

F. Houtart

Religion and Ideology, Sri Lanka,  
T.P.I., St. Peter's Seminary,  
Bangalore 560055, 1974, xvi + 541 pp.

Dr. F. Houtart's book, *Religion and Ideology, Sri Lanka* has already caught the attention of many interested readers. The book presents the penetrating researches of Dr. Houtart into the interactions of the religious, political and economic ideologies of Sri Lanka.

The book is divided into three parts: The first part deals with the political and religious fields in the Sinhalese kingdoms and their interactions. A review of the grandeur of the civilization of Sinhalese kingdoms—its technical achievements, the depth of its thought, quality of social life and organization—has been made in a poetical style. The author remarks that his approach to these kingdoms is "with fear and respect", fear because of his inability to render adequately the rich complexity of this social and cultural life, and respect because of what so many generations of men have built up, lived with and suffered from, and

cherished for so long. The objective of this part dealing with the Sinhalese kingdoms is the study of the relationship among the three systems, economic, political and religious, choosing some particular significant moment in history. The two periods dealt with are the adoption of Buddhism as a state religion in the 3rd century B.C., and the end of the medieval era in the history of these kingdoms at the time immediately preceding its disappearance.

After analysing the relationship between the economic, political and religious fields in the Sinhalese social ensemble at two different periods of its history, both characterized by the endogenous aspects of the construction of its social reality, in the second part two periods in which these ensembles were confronted with exogeneous elements are treated in detail. The two elements are, the Portuguese colonial regime with its temporal and spiritual conquest on the one hand, and the British colonial regime in the grandeur of empire and capitalism, on the other. The comparison between these two colonial systems is made so as to enable the readers to draw some interesting conclusions on the ideologies, which resulted in highly contrasting strategies and their effects on the periphery. To explain the variations in the effects of colonization on the political and religious fields and their interactions, the study of the conquest is taken up first, and next, the way the colonial regime came into force by means of a body of laws and the values of its economic and social systems.

Part three deals with the political and religious fields after independence. In this section the history and the interplay of different parties in Sri Lanka are analysed. The author has tried to bring out the social issues underlying the inter-play of political forces, the main currents, and the chief actors. He attempts to discover, the submerged foundations of political activities. The author has ingeniously telescoped into the interactions between the elements of the social stratifications, political movements and the ideologies of the different groups.

At the end, certain conclusions are drawn regarding the relationship between the political and the religious fields with regard to their structure and dynamics. The attention is focussed on the influence exerted by the political field upon the religious field rather than on the effects produced by the latter on the former. As one reads through the pages, he gets the idea that the author intends not merely to write the history of Ceylon's re

religious groups in a style of comparative study of religion, but rather a study of the development of one against the background of the other. His approach is neither historical nor structuralistic. The whole approach is in line with the theory of M. Godervau, namely, "the analysis of the different systems which constitute a society and their articulation shows that they are the application of a certain number of logical laws which are to be found in all societies".

In his analysis, the first stage consists of a theoretical framework based primarily on the theories of Max Weber dealing with the social function of religion and of religious institutions. It also includes the principles of the theories developed by Houtart himself in one of his earlier books. *The Church and the Latin American Revolution*. A synchronization of both leads to the construction of patterns of relationship between the religious field and the political field. The second stage consists of confrontations of these patterns with particular social situations. The author quotes from earlier documents to substantiate the historical perspective. But the history reconstructed has its own demerit too as it is more or less a theoretical survey that is achieved. The third stage of the work seems to follow a reverse order. It starts from the result of the confrontation of ideologies with empirical realities. The theories underlying the construction of the models are critically analysed with a view to revising or complementing the theory according to the contemporary situation. The approach to the gathering of empirical material seems to be sociological.

Throughout the book, religion is treated mainly as a social reality. The study is not concerned with its essence, its psychological function, or phenomenological description. Religion is socially a symbolic medium referring to supernatural forces, personified or not. Hence religion appears as an organized set of meanings, a frame of reference for all social matters structured around oppositions which can be reduced to a certain harmony.

The concept of politics presented goes beyond the framework of organization properly so called, to include every manner of imposing choices in the functioning of the social ensemble. The concept of ideological construct has also been employed. The political field is described as that portion of social space constituted by the dynamic concept formed by the relationships between groups, institutions and social factors.

F. Houtart deserves special credit for this research work. Besides throwing light on the interaction between the political, economic and religious fields in Sri Lanka, this work has also complemented and modified certain theories of interaction in these fields commonly held so far. This is certainly a very valuable contribution in the field of socio-religious studies.

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