

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN SRI LANKA

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Socio-Religious Situation

Sri Lankan society is basically multi-religious and multi-ethnic. It has a population of over 17 million. Four major world religions are present in Sri Lanka, namely, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. The division of population according to religions is as follows. Buddhists 69%, Hindus 15%, Muslims 7% and Christians 7.5%. The main ethnic group is Sinhalese who are the descendants of Vijaya an Arian, who came to Sri Lanka from the region of *Vangsa* (Bengal) about 3000 years ago, as it is recorded in *Mahawamsa*, the Great Chronicle of Ceylon¹. Then there are Tamils, Muslims and Burghers whose presence in Sri Lanka dates back to hundreds of years. A historical study about the emergence of the ethnic groups is not the purpose of this article. In the present context all these races have become part and parcel of the Sri Lankan society and they have their own contribution to make in the formation of a typically Sri Lankan ethos.

Sri Lankan Buddhism –The Origins

Speaking about the religions in Sri Lanka, it is important to understand the place of Buddhism in it. Buddhism in Sri Lanka is as old as Buddhism itself. Thus, Sri Lanka is generally known as a seat of early Buddhism. Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. Mahinda, the Son of Asoka who was the emperor of *Pataliputra* or *Patna*. Sri Lanka occupies a unique place among the countries which contributed to the propagation of the Buddha's teaching. This could be considered as a result of the missionary endeavour spearheaded by Asoka.

King *Devanampiyatissa*, following his Indian counterpart emperor Asoka, and greatly inspired by him, achieved peace, order and progress through the tenets of Buddhism. Following Asoka and using a Buddhist Philosophy as his base, he laid a solid foundation for a Buddhist way of life. Sri Lankan culture, art and literature are all enriched and developed on this foundation. We learn a great deal from literary,

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¹W. Geiger, *The Mahawamsa*, Government Publication Bureau, Colombo, 1960, p.51.

historical and archeological sources and also from foreign records about the dignified way of life that prevailed in the Anuradhapura Period.

King *Devanampiyatissa* dedicated the *Mahameghavana*, situated on the banks of 'Kolom Oya' to the South of the city for the use of the community of monks. The vast monastery built on the park came to be known subsequently as the *Mahavihara*. As it developed, it acquired so much importance that eventually it became the only center of learning in Sri Lanka to achieve worldwide recognition.²

Hinduism in Sri Lanka –The Origins

Hinduism as an institutional form of religion is of recent origin in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, there had been Hindus living in Sri Lanka from the pre-Buddhist era and the resulting influence on the local religions can be seen. The Indian influence on Sri Lanka was mainly due to territorial closeness. The *Aryans* who came to Sri Lanka from India were not totally cut off from their friends and relations.

From very early times there had been cordial ties between Sri Lanka and India. King Vijaya and his group got married to Indian women.³ These ties became stronger during the period of king *Devanampiyatissa*. One could safely conclude that with the social and cultural ties that existed with India, the religious beliefs and practices too got gradually integrated. There had been religious beliefs already in early Sri Lanka such as the worship of devils, worship of ancestors, lingam and trees⁴. Those beliefs and practices would have got easily integrated with what came in from Indian Hindu religious culture. Moreover, according to earliest parchment documents, there are indications to show that there had been some Brahmins living in Sri Lanka in the 4th century B.C. However, it could be observed that although traces of Hinduism or to be more precise, the Vedic religion, was prevalent in early Sri Lanka, Hinduism as an organized form of religion dates back only to a few centuries.

Muslims in Sri Lanka –The Origins

The presence of Muslims in Sri Lanka began due to maritime commercial activities. The Arabs were globally known for their skills in trade. The maritime trade of the Indian Ocean can be traced back to the dawn of civilization when as early as

²Cf. R. Chandajoti, *Buddhism, Its History and Civilization*. Colombo, 1975.

³Cf. W. Geiger, *op.cit.* ch. 7/48-58.

⁴Cf. Walpola Sri Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, M.D. Gunasena & Co., Colombo, p.44.

the third millennium B.C. the Harappan merchants of India traded with Mesopotamia through the ports of the Persian Gulf.⁵

By the time Islam was born in the 6th century A.D., the Arab and Persian traders were fully entrenched in the trading entrepots of India and Sri Lanka. In fact, Sri Lanka in the sixth century was the most important entrepot and the Persian occupied a privileged position here because they brought horses into the country.

The trade links with the Muslims developed over the centuries and so was the progress of Islam. It is quite clear that Muslims being quite meticulous about their religious duties built mosques and settled down in the places which suited them specially for trade.

Christians in Sri Lanka –The Origins

Christianity begins in Sri Lanka with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505. Like in the case of the Arabs, the Portuguese too came to Sri Lanka for trade, specially cinnamon. At that time, Buddhism and Hinduism held sway in the land whilst the Muslims were also present in the scene. Among the Sinhala people of the land there had been from the very advent of Buddhism in the 3rd century B.C., a close bond between the royalty and Buddhism. The kings endowed the monasteries with tracts of land and with revenue villages. The Buddhist monks advised the rulers and offered them spiritual guidance. They instructed and counseled the masses. The Buddhist doctrine and ethos pervaded every aspect of life and gave it meaning and direction.

Such was the religious environment that prevailed when the Portuguese came to Sri Lanka. There was harmonious co-existence of religions. With the arrival of the Portuguese the missionaries too entered the land. In fact the Portuguese missionary activities were sponsored by the State under a solemn agreement with the Roman Church authorities which came to be known as the royal patronage or *Padroado*. The *Padroado* played a decisive part in the establishment and growth of Christianity in Sri Lanka.⁶

⁵Cf. M.A.M. Shukri, *Muslims of Sri Lanka*, Aitken Spence Ltd., Colombo, p.89.

⁶Cf. M. Quere, *Christianity in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese Padroado*, Colombo Catholic Press, 1005, p.8.

Conversion took place as a result of the missionary activities. The changing of the local religion, if occurred, was mostly due to economic and political factors. There had been some kings of Sri Lanka such as King Dharmapala, who had good relations with the Portuguese and were also converted to Christianity.⁷

The conversion in general and the conversions of the kings in particular and taking over of some temple land to be given to the friars to build schools for the instruction of the young converts, offended the Buddhist masses, including the Buddhist monks.⁸

The various ups and downs, Christianity has grown in Sri Lanka for the last 500 years. All these four major religions which entered the Sri Lankan soil had co-existed for the last 500 years. Though there had been moments of turmoil and anxiety in the past, today there aren't any direct interreligious conflicts. But, some prejudices still remain especially among some Buddhists who consider the advent of the other religions as invasions and thus a proliferation of local culture.

However, this is not the view held by all the Buddhists. There are many who are open minded and are ready to accept others as co-pilgrims in the journey of life seeking its destiny.

The Ethnic Conflict

The Sri Lankan life had been marked with a process of peaceful co-existence over the past few centuries. Unfortunately, the picture had changed during the last two decades due to the protracted civil war which some refer to as an ethnic conflict. This has had its impact on interreligious dialogue as well. The continuing civil war has already swallowed over 60,000 lives during 17 years. Time and again the Sinhala Buddhists have raised their eye brows towards Christians and Hindus on their role in the conflict. Practically all Hindus are Tamils in Sri Lanka. Christians are both Tamils and Sinhalese. Some Sinhala Buddhists are suspicious of the Sinhala Christians with regard to their national consciousness, even though such suspicions are totally baseless. It is believed that this ethnic issue which has lead to terrorism

⁷ibid.

⁸ibid. p.19.

has its roots in the political past of Sri Lanka and the only viable solution lies in the path of Dialogue.

The Fourfold Dialogue

In 1984 the Pontifical council for Interreligious dialogue published a document entitled, "the Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions." In that document four types of dialogue are cited: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of deeds and collaboration, the dialogue of religious experience and the dialogue of specialists. It would be useful to speak of these aspects in the Sri Lankan context.

The Dialogue of Life

This kind of grassroots interfaith sharing is, above all, animated by a manner of acting, an attitude and spirit which guides one's conduct in daily life towards persons of other faiths. This attitude is one of concern, respect and hospitality towards the others.⁹

Dialogue of life is an everyday occurrence in Sri Lanka in its multi-religious and multi-ethnic milieu. Inspired and guided by the teachings of four great religions of the world the people of Sri Lanka are generally simple, peace loving and friendly. There is a significant sense of tolerance at all levels. The sense of the community and family is very strong particularly in the villages. Generally in a Sri Lankan village, the people know each other by name irrespective of their religion or race. There is an attitude of concern and respect to the other irrespective of his or her religion.

In the question of dialogue of life the people of Sri Lanka are united in facing the realities of life. One of the most fundamental realities is the dehumanizing level of poverty. About 80% of the Sri Lankans are poor and find life a struggle. In this common Struggle the people are together. The religious differences simply do not arise in such a situation.

There is an appreciable amount of goodwill among the clergy of different religions. In a village set up the parish priest generally knows the monk of the neighbouring Buddhist or Hindu temple. It should be noted that there are wide

⁹Cf. *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions*. Bulletin, XIX/2, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1984, p. 126-141.

stretches where there are no churches and where there is no Christian presence. There are some people of remote areas who have not seen a priest or a sister. There is an effort in the respective dioceses to make the presence of the Church felt in those areas. Therefore, in the Sri Lankan Church this is considered as an area that need to be fostered.

If the dialogue of life goes on well, one may be inclined to ask whether there aren't any obstacles. The attitude of division among religions is something that is promoted by a vociferous minority. There are some who call themselves pure-bred nationalists, in whose agenda the minorities need to be silenced and made to live as second class citizens.

At this point it should be mentioned that one thing that has angered the Buddhist in Sri Lanka is proselytism carried on by the fundamentalists. As a result the Catholics and the Protestants get branded as many Buddhists do not know the differences among Christians. In fact, it is unfortunate that the majority of the Buddhists and Hindus are not aware of the fact that the main target of their proselytizing is the Christians.

Dialogue of Deeds

This type of dialogue is described as one of deeds and collaboration with others for the goals of a humanitarian, social, economic or political nature which are directed towards the liberation and advancement of mankind.¹⁰ This fabric puts into relief our shared spiritual and human values that affirm the dignity of human person and the inherent worth of creation on the basis of which we can be co-workers for a more united, peaceful and just world community.¹¹

There is much scope for this type of dialogue in Sri Lanka. During the past few years a certain interreligious voice has been raised on certain issues of common importance to the nation.

Some issues are ecological in nature. In 1986 the government proposed a hotel project in a place called 'Kandalama' and many experts and environmentalists

¹⁰Ibid. p. 137.

¹¹C. D. Mitchell, "Taking Stock of the Present Christian-Buddhist Dialogue", *Pro Dialogo*, Rome, 1995/3. P.239.

predicted immense damage to the surrounding jungle and the natural lakes in the area. Further, it was also going to affect the rhythm of life of the people of the area. An interreligious protest was launched. However, the government went ahead and allowed the hotel to be constructed. Still, what is significant is the prophetic voice raised on behalf of the people and the nation, which had its own intrinsic value.

At the moment there is an issue related to a coal power plant which the government wants to install against the wishes of the people of the area. The church launched a massive campaign against this project because of the disastrous ecological impact and the injustices that would be caused to so many poor people of the area. The Buddhists and the Muslims of the area have joined hands with the Catholics and on this issue the government backed up and did not to go ahead. The interreligious co-operation was remarkable in the issue.

Another recent issue which has interreligious importance revolves round an election held in a certain province. Large scale rigging had been predicted and the Church with the co-operation of other religions monitored the elections by forming groups that visited the polling booths of the area during elections. In fact rigging and thuggery were prevalent in an alarming scale and the local Church came out strongly against this. A booklet was published containing the reports of eyewitnesses. Here again the interreligious co-operation was seen and a powerful non-violent message was conveyed to those responsible.

In the area of Dialogue of Deeds the collective work done towards the restoration of peace in Sri Lanka could be mentioned. A Buddhist-Christian delegation of religious dignitaries visited the North on many occasions where the conflict prevails. They were carrying the message of peace to the parties concerned. This interreligious effort has been appreciated by the peace loving people of the country.

Dialogue of Experience

The spiritual dialogue about religious experience is described as sharing of experience of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty as well as the expressions and

ways of searching for the Absolute. Through the encounter of spirituality of another tradition, our own religious consciousness is enriched and expanded.¹²

In 1999 there was a session on interreligious prayer which could be considered under this theme. It was the first time that such a programme was held in Sri Lanka. There was shared prayer and reflections made by the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. This focus of the gathering was Peace. The participants experienced the richness of this programme.

Dialogue of Specialists

This could be called the Dialogue of Theological and Philosophical reflection of an intellectual nature. This provides a forum for the experts of different traditions to come together to study and reflect on each other's tradition collectively. In our context there is certainly no difficulty in having sessions of dialogue of this nature because of the ample availability of resources. Nevertheless, a session of dialogue of Specialists has not yet been conducted. Probably the reason is the concentration made on the other aspects of Dialogue.

Current Situation

Since 1997 we have been forming an infrastructure necessary to foster dialogue in the country. The Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue was revived in 1997 and since then various initiatives have been taken. A core-group was formed in the name of the National Commission. Some members of this core-groups were sent to participate in certain formation programmes on Dialogue of the FABC.

There had been a concentrated effort to establish about 10 centers of dialogue all over the country. This has been envisaged as part of the plan for the Great Jubilee. In order to facilitate this process a Three Day Seminar was held on "Formation in Dialogue." About 50 participants received orientation during those three days. A document was formed containing the Acts of the Seminar. This document will serve as a point of reference in our future work.

The National Commission holds quarterly meetings where the situation of dialogue is discussed and the progress of work assessed. The National Commission

¹²ibid. p. 240.

organizes various programmes. One of the current events is an interreligious gathering which is being planned to be held shortly. Through the units of dialogue that have been established various interreligious programmes are being operated.

In addition to these efforts there are certain other groups both ecclesiastical and secular, which are at the service of dialogue. Considering the Sri Lankan realities both past and present, Dialogue is a delicate task in Sri Lanka. In fact some Buddhists refer to dialogue as another word for conversion. We need to go slow but with determination in the sure hope that work of dialogue is work of the Spirit.