

The national reconciliation process

The role of religion

Introduction

Religions play an important role in the lives of the people and in the Sri Lankan context religion always played a vital role in the day to day lives of the people and in the civil society. Religious leaders have always been respected and listened, political leaders have always sought their blessings before taking up office. Buddhist and Christian leaders have taken active part in the political field. The Catholic Church which got enrooted in the Sri Lankan society, since the Portuguese times has played a pivotal role in the social field and education and since the last two decades the church got involved in JVP insurrection and later in the ethnic crisis trying to promote the peace process.

The Buddhists have always been divided on the national issues, between the ideological concepts of Buddhaputra and Bhoomiputra, the former advocating social harmony while the latter advocating a unitary, exclusive Sinhala state.

Hinduism identified with the Tamils has played a low key role with very little influence on the LTTE and absolutely no influence on the Sinhala community. In Sri Lanka Hindu leaders did not play much political role because of their minority status and the historical animosity between Hinduism and Buddhism.

As for the Muslims, they were more focused on their own community's survival and were fighting for their vital space. They have always played a determinant role in the politics as arbiters between the different Sinhala parties.

There is a universal understanding and acceptance of the need for Dialogue which is an instrument for promoting Peace and Harmony. Peace cannot be achieved without understanding of what has happened, is happening and how the present situation will affect the future. This understanding promotes and serves as the foundation for sustainable peace. In the process of promoting dialogue, the important question is, what is the role of religions? And are they an obstacle or a contributor to building peace in Sri Lanka? Can we hold that religion can play a vital role in conflict resolution, or in peacemaking and post conflict peace building? How can the religious traditions in the traditional religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism offer a rich abundance of insight and guidance for promoting peace in Sri Lanka?

This paper aims at discussing the role of religion in building peace in Sri Lanka in the post war context. The main question which this paper will try to raise and critically analyze is, Can the Sinhala Buddhist clergy come to a consensus on a common vision on the national issue and how they can contribute to promote peace and Harmony? At a time when the south is jubilating and triumphant, considering the president to be a savior of the nation, what could be the role of the Buddhist clergy to motivate the government and the people to go for reconciliation?

In this context, what is the role that the church can play to promote the value of reconciliation? The dignity of the human person and the demand for justice for the oppressed?

This will implicitly take to the discussion on what the religious leaders have to undertake to promote peace and reconciliation process in the Sri Lankan Society. Ultimately the major issue would be to explore what the Faith Based Organizations involved in social action have to undertake as their primary mission to promote peace and reconciliation and the role they must play at this juncture..

The role of the Buddhist Sanghas and perception of the ethnic conflict.

Buddhism is the majority religion in Sri Lanka and is traditionally believed that it was brought into Sri Lanka at the time of Buddha himself. Buddhism has resisted during the Hindu invasions from South India and in the recent past from the colonial powers. As of today the majority of the Sinhala speaking Sri Lankans practice Buddhism.

The Buddhist clergy is organized into sanghas and their main purpose is to bring glory to “Dhamma” (the teaching of Buddha) and to ensure its defense. The Buddhist monks although less influential today are better organized than in the 1970-80.

Drawing on the “mahavamsa” legend (the mythologie of sinhala kings) about the brave sinhala people, the monks have always advocated for the safeguard of the national integrity , a unified Sri Lanka where Buddhism will flourish. Making reference to Mahavamsa, the Mahanayaka Theras (Head Monks) have observed that the entire island of Sri Lanka is the island of “Dhamma”, thrice sanctified by Buddha himself in the magical visits that included even the north. This mythical tradition also observes that the Tamil presence in the north was ousted by a Sinhala warrior in order to bring glory to “ Dhamma”.

This growing reference to ancient mythological reference brings about two ideological approaches which are quite divergent and competing : The “Buddha putra” (Sons of Buddha) and the “Bhoomi putra” (son of the soil). The Buddha putra ideology refers to peace and harmony; non violence and living the Dhamma as children of Buddha. Those monks who believe in Buddha Putra are more inclined to favor peaceful political solution which does not marginalize the minorities. They believe that all individuals have equal rights and all religions are to be tolerated.

On the other hand, the bhoomi putra ideology refers to the belongingness to the soil (“jus soli”) and promotes the ideology that Buddhism is linked to the belongingness to the soil. It promotes and encourages the Sinhala only approach and is intolerant towards other ethnic or religious groups, considering them as illegitimate sons of soil. Those who adhere to this ideology (they are a majority), claim that Sri Lanka is a land of Sinhala speaking community whose ethnical roots are Aryan ; they believe that they are sons of the soil and that Buddha first sent his disciples to this land. Based on this mythical convictions there is strong tendency to believe that the Sinhala are of Aryan origin and that the Tamils belong to the Dravidian race. These interpretations have become means for the Buddhist monks to justify the Sinhala linguistic superiority, religious, cultural and economic hegemony and superiority. These radical ideological positions have been used by the politicians and are even today instrumentalised by the present political parties, who find a fertile soil to nurture their political discourse and gain political mileage with them.

Over the years such use of Religion for political motivations, has legitimated radical Sinhala Buddhist fundamentalism and given birth to fundamental political parties such as JHU, Sinhala Urumai etc. All

these school of thoughts promote the unitary state model, “the one country, one nation “ ideology and above all are strong believers of the Sinhala superiority.

During the first presidential mandate, President Rajapakse was implicitly pushed into this school of thought and ideology by the political configuration of his government and the support that he was able to muster from the radical Buddhist clergy due to the political alliance with the JHU and Sinhala Urumai.

The unitary state model, “one country, one nation” ideology and above all the installing Sinhala Superiority in the island fuelled the ethnic crisis during the last three decades. Rajapakse was able to fully benefit from this ideology and also build his political strategy to solve the ethnic crisis. He went to war with the LTTE , putting aside all call for a peaceful and political solution. He went to war with the LTTE in order to eliminate the tigers and bring about the sacred unity of the country thus contributing to the safeguard of Buddhism. His military strategy along with the able command of Sarath Fonseka, the general in command at that time and at the same time linking all efforts with the JHU and Sinhala Urumai as well as the Buddhist clergy, was to eliminate the LTTE and do away with the separatism advocated by them and safeguard the Buddhist identity of the nation. Rajapakse was able to strengthen the bond between the state, Buddhism, the Buddhist clergy and the people. He did just the contrary of what Mrs. Bandaranaike did, that is secularizing the state and keeping the Buddhist monks aloof. Such political moves also gave a new role for the Buddhist monks who supported the move of Rajapakse, thus in a way ensuring that Buddhism contributed to safeguard the integrity and security of the nation.

At the same time, those monks who believe in the “Buddhaputra” ideology were inclined to promote dialogue and a peaceful negotiated political solutions. Many of them took the bold step of going to the north and meeting the religious leaders, meeting the LTTE representatives, meeting the Tamil population and assuring them of their support and prayers.

The above discussions reveal clearly that a part of the Buddhist Sanghas have played a key role to maintain the ethnic conflict while a minority Buddhist monks were open to promote dialogue and Peace.

The Role of the Church in the ethnic conflict

The Church has been an active player in advocating for dialogue and peace in the ethnic conflict and in particular from 1983 with the creation of the National Christian Council –Peace and justice commission. Statements have been issued especially in 1983 in the wake of the ethnic violence. The church due to its minority status and the complex situation, in which it found itself, was always very discreet in its interventions.

Standing for justice for the most vulnerable, the church leaders have always advocated for a political solution and a negotiated peace ; exhorted the Sinhala leaders to come to a consensus on the ethnic issue and above all have pleaded that this consensus be supported by the Buddhist monks.

When the violence became intensified and there was an outbreak of military struggle between the LTTE and the government towards the end of 1998, the church was challenged to take the issue beyond statements. It had to express concern for the victims of the ethnic crisis, take up relief activities and above all take the bold step of getting into mediation between the government and the LTTE. It is during this period, the president of Caritas Sri Lanka, Mgr. Malcolm Ranjith now made Cardinal, undertook

along with the Tamil Bishops and the influential Buddhist clergy the mediating role and had regular contacts with the government and the LTTE.

This mediating role was necessary for two reasons, one was to continue providing relief activities to the victims and the second was to get the LTTE to the negotiating table. Good will visits along with Buddhist clergy, Imams and Hindu priest were undertaken to the north and meetings were held with the high ranks of the LTTE to exhort them to stop the violence. The NCC-J & P Commission multiplied interreligious dialogue and move for peace and above all, the Bishops in the north and east were in the first line to exhort the LTTE to stop the violence towards innocent victims.

One Tamil Clergy played an important role in promoting dialogue through art and culture. Fr.Savery founder of the centre for performing Arts in Jaffna spearheaded cultural programs which would contribute to promote peace and harmony among the two ethnic groups. His activities were funded by caritas Partners and Secours Catholique-Caritas France was one of them.

The churches, in particular the Catholic Church through the Caritas network have contributed considerably in the humanitarian response. Through Solidarity, church was in dialogue with the government and the LTTE and this was contributive to alleviate the sufferings of the victims. The human value and justice in the Christian faith provided the basis for concrete commitments towards the Tamil minority. From 1990 onwards, the Catholic Church through Caritas Sri Lanka introduced the National Peace Program, though the encouragement and support of the caritas Member organizations who were part of the Sri Lanka working group. Jointly supported by the partners Caritas Sri Lanka was able to act with courage and conviction that as an instrument of the church it could contribute to promote peace and harmony in the society. This was undertaken through different kinds of animation programs, exchange visits, meetings with the military personnel etc.

However the role of the church in the political arena was limited. Church due to its universal identity was always perceived as western and in Sri Lanka as alien institution. This itself created certain ambiguities, especially when the church spoke on the ethnic crisis. Church's positions were perceived as subversive or pro-western and this was quite visible during the beginning of the 90's when the PTA was promulgated and was in vigor. Church was also very wrongly suspected of taking sides with the LTTE and there was a climate of distrust from the government.

It has always been a major challenge for the Church to take up overt stands on the ethnic crisis and this was due to its minority status and the fear that radical anti-Christian groups would use this to jeopardize its mission on the long run. This was also the case when radical groups attacked the churches and burnt the churches in Sri Lanka.

Albeit, the church has an important role to play in the post war situation where the dignity of the minority Tamil is in question, where justice is denied and above all basic human rights are denied. The church in this situation has a prophetic role to play, take up action for the sake of humanity and above all take up the challenge of a deeper faith response to the present post war situation.

The future role for religions and religious leaders

In Asia, Religions play an important role and people have great respect for religions. At the same time, all the religions, express the shared conviction on the imperatives of

cooperation and peaceful human society. It is an uncontested fact that all religions exhort that we respect each other and the communities live in respect and harmony. Peace is the key word in all the sacred texts of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity and at the same time all religions condemn moral vices like anger, cruelty, hatred and violence.

The teachings of Buddha are clear and they contributed at the same time in reducing conflict and hostilities amongst the kings of different states. Buddha exhorted the conviction that violence generates violence and asked his disciples not to prone enmity. For Buddha "If one produces enmity in answer to the other, the enmity will never stop. Instead it will generate more enmity creating hatred and distrust. For him, Love was the only means to combat hatred and violence.

It also goes without saying that it is impossible to achieve peace without any deliberate effort and conviction. Peace cannot be achieved merely by diplomacy, political compromise, or legal agreements. On the contrary, peace can be achieved by people who desire peaceful relations who take it into consideration as a moral issue and hence the role of religion becomes important and can play an important role in building peace and harmony.

In the present situation in Sri Lanka, religions, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism can offer a rich and abundance of insight and guidance for the phenomenon of peace and reconciliation. They have the potential to make a unique and substantial contribution to promote peace at the grass roots (as it was the case through the National Peace Program implemented by Caritas Sri Lanka). Indeed, all these religions set out the moral justifications and practical action that can contribute to conflict prevention, peacemaking and peace building. All the religions in today's world affirm the imperatives of cooperation and peaceful human society.

Buddhism provides lessons on pacifism, non-violent opposition, tolerance and moderation. Its emphasis on compassion, suggests useful approaches to eradicate conflict. The teachings of Buddhism are against retaliation, revenge and violence. A preventive lesson offered by Buddhism concerns the value of education in the inculcation of peaceful minds. Buddhism is extremely helpful in reducing tension and conflict that threaten world peace.

Christianity upholds the philosophy of love and instructs its followers to love one another and even their enemies. Christianity exhorts love for the neighbours even if there is hatred, refuses retaliation, revenge and violence and pleads in favours of creating peace and harmony on this earth as an obligation for all people who of faith.

It is here that the religious leaders have an important role to play in motivating and mobilising the faithful to work and aspire for peace ad harmony in the society.

It is in this context that the Religious leaders in particular the Buddhists and the Catholics have to motivate and mobilise the political leaders to work for peace and promote harmony in the society. They must promote the value that humanity needs to develop the mindset that love alone can be the ultimate saviour of this strife-torn, terror targeted Sri Lanka.

Time has come to assert the courage of non-violence and to reinforce by spiritual and philosophical underpinning the global efforts to fight and overcome violence and

terrorism through dialogue and tolerance not only as followers of faith, but as a way of life in the interest of building a harmonious community.

The Religious leaders have a key role to play in the national reconciliation process in the post war context. As religious leaders they have the possibility to convince the faithful to work for peace and speaking with a single voice they must be able convince the believers to work for peace and harmony.

A certain number of activities can be initiated by the religious leaders:

- Organise a national inter-religious peace and reconciliation day once a month to bring together people of all faith along with their religious leaders to promote dialogue at the grassroots.
- All religious leaders to meet the political leaders and dialogue with them for promoting peace and social harmony.
- All Faith based organisations to integrate the peace dimension in the development programs and promote life dialogue.
- Create an inter-religious platform for dialogue at the national level and also in the provinces to promote peace communities at the grassroot level.

Conclousion

Religion plays an important role in Asia and contributes to peace and harmony and in some case they are also factors of tension and division among different religious and ethnic groups.

The role of religion is important in the present post war situation in Sri Lanka. Diplomacy along is not sufficient to build peace and harmony in this war torn nation. Religion and its human values are very important to promote togetherness among the two communities.

The universal value of love and tolerance contained in the four religious traditions {Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam} will contribute to build a society of social harmony based on justice and human dignity.

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