

Chapter Four: Some Significant Religious Endeavors of Symbiosis for Peace in Sri Lanka

Having delved into the socio-political situations of the post-colonial times, the unsuccessful or partially successful endeavors for peace in the country and the various causes and conditions that escalated division and strife among the two major communities of the nation, I shall now move on in this chapter to outline and propose what I am convinced as the pathway for peace and harmony in the nation for the future. My firm conviction is that what I call *Samagama Samajam* – a Sinhala/Tamil phrase that expresses a society of symbiosis – is the answer for the establishment of human dignity of all the children of Mother Lanka, irrespective of their race, language and religion. It is in such symbiosis that peace and harmony in diversity is possible.

Hence, I shall illustrate the connection between religions and violence and their potency to advocate and facilitate non-violence and to advocate for justice and pluralism which will lobby for symbiosis as pathway for peace in my country. To demonstrate the viability and feasibility of symbiosis in Sri Lanka, I shall also highlight some of the pioneering endeavors of the various individuals and groups – as signs of the time (*semieia tou chronou*) that shine conspicuously as hope for peace in the future.

Religions and Violence

All religions condemn violence. The Lord Buddha said that violence begets violence. Our Lord Jesus Christ has taught to return violence with non-violence (Mt. 5:38-48; Lk. 6: 36-38). Islam speaks of mercy, compassion and peace as qualities of the God-fearing faithful. Both Buddhism and Hinduism extol qualities such as *Metta*

(loving kindness), *Karuna* (compassion), *Muditha* (altruistic joy), *Upeka* (equanimity), and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) as signs of a liberated person on the road to Eternal Bliss.

In spite of the historical incidences of condoning or perpetrating violence, all religions have as their basic values peace and harmony, freedom and life. But like all human situations and spheres of life, religions too have two sides as it were, as agents of life and peace, and agents of war and violence. The Crusades and Jihads, for example, are sad memorials to both Christianity and Islam, as agents and perpetrators of war and destruction, however much inspired by higher motives. When religion becomes a power structure controlled by vested interests, it has repeatedly given in to violence. One must distinguish between mythical violence and existential violence. For example, practically all early religions speak of strife in the divine sphere, e.g., war between gods and demons, slaying of a god or goddess to create the world and humans, strife between light and darkness, slaying of Vritrasura. These are found in the epics such as Gilgamesh, Enuma Elish, and Manusmriti. The very concept of bloody sacrifice in Judaism and Hinduism, as the greatest and most efficacious act of worship, is inspired by violence. Though mythical violence is idolized as divine and life giving, it is in the last analysis both destructive and death dealing, and triggers existential violence.

Franceois Houtart, a French Roman Catholic theologian and sociologist, argues:

It is too easy in an apologetic concern to claim that the content of the religion is essentially non-violent and that it is human beings who, whether individually or collectively, divert them from their meaning. In fact, the roots of violence can be found right back in the religious and that is why the religions can also easily serve as vehicles for violent tendencies. Here is a brief reminder of some of their features.

The sacrificial element is central to most religions....The sacralization of violence makes it possible to distinguish the latter from lawless violence which is rejected. Clearly all this can be found in contemporary events, like the fact that the Algerian GIA cut the throats of the victims and decapitated them.

The struggle between good and evil is another source of violence very closely linked to religion. It is largely present in the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. Identification with the good has justified much violence in the history of all religions, from wars to

colonial conquests, through internal repression of heretics and the inquisition. Finally, religious expansion has also been linked with the use of violence....If we touch on the great religious systems one after another, we find the same traces. The basic texts reflect the ritualized violence of sacrifices, the use of violence for a superior good, and the need for violence in defense of the faith, along with the ethical regulation of non-legitimate violence, all aimed at ultimate peace.

The above stated reflection on the basic components of mythical violence in almost all the great religions is not intended to undermine religions as unqualified or not apt to seek and establish peace, but only to provide a warning and help the readers to realize that, like all other human institutions and situations, the religions too - however much they claim to reach and touch on the sacred - are capable of and prone to acting inhumanely and violating the same values they extol. Therefore, no religion in the world today can claim to be true or hold the truth fully and exhaustively within itself. Secondly, no religion can claim to be able to judge the inadequacy and the limitations of the other religions, especially using its own yardstick measures as criterion for truth and goodness. In this sense, there is enough evidence to point to Christianity as a religion intolerant of other world religions, and proclaiming itself as the true religion, the fulfillment of all the others, or also condemning other religions as false. Hence, all religions inclusive of Christianity/Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, which exist and direct the people of Sri Lanka, must first become mindful of their limitations and their tendency to violence and evil, despite their high values and doctrines. They should consider the other faiths as companions and comrades in the search for peace and life and accept them as equal in responsibility and resources, to reach for goals that can only be arrived at in solidarity.

All the adherents of the great world religions are principally governed and nourished by their great values that extol life and good will toward others. But at the same time, ethno religious fundamentalism overtakes such basic values in situations

that threaten one's race, religion or identity. For example, the Sinhala Buddhists are inspired by the idea of being *Buddha Putras* (children of Buddha) living at peace with the rest of creation practicing *metta*, *karuna muditha* and *upeka* (c.f. beginning of this chapter). On the other hand, as *Bhumi Putras* (children of the soil) and patriots, they think that this country naturally belongs to them and that the other cultures, races and religions can only be tolerated as long as they pose no threats to their rights and advancement. They are convinced that being *Buddha Putras* and *Bhumi Putras* are mutually inclusive and that one complements the other, a.v., to be a real Sinhalese is also to be a Buddhist and vice-versa. Hence in times of ethnic riots the Buddhist principles *ipso facto* cede to violence and destructive attitudes.

Another example may serve to prove the same attitudes even among the Christians whose basic religious values of love, peace, tolerance, and justice are drowned by their ethnic allegiance or fundamentalism. A few years ago the government imposed a new tax called the "defense levy" on all goods, services and salaries. Every one including the non tax payers has to pay this tax . Though superficially this would mean contributing to the defense and security of the nation, actually it meant contributing to the elimination or oppression of the minority through the state military action. Though the war is said to be against the Tamil militants, virtually it is against the minority Tamils. This defense levy therefore posed a problem of conscience among the Christians who thought contributing to this levy would mean contributing to the violation of human rights or even genocide.

When this problem was discussed and debated in the official session of the leaders and Bishops of the church, there was strong opposite views among them. The majority of the Catholic bishops who are Sinhalese, legitimized the levy while the minority Tamil Bishops opposed it as it was to the detriment of their people. There

were occasions when Priests and Bishops prayed for the success of the “operation elimination” conducted by the state military and blessed the missiles that would be used to wipe out entire villages in the north and east. Alison Wynne reports the remarks of a Sri Lankan Tamil Christian:

During a ceremony of the blessing of the army personnel in Colombo, a mass was celebrated with the Catholic Bishop presiding and the other heads of the churches took part. The Anglican Bishop of Colombo gave the sermon along the lines that when you are called upon to do something you must do the job well. The media picked up the theme and highlighted it. This sparked a controversy with the church people in Jaffna. When they asked the Anglican Bishop why he had preached such a sermon to soldiers, he replied that he had a pastoral ministry to perform to those soldiers who are Christian.

The above stated examples and this quotation are clear proof of religious adherence and values being drowned out or overtaken by racial allegiance in times of opting for one or the other.

In Sri Lanka, there is unfortunately the popular belief among the different religions that only they, exclusive of the others, can bring lasting peace to the country. Buddhists, for example, inspired by political patronage and the powerful Sanga (monks holding primary positions) say that the Buddhists, comprising two-thirds of the people and having the resources of the Buddha Dharma (Buddhist teachings), are the only source that can bring peace to Sri Lanka. The Hindus say that Hinduism, being the most tolerant and least violent religion, holding within itself the “Sanadhana Dharma” - the Eternal Truths - has the resources to bring peace to Sri Lanka. Muslims say that peace in the country is possible only if the Quranic Principles and the way of Sharia are made the law of the nation. Christians of each denomination say that Christianity as the religion of the three of the four races and Christ as the Prince of Peace are capable of giving “that peace which surpasses all understanding,” and the sole savior of the entire world, Christianity alone can give peace to Sri Lanka. Thus, each religion

blames or criticizes the others, either for not being able to deliver peace or for blocking its process. Hence, they are busy making and carrying out their own agendas and activities for peace rather than creating a quadrilateral, powerful forum for peace. The exclusive monoreligious or mono-denominational activities and strategies for peace, with all the good intentions attached to them, tend to end up as rival and isolated piecemeal programs rather than being a powerful symbol that could prompt Sri Lankans to choose peace.

I am of the firm opinion that instead of creating four discourses to speak loudly for peace and harmony, it would be far more effective to speak articulately of four complementary versions or strategies for peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. In other words, instead of each religion creating its own exclusive and rival peace programs, campaigns, and strategies, all religions must converge in one public and inclusive forum in amity and solidarity, and propose interreligious and complementary policies and programs for peace. Religious amity, built on mutual acceptance of the truth and legitimacy of each other as effective agents for the emancipation of dignity, despite doctrinal differences, is a sine qua non condition if they are to stand as powerful allies of a Peace Force to make their clamor for peace reverberate in all directions of Sri Lanka. Such reverberation, in my opinion, will cause the political, social, and the militant forces seriously listen to them and be inspired to look for alternative policies and programs for peace.

Religions ought to guide politics and society rather than be guided by the latter, especially in pursuing the goals of the emancipation of human dignity. Because all religions are founded on basic human values that go even deeper and more fundamental than socio-political values, they can act as pedagogues for socio-political systems in these fields. Religions are basically political in nature, i.e., “they engage and

involve themselves in the affairs of the people.” (Here the word political is used in its etymological sense from the Greek work *polis*.) It is in this sense that the “people’s theologies,” from the 60s to 80s such as “Theologie del’engagement,” Theologie Politik (political theology) of the west, and the liberation theologies of the various third world countries sprang up in the church. However, one has to distinguish the difference between being political and politicized. To be politicized is to be sucked into or co-opted into a particular political system or power, only to sanction and support its policies and programs. Whenever a religion stands on its own right, acts on its own basic values, it acts for life, human dignity and common good. The lives of the great religious founders and leaders - the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord Buddha, Lord Krishna, Prophet Mohammed, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Dr. Ambedkar, Archbishop Oscar Romero, etc. - prove beyond doubt the leadership force that religion has to guide people, the oppressed and the marginalized on the strength of its own basic values. Nearly all prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures of the Bible have demonstrated their political nature in being the mouthpiece (*Naba* in Hebrew: to speak loudly) for justice and righteousness in socio-economic, political and religious situations. Hence, religions ought to be political and not politicized.

It is when religions are politicized, bought over by a particular political system or clutched by political powers, that they become agents and perpetrators of injustice, partiality, and violence. They are then made to give “sacred sanction” in the name of God or religion to all political programs whether good or bad. They are made to bless destructive missiles, elimination operations, genocidal programs, undemocratic laws and promulgations, etc. with success by their God (s). Instead of going too far into the old centuries, if we just turn our attention to the beginning of the 20th century, there are many examples of religion being both a sanctioner, supporter or silent spectator of

death, destruction, genocide and socio-political atrocities in Germany, Italy, Japan, India, Ireland, Sri Lanka, to name only a very few. If religion stands on its own, it has the capacity to be a guiding force. If on the other hand, it trades away its birthright/basic values, then it undoubtedly becomes a *goonda* (thug) of political power. Edward Schillebeeckx, a world-renowned Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, states clearly in the following passage that any religion, to be true and relevant, foster human love and dignity:

Men and women long for a culture of justice and love. A culture of human rights is not enough though it is a minimum and the beginning of love. But people long to be accepted unconditionally for his or her own sake, whether they be black, yellow, cross-eyed, handicapped or alien. Respect, forgiveness, love and trust give people “their due.” *Sui cuique bonum!* As a law, a “right” is frosty and cold. A humane culture is ultimately a culture of love, and this cannot be laid down in laws or codified; therefore, a religious movement, a religion which is not inhumanely alienated from its own true roots, is one of the most dynamic forces in a human culture.

Despite the heavy and often irreconcilable doctrinal differences, the religions mostly converge regarding human and ethical values. It is the most common and accessible ground on which a solid dialogue can take place. Life, peace, tolerance, freedom, dignity, unity, concord, harmony, compassion, and love are not only lofty concepts in all religions but are also values cherished, fostered and urged to become realities individual and social life. This is also the reason some parts of the scriptures of all religions are more popularly read and adhered to than the others by the members of those religions and also across religions. The Gospels, the Dhammapada, the Bagavat Gita and some suras of Ku’ran are examples of such popularity across religions. Hence, these religious resources can be made to spark dialogue, interreligious and cross religious amity and dialogue to strengthen human life and dignity which are undermined by ethno religious and socio political fundamentalism. If religions intentionally or inadvertently created such fundamentalism, now they are bound to

undo it by repeatedly propagating life-fostering values that are their real roots and strength.

Fundamentalism and fanaticism cannot and should not be confused with commitment. The latter, while it demonstrates love and zeal for one's own language culture race class religion, etc, at the same time includes respect for those of others which are different from one's own. It is an inclusive attitude or an acceptance of pluralism and symbiosis of races, cultures and religions that will provide a viable answer for conflict resolution in Sri Lanka.

Endeavors Toward Symbiosis in Sri Lanka

As far back as from the 1960s, one could see traces of attempts to accept and respect the legitimacy of pluralism in the country. In other words, right after the communal conflicts began to surface, many individuals and groups of good will and vision for the future of the country, began to experiment in all sincerity an ideology of symbiosis in their own way. Though there are much more than those enlisted in this section, these will serve to prove the point that racial and religious symbiosis is the answer for peace and harmony in Sri Lanka in the future.

Rev. Fr. Paul Caspersz SJ and Satyodaya

This Jesuit priest of the Roman Catholic Church and a Sri Lankan burger was the principal of a boys' high school in Galle. After the takeover of the schools in 1961, he with some of his friends among the clergy and laity of all faiths began a wider ecumenical center called Satyodaya (dawn of truth). Two great visionary Bishops called Rt. Rev. Leo Nanayakkara OSB of the RC Church and Rt. Rev. Laxshman Wickramasinghe of the Anglican Church supported him to begin this endeavor.

Though their main goal was to emancipate the socio political life situations of the plantation workers, the very composition of the catalist group, the administration, and lifestyle and atmosphere of the institution is an example of symbiosis.

From (religious) worship to workshops, from administrative policy decisions to participation in the programs are all done by a body of members who are from the four religions and the four races. Though Fr. Caspersz is the king pin of this institution, he enjoys no veto or last word power. Though started by RC leaders, the Church does not impose its weight in this center. The trustees are drawn from all faiths and cultures. Their programs include education, vocational skills, organization of community cooperatives, promotion of literacy and education among children and adults, conscientization of social and political rights, organization of personal and family life, representation of plantation people's problems to the relevant authorities. No one religion is extolled as normative and exemplary over the others but all as adequate and legitimate in its own way to emancipate its adherents if lived in accordance with its principles and doctrines. Great pain is taken constantly to prove that religious, racial and linguistic differences are not obstacles but the very nature and conditions for symbiosis. The Satyodaya center is situated in Kandy on a hill overlooking the tooth relic temple and its programs extend to the entire hill country of Sri Lanka where the plantation community consisting of Indian Tamils and Sinhalese are found. Though Satyodaya has not published any books about its work among the people, it is an active sign of the viability of peace and harmony through symbiosis.

Rev. Fr. Tissa Balasuriya OMI and the Center for Society and Religion

Fr. Tissa, an oblate priest who was at one time rector of the Aquinas University College, Colombo, began this center on a very small scale in a comparatively poor

circle of the city of Colombo in the 1960s. He acknowledges the inspiration of the above said two bishops and Rev. Fr. Peter Pillair OMI, a reputed sociologist and social justice propagandist, to start this center. The heavy and constant accent of this center is conscientization in terms of the socio political realities, publications of the same through books and periodicals, and engagement in emancipation programs on socio political and religious fields. Though heavily Christian in composition, and mostly Catholic, emphasis is laid on significant representation such as other religions, gender, and races. Their studies, reflections and publications are very theological and ecumenical. They conduct many workshops to raise consciences, both centrally and locally, and have engaged very actively in the attempts to resolve ethnic conflicts, both through the publications and programs. The main publication of the Center for Society and Religion is a quarterly magazine called *Logos* which takes up relevant current issues. Issues publicized include: Truth Peace Justice Freedom and Love (19-1), Justice and Religion on Education (21-2), Sri Lanka's Ethnic Problem (23-3), Conflicts of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka -85 (24-2), The Emerging Peace Process and the Ethnic Question (25-3). In addition to *Logos*, they also collaborate with two other periodicals called *Quest* and *Voices* which are Asian theological publications.

The Center for Society has now grown into a very powerful organization. Its theological perspective is justice and peace-oriented liberation. It was quite vociferous in its condemnation of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots and the inhuman violence against the powerless minority, through its publications. (I have quoted some of them in this work.) It was engaged in the formation of the various local citizens' Committee for national harmony (cited in the 2nd chapter of this work) and in the participation of rallies, demonstrations and negotiations for peace and amity among the different races and religions.

It was most unfortunate that Rev. Fr. Tissa Balasuriya was excommunicated by the RC headquarters in 1997 for his progressive and relevant yet controversial ideas on Mariology published in the book "Mary and human liberation." Though the whole process was unworthy of a holy institution, and unjustifiable by any standard of the Christian principles of love and tolerance, he was reinstated in 1998 as a consequence of heavy pressure of the solidarity of international groups both Catholic and Christian. The Center for Society and Religion (CSR) yet stands tall as a Christian yet interreligious and inter racial endeavor where racial and religious differences can be seen and experienced conspicuously while they strengthen each other to promote peace and justice through symbiosis.

I was associated with both the Satyodhaya and CSR as a friend and participant. I was involved in some of the plantation programs of Fr. Caspersz and the Citizens Committee and solidarity with Fr. Tissa in protest of his excommunication. As a member of the Sri Lanka Association for Theology (SLAT) and Ecumenical Association of third The affinity and difference of the species, World Theologians (EATWOT), I was involved in sending protest petitions to Rome. When I return to my country to continue my ministry in my diocese, both Satyodaya and CSR will be my companions and supporters in the endeavor for symbiosis.

Rev. Fr. Michael Rodrigo OMI (+ 1987) and Subhaseth Gedare

Rev. Fr. Michael Rodrigo, popularly known as Fr. Mike, was a professor of Philosophy, Buddhism, and Liturgy in the National Seminary. He obtained two doctorates: one in theology and one in Buddhism. After about two decades as a theological educator, he moved to a remote village called Buttala in south Sri Lanka, built an ashram in "wattle and daub" style - the house of the rural poor - and lived

there among the Buddhist folks, and agricultural peasants. He and some of his companions consisting of a couple of religious sisters, seminarians and lay persons were engaged in what is known as “the apostolate of presence.” They were involved in educating the rural poor of the causes of their low state of life. For example, the vegetables, fruit and milk they produced were bought by middlemen (politically connected) for the lowest possibly price and sold at an exorbitant profit.

The local squatters occupying untitled government wasteland who cultivated seasonal crops such as maize, manioc (yams), pumpkins, gourds, and vegetables or rice on a very limited scale, were evicted and hundreds of hectares of that land was given to an international sugar company under a local name Pelwatte Sugar Company. This too was done with the direct approval of the then current government of the United National Party. Fr. Mike taught the people to organize their work, have cooperative societies, and sell their produce directly to the gross and retail dealers, by-passing the middlemen, so that they can earn more.

He also protested the illegitimacy of robbing the land from the poor and leasing it to multinational corporations, and sent petitions to the local and national political authorities. He reflected theologically in a spirit of interreligious dialogue, with the poor and the peasants on justice, human dignity and basic human values. The people loved him and listened to his wisdom and followed his advice. They by-passed the middlemen, organized cooperatives and credit unions to sell their products and obtain easy payment loans.

Fr. Mike was warned and intimidated by the exploiters to keep away from their affairs. He received threats even from high political circles. Even some church leaders and his colleagues warned him and advised him not to engage in such “activities that are not for the church to be involved.” But he was convinced that salvation is first and

foremost liberation here and now. (He was my guru of philosophy in the seminary. He used to say “Christ cannot be proclaimed as the ‘light’ in a village that has no electricity and that we must **have** bread before we break bread.”) On the 9th of November 1987 as he pronounced the benediction after mass in his ashram, he was shot dead by an “unidentified gunman,” his brain and blood splashed on the faces of his little community and the door post. The murder was done with the approval of the political authorities. The poverty of the presence and participation of his own diocese but the wailing and mourning of the rural Buddhist clergy, men and women and they taking the objects stained with his blood as relics spoke eloquently, who really understood and accepted Fr. Mike.

Due to the lack of interest of the official Church, Fr. Mike’s Subhaseth Gedhara now runs in a very low key. But his example, his life, values and martyrdom are signs of the symbiosis of similar yet different convictions strengthening one another. It was his conviction that theological degrees and theses are irrelevant if they oscillate only in mid-air and cannot descend to the ground (the dust) where real people are. I too am convinced of the same and it has been my contention and conviction in my ministry in the past and it shall be in the future too.

Fr. P. Mariyanayagam SJ and “Jesus Lives” Ashram

After the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, an energetic and progressive Jesuit priest Rev. Fr. Mariyanayagam who was deeply moved by the atrocities done to the Tamils in the Trincomalge, China Bay area of the eastern province began an ashram in Bathicaloa to give haven to the displaced families and children of the Tamil communities - both Christian and Hindu. He bought up about 15 hectares of shrub land in the southern district of Batticaloa, built huts for them and began vegetable farming and off shore

fishing for their livelihood. The children went to the nearby school while the young men and women and the adults were engaged in growing food crops such as low country vegetables, potatoes, onions, chilis, bananas, cajus, and pineapples and as the ashram was in the eastern coast, he leased trawlers and fishing boats to give employment to those who were fishermen.

He himself lived among them in a hut similar to those of the displaced. No religious duties were imposed on them, they could go to the temples and the churches in the vicinity (4 Hindu temples, 2 Roman Catholic Churches, 1 Methodist and 1 Anglican Church within a 5-mile distance). There were common meditations and prayers not leaning on any particular faith, and community gatherings to discuss and evaluate issues such as methods of cultivation, fishing, pest control, manure and fertilizers, marketing the products, cooperative loans, facilities, etc. and community living.

Though the district Jesuit community lived just 10 miles away, he was not seen there very often except on their mandatory community days and on special occasions. There were a few reasons for his aloofness from the "Society." Fr. Mariyanayagam was considered by most of his colleagues and by the Roman Catholic diocese of the area as an extremist and controversialist. He was branded as not living his religion and his vows. His conviction that the entire creation is the "Church of God" and the earth as the altar and tilling it and growing food to feed the hungry as "a form of Eucharist," and living in harmony with and close to nature as spirituality (all these which today extolled as pluralism, eco-spirituality, etc.) were not condoned by his superiors or colleagues as authentic Christian ways. He did not wear the cassock or the liturgical robes, but wore the poor people's clothes - a veshti, a vest and a shawl (dress typical of poor Tamils in Sri Lanka and India).

He was very popular among the Hindus and Muslims of the district. His popularity among the Muslims was proved during the Muslim-Tamil riots in 1986. His ashram was untouched and he was given free and safe passage to and fro while another Catholic priest was assaulted and man-handled by them. The produce was sold en bulk to Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist traders to fetch the best price. Big companies which supplied weedicides, manure, fertilizers, fishing gear, etc trusted his organization and would give him the necessary credits. The profits and earnings were distributed equally among the workers irrespective of gender and grade. The individual families were encouraged to live a simple life and were compelled to save money in the nearby banks.

In his ashram he began a group of religious women consisting of young girls whose spiritual motto was similar to other RC religious orders for women but in keeping with the ashram atmosphere rather than a traditional spirit. They too were living in similar cadjan thatched huts with no cement floor, but gathered with him to pray, meditate and work.

This creative apostolate of presence, and a new form of symbiotic spirituality which was a potent paradigm for inter communal and religious harmony, suffered an unforeseen fatal blow with the untimely and sudden death of Fr. Mariyanayagam in 1993. In an attempt to save one of the children of the ashram from drowning, he himself was caught into the whirlpool and was drowned in the sea. His life, ministry and death were undoubtedly a convinced imitation of Christ. He was keenly convinced of the teachings of the reign of God as in the sermons of the mount and plain, the reality of the agricultural and marine parables, compassion for the oppressed and down trodden, the qualities of a good shepherd and finally his death, the ultimate sacrifice. Even after his death, both the RC diocese and the "Society" (SJ) were not prepared to

take up the responsibility of continuing his ashram. One reason put forward was the legal complications of the ownership of the land and properties of the ashram. It still continues on a very low scale, but unfortunately without sufficient leadership.

I was associated with Fr. Mariyanayagam as a priest and as a theological educator. He was my contemporary in the ministry even before he began the ashram. The anxiety about the callousness of the institutional church toward creative ministries and the cause of the emancipation of the poor (in spite of many institutions for the “corporal works of mercy” and charity) the wide distance between classroom theology and grassroots ministry, were some of the topics of our discussions even in the early days of our ministry. In the name “Jesus Lives” as it was told to me by Fr. Mariyanayagam, the accent is on the *lives*, to show that the convictions and the attitudes of the Lord are those that really matter. Here I am reminded of the concept that one should not look at, but look through Jesus. As an educator in the Theological College of Lanka, I took groups of students for two weeks at a time to stay at the Jesus Lives Ashram. The students, from the main line Protestant churches, were amazed and inspired by the “religionless” yet spiritual and Christian atmosphere and spirituality of the place. Eating simple food, sleeping on a mat on the sand, having no chairs, beds, cupboards, electricity and other comforts made them see and experience the ‘real cost of discipleship’ of Dietrich Bonhoeffer learned in their theological lessons.

The ashram is now in the war zone. It is dangerous for anyone to try out new things and venture into controversial ideas. Every attempt of the emancipation and well being of the Tamils is most often misunderstood to be antipatriotic, promilitant and communal-minded. On the other hand, if one tries to balance it by having good relations with the majority and the armed forces; it will be misunderstood by the Tamil

militants as betraying the Tamil cause. Hence, the situation is very precarious. One can only hope that before this ashram crumbles, God will raise persons to revive this most meaningful ministry.

Sevak Subramanyam Selvaratnam and the Protestant Churches' Christian Ashram Movement

In 1940, a priest by the name of Subramanyam Selvaratnam who called himself Sevak (servant) wished to be addressed as Periyannan (elder brother) began the Christu Seva Ashram (Ashram of the Service of Christ). As in the tradition of the church of South India, he was addressed as Elder Brother and as founder he was considered the Big Elder Brother and his successor was called Sinnannan (Small Elder Brother). This was a joint venture of the Anglican, CSI and Methodist Churches of Sri Lanka to interculturalize and incarnate Christianity on the Tamil/Hindu soil of the country. During the time of his successor Sinnannan (Sevak Isaac and Yesusahayam), another ashram was opened in the northern district of Batticaloa in a village called Kiran. The ashram community resembled somewhat the Ramakrishna mission in worship and lifestyle. Ramakrishna movement is a Hindu hybrid movement of interreligious amity and dialogue, eclectic in its ideology, which began a century ago by the Hindu Swami Ramakrishna Paramahamsar and popularized by his disciple the world famous Swami Vivekanandha, in the Bengal district of India. Though the Christu Seva Ashram was Christian in its outlook, ideology and conviction, its association and amity with the local Hindus is noteworthy. In the midst of the Christian traditional view of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, the western modes of Christian worship and lifestyle, Christu Seva Ashram followed the examples of the great missionaries of Inculturation of the 17th and 18th centuries: Robert DeNobili, Guiseppe Beschi, Pope, Percival and Sadhu Sundersingh to show the beauty and

depth of Christianity when expressed in Tamil culture, idiom and categories.

Though some may criticize that they did not give up the normative position of Christ as the only universal savior, their love and conviction of the efficacy of Hindu mysticism and spirituality and liturgy, to make those of Christianity more relevant and significant, needs to be admired and followed. Both Hindus and Christians of the north and east of Sri Lanka were taken up by the authenticity and sanctity of their endeavor and accepted them. The ashram liturgies and Bible studies attracted much attention in both places. In fact, many of their members of the congregation who were originally Methodist and Anglicans, now call themselves members of the CSA church.

Neither ashram was seen as a threat or rival to Hindus or their temples and shrines. Though both of them are in the war zone, the militants do not disturb them. In times of trouble and riots, like all churches and temples, the Ashram is a haven to the refugees. The savaks share their simple meals and facilities with them. Their field of service is only at the grassroots level. As Jesus was at home with the poor, the peasants and the oppressed, and they were at home with him, the Sevaks of Christu Seva Ashram and the other Christians and Hindus relate similarly to each other even today. The third leader, Sam Annan, died in 1996. He was a source of great strength for me at the shattering death of my daughter. Though the war has also affected the progress of the ashrams, they still continue in low key to serve the people in giving consolation and strength both psychologically and spiritually. Their apostolate of presence among the powerless is a strong reminder of the good shepherd who does not leave the flock in danger.

Other Cross Cultural Peace and Amity Research and Activity Programs

Over and above the exploratory endeavors of cultural and religious symbiosis, there are also some significant attempts to study, research and promote cross cultural

dialogue and amity. They are noted for their depth of study, research and their publications. The following are examples of the three categories: (1) Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue (EISD) a project of the National Christian Council of Protestant Churches; (2) “Thulana,” (which means balance) a center created and maintained by a world famous Sri Lankan Catholic Theologian Rev. Fr. Aloysius Peiris SJ; (3) Marga Institute, a non-governmental organ of interracial, religious organization of the intelligentsia of the country; (4) The Sarvodaya Shramadana, a Sri Lankan version of the Gandhian movement, founded and headed by a Nobel prize winner A.T. Ariyaratue.

Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue (EISD)

This institute was inaugurated by a Methodist missionary, Rev. Basil Jackson, a founding father of the Theological College of Lanka and a visionary of Church Unity, inculturation and interreligious dialogue, as an endeavor of the Methodist church. Rev. B. Jackson, after a few years, handed over the leadership to Rev. Lyn de Silva of the same church who from his very early days of ministry was convinced of Ecumenism as the answer for the future of Christianity in Sri Lanka as a united church and wider ecumenism, i.e. interreligious dialogue and amity as the model for peace and harmony in Sri Lankan society. As a minister and theologian of the Methodist conference, he promoted dialogue among the religions especially (there were no ethnic crisis at that time) and wrote books on religious dialogue and pluralism in Sinhala language to popularize them among the people. This became an endeavor of the unifying organization The National Christian Council consisting of the four main line Protestant churches, Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, and Presbyterian Churches, and the Jaffna diocese of the Church of South India. Based in Colombo, this center continues to

promote study sessions, live-in seminars and publications on inter racial and religious dialogue and amity. Their main publication is a periodical called “Dialogue.” This center now functions as a protestant Christian endeavor to promote the idea of symbiosis in the country.

Rev. Fr. Aloysius Pieris SJ and Thulana (Balance)

Rev. Fr. Aloysius Peiris SJ a graduate of the Pontificia Universitas Gregorianum in Rome and a world renowned theologian, began this study and research center in Kelaniya, a historic Buddhist pilgrimage city in the peripheral district of Colombo, in the 1960s. An expert in Buddhism, and the king pin of this center, but he also has some priests, nuns and students to help him in his study and research programs and maintenance of the center. His publications such as Love meets Wisdom, and Asian Theology of Liberation are world famous theological books. He is also one of the international directors of the renowned theological Journal Concilium. Both his seminars and publications are mostly geared to international and theological audiences. All the same, his center focuses on local problems and situations of social justice such as life and problems of the workers of Free Trade Zone (FTZ), religious riots, and life in the slums. He is engaged in dialogue with the responsible leaders of the Buddhist Sanga. One of his daring attempts was his public challenge to the present pope, that he should apologize to the Buddhists for his statement on the inadequacy of Buddhism to save humankind, made shortly before his visit to Sri Lanka in 1998. Thulana is engaged in some social service projects such as pre-school for the children of the neighborhood and community development to assert apostolate of presence in the vicinity.

Marga Institute

The word Marga in Sanskrit and Pali related languages means “the way.” This is not a religious organization, but one that is related to study and research of social and national issues and comes to the aid of both government and private organizations if it is approached by them for such help. This institute belongs to a category called non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Its publications portray the various studies under taken by its resource persons who are drawn from various sectors such as universities, politics, socio cultural leadership, and uses their knowledge and expertise to causes that promotes common good. Its studies and research are unbiased and reliable and is trusted by all. Though Marga uses religious resource persons, it does not lean toward any particular religion and in the same manner its team is also composed of all the 4 races and cultures and does not lean toward any one of them. At the present moment, the institute is engaged in conducting studies and research with the various experts and resource persons of the different sectors of national life, on the ethnic conflict to publish a 2-volume book as its contribution to critically diagnose the national crisis without bias and to sensitize the people and the socio political leaders so that a feasible solution can be found. I participated in the seminar workshop on the proposed publication of their study and research held in June 2000, consisting of about 50 members including professors, politicians, ambassadors, military officers, and religious leaders. I have also included in this work some of its findings and views. Though this institute is not grassroots based, its research and rationalization of the political crisis is highly conducive for serious consideration by those in levels of power and authority.

A.T. Ariyaratna and the Sarvodaya Shramadama

This is also an NGO built on Buddhist principles to foster well being, dignity and peace of all the members of the society. Its founder AT Ariyaratna, a former lawyer and civil servant, began this movement in the late 1950s inspired by Gandhian concepts. The word Sarvodaya as introduced by Mahatma Gandhi means the “rising up of all beings.” Shramadana means “spending one’s energy for the good of others.” From these two words the underlying ideology behind the movement can be understood as the community working together for common good. This movement has spread its programs such as preschools, volunteer social work/community work, conscience-raising seminars, community organization schemes etc. in 10,000 villages of the country, to disseminate attitudes of good will and acceptance of all races, cultures and religions. The Sarvodaya center is based in Ratmalana, a town in the southern periphery of Colombo and is respected by the government and various social and religious sectors of the island. Its idea of the pre-school project is the conviction that attitudes of Peace, amity, tolerance and mutual respect must be embedded into the children’s minds before they get into the schools and before reaching the age of reason. It not only conducts programs but also organizes on-going committees composed of the various sections of the society inclusive of children, youth, adults and leaders of both genders coordinated by volunteer officers. Once the program is introduced in the town or village it then continues and grows in time. Ariyaratne introduces his project thus:

I must reiterate that the Sarvodaya philosophy is principally motivated by the teaching of the Buddha. It is supplemented by the lessons learned by the nonviolent struggles of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others. Yet Sarvodaya is not a movement of Buddhism exclusively. It is a movement for all religious groups and also for all those who have no particular religion. We in Sarvodaya believe that religions should assist human beings and human groups to overcome internal defilement such as greed, ill will, and egotism, and promote internal spirituality so that beneficence, sharing, morality, and enlightenment will evolve within them. The ultimate objective should be building a critical mass of spiritual consciousness on this planet, which

is the surest way to live in a culture of peace.

In this chapter we have seen that also the religions have contributed in one way or another in the past for the existential crisis in the country. This has happened both through a failure to gear the understanding of their basic resources for the emancipation of human dignity, and their tendency to be politicized by the vested interests of the principalities and powers. At the same time, we have also seen the various daring endeavors of individuals and groups with vision and commitment, for peace and pluralism and the dignity of all races and religions. In the next chapter, therefore, I shall enlist my humble effects so far in the process of peace among the different races and religions, and outline a theology of symbiosis emerging from all these praxis and endeavors which give glimpses of hope for a peaceful future.

Chapter Five: An Emerging Theology of Symbiosis for Peace through Ministry in Sri Lanka

We have traced the historical, political, sociological and religious contributions, both to the escalation of communal violence and the socio-political crisis in the country. We have also had a close look into the various endeavors undertaken by people of good will and vision of all spheres to establish peace or at least to seek a possibility for peace. Though some of these efforts have met with either ephemeral success or failure, all of them provide us with some lesson and strength to go forward in pursuit of peace.

Hence, in this final chapter, it will be my endeavor to explain my attempts at different times and places, inspired by my convictions and background as a Sri Lankan

Tamil Christian minister. It is in this role that I have tried to pursue and seek peace and propose what I call an emerging theology of symbiosis for peace in Sri Lanka. It is an emerging theology in the sense that it comes out of the praxis experience and reflection rather than an already existent theology applied to the given situations. I shall also underscore that the four religions found in my country have the necessary resources to foster the way of symbiosis for peace and that this is their hour to legitimize *their raison d'entre* as emancipators of human life and dignity.

Symbiosis: A Paradigm for Peace

As I have stated in the introduction of the thesis, the symbiosis of trees such as the Bo tree, the Banyan tree and the palmyrah tree is a potent Botanical symbol which Sri Lankan labor provides for us to emulate the Sri Lankan way of society and life. This symbiosis, if considered deeply, contains rich and relevant lessons for us to learn. The Bo and Banyan both belong to a species known botanically as ficus, and they represent Buddhism and Hinduism respectively. There is therefore an affinity and difference between the two. The Palmyrah Palm traditionally represents the Tamils and grows copiously in the northeastern part of the country. Their intertwined and inseparable existence is an extraordinary symbol of strength in unity of the diversities.

These symbiotic trees share the same soil, manure, sun and water and though they are inseparably attached to one another, they are not parasites. As they are also firmly rooted in the ground, they receive their sustenance from mother earth according to their nature and need. Hence there is no exploitation of the rights of the other. Their embrace and the attachment to one another provide reinforcement and strength to endure even against devastating storms. An important lesson that can be learned in this symbiosis, is the wonder of maintaining the individual identities without fusing into one

another. All the three trees grow in their own way, put forth their foliage, flowers and fruits, in the same way that they would if they grew alone. They are not suffocated by the other, but allowed to be what they are.

I firmly believe that God in creation has provided this example and symbol of symbiosis in the nature of the nation, for humanity to emulate. Mother Lanka has the riches and resources to bring up her children of different races and religions in unity and harmony in their natural and legitimate diversity. Hence, it is important to gaze at this wonder of nature to be conscientized and convinced of pluriformous symbiosis as the most natural and even cultural way of society and life in Sri Lanka.

It is from this fact of botanical symbiosis that I have received the inspiration for a theology of symbiosis as the conducive and feasible ideology and methodology for peace and harmony in my motherland, torn apart by division and strife. Though I have formulated my conviction as a theology of symbiosis, I can see that many individuals and groups of good will, inspired by the same passion for peace and harmony, have begun to experiment in their own legitimate ways, the possibility and feasibility of unity in diversity - symbiosis. The following section, therefore, will highlight the various endeavors for symbiosis being undertaken currently.

I am certain that great results of harmony and love among people of different religions would arise if in Sri Lanka, what I may call “Inter Scriptural” or “parallel-scriptural” studies and discussions on common subjects or themes such as life, peace, unity, human dignity, altruistic love, compassion, respect for plurality and legitimacy of the other, become popular. As in the common forum where all four religions proclaim such values as understood and held by their religions, these parallel-scriptural studies can be held in churches, Temples, Mosques, schools and community halls, guided by the different religious teachers. They can be made to be seen and echoed by

transmitting them over the radio and television networks. Newspapers, religious bulletins, and affordable books can also cause surprising results of inter racial and religious amity. If religious texts and school textbooks have been used to inject religio-racial fundamentalism, I think they must be now made use to dismantle them and induce a spirit of magnanimity. Both in Tamil and Sinhala language, brotherhood/sisterhood is characterized as “Sahodharatvam” which etymologically means “of one womb.” This is a lofty and powerful concept and image which I am not aware of in any other non-Sanskrit related language. This imagery can be developed and articulated repeatedly in the parallel-scriptural peace studies.

My Endeavors through Ministry in Pursuit of Peace among the Races and Religions

As chaplain of a Christian secondary school consisting of 3000 boys and over 500 staff of all four religions, I was able to formulate and popularize such studies, sermons, prayers and liturgies in that school (Trinity College, a CMS school) for five years. Scripture passages of the different religions speaking of the same themes, similar images and symbols of different religions on a common concept, prayers from the scriptures were carefully chosen by me to forge interreligious liturgy on common occasions such as weekly staff prayers and students’ religious assemblies. The culmination of this interreligious worship were the Services held at the end of every term (valedictory -commencement) where readings from the Bible, Ku’ran, Upanishads, and Dhammapada were read from the same lectern and the graduating students were given lighted candles and blessed by their teachers by raising their right hand and pronouncing the valedictory blessing with the priest. These services took place in the Chapel of the college. Though some Christians of fundamentalist

tendencies objected to this in the beginning and discouraged the reading of the “other scriptures” in the chapel, the great majority of the staff and students were positively inspired by it.

My future ministry will be definitely characterized by the popularization of such “parallel-scriptural peace studies” in the country and the diocese. As teacher of “Major Religious traditions of Sri Lanka” in the theological College and Bible College in my country, I have always encouraged a sincere dialogue in search of the inexhaustible and unfathomable truths which surpass all religious teachings and revelations, for the purpose of religious dialogue. I believe that, as in the words of Bp. Stephen Niels, religious dialogue must not score on the weak points of the others, or establish superiority of one’s own faith or “win souls” by proving the rationality of one’s faith. God has been active in his/her/its creation everywhere, in many ways, in many times and through many persons. Dialogue therefore is to seek, know and appreciate the universal love and grace of the absolute, rightfully appropriated, by all religions. The different names, forms and concepts of the absolute is a valid proof that he/she/it emanates different brilliance as the cause of difference in creation (MAYIN), as Hinduism teaches, it is both Saguna and Nirguna - both full of qualities and has no quality. As Christians, we are called to bear the light of God’s love and mercy and its saving presence in Jesus Christ. But in taking that light, we ought to remember that we are not going into a world of darkness but into a world that is already “enlightened” by different “luminaries” of faiths. Dialogue and witness of the Christians therefore is both to proclaim and to be proclaimed of God’s ever-present and different salvific endeavors. As I have earlier mentioned, the Pauline text of God who has spoken to us in many ways at different times, at last has spoken to us through His Son Jesus Christ, speaks of innumerable saving acts through many sages and saints and confirms that

lately (not exclusively or climactically) in Christ. This statement also confirms God's continuous revelation and communication or self-exteriorization with humanity. It is the misunderstanding of any person of God or prophet of God as absolutely normative and final, that has caused both in Christianity and Islam that attitude of insulation and exclusivity which make dialogue to come to an abrupt end somewhere in the process.

As a theological educator and also student of the major religions, in the last two decades, I have engaged in interreligious dialogue at different levels. Our inter-religious fellowship include priests, Buddhist monks, Muslim moulavis, Brahmins and educated laity from the same religions. We have sat together to dialogue on common religious topics and as mediators of intercommunal peace and amity in times of communal eruptions. From 1985-1990, I was involved as chairperson of the relief and rehabilitation committee and vice president of the Citizen's Committee for national harmony in the eastern provincial districts, to carry out relief and rehabilitation of the victims of communal violence. Through funds received from OXFAM (England), I was responsible for the construction of 250 low-cost houses, distribution of relief goods in times of emergencies and shortage of food, and providing small scale self-employment projects for those who were unable to get jobs. I did this through the structural facilities of the YMCA of Kalmunai which had multi-ethnic and multi-religious membership.

As vice president of the Citizen's Committee for national harmony, I was also engaged in representing matters of violence and grievance in the socio-political fields to the government authorities. In those days (1985-90), the citizen's committee was the only body that was respected and approved to meet government and military authorities. Even the Tamil militants respected this set up because of its responsible composition.

In those days it was easy to dialogue with Tamil militants. Though they were armed and were conducting violent operations of eliminating informers and collaborators to the forces and military personnel, sometimes they would listen though they might not comply. They would respect the priests and citizens of good will. But that stage ended in 1990. As I mentioned earlier, now they are an international and world famous military organization and do not entertain such cottage talks and discussions as in the 1980s.

As citizen's committee we met in public places at regular intervals. It was composed of responsible and leading citizens of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Many centers were created where the citizens could lodge their reports and problems and they were looked into promptly. Two great services that we could do through this structure were: 1) report cases of human rights violations by political, military or militant personnel, and get remedy meted out to the victim; 2) speak to the military coordinating officer of the area, on behalf of innocent youth detained under suspicion of subversive activities, and urge release of them after quick inquiries. At that time it was dangerous, even fatal, for innocent youths to be detained in military detention camps. Inhuman tortures, mutilations and murders either because of extreme tortures, beatings and starvation or even as retaliation for soldiers murdered by militants occurred daily in the detention camps. Being close to the roadside, one could intermittently hear the pathetic and heart-rending cries, screams, and groans of the pitiable victims.

Mothers and fathers whose sons were taken away on suspicion, or young wives whose husbands were arrested in suspicion, would flock to the reporting centers of Citizen Committee to plead with us to get their loved ones back. It was pitiful to see the women wail and cry along the road and going from one camp to another looking

for their “missing loved ones.” It was dangerous for men to get closer to the police or soldiers, they would be beaten, shot or arrested. Young girls would undoubtedly be ill treated or molested by them. Only middle-aged or old women would dare to go in search of their sons and grandsons. At that time it was a common conclusion that if a person arrested in suspicion were not freed within 24 hours or before he/she is taken into the camp, there was all the chance of him/her losing limbs or life. Hence, this fear and anxiety started the hideous practice of heavily bribing military/police personnel to either stop from arresting or freeing those who have been arrested. There were also those heartless go-betweens or henchmen who took those bribes on fat commissions to arrange release.

The members of the Citizens Committee maintained a good relationship with the military officers and would plead for reasonable treatment of the detainees and hold quick inquiries and if found innocent of subversive or Terrorist connections, they would be released immediately. We also requested to arrange periodic family visits for the detainees. Though it was very risky for us powerless civilians to go into an area dominated by guns and grenades, not knowing whether we would return alive, it was definitely an experience of deep satisfaction as a Christian and a priest to work to save lives and to wipe the tears of those in sorrow. Twice I escaped imprisonment, once on suspicion of being pro-terrorist and again for reporting mass murder of innocent civilians by the armed special task force.

This is undoubtedly inspired by the ineffable and inexhaustible personality of the life and teachings of Christ Jesus the Lord himself. His mercy, his compassion to the widows and mothers, and those who suffer exploitation and oppression by others, his command to make peace and to lay down life for others made me feel called to enlist my humble participation in His salvific ministry. Many others religious people and

Christians urged by similar convictions gave their share of service to the people. There was no pay attached to this type of service. Sometimes we were misunderstood if we failed in our mission, or were accused of hard-heartedness or lethargy if we could not produce the results soon. Though praised and blessed by those who were able to get good results through our mediation, the risk was great and sometimes the accusations were unbearable. But I thought that that was natural. Those in grave problems, stress, anxiety and sorrow are not in a position to always think rationally and impartially. The pain and frustration their misunderstanding caused in us is nothing or negligible compared to the fire burning within and consuming them.

When the mothers, wives, and sisters were publicly crying on the roads and near the outer gates of the detention camps, I was not only moved to pity but began to reflect theologically. The widow of Naim, the widow of Sarephtah, the weeping women of Jerusalem, Mary the mother at the foot of the cross all came alive for me as living events. It is in this context and time of terror, I composed the following song during a bus journey about the suffering and danger faced daily by Sri Lankans:

How Can I Sing to Thee, Oh Lord?
(a modern Psalm from Sri Lanka)

In a foreign land engulfed by sorrow oppression and slavery, the biblical poet of psalm 137 found it difficult to sing songs of praise. Similarly, when I look around me and see what is going on in my country, the groans and cries I hear, the blood and fire that I see, the anger and bitterness I perceive; even though I do wish to sing a song of praise, "my tongue clings to my palate."

My soul oh God wishes to praise thee
But when I look around and the suffering see
It loses all the zealous fervor
To sing to thee oh my Creator

Children have become helpless orphans
Parents have lost their teenage sons
Wives have lost their handsome husbands
They've been killed by soldiers and militants.

Blood flows around me like spiteful rivers
Cries of pain jar right into my ears
Dead human bodies stink on the way side
People watch them and go on the other side.

The rich here sit on banquets every day
The poor on the other hand eat only once a day.
The price of food is as high as the mountain
For the poor even bread is like the fruit forbidden.

Thugs march out in vociferous demonstrations
The citizens hide inside houses with trepidation
Frauds have taken the reins of the nation
The just person is but a matter of derision.
Children suffer today without proper education
Abels die in plenty by Cains' assassinations
A silky sweet flower lies crushed on the track
The hearts of her parents and brothers into pieces crack

The good and the righteous suffer in life
while evil doers thrive like hive
Even the dog howls at the righteous with indignation
And the heavens too hail the mighty with celebration

Can I fiddle and strum when my house burns to consumption or
Rhyme and dance when my nation plunges into deterioration
When will poor and oppressed have favorable life situation,
Then will to thee a hymn of praise ring loud in unison.

Samagama Samajam or Symbiotic Society

My ministry in the future, therefore, would continue along the lines of inter-communal peace negotiation. My diocese, which occupies nearly one-third of the country (vide map) and is composed of a good blend of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian religions; Sinhala, Tamil (Indian) and Muslim communities, is a strategic stage for interreligious and ethnic amity and dialogue. While we foster the characteristic, life generating and polychromatic peculiarities of the different races and religions, I believe that a reality of "symbiosis" is what is needed for Sri Lanka and her future.

This is an age in which forming names for realities and ideologies is very

characteristic, especially in the rational circles. Such names or labels identify and differentiate one from the other and also portray the slants and tendencies of such realities or ideologies. Words such as right wing, left wing, liberal, conservative, fundamentalist, feminist are relevant examples of names and labels which show both the content and trend of the systems and their subscribers. Hence I shall try my utmost to define and describe the terms that I intend to use in this section to elucidate my stance and conviction on the well-being of my country.

Historians, sociologists, political scientists and theologians of all religions have repeatedly stated in the past five decades of the “co-existence” of different races, cultures and religions in Sri Lanka for centuries and millennia. They use familial symbols and words such as mother, children, brothers, sisters, to show the relationship among different races and cultures. Many of the Christian theologians say that all of them are children of the one God. Sri Lanka is the mother (Matha) of all her inhabitants. In fact, the national anthem begins with the words *Sri Lanka Matha apa Sri Lanka, namo namo namo matha!* Oh, mother Sri Lanka, our Sri Lanka, hail hail hail oh mother! In all political and religious platforms of the majority, powerful proclamations of this maternal - filial - brotherhood can be heard always both in times of normalcy and strife. But what is ironical is that these powerful images and convictions do not eschew genocidal or fratricidal action during racial and communal uprisings. The “other” is then seen as enemy and alien rather than member of the same household or born of the “same womb” - Sahodhara. The story of Cain and Abel (Gn. 4:8-9) illuminates this point. It is not only those of the Sinhala majority who are blameworthy of this inconsistency, even those of the Tamil and Muslim communities are counterparts of the same crime. Religious resources such as rituals and scriptures too are sought to enhance and strengthen violence in such situations.

Thus the above said familial symbols and peaceful co-existence of a plurality are more deceptive slogans than everyday reality in Sri Lanka. Though one might legitimize the fight among brothers as every day reality and therefore consider it unavoidable in socio-political and pluralistic systems, it is both illogical and fatal and definitely not in tune with justice and freedom which are the basic purposes of life on earth and in society. Therefore, I believe that in Sri Lanka sincere and serious considerations must be made together by all racial and religious systems to re-think these symbols, images and quasi-divine concepts; take away or drop irrelevant concepts, and forge new and life-generating values, and envision the reality and power of pluralism for the well being of all the children of Mother Lanka. Real peace, harmony, and dignity of all races and religions in Sri Lanka is an impossibility if we do not first dare to recast and rethink our myths and symbols and values. They should be put to that acid-test or as the traditional words go, the “fire test” to see, as Mathathma Gandhi said in his sathaygraha principle, if they would withstand the tosses, to remain in one piece. We cannot merely hang onto symbols and slogans that have lost their meaning long ago or hold onto solutions that have past their “expiration dates.” We must dare to dream and imagine anew to solve today’s needs, all the same being convinced that this process of re-thinking, re-dreaming and reformulating is a process as times and needs, situations and problems unfold over time.

All human beings have the fundamental human right to live a dignified and qualitative human life or in the words of the Bible, in a manner in which the image of God blossoms in them (Gn 1:26) or as Hinduism would say, full of “Brahma Tejas.” Therefore, either the sociopolitical and other infrastructural systems of a nation should be generally conducive to qualify all human life to such a state or should be adapted and changed to allow such qualification. There is absolutely no sense in rabidly holding

on to systems, traditions, concepts and symbols merely because they have been passed down to us through the ages. The Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Buddhists, the Christians, the Hindus, the Muslims, the politicians, the scientists must all dare to re-think and re-define their thus far unquestioned identities and values both collectively and impartially with only one purpose in mind viz. the dignity of all human life in Sri Lanka.

In the process of rethinking these things, one cannot but come to the realization that quite a lot of the so-called unquestionable basic, fundamental truths which have been attached to one's race, religion and culture do not, in fact, hold water. In this age of scientific, technological and genetic advances, it is strange to see people still subscribe to unrealistic myths as basic and true. The myths of the origin and language of the Sinhalese and Tamils explained in the first chapter of this essay are examples of such opinions that exist in an age of science and critical epistemology. It is such tenacious attitudes regarding pristine myths and traditions that have kept these two communities one, apart from the others on a relatively small island, and thus fostered racism. According to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Racism is the doctrine that one group of men is morally or mentally superior to another and that this superiority arises out of inherited biological differences. Of the modern theories aimed at dividing one portion of humanity from another, it is the most morally reprehensible and the least substantially based...The tenets of racism, however, lead to moral conclusions that contradict many of the most generally accepted civilized standards, and have notoriously led to what on ordinary grounds are inconceivable crimes... Nor have the most important racist theorists been equipped to judge the alleged facts on which they based their claims. The question of race is an enormously complex one, and a judgment on it requires a synthesis of materials from history and pre-history and from a wide variety of biological anthropological and psychological disciplines, but primarily from genetics. Many of the necessary facts have only recently become available, and major questions remain unanswered.

In fact, the word *race* is a fairly recent word which began to be used technically

and politically only in the 18th century after Darwin.

Racism causes problems not only in the socio-political spheres but in the religious and economic spheres as well. Anti-semitism, Zionism, the black-white conflict, Apartheid, the slave trade, colonization, forced conversions or eviction of heathens are but a few dreadful examples of the diabolical destruction rooted in racism in many parts of the world. Likewise, culture too is not a frozen reality but an ever-changing dynamic process. Customs, practices and traditions often let go of old components and take in new elements through interaction exchange and so on with the neighbors. Practically all that is extolled as culture and tradition among the Sinhala and Tamil communities of Sri Lanka consist of elements either borrowed from the others, inclusive of the European colonizers or those that grew and changed in different times. Like a river that is called by the same name yet not by the content, for the water constantly changes and flows, neither race nor culture is ever stagnant - physically, psychologically, rationally and situationally they are new and dynamic. There are no pure races or pure cultures - original and uncontaminated. Hence, it is absurd to rabidly cling to nonexistent or extinguishing values and pretend to eternalize them and create exclusivity based on purity and superiority of the race or culture.

Language too must be examined along the way if the goal is peace in Sri Lanka. Language is a necessary medium for both communication and community formation. Like race, language too, in many countries, originates in myths. In spite of the highly developed science of philology and linguistics, people still seriously entertain linguistic myths rather than their natural and complex evolution. It is also seen as an identifying and distinguishing characteristic of a group of people. Though it is quite legitimate and right, if considered fanatically, it can lead to the same bad effects as those of race. Fanatic love for one's language, considering one's tongue superior to

the others, and forcing one's language on others have caused separations, hate and rebellion from the beginning of recorded history. Hellenization, Pax Romana, colonizers' language as mandatory mode of communication in administration, are notorious examples of history in this field. In Sri Lanka too this has been partly the cause of communal conflict. The Sinhala-only Act of 1958 and the forcing of the minority Tamils to learn Sinhala, the inability and harassment of those who cannot communicate in Sinhala in the government offices and departments, daubing Tamil words and names from public boards and properties by fanatics of the majority sector, created equally fanatic attitudes among the Tamils. A similar situation happened too in India earlier when Hindi was made the official tongue of the country. The early 60s were characterized by both racial and linguistic conflicts and they fused into two dimensions of the same problem in Sri Lanka.

An Emerging Theology of Symbiosis in Sri Lanka

All the above illustrated endeavors are living examples of genuine, sincere and convinced attempts by various individuals to create peace in Sri Lanka. All of them live and move in the country among the people who are affected and who live in the midst of danger and death. Their ideology and actions are based on life on the ground, not hearsay or speculation from elsewhere. The fact that they are all ongoing and alive, also points to their relevance and acceptance not only by the various sectors of Sri Lankan society but the warring parties themselves (the government and guerrillas), as possible mediators for a viable and reasonable solution to the crisis. These endeavors in their own way explicate the importance of symbiosis rather than exclusive existence. I believe firmly that these experiments are a sure sign (semeion) or in Paul's words, growing birth pangs. (Rom. 8:18-27) for future peaceful symbiosis of the races and religions in Sri Lanka.

One has to realize that situations and ideologies and crises that are called “extremes” did not start as extremes, but as small as the mustard seed. Lethargy, partiality, lack of foresight, fundamentalism, frustrations, etc, have caused them to evolve within one generation’s lifetime, to such gigantic proportions. Hence, a process of reversal too would necessarily involve considerable time to rebuild the lost trust and good will among the contenders. It is right here that these endeavors for symbiosis can play their diffusive role as mediator and show all of Sri Lankan society that there is a future for a peaceful and dignified life for every child of the soil of Lanka. As this paradigm grows more and more powerful, and as the result the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Buddhists and the Hindus, the Christians and the Muslims find that they are loved, respected, cared for and not exploited or persecuted, the desire to live symbiotically will begin here and there first, and grow rapidly in public opinion. If the places where the Tamils, the Muslims, and the Sinhalese live are places where they are able to live as dignified, equal and sovereign citizens, I am of the opinion that the demand for a separate state for the Tamils will come to a happy end, because it was the political and socio-economic plight of the Tamils that triggered the demand for a separate state. This is the very reason why the LTTE, in spite of its military caliber, is ever prepared to sit at the negotiating table with the Sri Lanka government even after many previous pacts have fallen through.

The reversal process to rebuild mutual trust must begin with the school children and permeate into the universities and all other spheres of national and social life. Textbooks and teaching materials ought to be rewritten to illustrate the dignity of and legitimacy of all races, cultures and religions. In this sphere the existing textbooks on history, the Sinhala/Tamil language and literature and social studies have caused enormous damage to split the nation into many exclusive sections. The religion and

teaching its valuable doctrines and not on respecting the other religions and the need to live in peace and harmony among the different races. Though here and there in one lesson or two some mention would be made to peace, tolerance, harmony, love of neighbor as basic values of the religion they are not accentuated enough to be instilled into the young minds.

What begins in the primary and secondary schools, ought to be fully developed at the higher education level. Curricula of universities ought to rationalize convincingly the necessity and viability of pluralism and symbiosis as the only panacea for the national crisis. All university students in Sri Lanka are children of the era of communal warfare. Stories of peace and inter racial amity told by their parents and elders to them seem either unbelievable or irrepeatable in their lifetime. They all long for peace and harmony, for they see how this national crisis corrodes their very futures. Universities and centers of academic learning also therefore should reevaluate history, politics, and sociology to rationalize pluralism and symbiosis as the sine qua non condition for peace and human dignity. There are many military academics, police academics and other highly functional centers to train men and women how to shoot, kill and destroy in times of war. But unfortunately there is nothing called peace demics to train men and women to maintain and develop harmony in the society and neighborhoods.

Some religions and lay leaders of the various religions, since recent times have initiated little programs on conflict resolution or peace and reconciliation, they are still not developed or wide spread enough to form a substantial public opinion. Such programs and projects ought to be encouraged and intensified by their religious authorities so that they might have wide spread approval and success. Unfortunately, like the endeavors of symbiosis discussed earlier, such programs are more attempts of convinced and committed individuals or groups (little flock), or tolerated by their

religions rather than the projects of those religions. An approving and appropriate seal of the authority of the religion (without however exerting undue control) will definitely give strength and acceptance to such life and peace efforts among the people.

Seminaries, theological/Bible colleges, *Pirivenas* and *madhressas* (clergy training colleges for Buddhism and Islam) too are in my opinion guilty of the failure to equip their clergy as *eirenepoioi* (peacemakers). Their curriculum so far has no subject on Sri Lankan peace education. The emphasis given to evangelization conversion and mission is not given to the study of the Sri Lankan realities and the pedagogy for peace and harmony in the country. Even in subjects such as Sri Lankan Church History or Life and Work of Christian Minister, Pastoral Theology or Social Analysis which are taught at the graduate level, the socio political and religious conflicts are either not considered or only mentioned in passing.

Hence the theological educators of all these religions too must launch themselves into the salubrious project of re-routing the clergy formation curriculum to include studies and subjects on religious liberty, legitimacy of other faiths, social pluriformity and socio religious symbiosis. If the clergy and religious authorities do not become animators and facilitators of peace and harmony, all the lofty doctrines of the religious will at best remain mere concepts. As a theological educator, I shall try my utmost to work with the leaders of various religions to create a common, interreligious forum to speak on peace and symbiosis and introduce peace studies into the theological curriculum. My access to and association with three of the theological centers will, I firmly believe, provide me the opportunity to do it.

The gospels, which are the basis of Christian attitudes and consideration of life also in a special way reflect the Sri Lankan society today. The political and social turmoil, reign of oppression and terror, exploitation of the weak and minorities, the co-

existence of many races and cultures, racial religious fundamentalism and so on that were rampant in those days are quasi parallel reflections of Sri Lankan situations today. One can see as if gleanings the potent teachings and actions of our Lord Jesus on symbiosis. The earlier given examples of the Canaanite woman, the centurion, the Samaritan woman, in a particular way portray Jesus' attitude of the acceptance the difference and pluralism as the order of God's creation. His emphasis, "even this one is a child of Abraham" is a sure proof of Jesus' attitude of the other races existing in the nation as members (Sadodhara) of one family. His parable of the good Samaritan embraces and identifies the racially other as "neighbor." His curing of the leper and his deep conversation with and accepting water from the Samaritan woman is his way of showing consistence between word and deed. (Lk 7:1-10, 10:30-37, 17: 11-19, Jn 4: 4-26)

Even the disciples of Jesus and later the earliest "pre-Easter" communities of the Jesus movements and the "post-Easter" early Christian communities learned to live among the racially and religiously other people. They absorbed and appropriated concepts and customs of those others which were compatible to their faith and convictions. Though they were oppressed and a powerless minority, they lived in the spirit of symbiosis, i.e. maintaining their distinction yet contributing to the wellbeing of the other. They even dared to articulate and formulate their doctrines and convictions in the idioms, categories, ideologies and philosophies of those others (i.e. of Hellenism and Latinism). St. Paul himself is a clear example of paraphrasing and illustrating Christianity and Christian doctrine in Greco Roman and Middle Eastern thought. His epistles to the churches of the Greco Roman world show his ability and agility to use and adopt Gnostic, neoplatonic, stoic and other such philosophies as media to teach Christian truths. All these I consider as a belief in symbiosis of the early Christian

Church which provides strength, rationality, and guidance to the churches in Sri Lanka to emulate, and to cause harmony through symbiosis.

The Role that Religions Can Play in Fostering a Theology of Symbiosis

Religions do possess an authority and leadership among the people of Sri Lanka. Religion is close to their situations in life and plays the role of animator, enabler, healer and inspirer. The Scriptures, rituals and leadership which are the powerful resources of the religions should be geared to foster peace and life. Then they will be in a better position to strategize and inspire and mediate dialogue between the contending or warring parties. As the founders, prophets and great leaders of the various times did, the religions can become the voice of life and basic human values in times of death, terror and exploitation. Two men of the 20th century – Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who were religious leaders in their own way stand out so conspicuously as good and relevant examples of upholding peace, justice and human dignity through the perspectives of religion.

Both Gandhi and King were political and yet not politicized. Both of them exercised fully their religious leadership without political or government power. They were able to energize and mobilize millions of powerless people. In the two of them, the oppressed and marginalized were able to assert themselves. In their life time, both were able to achieve results and empower millions of people, that the politicians of their day could not match. The most important reason for their achievements, I would dare to say, was that both the oppressed people and the officials of power could see in them a true and transparent political engagement rather than vested and politicized interest. Their achievements are in no way lessened by the martyrdom they both suffered. I am convinced that all the genuine attempts of all leaders of good will in

spite of their abrupt end, are significant pointers and mile stones in the road toward the realization of peace, harmony and human dignity.

This is, in my opinion, the hour for the religions in Sri Lanka to nurture, foster, and intensify such life-generating endeavors of symbiosis to make them grow into an interfaith public opinion. As I mentioned, if all religions can march together in mutual amity, acceptance and solidarity, with one cry for a symbiosis of races and religions based on equal dignity, Sri Lanka will witness the beginning or the dawn of a down-hill journey from violence. If the religions exercise their role as mediators in accordance with their basic life-generating resources, and create a forum for the leaders of the nation to reach a consensus on:

Politics based on justice

Education to make aware that the nation is for all

Accommodation of pluralism as the way of life in the nation

Culture is to foster life and not fear and death

Equality of all four races and religions;

then the process of demilitarization of the militants, the return of the soldiers to their barracks and the dismantling of the weapons and missiles will begin to take place. The Sinhalese and the Tamils will not look at each other with suspicion, fear or hate.

Religions will not consider each other as rivals or aliens. Then the entire population of Sri Lanka will be convinced that in accordance with her fame, the country is truly an Island of Paradise.

Conclusion

The Ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka that began in the beginning of the post-colonial era in the form of protests, demonstrations and riots took the shape of armed

struggle in the latter part of the seventies. Since then, it has become more complex growing in stature and intensity day by day. According to statistics, about 1 million Sri Lankan Tamils fled to other countries as refugees, over 500,000 have become displaces within Sri Lanka, and over 60,000 people have lost their lives within the past 25 years.

Many different factors inclusive of politics, culture, religions and the economy have played their relevant roles in causing, developing, intensifying or mitigating this conflict from time to time. The conflict has seen sporadic or intended uprisings and temporary solutions caused by the same factors within the last quarter of the 20th century. Both the Sri Lankan quasi pan Sinhala government and the entirely Tamil militancy comprising the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elan are the two openly warring parties. One proclaims that the war is for *peace* in the Nation and the other promulgates that it is for the emancipation of the oppressed minority.

All negotiations at best have had partial or temporary success but have failed in the long run. There is fundamentalism and partiality and exclusivism on both sides. The aforementioned factors have also made willy nilly contributions to such attitudes. Hence, I believe that only a wide-spread and comprehensive spirit and longing for *symbiosis* of the four races and religions will ultimately bring peace into this land. A symbiosis that accepts and fosters the legitimacy and dignity of pluriformity and plurality, as the Sri Lankan way of life and reality, is the most feasible way in my opinion the way to end this self-destructive plague in Sri Lanka.

In the footsteps of their most enlightened and holy founders, the four religions can foster and propagate the spirit of symbiosis in the entire country. They have the necessary resources for such an endeavor. Many persons of good will and vision have already begun to show the possibility and viability of symbiosis. What is necessary is

that their examples be considered, developed, experimented with and put into the limelight so that all can see and be inspired by them and be convinced of their efficacy. In my own limited way, I shall also emulate these endeavors in my ministry in the future. I am certain that the time for a Samagama Samajam - a Sri Lankan Society of racial, cultural and religious symbiosis that will cause peace and harmony in my dear homeland - Sri Lanka is visible in the distant horizon.

Appendix I

Statistics of Sri Lanka*

Territory	25,000 sq. miles
Total Population	18 million
Density of Population	243 per sq. mile
Population Increase	1.1%
Urban Population	30%
Rural Population	70%
Life Expectancy	72 years
Adult Literacy	88%
Primary/Secondary Schooling	100%
National Workforce	20%
Per Capita Monthly Income	85 US dollars
Upper Middle Class	10%
Lower Middle Class	25%
Below Poverty Level	65%
Sinhalese (mostly Buddhists)	69%
Tamils (mostly Hindus)	23%
Muslims (all Islamic)	7%
Burgers (all Christians)	1%

(However, Christianity is found among Sinhalese and Tamils too and therefore forms 8% of the total population.)