



## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND RECONCILIATION?

We used to call him 'PLO=karaya', for he happened to be the only Sri Lankan among our friends who spoke up for the then suspect organization looked down as a terrorist outfit. He in fact set up some support group called PLO-Friendship Association or some similar name. A man with a slight limp and looking almost African, he remained faithful to Palestine. This was in mid-sixties when he joined the Official Language Department as a translator. What he did since then was a mystery to me until I read about him recently in newspapers. I am referring to the Sri Lankan Representative in the Palestine Territory, Dr. T. Jayasinghe by name. Why I thought of him all of a sudden is because of a pious act of his which I would not normally associate with a man of his caliber. He had apparently invited three Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka to visit Palestine and meet religious dignitaries there and Christian clergy in Jerusalem as well. The monks were led by a professor in the University of Kelaniya. They had met not only the Sri Lankan representative in Ramallah, but also visited the Church of Nativity where Jesus was born. I would say this was rather uncharacteristic of my old friend, but I admire his gesture at this time in the development of a culture of trust and reconciliation among the different religious groups in Sri Lanka. I had by that time read a number of reports on similar activities in various parts of the island. The first was that the priest in a church in Welimada had invited the local Buddhist monk to deliver the Vesak sermon at his church. The second was from Colombo where a Buddhist monk, Ven. Sumana, addressed the children at the Centre for Society and Religion at the invitation of a church centre which did an outreach program for Colombo homeless children. The report appearing in The Union of Catholic Asia News (02 June 2010) says that the monk explained the five Buddhist precepts to 20 children.

These reports reminded me of a news item in a Sri Lankan paper sometime back, about the celebration of Wesak in Negombo, a predominantly Catholic city. According to the report there had been unprecedented cooperation and friendship between the Buddhists and Catholics, both lay and clergy, on this festive day. Not only did the Catholic laymen and women organize the activities in temples, there were a number of Catholic Nuns giving flowers to the devotees to offer at the shrine. Some of the Catholic laymen interviewed by the press had explained that they in fact had been active in Buddhist temple organizations for a long time and found no problem in conducting their own affairs as good Catholics. More surprising for me of course was the interest taken by nuns in looking after the needs of their Buddhist neighbours. I wonder how much the

Buddhist clergy appreciated this gesture on the part of their Christian counterparts. Why I raise this question or the doubt is because I remember that not long ago we used to hear voices of discord and even antipathy from monks, with an Australia-based one among them. I can recall a Sri Lankan medical practitioner who wrote a series of articles to newspapers pointing out the un-Buddhistic nature of his approach and the policies he advocated. To put it clearly the particular monk had advised the Sinhala people to produce more and more children in order to ensure a Buddhist majority in the island. What a simplistic solution I thought even at that time. When I met this particular doctor some years later he was still critical of the monk.

What some sincere Buddhists fail to recognize or refuse to accept is that history cannot be changed and we cannot go on finding fault with a certain section of the population for what was done by their forefathers. Even if the actions were committed by the current generation itself one has to



draw a line to say this is enough. It is not possible to reconcile with others if we are not prepared to forget or at least to forgive, there will never be peace and harmony in the world. And there is no better religion to offer this message than Buddhism we profess to follow. I use this expression to highlight an intrinsic weakness in our attitude to other religions. It is not to pinpoint some culprit and put him on the mat, but to stress the fact that we have become selective in our treatment of other religions and religious groups. In short we cannot get over the feeling that ours is the best and the only true faith. Who are we to pass judgment on every thought and faith in the world? If the believer or the follower of one religion conducts himself as a model citizen of the world and leads a highly useful and productive life, who can say that his religion is bad or untrue?

In an unwanted excitement and exhilaration about religion, we tend to forget some basic facts about it. It is not meant to be a mass campaign to rally the troops for some military exercise or to bring about some well-thought out social reforms. We ignore perhaps the most basic issue, that religion is something highly personal and whatever salvation or deliverance we hope for, is not to be achieved through a mass organization or campaign. Each of us individually has to look for and find that illusive deliverance or salvation. In that exercise numbers do not matter. One's attention ought to be on oneself. It is when this basic truth is ignored or overlooked that we think of numbers to take on some imaginary enemy who has to be vanquished if

we are to gain salvation.

How many lives had been sacrificed in the past whether in the Crusades or at the stake for not believing what was taught by the priests? I remember how I went to the extent of approving the suggestion that we must not visit Taj Mahal because that would be supporting the Muslims who were responsible for the destruction of the famous Buddhist university of Nalanda (We had just visited it), so many years ago. Although my approval was temporary, I felt the gravity of the whole issue, where masses can be mobilized to kill and destroy anything that is 'enemies'. Buddhism can claim to be the only religion that did not promote war for its protection or propagation. Buddhists can still be provoked by silly arguments or scare campaigns. What Buddhists have to learn to practice is to behave as Buddhists so that they can bring about peace and harmony among people of different faiths and beliefs. Is this the message that so many sermons and preachers have failed to deliver to many Sri Lankans?

The instances described above offer a glimmer of hope at least in the Sri Lankan context. With the uncharacteristic gesture by the Sri Lanka Representative in Palestine, we are bound to see the process taking off on a world scale.

What made me look forward to this type of development was another report in an American newspaper. New York Times had some time back published what could be termed a 'Wesak' Message from the Dalai Lama, in which the Tibetan spiritual leader explains his background and hopes for world harmony and peace. His message appears under the caption 'Towards a True Kinship of Faith.' This is what he says. 'When I was a boy in Tibet, I felt that my own religion must be the best and other faiths were somewhat inferior. Now I see how naïve I was and how dangerous the extremes of religious intolerance can be today.'

He goes on to say some useful things. 'Finding common ground among faiths can help us bridge needless divides at a time when unified action is more crucial than ever. As a species we must embrace the oneness of humanity as we face global issues like pandemics, economic crises and ecological disasters. At that scale our response must be as one.'

He stresses the importance of harmony. This is what he says about it.

'Harmony among faiths has become an essential ingredient of peaceful coexistence in our world. From this perspective, mutual understanding among these traditions I not merely the business of religious believers; It matters for the welfare of humanity as a whole.'

The message from the Dalai Lama is really useful for Sri Lanka for two reasons, or because of two positive developments. One is the very productive exercise described earlier which speak about ordinary men and women going about their daily business with no imaginary enemies or obstacles among

their compatriots belonging to various religious groups. How Catholics in Negombo rallied round their Buddhist neighbours to help in their rituals must serve as example for rabble-rousers still raising the religious cry for disruptive purposes. This is something any civic minded person should abhor and try to prevent. If the opportunities offered by these examples are not missed, things ought to work well for our motherland.

The second development I refer to is the more important situation the country is now placed in since the defeat of terrorism achieved at a high human cost. One has to appreciate the sacrifices made by thousands of young men and women in that struggle. If the political atmosphere they created in their own risk, is not made use of for developments in other fields, the entire country will have to share the blame for that failure. What one has to remember is that scars of a war cannot be easily erased, for unknown reasons may exist for people to bear grudges and wait for an opportunity to do something damaging for the whole population. The most important factor for harmony at the current moment would be the amity and understanding among all ethnic groups irrespective of numbers and location. All the people in the land ought to be speaking of national unity in one voice.

One has to accept the fact that this is difficult to achieve and is still work-in progress. If religious harmony is assured, I feel half the problem is solved. This is an area where the monks and priests can play a very big role. I remember one of my Melbourne friends describing a religious ceremony in Ampitiya where he spent his childhood. Being a devout Hindu, he found no difficulty, he said, in reading the Buddhist stanzas (printed in Tamil script) distributed among all Hindus that had gathered there. What one should hope for is that type of harmony among all groups so that the county can look forward to real development, development of people with a purpose, in order to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity. What one has to understand is that Buddhism, if correctly followed, tells him or her that we have to treat every human being with respect irrespective of his or her colour or creed. All are equal before the law, and why not apply that basic principle to our every day thoughts, and look at individuals as worthy humans who are entitled to carry their own thoughts and beliefs with them without anyone's permission. When we begin to respect all individuals as worthy human beings, we cannot find fault with any one or not believing in what we say or believe. That is the attitude and approach we must adopt in handling issues that involve others, whether religious or otherwise.

Let us hope that our kith and kin in Sri Lanka learn from these simple examples given them by that Christian priest in Welimada, Catholic nuns in Negombo, ordinary civilians in Ampitiya, Christian Centre in Colombo, and above all, by the Dalai Lama, and usher in a new era of peace and prosperity for the island.