

## EVANGELIZATION IN THE MULTI-CULTURAL AND PLURI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF SRI LANKA\*

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### *I Introduction*

The dynamism of mission and of evangelization in Sri Lanka in the next few decades will be determined by the type of relationship that Christianity seeks to cultivate with the followers of other religions; and by the spirit of integration that the Christian religion endeavours to establish with the cultures that support and sustain these religions. Committed as it is to an active partnership in the promotion of justice and peace, freedom and human dignity, fellowship and fraternity,<sup>1</sup> Christianity in Sri Lanka cannot continue to toil in splendid isolation for the salvation of humanity. As a bearer, promoter and announcer of the TRUTH, the Church must openly manifest its willingness to be at the service of TRUTH, no matter who utters it or from where it is uttered.

In Sri Lanka, the phenomena of religious pluralism and multiculturalism are inextricably interwoven into the social fabric. Hence a realistic vision or project of evangelization for the coming decade and beyond cannot afford to ignore the complex and assertive religio-cultural ferment. In order that our reflections be pastorally relevant and realistic, it is important that we draw attention to the situation that obtains in Sri Lanka at present. The numerous national issues and problems faced by as Sri Lankans, as believers and followers of Christ demand and require a meaningful and an authentic Christian response. This response to the contextual reality must truly and fittingly correspond to the needs and exigencies that are generated from within this context. The present national situation with its multi-faceted challenges and conflicts, with its problems and prospects, agonies and achievements should therefore be the proper matrix of the church's pastoral concern and missionary action. Of pertinence here is the observation made by the Catholic Bishops of Sri Lanka that it is within this context of strife and strain, poverty and pain, death and destruction, the Church inclusive of its

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years the official Catholic leadership has quite strongly articulated the church's commitment to fundamental human rights and values. See among others the following pastoral letters issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, *Towards the Re-building of the Sri Lanka Nation*, (Pentecost 1984), pp. 1-3, 20-35; *The Nation in Crisis*, (April 1984), pp. 1-10; *Church in Sri Lanka in the face of the Growing Poverty of our People*, and *Catholic Bishops Support Statement of the Maha Sangha (The Great Council of Buddhist Monks)*, in: *Quest* 100 (1989), pp. 28-36.



leadership should discover its evangelical and ministerial identity.<sup>2</sup> The pastoral leadership both lay and ordained is called with the rest of the Christian communities to discover the manifold dimensions of the Church's ministry of evangelization within this turbulent national context.<sup>3</sup> It is within this existential frame-work that the church is called to enunciate God's abiding presence and proclaim or listen to God's message and celebrate the "memorial of God's saving action". The present national context is the proper *locus* within which the Good News can be announced by word and action, by being and doing and by sharing and self sacrifice – with all that it demands and with all that it involves.

In the Sri Lankan *Social ensemble*<sup>4</sup> the religio-cultural component wields a strong and decisive influence on national life as it does in other Asian countries. The dynamic and determinant role played by the religio-cultural factors within the Sri Lankan social mosaic also demands that these factors are studied and interpreted not in isolation but within the context of their on-going interactions with other social functions and realities. Experience teaches us that multiculturalism and religious pluriformity are integral aspects of Sri Lanka's ethno-social behaviour, communal life and history. Religion and culture permeate every strand of societal life whether it be political, economic, commercial or educational. Religion and culture continue to govern the daily life, guide the value-systems and direct the decision making processes of the people at their individual, family, communal and social levels.

The church's vision and thrust for evangelization should therefore meet creatively these realistic challenges posed by the plurality of religions and cultures within the frame-work of their continuous interactions with all facets of an evolving and emerging social milieu. Within the Sri Lankan social arena pluralism is not confined only to the religio-cultural realm. Rather in all its diverse implications pluralism is increasingly becoming an integral component of Sri Lanka's ethno-social politics and polity.<sup>5</sup>

Sri Lanka is not the only nation blessed with religious and cultural diversity. Ethno-social and religio-cultural pluralism is an inexhaustible Asian socio-spiritual resource that has been grossly neglected and at times even denigrated by the evangelizing Church in the early stages of its missionary history in Asia.

<sup>2</sup> See the first two pastoral letters mentioned above.

<sup>3</sup> Some recent issues of the bimonthly *Social Justice* published by the Centre for Society and Religion give a good account of the situation that prevails in Sri Lanka at present, see esp. nos. 30–40.

<sup>4</sup> By the term *social ensemble* we refer to the whole gamut of social realities and functions (such as political, economic, commercial, educational, religious, cultural etc.) that go to constitute a given society.

<sup>5</sup> See *A Charter for Democracy in Sri Lanka*, The Presidential Secretariat, Colombo, p. 2ff (year of publication not given).



Compelled by historical circumstances and prompted by "a new focus on evangelization"<sup>6</sup> in recent years many churches in Asia have ventured to discover this untapped resource by promoting the dialectical process of inter-religious dialogue and inculturation as integral to the ministry of evangelization and to the building up of a truly local church. In spite of the uniqueness of the Sri Lankan social ensemble within the Asian mosaic, the Sri Lankan church has much to receive and give to the sister churches of Asia and to the world-church at large, in the areas of inter-religious dialogue and inculturation. Therefore any serious reflection on the ministry of evangelization particularly in reference to religio-cultural pluralism must draw serious attention to the wider Asian pastoral and missionary spectrum. In terms of religio-cultural pluralism Sri Lanka is a microcosm of the macro-Asian reality. The suggestion that inculturation and inter-religious dialogue must lead to the initiation of a more radical process of "enreligionization",<sup>7</sup> is as applicable to Sri Lanka as it is to the wider context of Asia.

## *II Religion and culture in the Sri Lankan social ensemble*

The symbiotic union of religion and culture within the Sri Lankan social ensemble constitute a monolith that is in perfect conformity with Paul Tillich's perceptive assertion that "religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion".<sup>8</sup> For example from the time of its entry into Sri Lanka Buddhism, which today is the religion of over 68 per cent of the nation's population manifested an extra-ordinary spirit of accommodation to the local religio-cultural realities.<sup>9</sup> It has assimilated unto itself the Sinhala ethno-lingual and socio-cultural elements to such an intimate degree and depth that today the Sinhala population seek to identify itself as an ethno-cultural bloc that is moulded and galvanized by the Buddhist religious ethos. Almost the same can also be said of Tamil culture and Saivism.<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact in common parlance in Jaffna, the word "Tamil" and the terms "Hindu or Saivite" are used interchangeably. As for the Moslems<sup>11</sup> it is their religion that is claimed to

<sup>6</sup> See M. AMALADOSS, "Evangelization in Asia: A New Focus?", in: *Vidyajyoti* 51 (1987), pp. 7-28. Also A. J. V. CHANDRAKANTHAN, "Asian Bishop's Approach to Evangelization", in: *Indian Missiological Review* 9 (1987) no. 2, pp. 105-126.

<sup>7</sup> See A. PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, New York 1988, p. 52ff.

<sup>8</sup> P. TILlich, *Theology of Culture*, London 1964, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Revolt in the Temple*, Colombo 1953, pp. 1-10, 436-453, 485-502. Though this work does not present historical data with accuracy, it representative of the Buddhist-Sinhala religio-cultural symbiosis envisioned by Buddhist religious elite of Sri Lanka.

<sup>10</sup> All Saivites in Sri Lanka are Tamils and they worship Lord Siva as the Supreme Being of the Godhead. Today Saivites form about 15 % of the total population of Sri Lanka.

<sup>11</sup> Muslims account for about 8 % of the total population of Sri Lanka and even though a vast majority of them speak Tamil as their first language, they seek a collective identity in their religion.



determine their ethno-cultural identity. For the Christians<sup>12</sup> of Sri Lanka the cultural rupture that was created since the times of the first conversions of the Portuguese period,<sup>13</sup> has continued to widen, up until the times of Vatican II. The post Vatican II efforts to bridge this gulf through cultural adaptation, inculturation and inter-religious dialogue<sup>14</sup> continue to remain an incomplete venture. Productive results on this evangelizational enterprise cannot be reaped in the absence of a "core-to-core dialogue"<sup>15</sup> with Sri Lanka's non-Christian religio-cultural symbiosis.

The religio-cultural symbiosis permeates even the ordinary affairs of daily life and the complex net-work of social customs prevalent in Sri Lanka. Religiousness in Sri Lanka therefore cannot be reduced to an impersonal adherence to sacred doctrines, spiritual exercises and pietistic practices, just as the cultural consciousness of the different ethnic groups cannot be levelled down to customs, symbols and behaviours founded on an ancient tradition. In fact the term *religion* which is itself foreign to the biblical vocabulary, cannot be adequately rendered in Sinhala or Tamil and for that matter in any South Asian language. The term religion is rendered in the Sinhala and Tamil languages as *agama*, *dharmaya*, *dhaham*, *samayam*, *margam*, *marai*, *vedam*, *satyam* etc. refer either to an aspect of religion or to some of its essential scriptural components. These terms contain the sense of religion both as an intrinsic experience and a transcendental phenomenon. They describe religion as an intuitive vision of life and an unending Way to the Truth.

All religions in Sri Lanka are ideologically committed to non-violence and uphold the virtues of compassion and love toward all human beings and the entirety of creation; and emphasize the importance of promoting justice, peace and truth as integral to their respective religious teachings. But in actual practice, religious sentimentality sometimes bordering on fanaticism has made religions to play the role of *agent provocateur* and had led to extremist forms of

<sup>12</sup> In Sri Lanka all Buddhists are Sinhalese and all Saivites are Tamils but the converse is not true because the Christian population in the nation is interspersed among the two ethnic communities. The total population of Christians in Sri Lanka stand approximately at 8 % of whom over 6.5 % are Catholics of the Latin Rite.

<sup>13</sup> See TIKRI ABEYASINGHE, *Jaffna under the Portuguese*, Lake House Investments Ltd., 1986, pp. 53-58; F. HOUTART, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, Bangalore 1974, pp. 113-115, 168-171.

<sup>14</sup> *The Draft Documents* prepared for the Sri Lankan National Synod (1968-69) and the Acts of the National Synod published under the title *After Vatican II*, gave some brief guide-lines about inter-religious dialogue and cultural adaptation. There was hardly any systematic effort made to put the synodal proposals into practice particularly in the area of inter-religious relations. In fact except for a statement made in Feb. 1979 by the Bishops and Major Superiors of Religious Congregations at the close of the Mission Conscientization Seminar, the issue of inter-religious dialogue has not been given any importance in any of the Pastoral letters and Statements of the Bishops Conference.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this see A. PIERIS, "Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism", in: *Cross Currents* 37 (1987), pp. 47-75.



violence and hatred between the various religious groups.<sup>16</sup> Individually and collectively the four major religions professed in Sri Lanka have often failed to be an emollient of violence and destruction. In situations of ethnic, communal and religious riots and mayhem, even the official religious leaderships have responded either with silence or with pious platitudes about prayer, penance and peace. New and numerous are the challenges to be faced by all four religions as they enter the threshold of the third millennium. Whether the religious leadership has the far-sighted vision to encounter these challenges in a spirit of inter-religious unity and harmony in the name of human welfare and humanitarian service, remains to be seen.

As for cultures, for several centuries the Sinhala and Tamil cultures have brought out their creativity in such aesthetic forms as art, architecture, sculpture, literature, poetry, drama, dance, decoration, music etc. But culture cannot be confined merely within the sphere of aesthetics and arts. As an indispensable component of social and communal life, culture is also subject to progress and growth or deterioration and deformation. In Asian societies it is often the religious ideology that goes to monitor the progress and regress of cultural change. Drawing sustenance from the religious ethos, culture provides an atmosphere conducive for all persons in a society to live and grow into human wholeness and maturity. In this manner it promotes human sensitivity and communal solidarity. In this respect it remains to be seen whether Sri Lankan cultures in spite of several centuries of religious purification and social transformation have truly become mature and human in the best sense of the terms.

In the post-independence period the two dominant cultures with their religious vigour at the backdrop, have collided more than once. They find themselves going through a new spirit of resurgence and rejuvenation. This is further bedevilled by the criss-crossing of alien cultural traits through mass-media, migration and tourism. Some of the native cultural values stand challenged and changed in the face of this alien intrusion. This complex cultural labyrinth with its paradoxical characteristics is the locus of evangelization. And it is within this complex cultural matrix that we should find answers to questions about the possibility and prospects for inculturation and contextualization.

### *III Christianity and religio-cultural pluralism*

#### *1 Christianity and the religio-cultural symbiosis*

A critical examination of Christianity's relationship with other religions in the Sri Lankan social ensemble should be situated within a proper historical context. There is hardly any disagreement on the assertion that the model of the church established in Sri Lanka was one that was transplanted from

<sup>16</sup> See R. L. STIRRAT, "The Riots and the Roman Catholic Church in Historical Perspective", in: *Sri Lanka: Change and Crisis*, J. MANOR (ed.), London 1984, pp. 196-213.



Europe with European cultural embodiments, structures and expressions. The missionary and ecclesial tradition they represented and promoted had no previous experience of religious pluralism and much less of inter-religious dialogue. Its vision and thrust of evangelization went hand in hand with an aggressive denouncing of the religio-cultural symbiosis encountered by them, whether it be Sinhala-Buddhism or Tamil-Saivism. Since Christianity entered into Sri Lanka accompanied by a colonial and commerce-oriented political power, it enjoyed considerable political protection and patronage. This further entrenched the religio-cultural superiority of the evangelizing church *vis-a-vis* the evangelized.

Two classical examples are representative of the attitude of religio-spiritual and socio-cultural supremacy maintained by the early evangelizers. One is Fr. Belchior of Lisbon OFM who worked as a missionary in Sri Lanka in the mid-16th century and the other was Mgr. Giuseppe Bravi, a Benedictine monk who was Vicar Apostolic of Colombo in mid-19th century. The former represents an attitude *ad extra ecclesiam* and the latter *ad intra*. Fr. Belchior's "missionary actions" are expressive of the attitude manifested by the evangelizing church toward the native religions and cultures of Sri Lanka in the Portuguese period; while the assertive position held by Mgr. Bravi indicates the attitude shown toward the infant Church of Sri Lanka during the British period. It had been recorded that when Fr. Belchior of Lisbon was taken prisoner by the king of Jaffna, and the latter demanded of him why he had destroyed the temples and the images of the gods in his kingdom, Belchior replied, "that being dedicated to the devil who had no right to possess anything on earth, they were an insult to the glory of God, the only Lord of the universe; and he, a servant of God, had destroyed them."<sup>17</sup>

Mgr. Bravi's brazen statement was made in the context of the recruitment and formation of the native clergy in Sri Lanka. He went so far as to say: "tant que Bravi sera eveque jamais ses mains s'imposeront sur une tete noire [...]".<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly such an attitude reveals an obstinate assertiveness of the European religio-cultural supremacy over anything that is local or native. Fr. Belchior's actions give a clear illustration that in the Portuguese period both the Buddhist and Saivite leadership encountered a formidable spiritual foe in the persons of the Catholic missionaries. It would be too presumptuous to disregard this historical image and to think that our non-Christian brethren have deleted these from their collective memories. As a matter of fact, in the not too distant past, a month-long controversy was sparked off by an article written by a Catholic priest in *The Ceylon Daily News*, then a leading English daily. The article was written along the direction of inter-religious dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See FREI PAOLO DA TRINIDADE OFM, *Conquista Espiritual de Oriente*, Transl. by Felix Lopes OFM, Lisbon 1962, vol 3, pp. 33 and 67. Also S. GNANA PRAGASAR, *A History of the Catholic Church in Ceylon: Period of Beginnings 1505-1602*, Colombo 1924, p. 136.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted by CARLOS M. D'MELO SJ, *The Recruitment and Formation of the Native Clergy in India*, Lisbon 1955, p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> See *Buddhist Christian Dialogue: A Controversy*, Centre for Society and Religion, Colombo 1990, pp. 6-14, 23-82 (Editor's name not given).



Despite the church's gestures of inter-religious cordiality, many Buddhists and Hindus have their suspicions about our enthusiasm for inculturation and inter-religious dialogue. Of pertinence is a remark made by a buddhist when cultural adaptation was first advocated and attempted in Sri Lanka. He wrote: "[...] the so called indigenization appears to be a matter of tactics rather than of appreciation and admiration of things indigenous. In other words it appears to be a camouflage resorted to with a view to breaking down the apperceptive mass of Buddhists and to proselytising them by using the vast financial resources of the Church [...]"<sup>20</sup>

## 2 *From discord to concord: The need for dialogue*

Motivated by the zealous conviction that the church is the sole vehicle of salvation and induced by the desire to increase its numerical strength, pre-Vatican II Catholicism in Sri Lanka considered other religions and cultures as opposed to the person and message of Christ. Even as late as the 1960s the Catholic officialdom considered the teaching of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam to the students of the respective religions in Catholic schools as an abhorrent act of apostasy.<sup>21</sup> Catholic priests and missionaries studied other religions only to rebut and refute the latter's beliefs, doctrines and practices.<sup>22</sup> The catechetical manuals convincingly taught that visiting places of worship, or taking part in celebrations related to native cultures, or participating in worship and prayer with non-Christians would amount to a serious sin. Inter-religious marriages (disparity of cult) were openly discouraged not to mention the condemnatory judgements pronounced on the followers of other religions without any qualms. This unhappy past characterized by deep scars with hurtful memories is slowly getting healed thanks to some of the recent efforts made along the direction of inter-religious co-operation in common matters of national concern.<sup>23</sup> But a great deal remains to be done along this direction if the church intends to enter into the national stream with all its constituent elements.

The church may be tempted to over-look its historical past as one that is foregone and forgotten. Looking back their past some Christians may even shift the entire blame on to the foreign missionaries forgetting that these missionaries who acted in good faith were children of their times and history. But the basic question is whether the Church can afford to justify and perpetuate a tradition without demonstrating an action-oriented spirit of dialogue and cordiality. Is not the "Assisi event"<sup>24</sup> an apocalyptic fore-runner that should stir the Sri Lankan church for a creative dialogue of life.

<sup>20</sup> G. VITANAGE, "The New Look with a Note: A Comment on Fr. Mervin Fernando's article, 'Is Adaption Outmoded?'" in: *Quest* 4 (1969 Colombo), pp. 80-81.

<sup>21</sup> See F. HOUTART, *Religion and Ideology*, p. 256.

<sup>22</sup> The numerous apologetic tracts and booklets published by S. GNANA PRAGASAR are clear examples to this effect.

<sup>23</sup> See the Pastoral Letters of the Sri Lankan Bishops mentioned in note no. 1.

<sup>24</sup> For more details see *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition, Rome, 3rd November 1986.



*Dialogue should be seen as the SACRAMENT of a living and growing inter-religious relationship*, because dialogue is SIGN of a healthy relationship and in all its human dimensions, dialogue contains and promotes inter-personal and inter-communal intimacy. Any healthy and growing relationship is subject to change and criticism, tension and turmoil, development and deterioration. Inter-personal, inter-communal, inter-cultural and inter-religious relationships are no exception to this natural process. Dialogue is an honest and efficient means of promoting a relationship. When members of different religious professions meet together as partners it is already a sign of an existing cordiality and concord which gets strengthened as the boundaries of dialogue gets wider and deeper in terms of the social involvements and commitments of religions as the spiritual conscience-keepers of society. Christianity can spearhead a social transformation and help to alleviate the wanton blood-shed and destruction in Sri Lanka only by entering into a "living relationship" with other religions. There are various avenues open to the church to achieve this goal, but the question remains whether the church is willing to make use of them. For example Christian communities in Sri Lanka do not live in isolated ghettos, they merge and mingle with people of different religious professions in their every day life, in family and social gatherings at work place and office, there are thousands of children and students who live, study and grow with large numbers of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim students, but the church has failed to use these fora of actual life-contacts to nurture a true inter-religious dialogue of life.

Already in the colonial era many Buddhist and Hindu religious reformers sought to revive and rejuvenate their respective religions by internalizing some of the positive elements found in Christianity. For instance the orderliness of Christian worship, its method of preaching and teaching, its institutional efficiency and hierarchical structure were among some of the elements that Buddhism and Saivism absorbed into their religious systems. But the spirit in which it was done had a negative motive. Today the situation has considerably changed, other religions manifest a greater spirit of openness and accommodation. Besides, in the context of the present situation that prevails in Sri Lanka, inter-religious dialogue has become an urgency and a practical necessity catapulted by a realistic humanitarian concern arising from the ethno-cultural divide.

Against the backdrop of the prevailing ethnic conflict it may be said that in recent years the Sinhala bishops have expressed stronger desire to work with the Buddhist religious leadership while the Tamil bishops seemed to have established a good rapport with the Hindu or Saivite religious leadership. Noteworthy is also the fact that the inter-religious cordiality experienced today between the different religions was able to overcome the crippling divisions along ethnic lines. This form of a contextually-inspired, inter-religious cordiality is an excellent opportunity for the leaders of the four major religions to work out ways and means of overcoming the destructive divisions and to forge a common front to fight against all forces of social oppression



that keep the nation and the people from attaining the fullness of human life.

Even though the bishops of Sri Lanka have taken a bold initiative by articulating their intention to collaborate with the other religious leaders, the misconceptions pronounced and preached by the Catholic hierarchy still remains to be revoked and mended. The advice of the bishops to the laity to join hand in hand with the followers of other religions will bear no fruit unless the proper atmosphere is provided to the laity to appreciate the spiritual wealth and richness of other faiths. It is true that in recent times several efforts and initiatives have been undertaken by a few native priests and theologians to foster a positive approach to the faith and spirituality that these religions are able to offer to enhance Christian life. But the prophetic voice of the theologians are rarely heeded by the laity who for centuries have been made to depend on the hierarchical church for their religious knowledge and growth. This sense of dependence is also further reinforced by the traditional spirit of religiousness and an unquestionable respect for religious authorities. Given these and other over-bearing institutional dimensions of the Sri Lankan church, the advice and instructions of the bishops to the laity concerning inter-religious relationship and co-operation have better chances of producing good effects.

In this context, the leadership of the Church must make a concerted effort to put into practice the valuable insights and recommendations regarding the promotion of religious dialogue suggested in the many pastoral statements of the Federation of the Asian Bishops Conferences.

Another important aspect of religious dialogue is to instruct the Christian communities to meaningfully integrate into their life some of the significant spiritual and human values promoted by non-Christian religions. This can be effectively done by incorporating relevant aspects of the doctrines and teachings of other religions into the catechetical programme designed for Christian students and adults. It is truly regrettable that none of the vernacular catechetical books published with the approval of the hierarchy or published by the national and diocesan catechetical commissions, deal with at least an introductory exposition of the beliefs and practices of other religions and their human, spiritual and theological values.

### *3 Inculturation: Theological basis*

An excessive "ecclesialization" of soteriology that served as a powerful catalyst of missionary activity or of evangelization in the pre-Vatican II era has undergone a radical change. Missionaries who then laboured with the firm and uncritical conviction that there was "no salvation outside the Church" begin to recognize the mysterious presence and action of God in all that is human and in all that goes to promote the values of truth, justice and peace as integral to human wholeness.

The second Vatican Council's positive recognition of other religions as channels of sanctification has also had a profound impact on the church's relationship toward those cultures once designated as "non-Christian". This



recognition has opened a new horizon in the understanding and interpretation of the universal salvific plan of God. Mission is perceived more in terms of effective Christian presence and action than a matter of baptisms or the expansion of Christendom. The task of evangelization is presented not merely as the communication of the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to all people but is also explicated as continuing the *saving action* of Christ in history, at every age and place.

The relationship that the church seeks to establish with native cultures through the initiation of the process of inculturation should emerge from the realization that the entire human race has the same origin and destiny. The native religions with their cultural and traditional values and heritage must be viewed as included in God's universal saving plan. God's ubiquitous presence in and through creation is yet another biblical experience that serves as a powerful impetus for inculturation.

The New Testament speaks of various forms of the presence of Christ in the human family. The Church affirms, proclaims and celebrates this unfailing presence of Christ in the world and in humanity is also called to be a SIGN and instrument of the reality of Christ's mystery. The Church can never exhaust the total reality that is Christ but neither can the Church downplay it's vocation to be a SIGN OF SALVATION to humanity. We shall return to this point later.

By his Resurrection, Christ rose from the tomb of particularity into a world of universality – death, the final curtain of his human soteriological predicament was torn open thus allowing the resplendent radiance of Easter glory to shine forth. All religions and cultures, races and creeds that help to humanize this sinful world stood purified, redeemed and exalted by this unlimited and unfathomable Paschal Mystery. The presence of the Risen Lord therefore transcends the narrow walls of the Church and enlightens all who seek him with a sincere heart.

In the best sense of the word "inculturation" is an affirmation of this mystery of Christ's ubiquitous and active presence by means of the church's proclamation, celebration and participation in the world. Post conciliar efforts toward inculturation were confined to the embellishment and enhancement of cult and ritual. Discussions on inculturation was often aimed at identifying the "essence of Christian faith" so that it can be adorned with cultural elements dissociated from non-Christian religions. It was done with little realization that the notion of an "essence of Christian faith" stripped of its cultural expressions and experiences is as unrealistic as seeking to remove cultural elements from non-Christian religions without paying heed to their symbiotic union, we have referred to earlier.

The Christian faith has been lived and handed over, proclaimed and celebrated only and always in definite socio-cultural environments, its form cannot be reduced to an abstract essence. No universal essence of Christianity can be had without it being affected, shaped and conditioned by some form of cultural expression. While recognizing that the WORD MADE FLESH and the faith induced by this incarnational mystery had been shaped and re-expressed



by a wide variety of peoples down the ages, one cannot also refrain from articulating that the same faith has the power to animate and transform the religio-cultural entities it comes into contact with. It has been observed that "the universality of Christian faith is affirmed not by denying or transcending particularities but by experiencing the universal and the transcendent in the particular or in the *concretum* of a determined cultural context."<sup>25</sup> With a predominantly non-Christian majority (over 92 per cent of the total population) inculturation in Sri Lanka should be seen within the wider context of inter-religious relationships. Instead of getting a private loan of cultural elements from other religions to enhance Christian life and worship, inculturation should become the unending, free and proud celebration of a healthy inter-religious and inter-cultural relationship that is well-established and nurtured.

#### *IV Jesus Community and the Sri Lankan communities*

Dialogue and inculturation seen within the context of the on-going mission and evangelization of the church, raises certain pastoral questions that touch the foundations of "ecclesiality". The motive or goal of dialogue is certainly not directed toward conversion of non-Christians. But we do come across a large number of people who for obvious reasons hesitate to be part of the institutional church but desire to follow the person and message of Christ. They do not wish to be baptized as members of the Church but express profound admiration for the teachings of Christ and seek some form of membership in His Kingdom. They experience the presence of God in reading his WORD with devotion and faith.

Then there are others who are our dialogue partners from a distance. These are non-Christians who regularly visit our churches and shrines, join the Christians communities during some major feasts and festivals like Easter and Christmas. When the Word of God is proclaimed and preached these persons listen attentively, with devotion and faith they follow every aspect of the Eucharistic celebration but officially we have only one instruction to give them, i. e. we ask them not to receive the body and blood of Christ. But the question that remains to be answered is whether the community of Jesus allows any space for these people.

A general survey of the Gospels seem to give us an affirmative answer.<sup>26</sup> The Gospels clearly indicate that membership in the larger community of Jesus was not defined by legal principles and constitutional laws. Not all the members who belonged to this community of Jesus had the same degree of

<sup>25</sup> See F. M. WILFRED, "World Religions and Christian Inculturation", in: *Indian Theological Studies* 25 (1988), p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Here I have developed on the idea originally expressed by F. M. WILFRED in "Local Church: Practices and Theologies, Reflections from Asia", in: *SEDOS Bulletin* (April 1990), pp. 98-99.



religious commitment and faith. Jesus' community manifests a striking flexibility and spirit of accommodation in the way it was structured. Men and women, rich and poor, jews and gentiles, they were all welcome in this community. It was a trans-racial, trans-religious, open-ended community. Inclusivism was visible in all its diverse forms.

Among the thousands who followed Jesus one finds a variety of motives and interests. But, from Peter, John and James to the rest of the twelve, and from Nicodemus to Zaccaeus, from the Samaritans to the gentiles, from Mary of Magdalen to the women of Jerusalem who wept for him, one notices that a wide variety of peoples and groups came under the influence of Jesus. The degree and depth of their faith was different and dissimilarly. All this manifest that the community of Jesus was not a closed up group. Within the frame-work of dialogue and our understanding of community as an open-ended group is it possible to think of a different way of being an *ecclesia*?

#### *V Religions and the quest for peace in Sri Lanka*

For Sri Lankan Christians living in a context of disastrous turmoils and devastating human miseries, inter-religious dialogue should not be confined to the comfortable precincts of sacred places and religious mansions. With several thousand homeless, with thousands groaning under the weight of poverty, wanton blood-shed and death, dialogue cannot seek a mere enhancement of academic scholarship or inter-elite cordiality. Dialogue cannot be narrowly understood as spiritually edifying pietistic conversations between religious personnels.

Dialogue should become the effective antidote against our collective sin of conformism and inaction amidst a context of untold human suffering and agony.

All four religions professed by Sri Lankans uphold the value of peace and strive to attain PEACE in its purity and perfection through the practice of meditation and the offering of sacrifices. Peace is sought through prayer and penance. No Christian sacrifice is complete without an actual experience and symbolic sharing of peace which is the parting gift that Jesus gave his followers. He said, "My peace I leave with you and my peace I give unto you". Moslems always greet each other with the age-old custom of wishing peace in all its fullness and richness. The silent and serene sage Gautama Buddha was himself a personification of peace in all its life-giving dimensions.<sup>27</sup> The eightfold path and the four noble truths are prescribed from Buddha's own lived experience of the depth of peace that his followers may also reach the profundity of the everlasting peace of *nibbana* and the *samadhi* of *SHANTHI*.

<sup>27</sup> See A. J. V. CHANDRAKANTHAN, "The Silence of Buddha and his Contemplation of the Truth", in: *Spirituality Today* 40 (1988 Chicago), pp. 350-360.



For a Saivite devotee, no prayer is valid unless it is stamped by the desire to live in peace within oneself, with the whole of creation and with the creator.<sup>28</sup> *Om Shanthi* is sung thrice at the end of prayer and meditation sessions, thus indicating that every prayer is an encounter with the creator and "peace" is the concrete fruit of this encounter.

Despite this rich and realistic theology of peace enshrined in all four religions of Sri Lanka, the people find themselves crushed under the weight and weariness of war. Is this state of affairs not an indictment on our religious professions and practice?

The four religions professed by the Sri Lankans may differ in doctrines and belief systems, these religions may differ even on what they hold and teach about the origin and destiny of man or of creation, but all four religions repeatedly refer to their sacred scriptures as sign-posts of justice, peace and truth. These Holy Books teach about peace as an essential ingredient of religious faith. As a perennial human quest, justice and peace cannot be confined within cult and ritual as sacred symbols devoid of life and vitality. Sailing through the bloody seas of Sri Lanka, it is in the port of peace that the leadership of all four religions can come to anchor and begin their ministry of renewal and reconciliation.

## VI Conclusion

Mission or evangelization is not primarily an affair of men, women or even of the church or Christian communities. It is primarily the mission of God. God is the revealer and giver of the Word. It is his WORD announced by us that has the saving power and the redeeming rigour. The Church is only a committed partner. The mission of God is certainly deeper, wider and greater than the mission of the Church.

The centre and pivotal point of the Church is Christ himself. As a community united in Christ and gathered by His Spirit, the Church is called to represent humanity in its "redeemed" existence. It is for this reason that in the Second Vatican Council the functional role of the Church has been described as a "universal Sacrament of salvation."<sup>29</sup> The Church is thus entrusted with the mission of heralding God's kingdom and summoning all peoples irrespective of the divisions of race class, colour and creed to share the unity and fellowship lived and proclaimed by Christ.

The understanding of the Church as a visible "sign" and a "sacrament" has far-reaching theological implications and consequences for the mission of the Church, especially in the context of inculturation and inter-faith dialogue.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> For more on this see my article "Contemplation in Hindu Spirituality", in: *Living Prayer* 13 (1986 Vermont-USA), pp. 13-18.

<sup>29</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1.

<sup>30</sup> See S. J. EMMANUEL, "Inter-religious Dialogue at a Turning Point", in: *East Asian Pastoral Review* 26 (1989), pp. 350-364.



The universal Church which does not and cannot exist as a visible and perceptible reality in time and space, cannot also be a “visible sign and sacrament of salvation”, but the local churches can and must. This conviction should summon the local church of Sri Lanka to become a real event, by truly incarnating itself in the soil and by entering into the mainstream of social life and expressing its faith and worship from elements drawn from its religio-cultural heritage. Only in this manner can the church offer a genuine and self-effacing service in full solidarity and responsible participation.

The “SIGN” aspect of the local churches unveil an important dimension of Christian life. A sign is something that points to a reality other than itself and often out-side of itself. Spelt out more concretely, a sign becomes functional and relevant by not being self-oriented or self-centred. The sign aspect of the church therefore places the local church of Sri Lanka in a very precarious position. It constantly invites the church for a *kenotic* or emptying experience and calls for an undoing of all forms of triumphalism and self-seeking.

On the other hand, on a more positive note, a sign has an instructional, directive and orientational function. In order to perform these functions powerfully, the church must ceaselessly seek to be a genuine representative of humanity in all its religio-cultural pluriformities and ethno-social diversities. If Christianity confines itself only to a single culture, nation or people, the Church will fail to manifest its true nature as a “universal sacrament of salvation”. It would lack what may be termed as “semiological catholicity”, i. e. universality in its function as a sign.

The universality of Christian faith becomes recognized as a living and functional reality only when it is able to manifest its inexhaustible openness and receptivity among all peoples and cultures. In other words the task of evangelization is not to Christianize Sri Lanka, but to Sri Lankanize the Christian faith, in order that we may cheerfully offer back to the Father, with praise and thanks-giving, the gifts we have received from him as Sri Lankans. That is we wish to adorn the universality of the Church by offering the pluriformity of our ethno-cultural and religious gifts that God himself has bestowed upon this nation and our ancestors.