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INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN SRI LANKAN CONTEXT

A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION

Introduction

Religion plays a vital role in the process of socialization in the Asian region. While the western world has more exposure of secularization south Asian region still prevails hardly changed or very slow in bringing changes in case of religiosity. Sri Lanka a country/state that has established by its constitution as a Buddhist state keeps changing in a slow pace.

This analysis takes an ethno religions approach in discussing the Sri Lankan experience of Inter-religious dialogue. It is not a secret that the identity of a Sri Lankan is based on ethnicity, language and religion. I want to focus on how the indigenous political leaders use these three icons as the three pillars of their political regime, which they have been building since independence. Their deceitful behavior has brought the poisonous fruit of the post-independent ethnic war, but their thirst has no end. They have been making plans to create conflict between religious communities during the past war period as well. The Easter Sunday attack is the first hand experience we all have to witness their bloodthirsty attitude and humanity is the quality that they have mostly ignored.

At this juncture the country needs a dialogue among different ethnic groups and religious communities. The more the public is divided, the more this evil regime will find it easy to launch their own programmes. The Buddhist temple, Hindu Kovil, Christian churches should pioneer this dialogue in the name of their faiths. Ultimately religion is for human beings, not that human beings are for the religion' should be the theme of the present world.

Buddhism and Politics in Sri Lanka; a brief history.

Due to the colonial tension some members of the Buddhist monastic *Sangha* actively embraced the political activism aiming the independence from British Empire. They sowed the seeds for post-independence Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. After independence, in 1948 many local politicians began to use Buddhism to strengthen their political positions in the country. They made Buddhism a popular religion hiding the philosophical values of the teaching of Lord Buddha. They hardly used the philosophy of Lord Buddha to lead the country but they provoked religious extremism to remain in

power. They also used the ‘Sinhala’, the language of the majority to win votes. This behavior hindered the development of the country and created tensions among Sri Lankans and led to a civil war.

The religious hierarchy of our country; Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians did not pay enough attention towards this politicization for decades. They would have given a better emphasis on a dialogue among different faiths.

From early centuries of our history Buddhism and political power existed in a symbolic relationship.

Time has come to realize and to make the public realized or educated on this theme. Let me show some important historical facts which paved the pathway to this situation.

The Chronology in a nutshell.

- The traditional story in the fourteenth chapter of the *Mahavamsa* stresses that Buddhism was enabled to flourish institutionally in Anuradhapura, its point of entry, only because it had the support of a ruler, *Devanampiyatissa* (Guruge 1989:563-567)
- The British arrived on Sri Lanka, over 2000 years later, the seat of Buddhism’s political power was not Anuradhapura but the independent kingdom of Kandy which flourished between the 16th century and 1815. (E.J. Harris 2023, 02)
- The king was the mediator between the gods (the protectors of the city) and the people and both were under the ultimate authority of the Buddha, represented through a tooth relic of the Buddha. (Duncan 1990; Harris 2018:14-15)
- The Royal palace and most of the *devales* were within the sacred premises that housed the *Dalada Maligava* (G. Obesekara 2017:28 ; Harris 2018:82)
- For non-Buddhist religions such as Roman Catholic who had escaped the persecution of the Protestant Dutch could be incorporated if they accepted subordinate status within a hierarchy that placed the Buddha at the apex. (Thambiah 1992:175; Harris 2018:15 and 32)

- The island was seen as Sinhale, as belonging to the Sinhala people. The concept of Sinhale was kept alive through ‘the most of homage’ (Roberts 2004:13,54-59,69-78; Harris 2018:16)
- The religious and ideological imaginary of the Kandyan kingdom was formed by symbolic actions, ritual and landscaping rather than intentions of governance (Harris 2023:03)
- This imaginary broke apart when, in 1815, the British manipulated divisions in the kingdom to take control of the whole island but the British supported Buddhism. It is an imperial ideal that exercised power through avoiding offence to those governed (Harris 2023:04)
- British support of Buddhism was criticized as an offence in the sight of God by Robert Spence Hardy, a Wesleyan Methodist missionary who was posted to Kandy in 1836. He argued that British Support of Buddhism as hindering the work of missionaries (Harris 2023:04-05)

This situation encouraged the Colonial office in Ceylon to spread Christianity in a more efficient manner. Buddhists expected a respectful coexistence with British rule but this was interrupted due to the above incident and they were willing to embrace defensive action if a threat to Buddhism was seen. They started sending petitions to the government arguing for respect between religions. The collaboration and coexistence was short-lived and the Colonial office in 1830 and 1840 s, started to marginalize the monastic community. Eventually the Buddhist moved towards defensive strategies.

- In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the British administration in Sri Lanka returned to a more conciliatory and inclusive approach to Buddhism. For instance Buddhist monks chanted the *Mahamangala Sutra* on the Queen’s Birthday. This elicited vehement opposition from Christian missionaries (Harris 2023:08)

There were two major rebellions which Buddhist monks played a significant role, the first broke out in the Kandyan regions in 1817 - 1818. The Guerilla methods used, with the support of the monks and villagers and brought considerable parts of former Kandyan Kingdom under rebel control. The British mustered battalions from

India to face this situation. Violent protests continued and the second rebellion occurred in 1848.

- Voluntary organizations were started to protect Buddhism by key Buddhist revivalists such as *Mohottivatte Gunananda* to contest Anglican Society.

Vesak; the day when Theravada Buddhists celebrate the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha was made a public holiday in Sri Lanka with the intervention of Colonel Olcott. The first Vesak was celebrated in 1885 with a speech by Mohottivatte Gunanada at the prestigious Kelaniya Temple.

- The *Mahabodhi* Society was founded by *Anagarika Dharmapala* in 1891 and its journal became the mouthpiece for wider Buddhist activism and revivalism in Asia. Meantime he founded and edited the newspaper "*Sinhala Bauddhaya*" (Seneviratne 1999:29)
- The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was formed in 1898 in imitation of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)

According to the Sri Lankan Anthropologist Ganath Obeyesekere this was merely an imitation. He defined this as Protestant Buddhism.

- The work of *Mohottivatte Gunanada*, *Dharmapala* and his colleague *Valisinha Harischandra* prefigured a form of Buddhist political organization in the 20th century.
- One of the most prominent of the young monks, Wapola Rahula, wrote *Bhiksuvage Urumaya* (The Heritage of the Bhikkhu) in 1946. He wrote that monks did not remain confined to their cells but joined the struggles of people, involved with the rebellions of 1818, 1834, 1843 and 1848. Therefore he voiced a pro-independence stance, justifying monastic involvement. (Harris 2023:16)

Ecumenism: The Sri Lankan Experience

The unity, understanding and flexibility among Christian churches is the timely need to establish peace in Sri Lanka. Christ, being the greatest lover who preached the philosophy of love invites us to be united. Jesus taught us that love is greater than faith. Pharisees were people of faith but they did not have love to transform the world, but Jesus. According to St. Paul even the nations who exercise no explicit faith in YHWH can be saved through works of love. Thus Christians, both Roman and Reformed see their 'work of love' as 'work of faith'. Christ is the source of ecumenism. Ecumenism must not compromise the faith in Christ, who is the covenant between God and the oppressed. The enemy of Christ is not the non-believer or the other religionist but the oppressor, whatever his/her religion may be. The real crisis which is rooted in Sri Lanka is not the fact of religious identity, but the misuse of religious institutes by its political power. The timely need of Sri Lanka is nothing else but eradicating poverty and other disparities in our island. Religion can play a significant role in this regard. Christian Churches should never create chances for disunity. It should not be the matter of preference but a matter of mutuality. The one needs the other. The urgency of ecumenism in Sri Lanka has to be well understood and proclaimed. The lethargy shown by both Roman and reformed churches has already brought negative consequences, but it is worth noting some attempts taken by pioneers of ecumenism in Sri Lanka.

Eg:

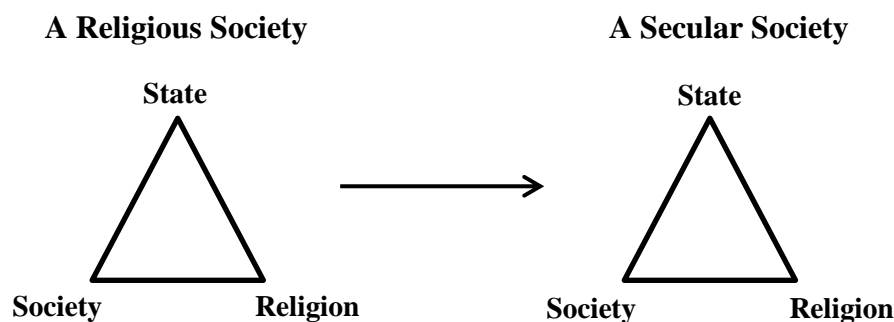
1. The Catholic Charismatic movement, founded by Fr. Oscar Abeyratna (1971)
2. The Centre for society and Religion, founded by Fr. Tissa Balasooriya, OMI.
3. Subodhi, founded by Paul Caspersz SJ and Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, OSB.
4. The Tulana Center for Research and Encounter, founded by Fr. Aloysius Pieris, SJ.
5. Subhasetgedara, founded by Fr. Michael Rodrigo, OMI
6. Devasarana; Anglican monastery founded by Yohan Devananda.
7. The Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue founded by Basil Jackson and re-instituted by Lynn A de Silva of Methodist Church.

Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) too insisted that ecumenism was the main focus brought by Vatican II; the epoch - making council of the Roman communion. This enthusiasm was waned after 1975. The time has come to reestablish this enthusiasm, because

Vatican II has explicitly admitted, that all channels in communion with her have ‘the right as well as this duty’ of self-government. We have to start witnessing a new beginning of ecumenism in the third world ‘A Journey of accompaniment’

The Political Regimes and Religion During the Contemporary History of Sri Lanka.

Global surveys witness that religiosity among people of Sri Lanka is very high. Religion is not only a system of beliefs and practices but also a basis for formation of exclusive identities. In secular societies education plays this role.



Sri Lankan context remains a complicated one due to its ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. The attempt of this paper is to examine the post-independent Sri Lankan society and its present situation. Politics, religion and secularism have remained intertwined for decades in Sri Lanka like the other post-colonial societies in the world. The traditional Buddhist society in Sri Lanka started to change during and after the colonial time when new faith groups and their institutions proliferated in many parts of the country. Religious faith became an important aspect of identity formation in Sri Lanka with the increasing spread and popularity of modern school education in growing significance of the connection between religion and school education. On the other hand some native elites who came back to Sri Lanka after their higher studies from countries like UK brought a higher influence on Sri Lankan politics and wanted to participate in governance. They were divided into political parties with diverse interests and ideological inclinations. The change of political regime in 1956 with significant decisions in the field of education and official language of the state led the nation to the emergence of large monolingual communities and reinforced their identities accordingly. It is popularly believed that this was the seed of the ethnic issue which grew up to a poisonous tree in dividing the ethnic groups in North and South.

Participation of Buddhist monks in political affairs has been continued and the 1950's has been its culmination. Buddhist political leaders maintained close relationships with Buddhist priests at different levels. Many of them developed the habit of visiting Buddhist shrines and prominent Buddhist priests on regular basis, in particular when they assumed office following key national elections. Not only that these were widely published & shown on mass media. These deceitful behaviors of political leaders were strong enough to keep the public blind folded from the reality. This continuous process prevents the emergence of secularization in Sri Lanka.

As a result the vicious cycle of ethno-religious divisions prevail in the country and the state has failed to bring in policy and institutional changes needed to narrow the gap between communities.

Conclusion

The theme of inter-religious dialogue should be widely discussed. It will be helpful for the general public to understand reconciliation and inclusive socio-economic development of the country. This should be a dialogue of healing the minds, not a spring of religious intolerance. The Easter Sunday attack in 2019 created a huge tension and intolerance in the two communities; Christians and Muslims. That was an eye opening event in order to establish faith and fellowship between the Islamic community and other religious communities. This shows how important is the coexistence of diverse religious communities within a state that is committed to safeguard the interest of all communities irrespective of their religious diversity.

Acknowledgement

This paper is an outcome of my interest towards the topic of inter-religious dialogue. This writing would not have been possible without the influence of the following intellectuals who are versatile in their academic fields and very humble and unique in imparting knowledge. Hence I extend my gratitude towards;

1. Professor K. Karunathilake and the senior Lecturer Mr. Sudeera Jayaweera - Department of Sociology, University of Kelaniya for creating an interest in me toward sociology.
2. Rev.Fr. Dr. Aloysius Pieris (SJ) and Tulana Research Centre, Gonawala Kelaniya, Sri Lanka for your availability and approachable nature.

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