

Working together for justice:
The relevance of religious faith for ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue
in the North of Sri Lanka

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1 Introduction and objectives

1.1 Is “ecumenism” possible in our context?

The term “ecumenism” evokes in us the general meaning of “efforts to promote unity among the different Christian denominations.” We, who are living centuries after extensive divisions sundered the Churches, are but inheritors of that stark reality. All the truer it is for us, living in a corner of Sri Lanka, namely the Jaffna Peninsula — where Christians, who are already a minority, find ourselves in different mainline Churches or Evangelical Groups, and are almost total strangers to one another. In such a seemingly uncondusive context, the question naturally arises: “Is it possible to build up true ecumenism among us, diverse Christians, in Jaffna?” One could take the search for an answer as one of the objectives of this essay.

1.2 Is “inter-religious dialogue” possible in our context?

Now let us turn to a concept closely related to ecumenism, namely “inter-religious dialogue,” which term evokes in us images of religious leaders in different colourful garb, seated around, calmly exchanging expert views! However, inter-religious dialogue does not have anywhere — and especially in our part of the country — a path strewn with roses before it. Why? Because — the images of majestic Hindu temples of a past century burnt or razed to the ground by the aggressively proselytising Portuguese forces, continue to rankle in the collective historical memory of our Hindu brethren; and they are evoked from time to time in speeches, newspaper articles and editorials. Again, because — those few Muslim brethren who have returned to Jaffna after the end of the Civil War, cannot easily erase the bitter memories of how they were expelled by the militants from their birthplaces in the North and East of the country, taking as their property only what they could carry in their hands; and they cannot help seeing these perpetrators of the past as Hindu and Christian youths who harmed them then. With all the possibility of such deep-seated rancour boiling over, a question naturally arises: “Is it possible to develop true inter-religious dialogue among the adherents of the different religions we find in Jaffna?” Again, the search for an answer could be taken as another objective of this essay.

2 Methods

This essay mainly relies on secondary research, in the sense of summarising, collating and synthesising existing knowledge of some aspects of the subject. The sources for this knowledge are, firstly, the collection of the documents promulgated by the Catholic Church from time to time, and secondly, writings on these topics by learned scholars. A further method used here is reflective practice, in the sense of reflecting on one’s experiences in one’s own context.

3 Findings

3.1 Description: ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue

After having perused many a description and definition of ecumenism, I suppose it is not unsafe for me to formulate a description of it, based on what I have gathered: “Ecumenism” means the endeavours of the members of different Christian denominations to strive for greater unity and understanding among themselves, to overcome the centuries-old divisions among Christian denominations and to build up the visible unity of all Christians.

While ecumenism denotes the attempts to unite Christians in mutual understanding, the similar type of efforts to bring about greater understanding and unity among followers of all faiths has generally been referred to as “inter-religious dialogue” meaning “not only discussion, but also ... all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment” — as described by an important document of the Catholic Church, whose title may be abbreviated as “Dialogue & Mission” (no.3).

3.2 The centrality of dialogue

The true practice of dialogue is pivotal for both the processes we have chosen to consider, namely ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. The very notion of dialogue means that one is open to *listening* as much as to speaking, to *receiving* as much as to giving. In true dialogue, both partners seek understanding and mutual growth. By engaging in dialogue, one does not betray one’s own faith; rather one fosters an openness to the faith of the other. Genuine dialogue is not a covert plan to somehow convert the other to one’s own convictions.

That dialogue is crucial is apparent when we consider the pivotal documents of the Catholic Church, especially the pioneering Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* of the Second Vatican Council. Not only does this document emphasise the importance of restoring unity among the different Christian denominations through ecumenical efforts; but, while highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in unifying the Church, it also focuses on overcoming obstacles to unity through *dialogue*, cooperation, prayer and mutual understanding among Christian communities (cf. nos.11, 12; emphasis added).

Again, the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the same Council, which was considered almost a revolutionary text for the Catholic Church of that time, emphasises the importance of unity and love among all people, since God is their origin as well as goal; “The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through *dialogue* and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men” (no.2; emphasis added).

3.3 Types of dialogue: in ecumenism and in inter-religious encounter

Since ecumenism aims to restore unity among all Christian churches and communities, it implies building up mutual respect and collaboration. It is obvious that dialogue is a crucial requirement to achieve unity, not only among Christians, but also with members of other faiths. The Vatican’s Secretariat for Non-Christians, in its document with the abbreviated title “Dialogue & Mission,” enumerates important types of dialogue among those involved in the ecumenical endeavour (nos.28-35):

- i. The Dialogue of Life is thinking and acting with “concern, respect and hospitality towards the other” whether in simple presence and witness, in service, or in direct proclamation of Christ's good news.
- ii. The Dialogue of Deeds implies “collaboration with others for goals of a humanitarian, social, economic, or political nature ... [for] the liberation and advancement of mankind.”
- iii. The Dialogue of Specialists is of scholars and spiritual practitioners to “confront, deepen, and enrich their respective religious heritages or to apply ... their expertise” to human problems.
- iv. The Dialogue of Religious Experience is of believers who “share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute.”

Among these, the Dialogue of Specialists is for theological/philosophical experts and not the ordinary believer; even the Dialogue of Religious Experience may necessitate special (spiritual) preparation of the participants. But the Dialogue of Life is what every sincere adherent of a religious tradition ought to have: concern and respect for the other in day-to-day life; and the Dialogue of Deeds, or collaboration with others in altruistic actions to solve humanitarian problems, is something any sincere adherent can take part in.

3.4 Types of unity: in ecumenism and in inter-religious encounter

What is the ultimate goal of ecumenical efforts, if not the achieving of unity? Speaking of the quest for unity in intra-Christian ecumenism, Paul Ladouceur enumerates six principal forms or types of possible (Christian) unity:

- unity of faith,
- institutional unity,
- sacramental unity,
- unity of worship,
- ministerial unity, and
- unity of action.

Next, moving on to the search for unity in the context of inter-religious dialogue, Ladouceur explores which of these types of unity would be applicable in the latter context (pp.179-83). He points out that, while the other kinds of unity mentioned above are more difficult to achieve in inter-religious endeavours (and less difficult in intra-Christian ecumenical encounters), nevertheless it is “*unity of action* in a multifaith context [that] may prove easier to achieve than other forms of unity. As among Christian churches, [so in the inter-faith context too,] unity of action typically focuses on commonly identified concerns in the moral, social, and environmental spheres.”

Confirming such a viewpoint, Pope Francis said in 2015, during the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Vatican II Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, “Dialogue based on confident respect can bring seeds of good that in their turn may bud into friendship and cooperation in many fields, especially in service to the poor, to the least, to the elderly, through welcoming migrants, and attention to those who are excluded. We can walk together, taking care of one another and of creation – All believers of every religion.” (Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue website, 2024).

3.5 Dialogue of life, dialogue of deeds, & unity of action

From the above considerations it becomes clear that, if one leaves out the religious adept and the theological expert, and considers merely the man and the woman on the street, it is the Dialogue of Life (concern and respect for the other), the Dialogue of Deeds (collaboration with others in humanitarian and liberating activities) and the Unity of Action (for the solution of commonly identified concerns in the moral, social and environmental spheres) that are the way forward in promoting ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue among the grass-roots “proletariat” of our diverse religions!

Our finding harmonises with the opinion of “Churches Together in England (CTE)”, an ecumenical organisation in the United Kingdom, that “it is fair to say that the traditional models of ecumenism, with top-down structures, and formal dialogues between professionals within hard denominational structures [have] increasingly given way to *a more relational, action-orientated and grassroots form of ecumenism*” (Website, 2024).

It is only when one conducts daily the elementary Dialogue of Life, that the Dialogue of Deeds will flow from it, and enrich the Unity of Action that calls for it: therefore the reader would agree with us if we state that we could encapsulate all of this within the single phrase “Unity of Action” — especially in the wider sphere of inter-religious dialogue. This leads one to reflect on one’s own experiences in Jaffna in the spheres of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue.

4 “Unity of Action” in our experience in Jaffna

4.1 “Unity of Action” in ecumenism in Jaffna

One must acknowledge that the Dialogue of Life has almost always been part of the day-to-day life of Christians belonging to different denominations, but living side by side in our towns and villages over the past four centuries and more. Helping one another at difficult moments, attending funerals and weddings, exchanging festive food on holidays and even lending money to tide over rough times — were common aspects of the Dialogue of Life between lay Christians of whatever persuasion. It would have been more the clergymen who had acute consciousness of the differences among themselves in beliefs and ritual rubrics, and thus felt alienated from one another.

Nevertheless, let us now consider the Unity of Action among Christians. It is noteworthy that the ecumenical organisation named the “Jaffna Christian Union” was a pioneer in the field, having been inaugurated as early as 1907 in the Jaffna Peninsula, comprising missionaries (from leading Protestant mainline Churches) such as the Methodists, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the American Ceylon Mission (ACM); they had already been meeting together “for fellowship and prayer and exchange of views” (Antone *et al.* 2013, ch.71: Sri Lanka). This was of course, long before the thaw of Catholic attitudes towards ecumenism in the Second Vatican Council!

At present, when one hears the word “ecumenism” in Jaffna, one is nostalgically reminded of the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” that falls in January each year. Throughout the week, ministers and youngsters from various Churches, Protestant and Catholic, meet together in different places for an evening of prayer and fellowship. This has built up friendship and collaboration mostly amongst the clergy; however, it is rather regrettable that the response from the lay people has been lukewarm at best!

Another commendable early ecumenical development in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka was the inauguration of two ecumenical “*Christa Seva Ashrams*,” first at Chunnakam near

Jaffna in the North in 1939, and later at Kiran near Batticaloa in the East in 1958, through the vigorous initiative of Rev. Sevak S.S. Selvaratnam. These ashrams, open to Christians of any denomination and even to persons of other faiths (or no faith!), are functioning even today as serene places of prayer, meditation and social service, and centres for developing indigenised forms of liturgy and worship.

Two active theological colleges in the Jaffna Peninsula are the St. Francis Xavier's Seminary at Jaffna (of the Catholics), and the Christian Theological Seminary at Maruthanar-madam (of the Church of the American Ceylon Mission: CACM). For several decades now, students of these two institutions have met together on a day each January to share discussions and fellowship. The bonds of friendship, begun here between the future clergy of these two Churches, have endured over the years and borne fruit in the sharing of ministry activities whenever possible.

During the brutal Civil War of more than thirty years, when people were killed, wounded, maimed or displaced from their homes and villages or towns, Christians often joined hands in providing refuge, relief supplies and temporary shelters for the unfortunate ones. The two Bishops in Jaffna, one Catholic and the other of the Church of South India (CSI), were forthright in condemning the excesses of the Military as well as that of the militants and in calling for a just solution to the festering "national question." This working together for the establishment of true justice and peace does indeed confirm the relevance of the religious faith of Christians for ecumenism in Sri Lanka.

However, one should note that this cooperation was not limited to just Christians; people of all faiths and their leaders united and collaborated to bring solace to those affected by the ravages of war, as will be seen in the section below.

4.2 "Unity of Action" in inter-religious dialogue in Jaffna

It is true, as mentioned in the Introduction, that the destruction of Hindu temples of the past by the colonial Portuguese forces continues to gall the collective historical memory of our Hindu brethren living alongside us; however, they do not want to lay the blame for the past on us, their Christian neighbours. Similarly, those few Muslims who have returned to live in Jaffna after the end of the Civil War cannot easily forget the irksome memories of being summarily expelled from their homes in the North and East; however, they do not hold their immediate Hindu or Christian neighbours responsible for the crimes of the past.

What has been noted in the previous section regarding the Dialogue of Life that has almost always existed among Christians of different denominations in our areas, is indeed what has existed among people of all faiths in our land — people living side by side in relative harmony in their villages and towns, helping one another in good times and bad, with neighbourly concern. However, differences in religious beliefs and practices have indeed caused fissures in this delicate fabric occasionally, more at the level of the leaders or the clergy, rather than that of the laity.

In the late 19th century C.E. in the South of Sri Lanka, Christian missionaries, influenced by the Enlightenment thought of Europe, challenged learned Buddhist monks to public debates with them, with the aim of showing the supposed superiority of Christianity and thus Christianising the land; however, these Christian missionaries failed to win the debates against the monks who had deep knowledge of their religion and eloquent fluency in their native language and literature. Although such public disputation did not gain currency in the North and East of Sri Lanka, controversies did take place through the written word — through pamphlets, tracts and other print media. The early Tamil newspapers *Uthaya Tharakai* and

Satyaveda Pathukavalan became vehicles for Protestant and Catholic clergymen respectively, to conduct religious polemics with learned Hindu scholars.

Nevertheless, it is fortunate that later in 20th century Jaffna, the Ecumenical Movement among non-Catholic Christians, as well as the broad-minded outlook of the Second Vatican Council of the Catholics, led to a more open attitude among all Christians towards the brothers and sisters of other faiths. This change of perspective was to prove crucial when the Civil War began to rain down not only bullets, shells and aerial bombs even on the civilian population of the North and East, but also displacement, deprivation and death. The bewildered people, made refugees in their own land, did not know whom to turn to in their hour of need; however, many Christian social service organisations, both Catholic and Protestant, had the necessary connections and skills to render assistance to this multitude of unfortunate persons, oftentimes through personnel who themselves were displaced from their homes. The Hindu brethren, though cautious at first about possible proselytization, later began to understand the genuine desire to help them in their need; thus, the Dialogue of Deeds silently flourished.

Unity of Action was specifically nurtured during wartime. The Jaffna Citizens' Committee, comprising Hindu and Christian lay and clerical leaders, felt warmly welcomed to regularly meet at the Catholic Bishop's House in Jaffna to deliberate on the war situation, draft reports or express protest. Even now, though the Civil War has been brought to an end, the population of the North and East continue to be deprived of many human rights, for example, the right to find out what had happened to their kith and kin who had been either killed or "forced to disappear" during the war. In many such cases, Unity of Action brings Christians to join their Hindu or Muslim brothers and sisters to express public protest or march demanding action. Unity of Action also inspires "Caritas" and similar Christian social service organisations to bring together young people of different faiths to discuss, debate and grow in relationship with one another. This working together for the establishment of true justice and peace does indeed confirm the relevance of the religious faith of our brothers and sisters of all persuasions for inter-religious dialogue in Sri Lanka.

5 Conclusion

The Introduction had stated that one of the objectives of this essay was to search for answers to the questions, "Is it possible to build up true ecumenism among us, diverse Christians, in Jaffna?" and "Is it possible to develop true inter-religious dialogue among the adherents of the different religions we find in Jaffna?" We have found above that, whether in intra-Christian ecumenical contexts, or in inter-faith contexts involving our Hindu and Muslim brothers and sisters, the Dialogue of Life (concern and respect for the other), the Dialogue of Deeds (collaboration with others in humanitarian and liberating activities) and the Unity of Action (for the solution of commonly identified concerns in the moral, social and environmental spheres), have at least initiated true ecumenism and genuine inter-religious dialogue, by means of these three elementary kinds of dialogue and unity. This gives us hope that, in working together thus for justice, we can come to realise the continued relevance of religious faith, even in the secularised society of Sri Lanka.

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7 References

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