

RELIGION THAT LEADS TO COMMUNALISM IN POLITICS

Antony Fernando*

Religion is a subject of such strange interest to people that it is difficult to say how many thousands of weeklies, monthlies and quarterlies dedicated solely to the subject of religion come out regularly. In Christianity that number is likely larger than in other religions. However large the number of contemporary religious magazines be, we have also to admit that publications which are mature enough to examine their own religion with a scientific objectivity and look at other religious traditions with respect and without bias are rare. They would not be more than a handful. Of the few open-minded periodicals I have come across, the one I have always looked up to as a model is the **Journal of Dharma** published by the Dharma Research Association of the Dharmaram College, Bangalore.

The Journal of Dharma is a Christian and Roman Catholic journal. But it is very down-to-earth. It attempts to look at its own Roman Catholicism as dispassionately as possible and at other religions as respectfully as possible. For such a journal to have survived for as long as twenty-five years is, without any doubt, a great achievement. It is for that reason that I, from the neighboring country, Sri Lanka, consider it a privilege to be associated with its Jubilee celebration.

The honesty with which the Journal of Dharma has stuck to its quest all these years, is no better portrayed than in the topic the editors have chosen for its Jubilee discussion. Of the numerous subjects they could have chosen from, they have selected what could be considered the thorniest, namely, "Communalism in Religion and Politics".

For us in countries like India and Sri Lanka, its examination at depth is not only important but even urgent. The social unrest that our countries have been going through for a long time and very particularly during the last few decades is in large part due to the political conflicts which have religion at their basis. What my paper has to examine is how and how much the reality we call "religion" is responsible for the strong tendency in many people today, specially those wielding power, to be

*Prof. Antony Fernando is the Director, Intercultural Research Centre, Kadawata, Sri Lanka.

communalist in whatever they do for the welfare of society. To be communalist is to seek exclusively the interests of one's clan-group, whether ethnic or institutional, in all political matters, national or international. That religion has much to do with the communalism in contemporary society is beyond question.

The divisive tendencies of religion are such that many thinking people have begun seriously to pose the question: Is religion the unifier of society or actually its divider? Will religion ever be able to help humanity become a global family or is it the splintering of society into ethnically divided groups that it will ultimately bring about? My paper titled "Religion that leads to communalism in Politics" points to the direction in which the answer is to be sought. It contains the hint that what actually leads to communalism in politics is not religion as such but rather one particular version of it.

In my view, much of the malaise in contemporary society is due to a flaw in our understanding of the word "religion". We have failed to understand with precision what it stands for. We religion-teachers --probably due more to the pressure of institutional structures than to any conscientious fault of our own-- have failed to realize that "religion" is not a word with one uniform sense. In the way actually used today, it has two different meanings. With each meaning, it takes a different form having a specific function to fulfill.

The point I want to bring out about the two senses of the word "religion" is of course one to which not much attention has been given so far by religion-teachers and even theologians. For that reason it won't be surprising if what I have to say will appear to many as new, untraditional and even challenging. But I have no fear in presenting my view here, because I am certain that I am before an enlightened audience that could evaluate it for what it is worth.

Of the two ways of understanding religion the one that newspapers and other forms of media take more generally into account is brought out in the dialogue given below. This dialogue which I have taken from a university course in the Sociology of Religion is imaginatively presented as taking place between a teacher and pupil in a French school.

Catherine, what is your nationality?

My nationality is French.

What is your religion?

My religion is Christianity.

Catherine, what would your nationality have been, if you had been born in Tibet?

If I had been born in Tibet, my nationality would have been Tibetan. What would your religion have been, if you had been born in Tibet? If I had been born in Tibet, my religion would, very likely, have been Buddhism.

Catherine, what would your nationality have been, if you had been born in Saudi Arabia?

If I had been born in Saudi Arabia, my nationality would have been Saudi Arabian.

If you had been born in Saudi Arabia, what would your religion have been?

If I had been born in Saudi Arabia, very likely my religion would have been Islam.

Catherine, what would your nationality have been if you had been born in India?

If I had been born in India, my nationality would have been Indian.

If you had been born in India, what would your religion have been?

If I had been born in India, my religion would, very likely, have been Hinduism.

If so, Catherine, isn't it by chance that you and I are Christian and French? Isn't it in the same way that all people acquire their nationality and religion? If things are so, does it not imply that we who, as French people, are today upholding the supremacy of Christianity, would have been upholding the supremacy of quite another religion had we been born elsewhere? Does that not mean that we should re-examine our customary attitude to nationality and religion, whether of our own, or of others?

This dialogue has no doubt a hurting side to it. Its composer seems to have wanted to drum into his students a truth that many of us would prefer left undiscussed. The fact is that the religion we take pride in adhering to, and usually hail as the best religion in the world, is something that each of us has got as accidentally as the color of our skin. I am Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim simply because my parents were so. My religion is not something I have freely and conscientiously chosen. Before seeking membership in it, I did not submit it to any examination. I didn't weigh the pros and cons of its values. I was just born to it.

What is equally important to note is that the religion acquired at birth is not any religion but that of the parents. The religion of the parents being that of their ancestors, religion which is inherited is always that of the clan. A clan could be a race with a common ancestry or a community with a common habitation. Each clan

has a religion of its own just as it has a language of its own. As much as a common language, a common religion helps members of a race to understand one another and act in unison.

Religion, awakened-to

Inherited religion, however, is not the only reality to which the word 'religion' is applied today. There is still another sense to it. One enters that religion only when one is mature enough to seek the meaning of life and look for a way to bring it to its fulfillment. The great founders of religions were concerned mainly about that adult form of religion. Religion as they understood it calls for reflection, judgment, decision. What that type of religion stands for becomes clear if we take a glance at the lives and teachings of just the Buddha and Jesus.

Siddhartha Gautama, who eventually became the Buddha, started at the age of 29 to search for the religion that he wanted for himself. When he did not find it in the schools of asceticism and meditation that he frequented, he looked for it on his own. It was at the age of 35 that he found it. He referred to that moment of discovery as the 'awakening' or the 'enlightenment'. It was at that moment that his mind felt awakened and enlightened to see the reality of life and with it the path that leads to genuine happiness. Ever after, the Buddha ("the awakened") preached that religion of "mind-awakening" (Buddhism) to those around him. For him the sole aim of religion was to awaken people from the dormant state of their minds. Religion was a matter of mind-awakening; and so real religion is not one that a person can inherit or acquire at birth.

Jesus of Nazareth did not practice or preach what we called above the "born-to" type of religion. He referred to his form of religion as the one to which a person is "re-born". When Nicodemus came to him to find out from him the path to the Kingdom of God, Jesus wanted him to be "re-born". Taking the word literally, Nicodemus is said to have queried: "But how is it possible for a man to be re-born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?" The answer of Jesus, though of a poetic nature, throws light on what we are to understand by religion of the "reborn-to" form. He said: "Flesh can give birth only to flesh. It is Spirit that gives birth to spirit" (Jn 3:1-8).

Views of Scholars

To see in clearer light the validity of this double understanding of religion, we should go also to the researches on religion done by western scholars. For quite some time scholars have been striving to solve questions posed about religion. They have conducted researches to find out how religions came to exist and what they actually do to people. Among them there are two who, though from two independent perspectives, have something very powerful to say about the issue we are concerned with, namely, the two forms of religion.

One is the eminent sociologist of religion Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). As can be seen from his book "Elementary Forms of Religious Experience"¹ Durkheim was strongly of the opinion that religion was a constituent element of the common pattern of life of clan-communities. According to him religions were there exclusively to ensure the unity and the solidarity of clan-communities. If he came to that conclusion it was because he saw something more in the structure of the clan-community than we usually do. For him a clan-community was not just an agglomeration of individuals. Members were so inter-woven with each other that the sense of affinity which this produced transformed the community into one corporal unit. A clan-community was like one body animated by one soul. To designate that moral body he used the Judeo-Christian term "church".

For him, religion was just "church" or an association in which members had the feeling that they were inseparably united. The code of beliefs and practices that the "church" upheld had no other purpose than to keep the community-group bound together and to give it an identity of its own. He put so much stress on the community-link that he explained even the belief in God as an outcome of an individual's submission to the community.

In his view "the believer is not deceived when he believes in the existence of a moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself. This power exists. It is society."² He used the word "society" in the sense of "clan-community". Clarifying further his idea, he says: "In a general way, it is

¹Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious experience: A Study in Religious Sociology* (George Allen & Unwin, New York, 1915)

²ibid. p.257

unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds merely by the power it has over them. For to its members, it is what a god is to his worshipers"³

Durkheim's idea of God-belief can be left out as it is not what is of importance to us here. But what cannot be laid aside is his idea that religion is an integral element of a clan's community life. It is because religion and clan are inseparably linked that membership in a religion is transmitted by parents to children just as membership in the clan.

It is unfortunate however that Durkheim focused attention exclusively on one form of religion, namely, that of the "born-to" form. He overlooked completely that of the "re-born-to" or the "awakened-to". But his idea is of immense value if we want to understand the peculiar way -- at times even fanatical-- in which most people behave in the matter of beliefs and practices.

The other authority whose views are fundamental for a deeper understanding of the issue in question is Rudolf Otto (1869-1937). He concentrated on the other version of religion. Judging from his book "The Idea of the Holy"⁴ religion is rooted not in an individual's link with the clan, but in the intuitive awareness of the "Sacred" that every individual has in his or her heart. People are not only deeply aware of a most profound reality but also want to revere it and keep united with it. According to him that consciousness of the "Sacred" is the basis of all religion. As he said: "There is no religion in which it does not live as the real inmost core; and without it no religion would be worthy of the name."⁵

Religion for Rudolf Otto is not, as for Durkheim, a form of "church" but a form of "spirituality". It represents the state of maturity that an individual aspires to achieve. The beginning of that state of maturity is a vision of higher life that one discovers through one's own experience of living.

Here again we have to say of Rudolf Otto what we said of Emile Durkheim. He too focused attention on just one sense of the word. He took it in the sense that we

³ibid. p.236-237

⁴Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press, England, 1923)

⁵ibid. p.169

have referred to as "religion re-born-to" or "religion awakened-to". As a scientific exponent of that form of religion, we cannot think of a better person than Rudolf Otto.

Source of Confusion

But the crux of the matter is that, however legitimate the two stands be, as a matter of fact, in the way contemporarily used, the word "religion" could refer to either. The word is equivocal. Religion working for the welfare of just one clan and religion working for the spiritual ennoblement of any human being can't be identical. Religion as submission to the demands of clan-consciousness and religion as submission to the universal laws that make people more fully human can't be the same.

What could be still more disturbing, is the question that one is compelled to ask here: If scholars as great as these can take the word "religion" in two different senses, is it a matter for surprise if ordinary people mix up the senses when they use it? Is anyone to blame if at one time people wage wars under the name of "religion" and at the other engage in activities that promote peace and harmony of the global community? There is not the least doubt that much of today's conflicts within individuals and between individuals is due to the lack of precision with regard to the way "religion" is understood.

The two forms of religion described by these scholars are different mainly because the functions they are intended to fulfill are different. The "born-to" form that Durkheim focused attention on has as its aim the welfare of the clan-community. For that reason, if we are to give it a name, we could call it "Clan-protective religion" or just "Clan-religion". The religion of the "awakened-to" form that Rudolf Otto took into consideration was personal religion. It was meant for the inner development of any individual of the human race. Its aim was to make people internally adult. It did so by giving the individual a vision of what it is to live and die rightly. For that reason we could call it "Life-vision religion" or even "Adult religion".

Once we accept that the reality of religion has two forms to it, then it should become obvious that any religion could find expression in either form. That is true of even multi-national religions called "Major Religions" the more noteworthy of which are Hinduism, Buddhism Christianity and Islam. If we take just Christianity as an example, we have to say that there could be a Christianity of the clan-protective form

as well as a Christianity of the Life vision form. To be able to recognize any religion in those two forms, we need to have beforehand some idea of the characteristics that distinguish them.

Clan Religion

We can start with clan-religion as that is what is less well-known. To get an idea of clan-religion in its modern form, that is, as applicable to major religions, we have necessarily to begin with what it was in primitive religions.

In the earliest days of human history when tribes lived apart from each other, each tribe or clan had its own culture. One clan was distinct from another because each had its own ancestral history, its own habitation, its own source of maintenance, its own language, its own political chief and, last but not least, its own beliefs and rites. With all the other elements of the clan's culture, religion helped ensure the unity, stability and identity of the clan. Religions of all the clans, -- and this is a point we should never ignore-- contained within them not only elements that were meaningful to just the clan, but also elements that had a universal significance.

None the less being primarily a group-matter, what religions in their clan-form gave priority to was the practice of religion in its externally visible form. Every member had to conform to what the leaders recognized as the basic elements of the clan's religion. Profession of faith and observance of rites by everybody in a visibly uniform way were the main ones. Mixing up with people of other clans in matters such as worship and marriage was forbidden. Those who ignored such requirements of religion were liable to be ostracized from the community or, in other words, excommunicated. In clan-religion, personality-elevating aspects of religion such as right thought, right judgment, right action were of much less consequence.

Using that broad acquaintance with primitive religions, let us now pass on to the Major Religions of today. Could we say that the tendency of a religion to protect a particular culture holds true of these too? The answer of many will naturally be "no"; and their argument will be that today's religions are no longer uni-racial or uni-cultural. They are multi-racial, multi-cultural.

But the multi-culturalness of the major religions is a matter that has to be approached with great discernment as appearances can be extremely deceptive.

There are at least two reasons for our saying so. First, major religions are not as uniform as they are imagined to be. According to the impression created, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are religions with one fixed form. But that is not so. In reality, there are many Hinduisms, Buddhisms, Christianities and Islams. Buddhism of Tibet, for example, is different from Buddhism of Japan, and Buddhism of Japan from that of Sri Lanka. Christianity is the same. The Greek Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, and the Protestant versions of Christianity are vastly different from each other.

When one particular religion is found in such diverse forms, we naturally ask what the cause of such diversities and even divisions could be. Is it possible that all these forms have been invented and initiated by the same founder? Could it be that both the Theravada and the Mahayana forms of Buddhism were initiated by the same Buddha, and that the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant versions of Christianity were started by the same Jesus?

There is no doubt that the religious thought of the great visionaries, in spite of the fact that they themselves lived in fixed cultures, was supra-cultural and so universal. But as soon as their thought was accepted by a clan, nation, or even an empire, it was not taken in exactly its original intent. Just as a cloth is cut and sewn to the size of an individual's body before it is used as a garment, religions were tailored to the cultural shape of the communities before they were accepted by them. Taken from that angle we have to say that modern religions in their denominationally-diverse institutional form are inextricably linked to a culture.

There is a second reason too for our affirming that the link between culture and religion holds true of today's religions too. To see that, we must look at the way religions have diffused themselves. What missionaries have carried to other lands is not just the spiritual message of the religion but much more the culture in which the religion developed. As a result, people of other lands have had to accept the religion along with the culture with which it is inseparably linked. Every major religion is rooted in a particular culture, -- one that could be treated as its mother-culture. That of Christianity is European culture; of Islam, Arab; of Hinduism, Indian; and of Buddhism, diverse units of Asian culture.

We can take the case of Christianity as an example. Though Christianity was born in the land of the Jews, already in its infancy it entered the western world. At first, it was not welcome. It was banned in the Roman Empire for three full centuries. The situation changed only when Emperor Constantine embraced the religion in 313 AD. Not long after that it became the state religion of the empire allowing itself to be shaped according to its culture. The Christianity that we know today is Christianity with the trappings of that state religion. It was in that Roman (eventually European) shape that Christianity was later diffused in the rest of the world. The vestments worn by the Catholic priest at ceremonies have little to do with Jesus Christ. They are derived from the vestments of the dignitaries of the Roman empire. Even the hierarchical system of the Christian churches largely goes back to the administrative system of the Roman empire.

This is no less true of other religions. The turban of the Sikh, the cap of the Muslim, the robe of the Buddhist monk or the garb of the Hindu swami have roots more in the mother-culture of these religions than in any directives coming from the founders. The very tendency of religions to lean on the mother-tongue of their earliest ancestors,--Hebrew and Greek in Judaism, Latin and Greek in Christianity, Arabic in Islam, Sanskrit in Hinduism, Pali and Sanskrit in Buddhism, --has the same basis.

All that goes to show how closely linked even major religions are to a particular culture. In that link to a culture, major religions are not different from clan-religions of the past. Their main function, no less than that of primitive religions, is to safeguard the institutional tradition. The leaders of the institution have to ensure that the tradition is preserved intact and that it is passed on from one generation to the other without change.

Adult Religion

In comparison with clan-religion, "Adult" or "Life-vision" religion is easier to grasp. At least in theory, religion has always stood for "spirituality" or "religiousness". For the founders of religions such the Buddha or Jesus, that would be the sense proper of "religion". Adult religion has its own goal which, unlike that of clan-religion, is not to make a person, a perfect Frenchman, a perfect Saudi Arabian, a perfect Indian or a perfect Tibetan, but to make anybody, Frenchman, Saudi

Arabian, Indian or Tibetan, a perfect human being. Rather paradoxically however, humanness is not something that people acquire at birth or by the simple fact that they are endowed with a human form. People are born only with the potential to be human. That is how the achievement of humanness at its perfect level becomes the ultimate goal of human beings.

The elevation of the individual from the "not fully human" to the "fully human" is what is referred to in religion as "liberation" and it is also what religion of the Life-vision form is concerned with. What "liberation" in religion stands for is a matter that needs to be carefully grasped. Of the numerous explanations given to it, the one that a modern person will find easy to comprehend is that given by the Buddha. For him the liberation that human beings needed most was from the stunted state of their minds as this is what brought pain and anxiety to people. The human mind in its initial unenlightened state is controlled by emotional desires. In that state human beings fail to see what brings them true peace and joy and they run after sleazy objects of enjoyment which ultimately bring them more sorrow than contentment. That is why the Buddha made "right understanding of life" the basis of his path to liberation. Right understanding liberated people from their enslavement to self-centered desires.

In theistic religions, right understanding of life is referred to as "faith". When correctly understood, faith is not submission to institutional traditions but submission to truth. Faith makes individuals selfless and rightly-related. This it does by making them accept the reality of life in its totality, that is in link with one's own inner self, with the whole of humanity, with the universe at large and with God the ultimate source of one's existence. Religion of the spirituality form has thus one clear goal in view, namely, that of making individuals mentally mature so that they could be rightly related to everything they are internally related.

The explanation given above about the two meanings of the word "religion" and of the two versions of religion these lead to could sound, as said before, new to many. But if the idea has a solid basis to it, we have no other alternative but to re-structure our attitude to religion accordingly, however hard this be. It is not easy for me here to point out all the aspects of the new attitude we have to adopt. I will restrict myself to just two aspects which could show how drastic the change will have to be. The two points I bring out here, --one on each version of religion,-- are only

meant as reflections to provoke thought and in no way as dogmatic conclusions to be accepted without question.

Fidelity to Truth

My first reflection is about Life-vision religion. Life-vision religion is religion understood as spirituality or religiousness. When taken as spirituality, religion stands for a set of values that make individuals mentally mature and, in consequence, autonomous in thought and action. Persons for whom religion is primarily a form of spirituality follow the dictates of their conscience and act in their day to day life with responsibility.

In my view, if our system of religious education has failed to bring people the inner liberation they seek, it is because we have not been introspective enough to distinguish between religion as spirituality and religion as culture. We have confused the two and, as a result, we have not given priority to what priority is due. Consciously or unconsciously, we have taught that what makes a person truly religious is fidelity to institutional tradition rather than fidelity to objective truth.

The outcome of that system of education is only too evident. As a general rule, our believers are not as adult as they should be. They are not autonomous in thought and action. They just say what their religion teachers tell them to say and just do what they tell them to do.

We have further failed to realize that fidelity to tradition is of no benefit to those outside the institutional community. If we take the case of Christianity, fidelity to the Roman Catholic tradition is of value to just the Roman Catholics and that to the Anglican tradition to just the Anglicans. But, when taken in its personality-elevating form, there is more to Christianity than is contained in the institutional traditions of either the Roman Catholics or the Anglicans. Christianity as Christianness is of use and value not only to the members of the different Christian denominations but as much to people of other religions.

The importance of giving priority to religion in its spirituality form is a matter that I myself, --if I am permitted to be a little personal here -- had quietly to awaken to due to certain problems I had to grapple with as a teacher of religion. I have been a teacher of Buddhism for nearly 20 years at a Christian Seminary, and a teacher of Christianity in a secular --predominantly Buddhist -- university for an equally long

period. To teach a religion to those who are not its adherents is by no means an easy task. The only way I could find to overcome the problem was to focus attention on the spirituality of those religions relegating to a secondary place their institutional dimension.

What I discovered in the process I have attempted to bring out in two small books. The one on Buddhism titled "Buddhism Made Plain,-- an Exposition for Christians"⁶ brings out the spirituality of Buddhism; and the one on Christian spirituality meant for Christians of any denomination and even non-Christians is titled "Christian Path to Mental Maturity"⁷. The first has been translated into a number of languages, and the second, published just two years back has already begun to get translated into different languages.

If I have referred to the method I followed in the teaching of religion, it is in no way to offer myself as an ideal, but just to show that the method works and that people are interested in religion as spirituality. When a religion is presented in its spirituality form, it is of interest and benefit to people other than those of just that religion. The Buddhistness of Buddhism is of appeal to non-Buddhists and the Christianness of Christianity to non-Christians.

If we are to teach the spirituality of a religion effectively, we must first take the trouble to find out in the particular religion we teach what the elements are that enable people to ennoble their lives. To find that out is not always easy. For that we must go primarily to the thought of the founders,--Buddha in Buddhism and Jesus Christ in Christianity,--rather than to the later leaders who gave an institutional structure to the religion. The great quality of religion in its spirituality form is that it unites communities. It does not compartmentalize them. It makes people adult and prevents them from becoming communalist.

Fidelity to Culture

The second point I want to focus attention on is the respect and regard we should show to religion in its clan-protective form. Clan-religion may not be religion in the proper sense of the word, for what it demands mainly is conformity to the external elements of religion. Clan-religion may also be what is directly connected with

⁶Antony Fernando, *Buddhism Made Plain,--an exposition for Christians* (Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, Indore, 1981)

⁷Antony Fernando, *Christian Path to Mental Maturity* (Inter-cultural Book Promoters, Kadawata, Sri Lanka, 1998)

politics and so what political leaders are interested in. None the less clan-religion is a social reality that we have to value for the very task it intends to fulfill. Unlike spirituality-religion which is concerned with all human beings and their global unity, clan-religion looks to the interests of just one clan. But we must never forget that the global unity of humanity will never be achieved if we do not help racial and national communities to safeguard their unity and continuity.

Those of us who adhere to Christianity in countries like India and Sri Lanka have a special reason to take that obligation seriously. It is no secret that many of us who love both our religion and our country feel somewhat segregated and even alienated from the age-old cultures of our national communities, which is basically Hindu in India and Buddhist in Sri Lanka.

To illustrate in a concrete way what is implied, let me take the present situation of one small race, namely, the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka to which I too belong. This is the majority race in Sri Lanka and what makes it distinct from other races is that its members use Sinhala as their mother-tongue. Ever since the days of European colonization in the sixteenth century, the Sinhala race has become split into two sections, the Sinhala Buddhists who form the larger number and the Sinhala Christians who are less than 10%. The cultural tradition of the Sinhala Buddhists goes back to nearly twenty five centuries. The Sinhala Christian tradition is not more than five centuries old.

The resentment that Sinhala Buddhists have shown and are showing still today to Sinhala Christians is well known. They have compelled the government to take over the Christian schools, to send away Catholic nuns working in hospitals, and to ban foreign missionaries. What the Sinhala Buddhists resent in the Sinhala Christians is not their adherence to Christianity as a form of spirituality or a philosophy of life – for which anybody has a natural right -- but the fact that, as a result of their conversion to Christianity, they have become subservient to a western culture breaking away from the culture of their ancestors.

I am not here saying that the Sinhala Buddhists are right in everything they have done or are doing but we must not be blind to the fact that the Sinhala Christians have made a serious mistake in disregarding and even totally leaving out the traditions of their ancestors. Among the traditions that they have given up one is the celebration of festivals that for centuries have been sacred to the Sinhala community and has been vital for their unity and identity. One such festival is the

Sinhala New Year held annually in the month of April which is purely a harvest festival. There is no justifying reason to prevent Christians from joining the Sinhala Buddhists in the celebration of such an ancestral festival adding, if need be, their own Christian interpretation to the rites. But the fact that they have dissociated themselves from it has, quite understandably, intensified the rift between the two groups.

Another tradition that Sinhala Christians have almost adamantly abstained from adhering to and which has aggravated the split even more is the showing of respect and reverence to the Buddha, a distinguishing characteristic of the Sinhala community for centuries. The Buddha who is undoubtedly one of the greatest teachers of religion in Asia has always been considered by the Sinhalese community as the one who bequeathed to them their moral code of conduct. Due to the narrow understanding of their own religion and also their ignorance of the sublime teachings of the Buddha, the Sinhala Christians consider the offering of flowers or the lighting of a lamp before the image of the Buddha as a betrayal of their religion and as an act of infidelity to Jesus, their master.

But the fact is that there is nothing to prevent Sinhala Christians from taking the Buddha as a great prophet of their race just as the first Christians who were Jews continued to revere Moses as the great prophet of their race even after their conversion to the new religion of Jesus. Further, such an external gesture as the offering of flowers or lighting a lamp before the image of the Buddha is only a simple way of asserting that while being Christian they are also Sinhalese and not French, Italian or English. If I have taken this simple case of the Sinhala Christians, it is only to show how important it is for people of today to understand their religion at depth so that they can follow it without losing their link with their culture.

Those are the two points I want to present for reflection at the conclusion of my paper. They are both based on the distinction I have made about the two meanings and versions of religion. They indicate the more introspective way we must adopt in dealing with religion at least in the future. If we follow the right approach a critical issue such as the one we will be discussing all these three days, namely that of communalism in religion and politics, will be easy to solve. In fact, we will not even have to bother about it for the problem will no longer arise.