



03 Fr. Dr. Claude J. Perera OMI,

LSS (Rome), PhD (Leuven), MA (Kelaniya, LK),
Catholic Chaplain and National Coordinator of
the Catholic University Students' Movement of
Sri Lanka (CUSMSL)

THE NEWMAN SOCIETY, Catholic Chaplaincy of
Mary Seat of Wisdom, University of Peradeniya,
Sri Lanka



Sri Lankan Perspectives on Religious Identity and Religious Plurality

The constitution of the Democratic Social Republic of Sri Lanka guarantees the basic religious freedom to all religions. The Constitution No. 9 says, "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)." These rights include:

- (a) the freedom of speech and expression including publication;
- (b) the freedom of peaceful assembly;
- (c) the freedom of association;
- (d) the freedom to form and join a trade union;
- (e) the freedom, either by himself or in association with others and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching;
- (f) the freedom by himself or in association with others to enjoy and promote his own culture and to use his own language;
- (g) the freedom to engage by himself or in association with others in any lawful occupation, profession, trade, business or enterprise;
- (h) the freedom of movement and of choosing his residence within Sri Lanka; and
- (i) the freedom to return to Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, according to CC 10, "Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice."

No Person shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. (CC 10)

According to CC 10 "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to

- (1) the equal protection of the law. No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds
- (2) of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any one of such grounds:

The above shows that on the basis of the Constitution of Sri Lanka there is freedom of religion to all. Religious identity of all is guaranteed in the Constitution. But the problem is whether this situation is found **ALWAYS** in practice. In general, the answer is affirmative, but there are particular cases of violation.

For this we have to understand the demographic situation and the historical circumstances of Sri Lanka. Statistics on religious affiliation can be tabulated as follows:

Religion	Number of People	Percentage
Buddhism	14,272,056	70.1
Hinduism	2,561,299	12.58
Islam	1,967,523	9.7
Christianity (all denominations)	1,552,161	7.6

Of these, Buddhists and Hindus have coexisted from the ancient times. Muslims came to Sri Lanka in the 7th-8th centuries CE. Catholicism came with the colonization of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) by the Portuguese in 1505 CE and Dutch Reformed Church in 1656 with the advent of the Dutch and Anglicanism with the coming of the British in 1896. On the part of the majority Sinhalese Buddhist extremists, there is a superiority feeling that they were the original inhabitants of the island nation and therefore, they are its owners. The others are infiltrators who came in later and who have little or no right to live in this country. This is particularly so among the Buddhist fundamentalists and those led by them. Similarly, all adherents belonging to various religions feel that their doctrinal claims are superior. Generally, there is little respect for each other's beliefs. In such a situation, interreligious dialogue is practically impossible. But the post Vatican Catholic attitude of tolerance has been something very positive. Besides, there is no fundamentalism in the Catholic Church. But such sympathy and benevolence are interpreted by fundamentalist and chauvinist elements in non-Christian religions as subtle forms of proselytism. Politicians try to please everyone for their own political advantage and cause of religion suffers because of this.

Christianity is identified with the West. Although Jesus was an Easterner, Christianity is identified with the West since it was brought to Asia by Western colonialists. There is a terrible antipathy towards whatever is associated with colonialism although they did also many good things. On the other hand, although five centuries have passed, traumatic memories of persecution of Buddhists and Hindus by the Colonial Portuguese, Dutch and British is deep seated in the sub-conscious of the populace. They still recall to mind the events related to forced conversions as well as public apologetic debates of the 19th century between Protestants and Buddhists (e.g. Pānadurā Wāda) at which the Buddhist won, and make hate statements so that the bitterness continues while affirming their superiority over Christianity. Apart from fanatic members of the laity, the biggest drawback is the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim clergymen who have become bitter sowers of anti-Christian seeds.

The Catholic Church as well as the Mainline Protestant Churches have since 1960s adopted a tolerant attitude and have been engaged in dialogue with religions, particularly with Buddhists and Hindus. In Sri Lanka clergymen like Fr. Michael Rodrigo, omi (who was martyred in 1987), Archbishop Christopher Bonjean, omi, Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, OSB, Anglican Bishops Lakshman Wickramasinghe and Lakdasa de Mel, Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, omi, Fr. Aloysius Peiris, SJ, Fr. Paul Casperz, SJ, Fr. Paul Sathkunamayagam, SJ, Rev. Lynn de Silva and Rev. Yohan Dewananda (Anglican Church). The dialogue with Buddhism in which they were involved was a sincere one in search of the truth. They approached the question

without Catholic superiority or with filthy gains of proselytism. There was a dialogue of life, social commitment as well as intellectual pursuit. This is not the case with Christian fundamentalist sects whose sole intent is conversion through proselytism. Such attempts have had violent backlashes from non-Christians.

Problem areas related to interreligious dialogue can be listed as follows:

- Christians cannot erect a place of worship, or an object of veneration like a statue, cross etc as and when they wish. Strict procedures are adopted in getting permission for such things which are often difficult and fruitless. Even when such permission is obtained there have been related instances of burning and vandalism.
- Although there is no constitutional obstacle, a Christian can never be accepted as a President or a Prime Minister of the country. Christians are free to hold any other position in the state sector.
- Sometimes, publications and media coverage of offensive, derogatory and provocative nature come out.
- There are sporadic instances of violence among various religious groups on various issues, though these are not regular occurrences.
- Hate statements are common between Buddhists and Muslims and it is on the increase all the time.
- The ethos and moral values propagated are one thing and their practice of them is unrelated to theory.
- Empty ritualism devoid of the demands of justice, equality and freedom
- This kind of hostile spirit is prevalent even among some of the younger people.

Conclusion

We Catholics are serious and sincere about dialogue with other religions. For me it looks that Catholics are the only ones who want and work towards it. Other religions are not interested in such ventures. But that does not mean that we give up. It is our firm hope that someday the truth will make all humans free and make humanity realize our common brotherhood and sisterhood.