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A Catholic Shrine in its Social Context

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Introduction

In this paper I am concerned with describing certain aspects of a Roman Catholic shrine in Sri Lanka. Ten years ago it did not exist; yet by 1974 the shrine at Devagama had become one of the most important Catholic centres of pilgrimage in the country. Since 1975 numbers have declined, but it still remains a major religious centre.[1]

The central theme of this essay concerns the sacredness of the shrine. The focus is upon those processes through which the shrine has come to be defined as sacred, how its sacredness is maintained, and what are the threats to its sacred status. I shall argue that the rise of Devagama as a sacred centre is intimately related to certain political developments in Sri Lanka over the last few years, coupled with re-interpretations of Catholicism current not only in certain sections of the Sinhalese Church but also in the Catholic Church as a whole.

It is important to point out at this point that the rise of Devagama is not a unique event. There are a number of other Catholic shrines of recent origin in Sri Lanka which centre around individuals who claim to be possessed by saints and which share many features in common with Devagama. Similarly, parallel developments have taken place amongst the Buddhists of the country.

Furthermore, the account presented here is only one of a series of possible accounts. For instance one could produce an account which stresses the similarities between what is happening here and the recent developments amongst Sinhalese Buddhists. In both religions we find an

1. The fieldwork on which this paper is based was carried out at various times between 1974 and 1976. It was financially supported by the Social Science Research Council and the Carnegie Trust. I should like also to acknowledge the help, advice and encouragement I have received from Professor G. Obeysekere and D. Winslow. Finally, I must thank Father Somaratne and the devotees of the shrine at Devagama. They have always treated me with the utmost politeness and generosity despite the fact that they knew full well I did not share their beliefs. Names have been changed in the text to avoid offence.

increase in the incidence of possession, in the belief in direct intervention of supernatural beings in the mundane world, and in what Wilson (1973) would call "thaumaturgical" activities. In many ways the modes of interaction between man and the divine are identical, no matter what the stated religion is. As such, and for certain purposes, it may well be preferable to talk in terms of "Sinhalese Catholicism" or whatever. And in terms of this type of approach, the points developed by Obeyesekere in his analyses of Folk Buddhism are directly relevant to understanding what is happening amongst certain sections of the Catholic population including those who frequent Devagama (Obeysekere 1970; 1974; 1977).

But in this paper I wish to stress not the similarities but rather the differences between Catholics and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. In particular I want to stress the notion that in Sri Lanka, religious identity is an important political factor, and that to be a Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Catholic is to make a political statement. As I hope to show, the growth of Devagama as a shrine is directly related to the changing implications of what it means to be a Catholic. On the one hand, the rise of the shrine consists of a series of metaphorical statements concerning these implications. On the other, it is an attempt to change the nature of these implications.

The Rise of Devagama

Devagama is a small village about fifty miles inland from Colombo. Travel to Colombo and the coast from Devagama is relatively easy both by train and road, a factor not without importance in the rise of the shrine. The village itself is in the foothills of the "Up Country", the mountainous interior of Sri Lanka which remained independent of foreign rule up to 1815 and which even today retains a certain identity separate from "Low Country" Sri Lanka. In administrative terms, Devagama is in a territorial unit which in some senses is marginal to both Up Country and Low Country Sri Lanka. The area around Devagama is remarkably beautiful, flat stretches of paddy land being surrounded by steeply sloping hills covered in rubber, teak and the gardens of the villagers.

The people of Devagama are mainly members of the Batgama caste, a large but low status group whose traditional occupation seems to have been as servants to their caste superiors. Their low status appears to have attracted missionary attention as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. The first group of missionaries to take an interest in the village were members of the Salvation Army. They were followed by Anglicans and then in the early twentieth century by Catholic missionaries. Today,

Buddhists form the largest single religious group in the village, but there are substantial numbers of Catholics and Anglicans along with smaller groups of Seventh Day Adventists and members of the Salvation Army.

Most of the Catholic missionaries active in this area were Italian Jesuits. In 1930, with financial help from Low Country Catholics, they built a church at Devagama on top of a huge rock. Leading up to the church they laid out a "Way of the Cross" which culminated in a set of life-size concrete statues depicting the crucifixion scene. The church was dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes and fittingly, a grotto modelled after that at Lourdes was built behind the church on the highest point of the rock.

Thereafter, the parish of Devagama seems to have been left in a state of benign neglect. Only infrequently was there a resident priest in the village. Normally a priest from a neighbouring parish came to the village every fortnight or so. Devagama was just another insignificant village, unknown to anyone not living in the immediate vicinity. But things began to change with the appointment to the parish of a priest called Father Somaratne in 1970, and from this time, Devagama began its rise to fame.

Father Somaratne's parents were both Catholic teachers. Even as a child he seems to have been a particularly devout Catholic, very early developing a special devotion to the Virgin, and it was no surprise when he decided to enter the Church. After attending a seminary in Sri Lanka, he went for further training to a Catholic seminary in India.

Even whilst a seminarian, Somaratne was the centre of some controversy. Some of his classmates claim that he was nearly expelled from the seminary on a number of occasions for not showing himself suitable for the priesthood. They claim that he frequently took insufficient interest in his studies, oscillating between extreme pietistic devotion to the Virgin, and periods of non-interest in religious affairs. But he survived, returned to Sri Lanka, and was ordained a priest.

When Father Somaratne arrived at Devagama, it was just another remote rural parish, not by any means a coveted appointment and more suitable as the last charge for a priest about to retire than as a first appointment for an active young man. At first he appears to have been content with encouraging the cult of the Virgin amongst his parishioners. Thus he encouraged the villagers to wear the scapular and to say the Rosary every night. He introduced communal Rosaries on Saturdays at the grotto behind the church, and led his congregation through the Way of the Cross on

Fridays. How successful he was at involving his parishioners in such devotions I cannot say. And although his pietistic attitudes were somewhat unusual in comparison with most priests in Sri Lanka, these Marian devotions in themselves would probably not have led to Devagama becoming the shrine it is today. What seems to have been crucial in its rise was the presence at Devagama of a "Holy Relic".

Sometime in the 1930s, one of the Italian Jesuits involved in building the church at Devagama brought back from Rome what was claimed to be a Thorn from Christ's Crown of Thorns. For some reason, he deposited the thorn in Devagama church. The sacred claims for this Thorn were not generally accepted by the clergy in Sri Lanka. It was not accompanied by any authentication and it seemed most unlikely that if it was a true Thorn that it would end up in Devagama. Thus no-one took it very seriously, the general attitude towards it being summed up by a priest who told me it was "simply a piece of rubbish foisted off on colonials by those sharks in the Vatican". So when Father Somaratne arrived at Devagama, the Thorn was languishing in a cupboard in the Mission House, neither treated with any great veneration nor the centre of any devotion.

At first, Father Somaratne seems to have been unaware of the Thorn's existence, but when he realised its sacred claims he brought it out of its obscurity and began to treat it with the reverence proper to a relic of Christ's passion. Soon he realised that if it was truly a relic, then it must have supernatural powers. So when two villagers were brought to him suffering from demonic possession, he blessed them with the Thorn, pressing it against their foreheads. The demons were successfully eliminated, and so the Thorn began to be used to heal others, both those possessed by demons and those suffering from more mundane problems.

The fame of the Thorn soon began to spread outside the immediate areas of Devagama. At first, only those from local towns came to the church. But as its fame grew the shrine began to attract pilgrims and devotees from all over Sri Lanka, even from distant Tamil speaking areas.

At the beginning, the lure of Devagama lay in the miraculous curing power of the Thorn. But very quickly a transformation of sorts occurred. Devagama became a sacred place; a divinely chosen spot. The miraculous cures effected at Devagama began to be interpreted as an indication, not only that the Thorn was a true relic, but that the place itself was divinely chosen. Furthermore, the belief developed that this divine choice had been exercised by the Virgin Mary who had also chosen Father Somaratne to be her agent on earth. So whilst at first only the sick

and lame had been brought to Devagama to be healed, now people began to come for a whole host of reasons, some for directly pragmatic reasons, others, ostensibly at least, out of more spiritual interests. And so a circular process of growth set in. Because of the miracles at Devagama so the sacredness of the place increased. And as its sacredness developed, so the greater the number of miracles.

By 1974 a relatively fixed pattern of public rituals had developed at Devagama which has remained constant ever since. The same set of rituals occur every weekend, modified only by the occurrence of special feasts such as Easter and the various feasts of the Virgin. The rituals begin on Friday evenings with the Way of the Cross. This is followed by a mass at Calvary and, after a short break, with midnight vigils in the grotto. On Saturdays there are novenas in the grotto followed by a long series of communal blessings when Father Somaratne blesses the people with the Thorn and with a "miraculous" statue of the Virgin. After these communal blessings there follows a long series of individual interviews and blessings from Father Somaratne. Many of the faithful begin to leave on Saturday evening but others remain until after morning mass on Sunday.

The largest crowds, numbering anything up to 5,000 people, come on the first weekend of each month, but on any weekend there are rarely less than 1,000 devotees present. Since 1975 there has been a decline in the numbers present at Devagama, perhaps by as much as 50%. Even so, Devagama remains one of the most important Catholic shrines in the country in terms of the numbers it attracts and the frequency of their visits. Individual motives for coming to the shrine may, as I have said, be mundane and pragmatic in the extreme, but the fact that people come to Devagama depends upon its peculiarly sacred nature, upon it being defined as a centre of worship and of contact with the divine. This, in the eyes of the faithful, makes it qualitatively different from other religious centres in Sri Lanka. And it is to these sacred aspects of Devagama that I now wish to turn.

The Sacredness of Devagama

A fairly orthodox approach in anthropology is to argue that what is sacred is that which relates two otherwise discrete entities. Given a radical distinction between the divine and the mundane, then if the divine is to have any relevance for the mundane, some form of communication must exist between these separate levels. And the vehicles of communication are entities which partake of the essence of both levels, being both divine and mundane. Thus Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Saints all bridge this

gap. They are (or were) both human and divine beings. Furthermore, if religion is to have any relevance for profane everyday life, then religious action must be focussed upon these sacred entities through which communication with the divine can be attained and maintained.[2] The shrine at Devagama is such a sacred entity. Here, the ontological gulf which separates this world and the divine is bridged. It is a place where people can communicate with the divine and approach the power of the divine through the sacredness of the shrine. To quote Christian's comments on Spanish shrines, Devagama is "a specially charged transaction site with well proven intermediaries for communication with the divine". (Christian 1972: 101).

For the faithful who frequent Devagama there is no problem concerning the sacred nature of the shrine. For them, the miraculous cures; the boons granted; the very "feel" of the place are sufficient to justify their knowledge that Devagama is a sacred place. Such supernatural events are proof that the Virgin has chosen Devagama for her divine purposes and that Father Somaratne is Her specially chosen vehicle. Of course, the faithful may well be correct in their views, but to the cynical anthropologist it is clear that the Virgin is not the agent defining Devagama as sacred but rather that the defining agents are the people themselves. It is because they define Devagama as sacred that they come to the shrine for divine aid.

At Devagama, three sets of items seem to be crucial foci of the shrine's sacredness; these three sets being more or less interdependent on one another. First of all, Father Somaratne is considered to have a special relationship with the Virgin Mary which makes him a sacred, supernaturally charged person. Secondly, the place itself is considered divinely chosen by the Virgin and because of this is imbued with a special quality. And thirdly, the relics of the shrine are supernaturally charged. Furthermore, their presence at the shrine is again related to the will of the Virgin, for she is the one who has united relics, place and priest, bringing them together for Her divine purposes.

Let us first look at Father Somaratne for he triggered off the development of the shrine at Devagama by bringing the Thorn out of obscurity and by instigating Marian devotions at the shrine. Furthermore, he alone of the three foci of sacredness has control over his actions. By his actions he can reinforce or undermine his own sacred status.

2. On this point, see for instance Leach 1976; Douglas 1966 and Christian 1972.

The faithful consider that Father Somaratne has been chosen by the Virgin as Her mouthpiece on earth. Some say She chose him because of his great devotion to Her; others see his piety as the result of the Virgin choosing him. But whatever the causal chain, Father Somaratne is seen as enjoying a very special relationship with the Virgin. It is generally believed that She communicates with him through dreams. Thus it was only through a dream that Father Somaratne discovered the Thorn, and only through her promptings that he began to use the Thorn, for blessing the sick. Such is this relationship with Her that Father Somaratne is thought to be qualitatively different from ordinary mortals, including other priests. He is considered to be "almost" a saint. His touch alone is often sufficient to cure the sick and to drive out devils. He is supposed to have the power of foretelling the future and of instantaneous travel from one place to the next. Even his clothes possess these supernatural properties of healing and people expect them to become relics when he dies. Some even say that he is already "like a relic".

Stories concerning Father Somaratne are such as to reinforce his sacred status. Some, like those mentioned above, stress his supernatural powers or his close personal relationship with the Virgin. Others, like the two below, are of interest in that they point to a symbolic equation of Father Somaratne with Christ, the most sacred of all mediators. Both of these myths are concerned with temptation and both stress his rejection of the secular world.

The first appears to refer to Father Somaratne's problems with the hierarchy whilst a young man. This story claims that whilst he was an assistant priest he began to have doubts as to his vocation and considered leaving the priesthood to get married. But then in a dream the Virgin made Her first appearance. She told Father Somaratne that She had a special purpose for him, and that he should remain in holy orders. Only when he came to Devagama did the Virgin reveal the nature of this mission. Since then, She has continually appeared to him, encouraging his work at the shrine and telling him what rituals should be performed.

The other myth deals with Father Somaratne's relations with demons and sorcerers. Many of the pilgrms who come to Devagama for aid are thought to be charmed; to be the victims of sorcerers who send demons to attack them (see Stirrat 1977). It is claimed that on a number of occasions powerful demons have tempted Father Somaratne with promises of power wealth and sensual delight. But Father Somaratne has always spurned these blandishments and, with the aid of the Virgin and through his powers as a priest consigned these demons to hell.

What these myths do is to set Father Somaratne apart from the generality of laymen and priests by stressing his special, close relationship with the Virgin Mary. He is Her chosen tool and his actions are manifestations of Her desires. Through this special relationship, Father Somaratne is thought to possess a unique and sacred status.

For himself, Father Somaratne studiously refrains from either affirming or denying any of these stories about him. To affirm them would be to expose himself to action by the Church hierarchy, whilst to deny them would put at risk the sacred character of the shrine. Yet his actions effectively back up the explicit claims of others as to his sacred status, for they reinforce the view that somehow he is in closer contact with the divine than is the normal priest.

Thus in his public life Father Somaratne continually displays his extreme devotion to the Virgin. He always wears the scapular. He always carries his rosary, his lips moving in continual prayer as he fingers his beads. On his face there is an ever-present look of saintliness and otherworldliness further expressed by his seeming inability to cope with the day-to-day aspects of organising a major pilgrimage centre.

His private life appears to be as pietistic as his public persona. He leads a particularly austere life. His mission house is bare, food is scarce and is continually being given away. In general he rejects comfort, even his vestments being frequently torn and ragged. From Thursday night until Sunday morning he fasts, and on Friday nights he is involved in continual prayers.

Since the rituals at Devagama began, Father Somaratne appears to have adopted more and more extreme forms of devotion. It is as if to maintain his sacred status his behaviour should become more and more saintly. Thus his weekend fasting appears to have started in early 1974. In 1976, more spectacularly perhaps, his role in the Way of the Cross changed. Previously he had simply led the prayers at each Station. But in 1975 he began to walk barefoot up the hill carrying a huge wooden cross, stumbling where Christ stumbled and generally replicating Christ's Passion.

In sum there is a sense in which Father Somaratne's behaviour and the myths which surround him indicate a position structurally analogus with that of Christ. The stories of his temptation and his supernatural powers and his general behaviour parallels that of Christ. Thus his performance with the Cross on Friday nights is interpreted as a penance for the sins of man and is explicitly compared by the devotees with Christ's

Passion. Admittedly, Father Somaratne does not openly claim the status of Christ nor does he claim to be the Son of the Virgin, but he does seem to model his behaviour on that of Christ, and this parallel is not lost on the devotees at the shrine.[3]

Now let us turn to the relics present at Devagama, those objects which possess a peculiar sacred power and which mediate between man and the divine.

I have already mentioned the Thorn, found and activated by Father Somaratne. For reasons which I shall discuss below, the Thorn was officially superseded in 1976 by what is claimed to be a piece of the True Cross. The striking feature of the Thorn and the piece of the True Cross is that both are directly related to Christ, the prime mediator between man and God, and both are related to His passion and death, the sacrifice through which humanity can find salvation. The sacred power in these objects is the result of a kind of osmosis; Christ's sacredness seeping through to the objects which surround him.

Of a slightly different order are two statues of the Virgin, kept at Devagama, both of which are supposed to have miraculous powers. Their history is exceedingly obscure but for both it appears that their sacredness lies in the fact that they have been proved efficacious in the past and if they are efficacious then obviously they must be sacred.[4] However, it is not surprising that at a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes there should be miraculous statues of the Virgin. And furthermore as the prime mediator after Christ between man and God, it is fitting that miraculous statues of Her should co-exist with relics of Christ. If the Thorn and the piece of the True Cross have their sacredness rooted in their metonymical relationship with Christ, then the status of these statues depends upon their metaphorical relationship with the Virgin.

Father Somaratne can, as it were, take an active part in the process of defining himself as sacred. But the sacredness of the relics is something that is imposed on the objects from without. There is nothing inherent in a thorn or a piece of rotting wood or even a wooden representation of the

3. Indeed, one could go further and argue that not only is Father Somaratne a structural analogue of Christ but also of God; Pilgrims at Devagama frequently claim that he sleeps with one of the miraculous statues of the Virgin. They interpret this behaviour as a sign of devotion to Our Lady, but one could argue that Father Somaratne is not only a metaphorical Christ, but also a metaphorical God, sleeping with a metaphorical Virgin.

4. At least one of these statues appears to have been brought to Sri Lanka from Europe.

Virgin which makes them sacred. Similarly with the place itself. Its sacredness depends upon people defining it as sacred, and selecting certain features of the place as significant for this definition. Admittedly, when Father Somaratne arrived at Devagama, the place was already equipped with a church, a grotto and the Way of the Cross. What he did was to activate them and in so doing, the meaning and significance of the place were altered. Many churches in Sri Lanka have grottos and Ways of the Cross but only Devagama is especially sacred.

For the faithful there are a number of features which make it a suitable place to be chosen by the Virgin. First of all, there is its rural beauty. Devagama is considered to be a splendid place to think about religion, far from the mundane noise and bustle of urban life. And because the Virgin has an affinity with beauty, therefore She chose this spot. Secondly, they stress the point that Devagama is a low caste village. This they say is important in that caste is a thing of this world. It is not a divinely ordained institution. By choosing Devagama the Virgin was affirming the ideal that all are equal before God. Furthermore, they claim (fallaciously it seems) that the rock at Devagama was the site of an ancient Portuguese church where Catholics were killed by Buddhists. Thus the site is sanctified by the martyrs' blood.

Yet all these reasons which are given as to why Devagama should be chosen by the Virgin are *post facto* statements. At base what makes Devagama sacred are the miraculous cures; the public and visible exorcism of devils; the boons and favours granted to those who have faith. Here there is a certain circularity of argument and a certain arbitrariness of thought. The shrine is sacred because of the miracles that take place here. Yet these miracles only take place because the place is sacred.

Whatever the myths and stories used to explain why the Virgin chose this particular spot, what is more important on an everyday basis is the maintenance of this sacredness no matter how this sacredness was originally obtained. And just as Father Somaratne modulates and controls his behaviour to retain his status and just as by treating the relics in a particular fashion their status can be maintained, so too the sanctity of the site has to be maintained by hedging it about with behavioural prescriptions and proscriptions. Thus certain types of behaviour are rigorously excluded: drinking, using drugs, fighting, quarrelling, flirting, buying and selling, and so on. Pilgrims are expected to act with decorum, behave in a seemly fashion and generally be "religious". For the faithful, what has gone

wrong with many of the older centres of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka is that they have become like holiday camps. And this has destroyed their sacred status and their spiritual potency.[5]

Overall then, the sacredness of the shrine is a property imposed upon it by the people themselves. In no way is sacredness a quality inherent in the object or the priest. Ultimately, the shrine is an extremely arbitrary construction of myths and tales, justifying its sacredness. It is sacred because people believe it is sacred. Given this, various events can take place there, predicated upon its sacredness but also reinforcing its sacred nature. Thus the problem remains as to how we should go about understanding the process through which Devagama became a sacred shrine. And to achieve such an understanding, I would claim that we have to shift the level of discussion from the shrine itself to a consideration of its position within Sinhalese Catholicism and the various processes taking place inside the Church in Sri Lanka.

Political Modalities of Catholicism in Sri Lanka

Although Catholicism was first introduced into Sri Lanka by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Church as it exists today is essentially a development of the forms of religion introduced in the nineteenth century. The efforts of the Portuguese missonaries and the heroisms of the Oratorians from Goa during the Dutch period are now largely matters of myth. They have little direct relevance for the forms of Catholicism which exist in Sri Lanka today.[6]

After the British occupation of the Maritime Provinces in 1795, religious toleration was introduced which allowed an influx of missionaries into the island to recover and re-educate the Catholic groups in Sri Lanka. Most of the missionaries were European, mainly from France, Italy and Iberia, the French influence being dominant. And despite colonial rivalry elsewhere in the world, relations between the French missionaries and the

5. Here one is reminded of Durkheim's notion of the sacred as "things set apart". Not only must the sacred mediate between the divine and the mundane: it must also be separated out from the mundane (Durkheim 1976: 36-38). However, one must remember that for Durkheim the sacred meant something slightly different from what Leach *et al* mean by the term.

6. One of the most conspicuous gaps in the history of Sri Lanka is an adequate treatment of the fortunes and vicissitudes of the Catholic Church in the country. For the Portuguese period, there are some important primary and secondary sources available (e. g. Abeysinghe 1966; de Silva 1972; de Queyroz 1930; Pieris 1913), and for the Dutch period, there is the important work of Boudens (1957). But for the nineteenth century, there is almost nothing of any importance written on the subject.

British administration seem to have been good. Today the only signs of any conflict there may have been are the remnants of an attempt to introduce the cult of Joan of Arc.

The brand of Catholicism introduced and propounded by these missionaries was pietistic in the extreme.[7] Essentially it involved the encouragement of prayers, devotions, the use of the Rosary, and the cults of the Virgin and of the Sacred Heart. It stressed a view of the cosmos in which there is a major discontinuity between the mundane and the divine, this gap being bridged by various mediators such as Christ, the Virgin, the Saints and the Church. Salvation was defined in purely spiritual, otherworldly terms, and could only be gained through spiritual action. Indeed, such was the stress laid by Catholic missonaries on ritual and on the sacred that during the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries made frequent attacks on the idolatory and superstition peddled by Catholic priests seeing their teachings as a bastardised form of Christianity closely akin to the religions of the heathen. (Robinson 1855, Selkirk 1844).

Parallel with their claims to be mediators between man and divine the priests claimed a similar role in politics, interposing themselves between the Catholic laity and the colonial regime. At the national level the government dealt directly with higher levels of the Church hierarchy whilst at the local level administrators tended to deal with the local population through the priests.[8] The clergy tended to be rather isolated from their congregations occupying large mission houses, leading lives similar in many respects to their administrative counterparts, and dealing with their parishioners through lay leaders known as *muppu rahalas* and *annaavi rahalas.*

The result was a congruence of the political and the religious orders. In both the relationship between the common man and the sources of power, secular or divine was achieved, not directly but through a series of mediators. The hierarchical organisation of the sacred paralleled the hierarchy of the polity, the missionary priests playing a crucial role in both structures. Not surprisingly, there was a close – one might say symbiotic –

7. I am aware that "pietistic" may not be the accepted term for the type of Catholicism I am describing here. Yet it is frequently used by Catholic priests in Sri Lanka to describe such religious behaviour, and I have difficulty in producing an alternative term. One could, perhaps, use the terminology employed by Pin, but these terms do not neatly fit with the data in question here. See Pin 1963 quoted in Vallier 1970.

8. In any fishing disputes which occurred, the first move by a government agent appears to have been to contact the local priest and if possible get him to settle the dispute. The intercedary role of the priest is frequently mentioned in the diaries and reports of the colonial civil servants.

relationship between missionary priest and colonial administrator, each supporting the other. And these contacts were made even closer as both parties shared much the same life styles, interests and education, especially in comparison with the local population.

Throughout the nineteenth century in both religious and political aspects of life, the Church stressed the exclusivity of the Catholic population in this Buddhist dominated country. On the political level the use by the administration of the priests as political mediators encouraged this process, Catholics being treated as an identifiable entity by the government. And in the religious sphere, continual attempts were made to instill in the Catholic population a sense that their religion was radically different from their non-Catholic counterparts. Various sanctions ranging up to excommunication were used to discourage Catholics from engaging in non-Catholic activities such as frequenting *devales* or *viharas* or taking part in non-Catholic rituals. Marriage between Catholics and non-Catholics was discouraged. The pulpit was freely used to persuade the laity that they alone possessed the "true" religion, that they alone were assured of salvation. In sum, the nineteenth century saw, if not the origins then the consolidation of a particular Catholic identity amongst the Catholics of Sri Lanka.

Particularly important in this context was the development of a Church-controlled educational system. Throughout the century, an excellent network of Catholic schools and colleges grew up in Catholic areas of Sri Lanka. Not only did this reinforce the sense of a separate identity amongst the Catholics, but it also led to Catholics being over-represented in the higher levels of business, commerce, in the civil service and in other governmental sectors (Ames 1973).

In sum then, the re-establishment of Catholicism in the nineteenth century created a European missionary dominated Church. In religious terms it produced an extremely pietistic form of religious activity. In political terms it encouraged the development of a specific Catholic identity in Sri Lanka with priests acting as mediators between the laity and the government. Catholics became a privileged minority in colonial Sri Lanka, the Church effectively furthering its own interests and those of its members.

The early years of independence did little to change this picture, the religious neutrality of the early U.N.P. government effectively favouring the Catholic church. But from the mid 1950s, the position of both the Church and the Catholic population began to deteriorate rapidly. This

period saw the political ascendancy of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism and the development of a strong sense of national, linguistic, and religious identity amongst the majority community of the island, the Sinhalese Buddhists. And for various reasons, to the groups now in control of the country, Catholicism became something which had to be fought against. (Wriggins 1960; Kearney 1964).

To the Sinhalese Buddhists, Catholicism was not simply an alien religion: it was also a relic of colonialism. Founded on alien theological and philosophical principle and purveyed (even in the 1950s) by European missionaries, the existence of a strong Catholic church in Sri Lanka was a reminder of the past indignities suffered by the Buddhist religion. The Church itself did little to contradict these views. It continued to brand Buddhism as a heathen religion, and continued to stress its relationship with Rome rather than with the state or the culture of Sri Lanka.

At the same time, the wealth, power and influence of the church, and the privileged position of Catholics in all sectors of Sri Lankan society were further spurs to anti-Catholic action. Whether Catholics had gained their position through superior educational facilities or through, as was often claimed, a sort of 'mafia' system, was not really important. The facts of the case as far as the Buddhists were concerned, were that Catholics formed an over-privileged minority in the country as a whole.[9]

The result, once the Sinhalese-Buddhists gained control of Parliament, was a series of confrontations between the State and the Church; between Buddhists and Catholics, all of which ended with defeats for the Catholics. Thus most missionary priests and nuns were repatriated and proposals were made to limit the number of Catholics in the Civil Service and in the Universities. But probably the most important event was the government takeover of Catholic schools in 1961. The Church fought this takeover bitterly, actively encouraging laymen to occupy the schools. In the end, a settlement was achieved through the intercession of the Bishop of Bombay, and the Sinhalese bishops had to withdraw ignominiously. Yet in the process they effectively abandoned the laity, and this incident still stirs strong emotions over fifteen years later.[10]

By the mid sixties, if not earlier, the Church had realised that it had failed as an effective political institution. In every confrontation with the State the Church had been defeated. Now all it could do was to fight a

9. These are most clearly presented in the report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry.

10. On Catholic attitudes to the take-over, sse the pamphlet by "L. X. F." The impact of the take-over is discussed in Kearney 1964.

rearguard action, accommodate itself to whoever was in power, and attempt to retain what influence it had. One of the most obvious changes here was that by the late 1960s, the Church ceased to direct its members as to how they should vote, and adopted a position of political neutrality. Also important was that priests began to lose their mediatory role between the administration and the laity. On one side they were bypassed by the electoral process; on the other by an ever-expanding bureaucracy. Admittedly, priests continue to perform such roles in certain situations, but as clients of the ruling party rather than as priets *per se*. And whilst in the past a villager might turn to a priest in his dealings with the administration, today it is much more likely that a villager will turn to the M.P.

As far as the laity were concerned, in particular those in "middle class" situations, the decline from their previous privileged position was such that they began to feel themselves an oppressed minority, actively discriminated against in various spheres of life, notably in appointments to government posts. This feeling of discrimination was only exacerbated by various government moves which were interpreted as stages in the establishment of Buddhism as the State religion. Such events included the declaration that Anuradhapura was a sacred (Buddhist) city, with the subsequent removal of the Catholic church outside city limits, and the substitution of Sundays by poya days as the weekly holidays.

In sum then, the Church as a political institution has failed as a mediator between the Catholic population and Church to defend and further the interests of its members. And so the implications of what it means to be a Catholic in Sri Lanka have changed. Over the years, the Church has fostered the development of a specific Catholic identity and was able to guarantee specific advantages for those who subscribed to this identity. But with the political eclipse of the Church, to be a Catholic no longer ensured advantages but rather the opposite.

This political decline would in itself have been sufficient to put in question the claims of the Church to be the prime mediator between man and God. If the Church fails in this world, then how can it succeed in its claims to be the divinely instituted channel of communication with an omnipotent God? But the situation is complicated and exacerbated by factors working at a slightly different, though related, level.

One of the major strands in the theological history of the Catholic Church, and the cause of frequent debates, schisms and heresies, has been the nature of the relationship between man and God. At one extreme we find the position roughly exemplified by the type of Catholicism introduced

into Sri Lanka during the nineteenth century. This stance posits the radical separation of man from the Divine, the gulf being bridged by various sacred entities in whom characteristics of the Divine and the mundane are amalgamated. Here we find an elaboration of the category of the sacred; of religious actions being defined as concerned with the sacred, and with salvation being defined in other-worldly terms. Furthermore, the Church as a divinely ordained institution becomes a crucial mediator between man and God. The clergy is given a peculiarly sacred status, priests being viewed as ritual operators particularly concerned with the sacred. Finally, this set of notions concerning the man/God relationship tends to be associated with political philosophies stressing the hierarchical and holistic nature of political society.[11]

At the other extreme we find a radically different set of ideas concerning the relationship between man and God. Rather than there being a great divide, God and the divine are effectively present in all men. Christ, rather than being a sacred mediator, is the prototypical man, an exemplification of what man should be. In this conceptualisation of man/God relations, there is little room for a category of the sacred, for there is no need for a set of mediators between two ontologically separate domains. Furthermore, the role of the Church and of the priest is radically altered. For now all men are in direct contact with the divine. In its extreme Protestant form, there is a priesthood of all believers. And salvation, far from being defined in other-worldly terms, begins to be seen in the context of this world rather than in terms of some spiritually separate domain, for there is no such separation. Finally, such theological notions tend to be associated with views of political society which stress egalitarian and individualistic forms of social organization. (Leach, 1973; Hill, 1958; 1972).

In its most recent manifestations, this debate has been represented in the discussions before, duringand after the Second Vatican Council. Whilst the Church as a whole can be seen as moving gradually from the first to the second positions mentioned above, the extreme positions are more easily recognisable. Thus at one end of the continuum we find figures such as Bishop LeFebre with his stress on conservative theology, the importance of the sacred, a spiritual definition of salvation and the divine mission of the Church. At the other extreme, Camillo Torres is, at least symbolically, an exemplification of a radical extreme. Here the institutions of the Church are seen as a barrier to salvation, the sacred as irrelevant if not actively dangerous to true Catholicism, and salvation as something to be discovered in this world. Whilst LeFebre is associated with right-wing,

11. For a parallel though distinct and more particular argument, see Leach, 1973.

anti-communist political positions, Torres stresses the political and social role of priests and their role in a left-wing revolutionary movement (Gerassi, 1971).

These processes and tensions visible in the universal Church are just as obvious in the local context of Sri Lanka. And just as the crisis of Vatican II was directly related to the decline of the European powers and the growth of egalitarian political ideologies, so in Sri Lanka the more local reverberations of this debate are related to changes in the dominant political ideologies and in the political structures of the country.

With the decline in their political power and a growing realization that the Church in Sri Lanka had to make certain accommodations, the hierarchy was forced to shift its position. Thus services are now in Sinhala and attempts have been made to indigenise the rituals involved.[12] Furthermore, there has been an attempt to create some sort of dialogue with other religious groups in Sri Lanka and to discourage the more pietistic of devotions and Catholic extremism in general. Priests are actively encouraged to take part in social and economic activities which even ten years ago would have been unthinkable.

But within the Church there is a small minority of extremely vocal and socially visible priests for whom the Hierarchy is not moving fast enough and for whom the Church is a bastion of reaction and irrelevant ritualistic activities. These priests and their few lay followers follow radical Catholic lines of thought which deny any utility to pietistic forms of religious activity and attack the various devotions to the sacred. For them the cults of the saints and of the Virgin are mystifications, misleading the laymen. Rather, they see "true" Catholicism as being a radical political doctrine, and the priest's role as being to involve himself wholeheartedly in over-throwing existing hierarchical forms of political and social organisation. Furthermore, given their political positions, they tend to cultivate links with other like-minded political groups rather than with the Church as a whole, a strategy which for them at least solves the problem of the political implications of being a Catholic in Sri Lanka.

I must stress again that such extreme radicals are a small minority in the Church, but they are extremely vocal and in a sense embody the direction in which the Church in Sri Lanka has been moving over the last

12. In one instance, a Sinhalese bishop approached an anthropologist (not the writer) for advice as to how to indigenise the rituals of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka.

few years. Few they may be, but for the layman the activities and doctrines of these priests pose major problems, as indeed does the general shift in the teachings of the Church over the last few years.

I began this section by describing how, over the last 150 years, Catholics in Sri Lanka have been inculcated with certain notions as to their separate identity in Sri Lanka, and with certain ideas of what Catholicism as a religion involves. Now they find that not only has their privileged position as Catholics been eroded, but that even their own priests are attacking what was previously considered proper Catholic behaviour. The situation today is one which Durkheim might well have described as "anomic" (Durkheim, 1952). Even if there is not a state of "normlessness" there is at least a state in which there is no one internally consistent set of guides to belief and action. "Truth" has disappeared to be replaced by a number of conflicting 'truths'.

Devagama in the widest context

Given the processes outlined in the previous section, Devagama can be seen as an attempt to return to, and to the development of, a set of sacred components – what certain Catholics see as the "true" faith. Admittedly, for the observer, such a return is impossible. Yet the themes of traditional Catholicism in Sri Lanka – the importance of the sacred, the crucial role of the priest, and the significance of a peculiar Catholic identity are all central features of the shrine. And furthermore, this is not simply a set of symbolic statements. Given the particular view of the cosmos subscribed to by the devotees at the shrine, Devagama is the path through which real power can be regained.

For the faithful at Devagama the universe, including this world, is governed by a series of spiritual forces, the centrepiece being the ceaseless battle between the forces of good and evil. Evil forces are always trying to lead human beings astray, and thus suffering and hardship are introduced into the world. The road to salvation thus lies through good spiritual action. Through these actions, and with the help of God and his supernatural agents, the forces of evil will be defeated. Put in to the Sri Lankan context, the political decline of the Church is directly related to the fact that the Church has forgotten its spiritual role. The changing teaching of the priests coupled with their reformulations of what religion should be are seen as the work of the devil. The Church has been infiltrated and subverted by demonically inspired supernatural forces and thus has lost its political power. Not only does Devagama represent to the faithful a spiritual regeneration for themselves but by returning to true Catholicism a chance to recover their privileged position in society.

Crucial here is the belief that the Church and the priesthood have become too involved in the mundane and the secular. For instance, it is frequently claimed that the Church is more interested in its wealth and in its possessions than in the spiritual welfare of its members or in fighting evil forces. Central to this issue is the role of the priest.

As I have pointed out, priests were traditionally somewhat isolated from their congregations, their main contacts with them being achieved via intermediaries, and their functions broadly limited to the spiritual and to interacting with the administration. As such, most of their time was spent within their churches and mission houses and in general they had little contact with the day to day life of their congregations. They were expected to shun women, always wear cassocks, and generally set an example of the spiritual life.

The new generation of priests act in a very different fashion. Seeing their role as involving active participation in social and economic activities, they have attempted to become actively involved in the mundane world, moving out of the mission houses into the villages. In the process, many of them have begun to shed their cassocks, coming into frequent contact with women,[13] and at times actively involving themselves in left-wing politics.[14] Furthermore, in their attempts to play down pietistic elements in Catholicism, they actively discourage more spritualistic forms of religious expression and in certain cases have begun to remove the statues and other ornaments from the churches.

To the faithful, Father Somaratne's behaviour is the model of what a priest's life should be. He actively shuns the mundane world, refusing to involve himself in non-spiritual activities. In his manner and in his sermons, he displays the epitome of what a priest should be: a truly spiritual person, an example to all of the religious life. And even if his devotees admit that not all priests could behave in quite as perfect a manner as Father Somaratne, yet they claim that his is the example to be followed. Furthermore, Father Somaratne continues to perform functions which elsewhere, even if not banned, are at least heavily discouraged. He blesses the sick, chases out demons, and encourages traditional forms of devotions. Here, vows can freely be made to the Virgin which priests elsewhere would frown upon.

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13. This contact with women must in part lie behind the number of priests who left the priesthood in the early seventies.

14. During the J. V. P. insurrection in 1971, more than one priest was actively involved in helping the rebels.

Thus Devagama has captured those of the laity left somewhat bewildered by shifts in the definition of true Catholicism. In a sense Father Somaratne's own devotions to the Virgin, his encouragement of Marian devotions at Devagama, and his discovery of the supernaturally charged Thorn, were isolated and chance events. But they happened to coincide with an inchoate set of feelings amongst many of the Catholic laity. The rise of the shrine depended upon the conjunction and the coincidence of a particular set of isolated incidents with these much wider forces at work in Catholic Sri Lanka.[15]

In part, the rise to fame of Devagama was achieved through knowledge of the shrine passing from person to person. As knowledge of the miraculous events at Devagama spread, so more and more pilgrims came to the shrine. But perhaps of equal importance in its rise to fame was the way in which Devagama became linked with wider conservative movements in the Church as a whole.

Recent theological developments in Catholicism have not gone unchallenged, either in Sri Lanka or in the wider world. In Sri Lanka one of the leading conservatives, rumoured to have the backing of senior priests who do not care to make their views public, has been one of the few remaining foreign missionaries. In the late sixties and early seventies, he was already causing embrassment to members of the hierarchy by questioning the decisions of Vatican II and by acting as a propagandist for an almost antediluvian form of Catholicism. When he discovered Devagama he quickly became impressed by it, and became a frequent visitor to the shrine. Through his efforts, not only did the fame of Devagama spread more quickly than it would otherwise have done, but it also became the symbol of conservative Catholicism.

Through these contacts, Devagama became part of the international conservative Catholic movement involved in fighting radicalism where ever it occurred. Thus at Devagama, pamphlets printed in Canada, the United States and France are freely available reporting apparitions in various parts of the world, giving information on other Marian shrines, and generally attacking non-pietistic forms, of Catholicism. These contacts further support the faith of the devotees at the shrine for now they see themselves as part of a world-wide movement.

So far I have discussed the rise of Devagama mainly in theological terms, seeing it as a reaction to the rise of new forms of Catholicism as a self-conscious return to the "true" and "traditional" religion. As such,

15. For a similar approach, and one which I return to later, see Fry 1976.

it must involve an elaboration of the sacred domain. Firstly almost by definition, traditional Catholicism involves the sacred. The hierarchy of Church, by attacking the category of the sacred, has necessarily implied its reproduction elsewhere. And secondly, the disenchantment with the established Church is in part to do with the assumption that the Church has lost its divine power and thus cannot mediate between man and God. To re-create this contact the sacred mediators must be re-created.

But Devagama cannot simply be understood in terms of theological wranglings within Catholicism. If, for the devotees at Devagama the hierarchy in general and the radical priests in particular are the prime enemies, the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka run them a close second. Despite the fact that some Buddhists do frequent Devagama, experiment with these alternative religious techniques and receive Father Somaratne's blessing,[16] Devagama is generally an arena for the expression of anti-Buddhist sentiments. Buddhism is identified as the work of the devil; as a heathen doctrine guaranteed to send its adherents to hell, and dedicated to the overthrow of true Catholicism.

Expressions of such sentiments are quite explicit. Historically, Devagama is seen as the site of Christians being martyred by Buddhists. Furthermore, the demons who possess the afflicted who come to Devagama are mostly the gods of the Hindus and the Buddhists. Thus the exorcism of these demons is, for the faithful, an expression of the superiority of Catholicism over Buddhism (Stirrat, 1977). It is not that these evil beings do not exist. Rather, it is that they are not Gods but demons, and that their powers are inferior, both in effect and in morality to those of the Virgin.

Perhaps the most interesting manifestation of these anti-Buddhist feelings is a myth frequently repeated at Devagama. It tells how in the 1950s a *bhikkhu* living in a nearby village wrote a scurrilous pamphlet attacking the cult of the Virgin. Since then, all his relations have died horrible deaths, the revenge of the Virgin. The monk himself is still alive but very ill, and he is only being kept alive so that he can witness the ultimative victory of the Virgin. Before he dies, she will appear to him.

Just as Devagama is a vehicle for the expression of anti-Buddhist sentiments reminiscent of nineteenth century missionaries, so the political attitudes expressed here are reminiscent of those held by the Church before it lost its political power. Whilst the hierarchy today is careful

16. On one occasion a *bhikkhu* appeared at Devagama and received Father Somaratne's personal blessing.

not to make open statements about politics, many of the devotees at Devagama come for political help. In general, it is felt that the Virgin is on the side of right-wing and anti-communist parties. Thus continual requests are made to Her that She saves Sri Lanka from the communist menace. These political aspects were particularly noticeable prior to the 1977 election.

In sum then, there are a number of inter-related themes present in the shrine which re-present those themes which typified the form of traditional Catholicism in Sri Lanka. Thus here we find an emphasis on the sacred and the spiritual role of the priest. We find the elaboration of anti-Buddhist and isolationalist Catholic sentiments. And we find these associated with a politically right-wing ideological stance. Admittedly, this is no exact reduplication of the past, for the rise of the shrine is thought to be closely associated with the direct intervention of the Virgin Mary. But it is an attempt to recreate what is seen as a "golden age" of the past.

Furthermore, the rise of Devagama should not be seen simply as an effloration of an affective or symbolic nature. It is crucially concerned with a search for real power. What is at stake here is an attempt to tap Divine power (see Christian 1972; Leach 1976). As far as the faithful at Devagama are concerned, the deteriorating position of Catholics in Sri Lanka is the result of the Church forgetting its true role. By returning to the "true" religion; by recreating the "correct" moral and spiritual order Catholics will once again enjoy real power in the world.

Here, it is worth noting the prominence of middle-class devotees at Devagama. They dominate not so much in numbers but rather in that they are the ones who return time after time to the shrine and whose interests in and motives for coming to the shrine are less narrowly particularistic than other pilgrims. It is amongst these people that the ideology of the shrine is generated, pilgrims from peasant or working class backgrounds being content with obtaining what the shrine can offer. In part, this predominance of the middle classes has to be viewed in terms of similar activities amongst Buddhists (see Obeysekere 1970). But it is also amongst the middle classes that a feeling of anti-Catholic discrimination is most strongly felt, for they are the Catholics who are in most direct competition for scarce jobs and resources with the Buddhists.

The most clear expressions of the fact that Devagama is concerned with the search for real power is to be found amongst the small minority of devotees at the shrine who subscribe to a millenarian ideology. For them, Devagama is the first step in the process towards the millenium.

They believe that the Virgin is going to appear at the shrine. Here, She will rally her forces and lead them in a triumphant last battle against the forces of evil. In this battle Buddhists, Communists and those in the Church who have abandoned the true religion will all be destroyed and condemned to eternal damnation. Only those who have faith will live to enjoy the millenium.

In sum then, the rise of Devagama and the development of its sacred character appear to me to be directly related to the wider context of Catholicism in Sri Lanka. The political decline of the Church puts in question its claims to be the sacred mediator between man and God, the situation being exacerbated by various shifts to the theological position of the clergy. Father Somaratne's arrival at Devagama, his discovery of the Thorn, and his encouragement of Marian devotions were chance events. But they happened to coincide with a situation in which many Catholic laymen felt a lack of faith in the direction the Church was going, and found in Devagama a mode of expression which allowed themselves to re-assert the traditional tenets of Catholicism in Sri Lanka. And this was not simply just a matter of expression. For the faithful at Devagama, the shrine represents a rediscovery of divine power; of contact with the Divine through the sacred which the Church once promised them. Through Devagama to be a Catholic once more becomes a highly privileged status.

Internal and External threats to the Shrine.

Devagama is not a static phenomenon. Rather, it is a moment in a series of continuing processes in Catholicism and in Sri Lanka, and any stability is purely temporary, a short-lived balance between various forces at work in the wider context. Thus those processes, tendencies and contradictions which have led to the rise of the shrine since 1970 are continuing and will inevitably lead to further changes in the structure and content of the shrine.

Since about 1975 or 1976, the number of pilgrims coming to Devagama has begun to decline. For various reasons I hesitate to interpret this decline in numbers as necessarily implying a decline in the importance of the shrine. The fall in numbers is a purely quantitative factor in itself of little meaning. Whilst in the first rush of enthusiasm people came in great numbers, their absence does not necessarily imply any lack of commitment but perhaps simply a lack of energy.

The faithful at Devagama are well aware of this decline and put forward various reasons for it. The most popular is to argue that people simply cannot afford to come to the shrine. They point to declining living

standards, coupled with a high rate of inflation, and it is true that for a family to come from Colombo to Devagama for a weekend does involve very heavy expenditure. The faithful go on to point out that the great mass of pilgrims at the shrine have always come for very specific purposes: to make vows, to ask for boons, to be healed. Having visited Devagama and having received Divine aid, there is no reason to return week after week. Such is the efficacy of the shrine that numbers will inevitably decline.

There is some truth in both these arguments. Those who want to come may be dissuaded by the expense involved, and those who came in the past do not need to come now. These factors do not necessarily imply any decline in people's faith in the shrine. But there are forces at work, both internal and external, which do threaten the sacred nature of Devagama and which may ultimately destroy people's faith in the shrine.

At the heart of its sacredness there is a basic ambiguity which is difficult to maintain. As I have argued above, the sacred depends upon a juxtaposition and interpenetration of two ontological categories which are normally separate: the divine and the profane. At any time the maintenance of the sacred depends upon the maintenance of this delicate balance. If the sacred becomes too divine, then it ceases to be a mediator. Alternatively, if it becomes too profane, then it is useless as a channel of communication with the divine.

It is difficult to conceive of a situation where Devagama becomes so divine that it ceases to be relevant as a sacred mediator. Possibilities come to mind of Father Somaratne slowly withdrawing from his priestly role, becoming more and more of an ascetic world renouncer. This is possible though unlikely. More obvious are the threats to its sacredness from the secular world.

Devagama started off as a remote parish church, little known and insignificant. In a matter of three or four years it grew to national importance attracting hundreds of pilgrims. Simply to cope with these numbers, a number of pragmatic problems had to be solved: the supply of food, water, sanitation, sleeping accommodation and the control of the crowds.

The obvious person to handle these problems is Father Somaratne yet he has remained aloof from such matters. To involve himself in such activities would jeopardise his claims to supernatural status. His role is to act as a sacred mediator between man and the Divine, not to act as a sanitary inspector. Rather, he must be the personification of the spiritual

priest. And so the actual organisation of the shrine has been largely left to the devices of the faithful. Thus whilst Father Somaratne may have protected his own purity, he has put at risk the sacred status of the shrine as a whole.

The people who run the shrine in the sense of organising day-to-day affairs are a group of young laymen known as Father Somaratne's *golayo*, a word which can be translated as "disciples". Most of these youths are fairly well educated but many are unemployed. One or two stay around the shrine all week, whilst others come at weekends. None of them are paid although they may receive food and shelter at the shrine, And although they work with Father Somaratne's permission, they are effectively their own masters. They marshall the crowds, act as acolytes, give advice to pilgrims, clean up the shrine, handle the money offerings, make sure the lights and the loudspeakers work. But most importantly, these young men control access to Father Somaratne.

This control of access to the priest is crucially important, not only in that he has a special power in himself, but also in that it is through him that one approaches the sacred relics. When the shrine began its rise to fame, it seems that anyone who came could approach him directly. But as numbers grew, this simply became impractical, and meeting the priest became more and more dependent on the good offices of the *golayo*. They thus form a series of intermediaries between the laymen and the divine. In a primitive fashion they represent the first stages of bureaucratisation. Alternatively, they can be seen in terms of what Weber called the "routinisation of charisma" (Eisenstadt, 1968). As early as 1975 the role of these young men was beginning to be a matter for resentment amongst some of the pilgrims. The *golayo* were said to have favourites: some claimed they accepted bribes.

At the same time as the *golayo* began to emerge at Devagama, the class composition of pilgrims at the shrine seems to have changed. When the shrine started, devotees tended to have been in the main rural peasants. Later the majority seem to have come from the lower classes of Colombo. But its fame percolated up through the class hierarchy and more and more devotees from middle class backgrounds began to frequent the shrine. And the latter have attempted to model Devagama after their own image of what a shrine should be.

First of all, the middle class elements have attempted to control forms of private devotion at the shrine. Both fomally and informally they have tried to reduce the incidence of more "boisterous" and less "seemly" types of behaviour at Devagama. They have in effect tried to bourgeoisify the shrine.

Secondly, the middle class patrons of Devagama have tried to assert their class privileges within the confines of the shrine. They argue that as they give more money to the shrine they should enjoy certain privileges at the shrine. They claim that because they are "better" people than the peasants, then they should have easier access to the priest, the relics and the blessings. And in conjunction with the *golayo* they have been generally successful.

The effects of the growing control of Devagama by the *golayo* in particular and the middle class patrons in general has led to a growing resentment and disillusion amongst other devotees at Devagama. For one of the features to which all pay lip service is that here all are equal before God and the Virgin. Its sacredness in part depends upon an ideal of something Turner would label 'communitas', and which stands in stark contrast to the organisation of secular society (Turner 1973). But as Devagama becomes progressively bureaucratised and bourgeoisified, its claims to sacredness come into question amongst the poorer pilgrims. Indeed, some of the newer shrines in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka seem to in part be a reaction to these processes at Devagama, the devotees at these new shrines in many cases shifting their allegiance from Devagama.

A further group of developments which has threatened the sanctity of Devagama has been the commercialisation of the shrine. As numbers of devotees grew in the early sixties so there was a mushrooming of commercial establishments catering for the needs of the pilgrims. Boutiques grew up to supply food and drink, rooms for the night, and to sell the religious paraphernalia of Catholicism: rosaries, incense, olive oil, candles, pictures and scapulars. Admittedly these boutiques do not exist on Church land or within the sacred areas, but abutt directly on to it from all sides. And these enterpreneurs spare no effort in getting what they can from the pilgrims; prices in Devagama being noticeably higher than elsewhere, even rising when the crowds are at their largest. The result is that in this centre of spiritual devotion the commercial world is brutally present.[17]

Furthermore, as numbers grew at the shrine, so too did the numbers of those present for non-religious purposes. The most obvious are the beggars, frauds and fools who congregate at any shrine. But probably more important is the way in which Devagama has become something of a holiday resort. This is particularly evident on the first weekend of each month when the numbers present are at their greatest. On these days, a

17. One of the most visible signs of the decline in numbers attending the shrine is the number of boutiques which today stand abandoned.

striking number of fashionably dressed young people appear at the shrine, more intent on being seen and noted by their peers than in attaining a state of grace.

These various processes, all internal to the shrine, have tended to erode the sacred nature of Devagama by introducing the profane and the mundane. A constant theme of Father Somaratne's sermons is how Devagama is a sacred spot and how it should be kept sacred. The more committed devotees too are continually on the look-out for forms of behaviour which threaten the shrine's sacred status. Yet just as other Catholic shrines in Sri Lanka are dimissed by the Devagama devotees for their profanity, so some old devotees of the shrine are beginning to desert Devagama for the same reasons. And this process seems to be continuing inexorably.

Externally too the sacredness of the shrine is under attack from the wider Catholic Church. Father Somaratne himself is careful to say or do nothing which might expose himself to disciplinary action by the Church. For instance, technically speaking he does not exorcise demons, for he is not licensed as an exorciser. Rather, what he does is to "bless" those who are demonically possessed. Similarly, he is careful, at least on the public stage, not to claim any special direct relationship with the Virgin, nor to openly criticise or attack the hierarchy. Yet the whole stance taken by Father Somaratne and the beliefs and actions current at the shrine are a direct challenge to the authority of the Church.

If the Church ignores Devagama, then by ignoring it they can be seen as countenancing what is going on at the shrine and the type of Catholicism exemplified here. On the other hand, if they take direct and drastic action against the shrine, they risk a head on clash with large numbers of the laity and the possibility of creating martyrs. As a result, the Church has moved very cautiously, different sections of the Church taking slightly different positions.

Perhaps the only members of the priesthood for which Devagama poses no problems are the conservatives in the hierarchy. For them it is a symbol of what the Church should be, and in certain instances they seem to have actively encouraged their congregations to go to the shrine. But this is rare. A more frequent reaction has been that exemplified by Father Somaratne's own superior. On the one hand, he implicitly gives Devagama his approval by occasionally visiting the shrine on important feast days. Yet on the other he attempts to bring the shrine directly under his control and thus prevent the more extreme expresses at Devagama. Thus, in 1976, he ordered

the Thorn to be withdrawn from public use at Devagama. The problem with the Thorn was simply that as a relic, it was insufficiently documented. But in a sense more was involved. The Bishop's action was a reminder to all that he was Father Somaratne's superior. And as if in revolt against this, the devotees still see the Thorn as the most important relic at Devagama even today.

A further move by the Bishop has been to appoint an administrator to look after the financial and organisational aspects of the shrine. The administrator is another parish priest who comes for two or three days every week. Some devotees at the shrine rationalise his presence by arguing that Father Somaratne is too busy to deal with such things, and that the administrator is simply there to help. Others see it as a directly hostile move, the administrator siphoning off funds from the shrine for the diocesan coffers, spying on what is going on at the shrine, and waiting for Father Somaratne to overstep the mark.[18]

So far the Church as an institution has done little to discourage pilgrims from going to Devagama. Any direct attack might well backfire on the attackers. Many priests wait for a slow institutionalisation of the shrine into the wider Church, regularisation of this deviation from the norm. At the same time, the Church waits for Father Somaratne to go beyond his competence and thus expose himeslf to disciplinary action. A common solution suggested by priests hostile to the shrine is that Father Somaratne should be sent abroad for a couple of years for "further training". By doing so, it is hoped that Devagama would decline as a shrine, any other priest at the church refusing to encourage the present forms of religious activity.

But perhaps the most common view, especially amongst the radical priests most opposed to the type of religious activity found at Devagama, is to argue that Devagama will decline of itself. They argue that it is a purely ephemeral phenomenon which will soon disappear for it represents a form of Catholicism doomed to disappear with the spread of education about the "true" nature of religion. This may well be true in the limited sense that Devagama will decline as a shrine. But it will only disappear to be replaced by other, very similar centres of religious enthusiasm of a type equally abhorrent to these radical Catholics.

18. Only a few welcome the administrator's appointment in that it does prevent the worst of financial irregularities.

Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, let me summarise and re-present my discussion on the rise of Devagama in a slightly different form. In a sense this involves turning my presentation back to front.

One of the differences noted by many writers between the so-called "world religions" and more localised religious traditions is that the former are in a way more "free floating" and more "flexible" than the latter. It is difficult to conceive of Nuer religion or the religion of the Lugbara becoming the subject for missionary activity in the way in which Buddhism or Islam or Christianity have been spread across the world. They are, as it were, too embedded in the social institutions of Nuer or Lugbara society.

The world religions are partly world religions simply because of their plasticity. As theological systems thay can be conceived of by their adherents as independent of particular social context. They represent absolute truths and can be exported at will. Such is their flexibility that Catholicism for instance can be found co-existing and co-operating with an infinite number of socio-political systems. In the course of achieving these accommodations, however, the same religion becomes differentiated from one context to another, Thus French Catholicism and the Catholicism of, say, Latin America, are very different animals. There is a relationship between the two, but that relationship appears to exist more at the intitutional levels of the Church and at the theological level of the priests rather than at the sociological level (see Geertz 1968).

It seems to me that this plasticity is not simply a matter of different social contexts but is rather a central feature of Christianity and any other of the world religions. Inherent in Catholicism is a multitude of possible theological positions. In other words, it is impossible to summarise the "principles of Catholicism" which are true for all ages and for all Catholics in a few pages, an exercise which is common in anthropological writings on other world religions such as Buddhism and is just as invalid in these other contexts.

In this paper I have mentioned only two of the possible theological positions inherent in Catholicism which can be conceived of as "conservative" and "radical". The former postulates a radical distinction between man and God, contact with the divine being achieved through a series of sacred mediators. This theological position tends to be associated with a hierarchical ecclesiastical organisation which in turn is associated with

notions of the proper ordering of society. On the other hand, the radical, almost Protestant position denies the wide gulf separating man from God. Rather, God is in us all; there is no need for a series of sacred intermediaries nor of a hierachical ecclesiastical structure. And this theological position tends to be associated with egalitarian and individualistic social philosophies.

In Sri Lanka until recently, the brand of Catholicism in general vogue tended to be of the first variety and was associated with hierarchical notions of what the social order should be and was like. Associated with this theological stance and its associated ecclesiastical institutions was the political situation in which certain advantages of a pragmatic nature accrued to Catholics. But a number of things happened which broke this tight system,

The first was the failure of the Church to protect the interests of its followers. The political failure of the Church put in question its claim to spiritual effectiveness.

Secondly, there was a shift in how priests tended to view the true nature of Catholicism; a shift which in the terms used in this paper can be viewed as involving a change from conservative to radical Catholicism. In a sense, this was an independent factor and has to be understood purely in theological terms. But it was also related to the changing fortunes of the Church in the world context and to the changing situation of Catholics in Sri Lanka.

The result of these various factors was that a large section of the Catholic lay population in Sri Lanka was left in some confusion as to what was the nature of "true" catholicism. Having been educated in one type of Catholicism they were now told that their traditional forms of religious activity were misguided. Furthermore, they found that the advantages which had once accrued to them as Catholics were now no more.

It was in this situation that Father Somaratne began his ministry at Devagama. The rise of the shrine as a centre for conservative Catholics, the restatement of the sacred and a search for a recovery of power is the result of the coincidence of the man with a particular social situation. Father Somaratne is by any standards a charismatic figure. But his success lies not simply in his charisma but in his ability to act as catalyst; his ability to articulate the sentiments and mood of a sizeable proportion of the Catholic population in Sri Lanka.

Peter Fry in his recent book on spirit cults in Zimbabwe has produced an argument similar to that which I have presented here. His comments on these spirit mediums are just as relevant for Father Somaratne:

> "these spirit mediums transformed the sentiment of protest from *vox populi* to *vox dei*... They were charismatic figures whose relevant message was acceptable and accepted by the people". (Fry 1976: 61)

Father Somaratne's message was and is acceptable to and accepted by the people. It was the *vox populi* which made Devagama sacred, turning their sense of protest into *vox dei*.

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