

The Spiritual Conquest: Baptism or Conversion?

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The Iberian voyages of discovery of the 14th and 15th centuries saw not only the opening of new territories but also an unprecedented expansion of missionary activity. Promoted by the Catholic Church its object was to convert the populations of these new territories to Christianity.

This paper examines the extent to which the missionaries who came to Ceylon were suited to the task of converting the people of this island. It argues that as regards the fervour and zeal they brought to the task their commitment and dedication was “exemplary”. Conversion, however, in the real sense of the word, it is maintained, means a radical change of beliefs caused by intellectual conviction, spiritual motivation or emotional insight. In that context it is argued that some of the method of recruitment, the type of training provided to them, their continued lack of proficiency in language and the consequent heavy reliance on interpreters did not match the requirements of conversion in the real sense of the term. The actual methods adopted by the missionaries as well as the instances of professed converts sliding back are cited to illustrate this point of view. (All the various methods of conversion are not discussed in the paper.) These circumstances, it is submitted, determined the direction that proselytization took in Ceylon, which was an emphasis on baptism first, while any instruction, even if it preceded baptism, was hasty, brief and, since done mostly through interpreters, incomplete. Baptism occurred but not necessarily conversion.

The sources this paper will rely on are what the missionaries themselves have recorded – the account of Paulo Trindade for the Franciscans; the letters and reports of the Jesuits extracted from Fr. V. Perniola’s “The Catholic Church – The Portuguese Period”; the various writings of Portuguese historians; contemporary accounts of the Portuguese apostolic mission by authorities such as Boxer, Sanjay Subramaniam, Russel-Wood, Priolkar, Flores, Tikiri Abeysinghe and C.R. de Silva.

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