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Christianity as an agent of social change

**A theoretical framework for analysing the history of the Christian Community in Sri Lanka (in the Sinhala Buddhist background)**

**A sociological analysis with theological implications and repercussions**

Change is an ever-present sociological reality within society. The sociological force called change takes many faces in society with the existing phenomenon in context. Change can come about within a particular community, due to outside factors impinging on a particular community, or as a result of contextual realities within society. Regarding change Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt have noted,

“All societies change continuously. New traits appear either through *Discovery* and *invention*, or through *diffusion* from other societies.”<sup>1</sup>

The findings of the history of Christianity in Sri Lanka can be understood in the light of the many faces of this sociological reality called change. Explaining this reality of change in the society and religion Weber has observed,

For every religion we shall find that a change in the socially decisive strata has usually been of profound influence.<sup>2</sup>

Primarily, Christianity was introduced to Sri Lanka as a colonial reality. When a country is being colonised it is a time of great change. The colonial power initially had a number of intentions towards the countries that it was colonising. These included social, political and economic intentions<sup>3</sup>. Within the category of the social intentions of these colonialists, culture became a very important factor. Especially in Asian countries such as Sri Lanka traditional religions became an integral part of the culture, and these religions played a vital role in forming the culture of that society. For instance, in Sri Lanka from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC onwards, Buddhist monks were considered as the mentors of society<sup>4</sup>. This background of Buddhism within the culture of the Sri Lankan Sinhala people did not create a supportive atmosphere for the colonial powers to achieve their social, political and economic ends, and so the Western colonialists often used Christianity to deculturise local people to the Western ways in order to realise their social, political and economic goals in the colonies. In this manner Christianity became a force of change in changing the culture of the people of Sri Lanka and helped to promote the Western cultural patterns in this country. A good example of the above is the way in which Christian missionary education produced local people who were able to run this colony according to the values and attitudes of the colonial government, especially the British.

In a colony when a new religion is introduced it is not introduced into a vacuum. Already there are beliefs and practices that perform certain social functions within the society. Regarding these social functions performed by various religions, Durkheim has said,

“...religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which expresses collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So if the categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they too should be social affairs and the product of collective thought.”<sup>5</sup>

There are many sociologists who have elaborated on the ideas presented by Durkheim. The following are some observations on Buddhism in Sri Lanka, regarding the social functions of religion, presented by I. Robertson.

#### 1. Social solidarity-

“Religion functions as a form of social cement. It unites the believers by regularly bringing them together to enact various rituals, and by providing them with the shared values and beliefs that binds them into a community.”<sup>6</sup>

In Sri Lanka, in Sinhala areas the social solidarity was cemented around the tank (*Weva*), Buddhist shrine (*Dagabe*), village (*Gama*) and the Buddhist temple (*Pansala*) in the village (*Wevai Dagabai Gamai Pansali*).

In the agricultural system the tank supplied the necessary water. It is said that often the soil that had been dug up to make the tank was used to build the Buddhist shrines, or *Dageba*, in which relics of Lord Buddha or his Holy Disciples were deposited. These shrines are visible above the paddy fields as a sign of hope for the local people. The village temple is situated close to the shrine, often on a hill, and has a community of monks who act as a model community for the village. These monks share everything in common; this is called “*sangika*” in Sinhala. Most of the rituals which bring the village-folk together are performed in the temple around a statue of Lord Buddha and the Bo tree (*ficus religiosa*), the tree under which the Lord Buddha was enlightened<sup>7</sup>. The temple was the place where people experienced solidarity through their Buddhist beliefs, got advice and counselling from the monks, and felt that they belonged to each other as a part of their existence in the village. Thus Buddhism in the Sinhala village became the unifying factor of the village community that was centred around the temple, shrine and the community of monks who lived in a simple dwelling place in the temple grounds.

## 2. Provision of meaning

“Religion provides a theodicy that gives meaningful answers to ultimate and eternal questions about existence. It offers explanations to human predicaments and gives purpose to a universe that might otherwise seem meaningless.”<sup>8</sup>

Where the ultimate and eternal questions are concerned Buddhism was able to give a profound philosophy based on Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path. These emphasise the impermanence and changing nature of all things that exist. Being a detheistic religion, which is neither eternalist nor nihilist, it presented a path for salvation or nibbana in its own way<sup>9</sup>. This gave a sound and meaningful understanding to Buddhists in Sri Lanka concerning their questions about existence.

## 3. Social control

“The more important values and norms of a society - for example, those relating to human life, sexual behavior, and property - tend to be incorporated not only in law but also in religious doctrine. The teachings found in such sacred scriptures as the Bible and the Koran would have far less force if they were regarded as the work of ordinary mortals. By powerfully reinforcing crucial values and norms, religion helps to maintain social control over individual behavior.”<sup>10</sup>

The main teachings of Buddhism are written in a holy book called the *tripitakas*. The literal meaning of *tripitakas* is ‘three baskets’. These baskets or sections are namely the *Vinaya* (Discipline), *Sutra* (sermons of the Lord Buddha) and *Abidharma* (higher doctrines). Of these three sections, a particular part of the *Sutra* (or sermons of the Lord Buddha), called the *Dhamma pada*, is very commonly and widely read by people to get instruction for their everyday life. For example, the duties of parents and children are given in the *Sigalovada Sutta*<sup>11</sup>. Even instruction on matters like the causes for downfall are given in the *Parabhava Sutta* of the *Sutta pitaka* in the *Tripitaka*<sup>12</sup>. Although these are not laws they control society by making a harmonious atmosphere in which the people of the Sri Lankan Buddhist community can exist.

## 4. Social change

“Religion can sometimes inspire or facilitate social change. Religious values provide moral standards against which existing social arrangements can be measured, and perhaps found wanting. The civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, for example, derived much of their impetus from religious teachings about brotherhood and peace. New religious movements are particularly likely to be critical of the social order and to encourage their adherents to criticize or challenge it.”<sup>13</sup>

From the 3rd century BC Buddhism was at various times a force of change in Sri Lankan society. The introduction of Buddhism by Arahata Mahinda in the 3rd century BC changed the lives of the people in this country. The concept of *Avimsa*, that is, of not harming any living being including animals influenced and changed the lives of people by encouraging them to be less aggressive. Where social change was concerned, a classic example would be how people became agricultural under the influence of Buddhism, even without having had a clear pastoral era after the Stone Age.

## 5. Psychological support

Religion provides individuals with emotional support in the uncertainties of this world. For example, it helps people during the major events of their life cycle. Although puberty rites are no longer practised in the United States (the nearest equivalent is the Jewish bar mitzvah), birth, marriage and death are almost always marked by religious rituals such as baptism, wedding, and funerals”<sup>14</sup>.

In Sri Lanka Buddhism plays an important role in society during these major events of the life cycle. The ritual called *matakavastra pujava* at the funeral can be given in this regard. Concerning *matakavastra pujava* L. de Silva has observed,

“The ritual called the *matakavastra pujava* is by far the most important funeral ritual. It is a sort of an act of grace by which merit is transferred to the departed before the body is buried or cremated. It is done after the preliminaries, such as the administration of *pansil*<sup>15</sup>, preaching of a short sermon and speeches are over. The ritual consists in offering a piece of cloth as the case may be, to the monk or monks, while the nearest relatives pour water from a vessel into a plate or cup till the water overflows....”<sup>16</sup>

When a new religion is introduced to a society, a new set of values and attitudes also enters the society. This challenges the stability of the existing religions. The above five functions of religion, namely social solidarity, provision of meaning, social control, social change and psychological support, established by the already-existing religions, go through a process of drastic change with the introduction of a new and alternative religion. This alternative religion gradually begins to take over some of the aspects of the social functions performed by the already-existing religion, thereby creating uncertainty for the existing religions as they face losing or changing the power and control that they have already established in that society. The following are some examples within Sri Lanka society.

The introduction of Christianity disturbed the life that centred around the Buddhist temple (*Pansala*) in the village. It changed the social solidarity of the village, as those who became Christians found new meaning for their life as they began to live for Almighty God. Teachings of the Bible, such as the Ten Commandments, began to shape the life of the society, acting as a social control. Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, facilitated the rise of capitalism by providing values that are favourable to capitalism such as hard work and the reinvestment of money<sup>17</sup>. Christianity introduced colourful birth, marriage and funeral rites which were more attractive than the earlier rites of traditional Buddhism.

In a context of this nature the already-existing religions within a community make some kind of response, usually one of three general responses. The easiest response is to ignore the challenge that the community is facing and to pretend that nothing has taken place. By this approach the established religion strives to keep secure the place that they had in the society. The second response might be to resist the change that has taken place, and, with this resistance, to try to return to the old order that that religion had in the society. The third option is to comply with the new situation and to cope with the challenges that come out of it<sup>18</sup>.

Resistance to change takes place due to various reasons in society<sup>19</sup>. The lack of new inventions creates an unfavourable atmosphere for change. If people in the society are craving for new thought forms, attitudes and values, this creates a fertile ground for change. In a context like this change takes place without much opposition in society<sup>20</sup>. In this regard, the Sri Lankan fisher community, that was of the Karava caste, was ready for change as, for various reasons, they wanted new thought forms, attitudes and values. In this regard M. D. Raghavan has observed,

“The readiness to embrace Christianity arose from many causes. Being comparative newcomers, the Karava were less enmeshed in the intricacies of the Sinhalese social structure. Lesser involvement in the feudalism of the time gave them greater freedom of action.”<sup>21</sup>

As the Sinhala agricultural people in Sri Lanka the Karava entirely did not reject or resist this new religion called Christianity. Some Karava people embraced Christianity in order to settle in the new set-up, as they did not have so much tradition and reverence for the past. On the other hand, where the agricultural people in Sri Lanka are concerned, at the time that Christianity was introduced they were emotionally and sentimentally bound to the practices, ideas and customs of the agricultural lifestyle that had emerged under the influence of Buddhism. Thus the traditional attitudes of people meant that new things would not be allowed or accepted, and many agricultural people resisted and rejected this new thing called Christianity. As observed by Shankar Rao this happened not only because of love for the past but also because of fear of the new.<sup>22</sup>

It was even due to ignorance that at times people rejected the new elements. For example, at the beginning many people in society rejected the germ theory of disease.<sup>23</sup> It took a long time for people to accept this theory. At its introduction Christianity also faced a similar challenge as a new element in society. To begin with Sri Lankan people were reluctant to send their girls to schools started by the Christian missionaries, and it took some time for people in Sri Lanka to accept this change, that of women studying in schools in the same way as boys. Habits can be viewed as another obstacle to social change. Often people get scared of new practices and habits<sup>24</sup>. The observations made by Sinhala people on the arrival of Don Lourenco De Almeida on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1505 prove that people have a fear of new practices. They observed this group of people and, sharing their understanding of their eating and drinking habits, said,

“ They eat hunks of stone and drink blood ”<sup>25</sup>.

This statement shows how these Sinhala people disliked and rejected the eating and drinking habits of the Portuguese.

Since the main emphasis of this research is on an inquiry into the Christian community in Sri Lanka, the most important task is to analyse the social impact of this community in Sri Lanka. For the entry point into this task different faces of this sociological reality called change can be employed<sup>26</sup>.

The first face of change that we have considered is demand. The impact of this face is analysed in the context of the diverse cultures and religions of Sri Lanka. At this point the fact is being taken into consideration that “ All social changes are cultural changes “. Sociologically therefore, we are interested in cultural change only to the extent that it arises from or has an effect on social organisation<sup>27</sup>.

Religion is associated with culture, and neither is it independent of other similar phenomena such as politics and economics. Therefore it is vital to examine the demand for Christianity in the context of various religions and beliefs in order to examine the social impact of Christianity in Sri Lanka. According to C.N. Shanker Rao of India any religion has a basic structure which includes theologies and creeds, ceremony and ritual, symbolism, religious codes, sects, festivals, sacred literature, myths and mysticism<sup>28</sup>. For instance, in the Buddhist structure in Sri Lanka the Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path exist as religious codes<sup>29</sup>. Festivals such as *Vesak* full moon day (the feast of the birth, enlightenment and death of Lord Buddha) and *Poson* full moon day (the day on which Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka) are an integral part of Buddhism in Sri Lanka<sup>30</sup>. Buddhists venerate the sacred literature called the *Tripitaka* which consists of *Vinaya* (discipline), *Sutra* (the sermons of Lord Buddha) and *Abhidharma* (doctrines). Therefore when a new religion is introduced into a particular context the above basic structure of the already-existing religions overlaps and creates demands on the new religion. In this regard, with the introduction of Christianity, the Christian sacred book called the Bible, festivals such as Christmas (the nativity of Christ) and Easter (the resurrection of Christ), and the religious codes such as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, all integral parts of the basic structure of Christianity, were introduced<sup>31</sup>. Changes came about in the existing basic structure of the new religion so that it could settle into its new context as an integral reality within society. For example, the way Buddhists respected the Buddhist sacred literature affected the way in which Sinhala Christians accepted and respected the Bible. Again, Christians used the same tune of the chanting done by Buddhists in reciting their sacred literature to proclaim the Bible message. The celebration of *Vesak* had an impact on the celebration of Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter. In this regard the way in which Sri Lankans understood the birth of the Lord Buddha on the *Vesak* full moon day influenced the Sri Lankan Christians in their understanding of the birth of Christ on Christmas Day. Today both of these festivals are considered as festivals of light in Sri Lankan society.

Here the important fact that Protestant Christianity that was introduced after 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Sri Lankan religions (especially Buddhism) grew up in the industrial and agricultural systems respectively is taken into consideration. In the face of external demands the impact made by the Christian community in retaining its integrity is analysed in order to highlight the social behaviour of this community in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankans who embraced Western Christianity, which had grown up in the industrial set-up, had to face various demands or challenges with regard to their attitudes, values and thought forms, and they went through a process of integration which had an effect on society.

The second face of change that could employ is crisis. The main contributory factors to the crisis for the Christian community are power, identity and ideology in society. The power that this community inherited from the colonial government, especially from the British, underwent a process of change after independence

in 1948. The crisis created by the situation after independence forced this community to change their identity accordingly. Regarding this C .N. Shanker Rao has observed,

“ Individuals who feel that social change endangers their interests are likely to oppose it. They therefore fight every proposal in this direction. Such persons may organise themselves as opposition groups when their “rights” are threatened. Similarly, people oppose changes if their *self-interests are endangered.*”<sup>32</sup>

According to the above sociological statement, when the so-called rights of some individuals of this community were threatened and endangered due to the change of power they got themselves organised as opposition groups. This observation became a reality among urban Christians. They represented the majority of the Protestants such as Anglicans and Methodists and some urbanised Roman Catholics as well.

In my analysis the observations of Marx and Weber are considered useful. Regarding this Ann Levine has observed,

“Whereas Marx saw religion as an obstacle to social change, Weber saw it as an agent of social change. Weber began with a puzzle: Why were the leading capitalists of the day overwhelmingly Protestant? Why not Catholic (or Buddhist or Muslim)? He found an answer in the Calvinistic phase of the Protestant Reformation. Calvin believed that the individual’s fate in the hereafter was preordained but did not advocate passive acceptance of whatever life brought. Rather he preached the redemptive value of work. The Protestant work ethic, with its peculiar combination of hard work and deferred gratification, was ideally suited to capitalism. Under Calvinism, investing in profit-making ventures became a moral duty. In this case, then, religion played a major, active role in social change. The one point on which all these theorists would agree is that the structure of religion and that of society are intertwined.”<sup>33</sup>

In the above observation of Weber he noted that the growth of Capitalism was very visible in the West where Protestantism had become dominant.<sup>34</sup> Therefore in his famous thesis called “*Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*”<sup>35</sup> he presented a hypothesis to show the connection between Protestantism and Capitalism<sup>36</sup>. In this hypothesis he pointed out that Calvinism, which is an integral part of Protestantism, contributed towards the rise of Capitalism in the West. He highlighted that the important values of Protestantism such as thrift, hard work, and honesty were instrumental in the rise of Capitalism in the West in the Protestant context<sup>37</sup>. He especially emphasised that the religious shift that took place at the Reformation in understanding asceticism influenced the rise of Capitalism in the West. At the Reformation the monastic virtues of asceticism began to change in the direction of this worldly asceticism. Against this background asceticism was associated with the work and the life of this world. Therefore asceticism was understood not merely as the renunciation of this world but as having to do with the quality of the performances of activities in this world. This happened mainly due to the rigid doctrine of predestination where people had to search for signs of salvation on the basis of success in this world. Material gains and industrial prosperity were understood as blessings from God and the signs of the assurance of God’s salvation<sup>38</sup>. The following observation of Weber explains the aforementioned realities,

“The world exists to serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone. The elected Christian is in the world only to increase this glory of God by fulfilling His commandments to the best of his ability. But God requires social achievements of the Christian because He wills that social life shall be organised according to His commandments, in accordance with that purpose.”<sup>39</sup>

Weber also analysed the link between Protestantism and Capitalism in other main Calvinistic doctrines such as election<sup>40</sup> and sanctification<sup>41</sup>. He found that both of these doctrines played a part in the rise of Capitalism. The meaning of election is that God has chosen and given His grace; sanctification is the making holy or of being made holy. Protestants believed that both election and sanctification are activities of God and as such do not depend on our efforts. But the certification of election and sanctification depended on the successfulness of activities of this world<sup>42</sup>.

Especially when Protestantism was introduced under British rule the above values and influences, which also promoted Capitalism, migrated to Sri Lanka. Even in Sri Lanka, it was very evident that in the context of Protestant values Capitalism found a fertile ground for its growth. The growth of Capitalism occurred mainly in the upcoming urban areas of British rule. Capitalism became well rooted in Colombo, the centre of the commercial activities of the British<sup>43</sup>.

In this background there were some Buddhists who also lived and worked in the Protestant atmosphere with its associated rise of Capitalism. Gradually these people began to lose the Sri Lankan feudal values that had grown up in the context of Buddhism. However, not all Buddhists wanted to give up Buddhism in order to become Christians, and so many of those living in the urban areas underwent an identity crisis<sup>44</sup>. Without any doubt the best example in this regard is a person commonly known as Anagarika Dharmapala whose former name was Don David Hewavitarne. Commenting on this identity crisis G. Obeyesekere has observed,

“ His lack of roots in the traditional social structure – the absence of village, caste or regional identities - impelled him to seek his identity in Buddhism. Moreover, insofar as he lacked local identities like caste, he could appeal to all sectors of the educated Sinhalese. His religious conflicts led him to be an inveterate and implacable foe of the Christian missions, and he brought into Buddhism the zeal, enthusiasm and bigotry that characterised the mission dialectic. In 1902 he writes (in English) “ The sweet gentle Aryan children of an ancient historic race are sacrificed at the altar of the whisky-drinking, beef-eating belly god of heathenish. How long, O how long will unrighteousness last in Lanka?” And: “ Practices that were an abomination to the ancient noble Sinhalese have today become tolerated “ And again: “ arise, awake, unite and join the army of Holiness and peace and defeat the hosts of evil. ”<sup>45</sup>”, “<sup>46</sup>

Here, according to Obeyesekere, he (Dharmapala) became a Protestant Buddhist<sup>47</sup>. Although initially the impact of his appeal was on the Sinhala and English educated intelligentsia, he later had an impact on all Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

Here we see how this English-educated person who studied in Christian schools and whose father became a rich businessman in Colombo in the Capitalistic set-up was instrumental in giving birth to a reformed form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka<sup>48</sup>. He was greatly influenced by Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott who organised the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 and who came to Sri Lanka to organise the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka.<sup>49</sup>

This shows how Buddhists had to adopt Protestant values to be Buddhists in the Capitalistic system. This once again proves the close connection between Capitalism and Protestant ethics. For example, these Protestant ethics are well highlighted in the Systematic Code for Laity prepared in Sinhala by Dharmapala in 1898. The rules were listed on the following subjects.

- The manner of eating food (25 rules)
- Chewing betel (6)
- Wearing clean clothes (5)
- How to use the lavatory (4)
- How to behave while walking on the road (10)
- How to behave in public gathering (19)
- How females should conduct themselves (30)
- How children should conduct themselves (18)
- How the laity should conduct themselves before the Sangha (5)
- How to behave in buses and trains (8)
- What village protection societies should do (8)
- On going to see sick persons (2)
- Funerals (3)
- The carter’s code (6)
- Sinhalese clothes (6)
- Sinhalese names (2)
- What teachers should do (11)
- How servants should behave (9)
- How festivities should be conducted (5)
- How lay devotees (male and female) should conduct themselves in the temple
- How children should treat their parents (14)
- Domestic ceremonies (1)<sup>50</sup>

These rules clearly depict Puritan<sup>51</sup> and Calvinistic<sup>52</sup> ethics at their outset, and so this gives the framework in which Protestantism influenced Buddhism in Sri Lanka. At the same time this influence contributed immensely

to Buddhist missionary activities in the West where Capitalism and Protestantism are two integrated realities. Yet in the purview of this study this is not analysed and it is a study area for another research of this nature.

Even in analysing groups such as carpentry community in Moratuwa the above observations of Marx and Weber used, as they are useful and meaningful in understanding the social behaviour of this community. The different behaviour patterns of the Roman Catholic and Protestant carpentry communities are emphasised by confirming the hypothesis of Weber on social change through Protestant ethics. This is clear in the way in which many Protestant carpenters have joined the middle class while very few Roman Catholic carpenters have become middle class in their community in Moratuwa. In this regards the sociological concepts of contagion and the collective mind are used on the Roman Catholic fisher folk and the carpentry community, while in analysing the Protestant carpentry community the personal purity of the Protestant ethic is taken into consideration.<sup>53</sup>

The introduction of colonial education can be viewed by comparing the formal mass education managed by the Christian missionaries and the traditional non-formal education that took place within the caste system of Sri Lankan society<sup>54</sup>. By doing so the issues that emerged with regard to mass education could be presented by highlighting the social change that influenced Sri Lankan society. In Sri Lanka, it is accepted by many sociologists that education, especially the missionary education introduced by the colonial powers (especially by the British) became a considerable factor in social change. The following are some of the observations made by a few sociologists on education and social change,

Francis J. Brown's observation,  
 "Education is a process which brings about changes in the behaviour of the society"<sup>55</sup>

Peter Worsely's observation,  
 "that education reflects society, and educational change follows social change"<sup>56</sup>

C. N. Shankar Rao has observed,  
 "Education can also be understood as a factor of social change."<sup>57</sup>

When Christian missionaries introduced their education under the protection of the colonialists, they considered schools and colleges as the nucleus of their future church. Under the British in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as reported by Anagarika Dharmapala, in the Christian missionary schools the Bible was read Bible four times a day.<sup>58</sup> Here it is clear that Christian missionaries used education more for social change than social control in Sri Lankan society.<sup>59</sup> This enabled a change in behaviour of the students who underwent this form of education. At times this created a conflict between the school and home environment, such as experienced by Anagarika Dharmapala.<sup>60</sup> For example, within the school the caste that the student belonged to was not considered important, and the eating of beef or pork was not seen as a bad social habit. On the other hand, in the home environment caste established the position and often the employment of the family in society, and the eating of pork and beef were considered as bad habits of the low or outcast people of society. Education under Protestant missionaries such as the Anglicans promoted the removal of so-called superstitious beliefs and the irrational fear of supernatural beings through this education. Sometimes this created tension between the Buddhists and Christians in society. For instance, Christian missionaries often said that the worshipping of a Buddha statue or a Bo tree was superstition, and that observing auspicious times showed a baseless fear of supernatural beings and should be discarded.

Christian missionary education also facilitated a paradigm shift in the philosophy, attitudes and values of one's life in society. In this regard the background in which Christian missionary education sprang up became important. There were two main influences on the Christian missionary education introduced to Sri Lanka, namely the rise of Capitalism and industrialisation, both of which were reflected in and promoted by missionary education.<sup>61</sup> The necessity for the Christian missionary type of mass education emerged as a result of the industrialisation in the West. In the Western context of industrialisation, when cottage industries were replaced by mass production it became necessary to employ a large number of men such as engineers, accountants, book-keepers, technicians, planners and clerks in order to ensure the smooth running of the industrialised society.<sup>62</sup> This created a group of people in society who did not get directly involved in the actual outcome of production. At the time the work that they accomplished in the production process was called a "white collar job".

When Christian missionaries introduced this mass education to Sri Lanka, naturally it prepared people for white-collar jobs. In this above background it was especially the Sri Lankans who embraced the Protestant

form of Christianity who were attracted to these so-called white-collar jobs. At the same time middle class urban Buddhists were also attracted to these white-collar jobs. People who got into these jobs had a shift in their caste or regional identity and the traditional social structure of the village that they came from. When a group of people from the same caste converted to a particular Protestant sect such as Methodist or Baptist at times this strengthened their identity. This could be understood on the following observation by Weber,

Castes share with the Protestant sects the element of social exclusiveness: <sup>63</sup>

For their survival they gradually came to fully depend on the salary that they received at the end of the month. This shook the social structure and the employment system, which fully depended on the caste system of the Sri Lankan society.

The other important aspect of this education was the way in which it promoted Capitalism in Sri Lanka. This Protestant education was highly immersed in the Calvinistic <sup>64</sup> and Puritan <sup>65</sup> values of Protestantism. Therefore in the background of understanding material gains as blessings from God and as an assurance of God's salvation this education promoted competition in the process of education. <sup>66</sup> In the process of competition the losers gradually got eliminated and were forced to join the production workforce.

Challenge and response are the next faces of change that I have considered in my analysis. Any community that exists in society faces challenges for various reasons. When there is a challenge a response is inevitable. This process of challenge and response becomes a factor of social change. This type of change takes place mainly as a result of three primary forces of change, namely discovery, invention and diffusion in society. <sup>67</sup> I have used the sociological explanations of these terms to analyse the responses made by Christians facing challenges in Sri Lanka. Here an effort is being made to explain sociologically the ecclesiastical terms of adaptation, indigenization, inculturation, contextualization and syncretism. These three concepts of discovery, invention and diffusion are used within the following sociological framework:

“ A discovery is a human perception of a fact or relationship which already exists.” <sup>68</sup>

This explanation gives the indication that discovery becomes an agent of social change once it is put into practice in society. Therefore this discovery is not something entirely new. With the above definition the concept of discovery is used to analyse the so-called adaptation of the Christian church. In this regard discoveries such as language, thought forms and concepts are analysed in the adaptation highlighting the social influences of these in the society.

“An invention is often defined as a new use of old elements of the culture.”<sup>69</sup>

By using the term invention as defined above, the processes of indigenization and inculturation are analysed to measure their social influence in Sri Lanka. In 1948 Gillin pointed out that an invention might be new in principle, form, function or meaning. This idea is used wherever it is helpful in bringing out the social influences of the aforementioned processes of indigenization and inculturation in the Christian church in Sri Lanka. To measure social influence, sociological terms such as cultural relativism, cultural universals, ethnocentrism, real culture and ideal culture are used to make the presentation meaningful and effective sociologically. <sup>70</sup> The positive term, contextualization, and the negative term, syncretism, both used in the context of the Christian church, are tested in the framework of the sociological term diffusion to emphasize the social impact of these in the society. The term diffusion is used in the following context, as noted by Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt,

“ Even the most inventive society invents only a modest proportion of its new elements. Most of the social changes in known societies have developed through diffusion, the spread of culture traits from group to group. Diffusion operates both within societies and between societies. Jazz originated among Negro musicians of New Orleans and became diffused to other groups within the society. Later it spread to the other societies and has now been diffused throughout the civilized world. Diffusion takes place whenever societies come into contact. Societies may seek to prevent diffusion by forbidding contact.” <sup>71</sup>

The positive use of diffusion to retain the integrity of Christians in contextualization, and the resistance to diffusion due to the fear of losing Christian identity in syncretism, are made vivid by highlighting their social impact in society. To highlight the effects of these ecclesiastical concepts in society the effort is being made to



analyse and interpret the content of these terms sociologically. “A new dictionary of theology” has defined syncretism as follows,

“The term *synkretismos* was explained by Plutarch as meaning coming together to oppose as external foe, as frequently squabbling Cretans were supposed to do. Erasmus used the term *synkretizein* to mean a prudent alliance, and Melancthon and other reformers also used the term in this sense. Therefore it took on the negative nuance of an inadmissible mixture of religious belief or practice, and came to be applied as a term to abuse in theological circles.”<sup>72</sup>

Bringing out the meaning of “contextualization” A. J. V. Chandrakanthan has observed,

“the critical assessment of what makes the context really significant in the light of **Missio dei** <sup>73</sup>. It is the missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate in it. It is the contextualization of the contexts in the particular historic moment, assessing the peculiarity of the context in the light of the mission of the church as it is called to participate in **Missio Dei**.”<sup>74</sup>

In this regard for instance in the light of diffusion under contextualization certain Christians took steps to make Christianity meaningful and contextual in the agricultural society of Sri Lanka. As a result such effects as the understanding of the agricultural seasons in the context of Christianity and the usage of agricultural idioms in Christian theology became a reality in Sri Lanka. For example, with this kind of emphasis the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, which is an agricultural festival, began to gain importance in the Christian Church.<sup>75</sup> On the contrary those who had been concerned about so-called syncretism tried to prevent elements connected with other religions or cultures, such as music or words, believing that they go against their Christian faith. This group in the Christian church refused the usage of Sinhala words such as *Pin* (merit), believing that it is an act of syncretism contrary to the Christian faith.

The general theories of social change accepted by sociologists fall into four main groups, which being evolutionary theories, cyclical theories, equilibrium theories and revolutionary theories.<sup>76</sup> Out of these four theories equilibrium theories can be employed to analyse the use of opportunities by Christians in the context of change and its social impact. To keep the tension and balance of the equilibrium theories in society the contrary conflict theories also could be used. Regarding this D. Light Jr. and S. Keller have noted,

Equilibrium theories stress the adjustments that maintain social stability; social change is generally seen as harmonious. Contrary to this view are the conflict theories, stressing the ubiquity of change and conflict. Society, according to these theories, rests on the constraint of one group by another; social change is generally seen as discontinuous as power shifts from group to group.<sup>77</sup>

Equilibrium theories and conflict theories can be used in the analysis in the framework of the understanding that Christians have become the main culture, subculture and the counter-culture in the various communities in Sri Lankan society. As can be seen in Sri Lanka in the fisher and carpentry communities, Christians were able to become the dominant culture. In the urban areas they became a subculture, while in the majority of agricultural areas in Sri Lanka Christians often behaved as a counter culture in society.

Against this background, although at times there were conflicts in contexts such as counter cultural situations, it is stressed that in the long run, according to equilibrium theories, generally social changes are harmonious and bring social stability. This is very apparent in the way in which Christians have become integrated in Sri Lankan society while retaining a unique integrity.

<sup>1</sup> P.B. Horton. & C.L. Hunt, *Sociology: Western Michigan University* (London: Hill Book Company, 1964) 507.

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958) 270.

<sup>3</sup> P.B. Horton & C.L. Hun, – *Sociology: Western Michigan University* (London: Hill Book Company, 1964) 387.

<sup>4</sup> L. de Silva, *BUDDHISM beliefs and practices in Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute, 1980) 37-44.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1965) 22.

<sup>6</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York: Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 407.

<sup>7</sup> M. Roberts, ed., *Collective identities, nationalism and protest in modern Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: Marga Institute, 1979) 311.

<sup>8</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York: Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 407.

<sup>9</sup> L.de Silva, *BUDDHISM beliefs and practices in Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute, 1980) 50-60.

<sup>10</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York: Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 407.

- <sup>11</sup> L. de Silva, *BUDDHISM beliefs and practices in Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute, 1980) 132.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.
- <sup>13</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York :Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 407.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.
- <sup>15</sup> *Pansil* is the observance of 5 precepts of Buddhism
- <sup>16</sup> L de Silva, *BUDDHISM beliefs and practices in Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute, 1980) 50-60.
- <sup>17</sup> J. Macquarrie & J. Childress, ed., *A new dictionary of Christian ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1986) 599.
- <sup>18</sup> J. S Zaccaria, *Facing change*, (U.S.A: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) 21-22.
- <sup>19</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 550.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.
- <sup>21</sup> M. D. Raghavan , *The Karava of Ceylon, Society and Culture* , (Colombo: K.V.G. de Silva & Sons, 1961) 32.
- <sup>22</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 550.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.
- <sup>25</sup> M. D. Raghavan , *The Karava of Ceylon, Society and Culture* , (Colombo: K.V.G. de Silva & Sons, 1961) 30.
- <sup>26</sup> J. S Zaccaria, *Facing change*, (U.S.A: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) 14 -18.
- <sup>27</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 546.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.
- <sup>29</sup> L de Silva, *BUDDHISM beliefs and practices in Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute, 1980) 47-51.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-233.
- <sup>31</sup> A. Richardson & J. Bowden, *A new dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM press Ltd, 1987) 100-108.
- <sup>32</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 551.
- <sup>33</sup> M.S Bassis., R.J. Gelles & A. Levine, *Study guide to accompany Sociology, An introduction* , (New York: Random House, 1983) 172 - 173.
- <sup>34</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* , (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 40.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.
- <sup>36</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 719.
- <sup>37</sup> J. Macquarrie & J. Childress, ed., *A new dictionary of Christian ethics*, P., (London: SCM Press, 1986) 599.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.
- <sup>39</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* , (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 108.
- <sup>40</sup> A. Richardson & J. Bowden, *A new dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM press Ltd, 1987) 175.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 542.
- <sup>43</sup> M. Roberts, ed., *Collective identities, nationalism and protest in modern Sri Lanka*, ( Colombo : Marga Institute, 1979) 279-313.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.
- <sup>45</sup> A. Guruge, ed., *Return to righteousness :From the Anagarika Dharmapala's writings*, (Colombo: Govt. Press, 1965) 697.
- <sup>46</sup> M. Roberts, ed., *Collective identities, nationalism and protest in modern Sri Lanka*, ( Colombo : Marga Institute, 1979) 302.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 294 -313.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 294 -313.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.
- <sup>51</sup> J. Macquarrie & J. Childress, ed., *A new dictionary of Christian ethics*, P., (London: SCM Press, 1986) 519-522 .
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-73.
- <sup>53</sup> Fernando , *Integrity and Integration of Christian Community in Sri Lanka* ( Unpublished Thesis, 2001)
- <sup>54</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York :Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 378.
- <sup>55</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 581.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 581.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 580 .
- <sup>58</sup> M. Roberts, ed., *Collective identities, nationalism and protest in modern Sri Lanka*, ( Colombo : Marga Institute, 1979) 298-299.
- <sup>59</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 580.
- <sup>60</sup> M. Roberts, ed., *Collective identities, nationalism and protest in modern Sri Lanka*, ( Colombo : Marga Institute, 1979) 298.
- <sup>61</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York :Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 377-388.
- <sup>62</sup> C.N. Shankar Rao, *Sociology*, ( New Delhi : S. Chand & Company, 1998) 427.
- <sup>63</sup> R. Bendix , *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* , (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1962) 143.
- <sup>64</sup> J. Macquarrie & J. Childress, ed., *A new dictionary of Christian ethics*, P., (London: SCM Press, 1986) 71-73.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 519-522.
- <sup>66</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York :Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 377-388
- <sup>67</sup> P.B. Horton & C.L. Hunt, *Sociology*, (London: Hill Book Company, Western Michigan University 1964) 507.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 484 .
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.
- <sup>70</sup> I. Robertson, *Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (New York :Worth Publishers Inc, 1983) 65-70.
- <sup>71</sup> P.B. Horton & C.L. Hunt, *Sociology*, (London: Hill Book Company, Western Michigan University 1964) 485.
- <sup>72</sup> A. Richardson & J. Bowden, *A new dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London : SCM Press, 1987) 559-560.
- <sup>73</sup> "Mission of God"
- <sup>74</sup> A.J.V Chandrakanthan, *Catholic revival in post-colonial Sri Lanka*, (Colombo : Social and economic development centre, 1995) 13.
- <sup>75</sup> N. Abeyasingha, *The radical tradition* , (Colombo :The ecumenical institute, 1985) 106-109.
- <sup>76</sup> D. Jr. Light. & S. Keller, *Sociology: Both of Princeton University*, (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) 557.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 557.