged woman suffering from arthritis or a young man successfully obtaining a job in Dubai, all become signifiers of this wider, transcendental reality. The preoccupation with legitimate domination and authority breaks down the divide between the macrocosm and the microcosm, between the universe and the individual.

By approaching religion in terms of domination and authority, the frequently used distinctions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' or 'tradition' versus 'change' also become extremely problematic. Earlier I mentioned that one of the main themes in writings on Sinhala Buddhists has been the ways in which Sinhala Buddhism has been transformed over the last century or so. Much of this body of work presents an idealised, often perfectly integrated and highly functionalist view of the role of Buddhism in the past.⁵ The result is an extremely static, ahistorical picture of the past which is surely questionable, and even if such an unlikely picture of the unchanging past is true for Buddhist Sri Lanka, it quite clearly is not when one looks at the history of the Catholic Church. What emerges after even the most cursory look at the latter is a picture of continual change, of continual struggle over what is and is not 'true Catholicism' and of major shifts in the dominant interpretations of the Gospels. It is not that there is no continuity, but rather that the continuity of institutions (such as the Church) or of elements (such as the Virgin Mary, the saints) should not be allowed to disguise the discontinuities which are at least as important. The claim that the Church makes to being the bearer of an unchanging tradition is itself part of an attempt to legitimate its own authority. Tradition is thus an aspect of domination and in itself an area of dispute.