

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN RECONCILIATION

By A. T. Ariyaratne

At the outset I wish to thank Mr. Asanga Abeygoonsekera, Executive Director of Lakshman Kadirgamer Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies, for inviting me to deliver the Keynote address at this National Conference on “The Role of Religion in Reconciliation.”

I understand that this conference is the eighth in a series organized by the Institute where the subject of Reconciliation is being studied and discussed from a number of perspectives. For my part I do not claim to be a scholar or a national leader who can influence the intellectuals and the decision makers in our society. From my student days up to today for nearly sixty-six years I have been engaged in working at the grass roots level to empower those who are the poorest and the most powerless in our society. Out of this period over fifty-five years were spent with the **Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement**. So my remarks on the subject assigned to me, namely, **The Role of Religion in Reconciliation**, will be conditioned by the experiences I had both in our country and abroad in carrying out Sarvodaya activities.

This is a very timely conference, especially as it is being held at a time of great national debate on the system of devolved government and the role of the international community. The delay in achieving reconciliation after the end of the war gives the discussion to day special relevance. There is polarization within the country that is manifested in election results that reflect an ethnic divide. Internationally, there is the accusation of serious human rights violations that is not going away due to inability to make a satisfactory response. There is no agreement between Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims on key political issues or between Government and Opposition on addressing the burning issues.

Providing a leadership that heals the wounds of war and transforms the structures of governance into ones that meet the aspirations of both the ethnic majority and minorities is the continuing challenge for our beloved country. It is my conviction that the vision and work of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement can contribute in some measure to reconciling the people of our country consisting of all communities and living in different regions. Sarvodaya is a word coined by Mahatma Gandhi to mean working for the “Welfare of All.” We in Sri Lanka adopted this word giving it a broader meaning, which is consonant with the Buddhist cultural

background. Sarvodaya we defined as “Awakening of All.” The meaning of the word “Buddha” is “the Awakened One.” The Sarvodaya concept of the Awakening of All goes beyond human beings. It includes:

“ Whatsoever living beings there are, weak or strong, without exception, long or short, large, medium or small, subtle or gross, those seen or unseen, those dwelling near or far, and those born or yet to be born, May all beings without exception be happy.” (The Buddha- Karaniya Metta Sutta)

“Let one’s thoughts of boundless loving kindness pervade the whole world, above, below, across, without obscuration, without hatred, without enmity (The Buddha-Samyutta Nikaya)

“Loving –kindness or compassionate love purifies the mind and the mind becomes a very energetic force to radiate for the well-being of others” (Ven.Dr.K.Sri Dhammananda)

“When practiced together with wisdom and insight metta will indeed become a powerful healing force which will transform us into a more compassionate and caring community, as well as transmuting all negative energies and entities into light, love and harmony.” (Ven. Bhante Mahinda of Australia, the Founder of Aloka Foundation and the Metta Round the World Movement)

If at all we in Sarvodaya had any theoretical foundation, which inspired us, the teachers and students of Nalanda College Colombo, and later hundreds of other individuals and educational institutions, it was the above thought of Metta or Loving-Kindness to All. Certainly this thought was from the teachings of the Buddha. But it had the capacity to go beyond the boundaries of a religion and become a spiritual force to transform people’s consciousness, their social, economic and political beliefs and behavior. Our principle objective was, first, our own Total Personality Awakening (Purna Paurushodaya) by practicing Metta (Loving Kindness), Karuna (Compassionate Actions), Muditha (Acquiring Altruistic Joy) and Upekkha (living with Equanimity). The Buddha named these four qualities as Brahma Viharas (Four Sublime Abodes).

Metta is an easily acquirable spiritual practice through regular meditation. However one has to take another step to translate Metta into Karuna or Compassionate Action. For this exercise we selected the economically poorest, socially most depressed, politically most powerless, rural communities in our country. In small groups such as 50 volunteers or in big

groups such as several hundreds we encamped in these villages, sometimes going several miles on foot, we reached these villages, encamped among the people, organized the community and worked with them physically building access roads, village tanks, irrigation canals, wells, school buildings, community centres, land reclamations and tree planting campaigns and so on, all connected to Basic Human Needs satisfaction of communities as identified by them.

Within nearly three decades we covered the whole country not leaving out any community including the plantations communities. In village communities we hardly faced any opposition to this program from the common people except for a few people whose social status got threatened when caste, class, racial, party political, religious and other barriers that divided people were breaking down. Sarvodaya never aimed to build an affluent society out of these poor and powerless communities. Sarvodaya's objective was a No-Poverty No-Affluence society beginning from the village communities and progressively going upwards to influence the whole nation and decision makers.

This was no easy task as Sarvodaya believed in three salient principles of Truth, Non-violence and Self-denial. This also implies that we totally reject social, economic and political organizations that promoted Greed, Aversions and Ignorance. Some of these organizations unfortunately are founded on organized Greed and Violence. By controlling the media in various devious ways they keep the people in a Bliss of Ignorance of Reality. It is sad that the same cancerous greed for wealth and power using organized terror and violence that promoted imperialist interests using Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam for over 2000 years have reached our shores in recent decades.

Ian Fry, an Australian scholar, researcher and writer with whom I made acquaintance in the meetings of World Conference on Religion and Peace, has written a book titled "TROUBLE IN THE TRIANGLE". This book is in five parts and over 2100 pages where the history of three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and their involvement in all the wars and blood shed that occurred not only in Europe and the Middle East but all over the world are vividly described. Sarvodaya struggled for over 55 years to counter this disastrous trend coming to Sri Lanka by high lighting the Spiritual Awakening aspect of religions without being partial to or confronting any religious dogma, rituals or practices.

At this point I wish to quote our most beloved Lakshman Kadirgamer who said “the battle for peace, (has to be) fought in the hearts and minds of people. It is won or lost there. One can win wars but lose peace.”

It is widely believed that the people are politically apathetic and are too afraid of retribution to be involved in political affairs. This is a justifiable concern; however, it must also be remembered that much of the population remains in a state of poverty and does not have the opportunity to think about ideological issues when their very survival is so difficult to pursue. Furthermore, they have become subject to the propaganda regularly circulated by the media. Seminars, pamphlets and other educational materials, though they may be useful, will thus have limited impact at the grassroots level. **We have to aim at a critical mass of spiritual consciousness pervading the whole nation.**

I would submit that Sarvodaya’s work highlights the positive effects of a grassroots movement for peace. Working in more than 15,000 villages all across the country Sarvodaya has been able to persuade both the people and their immediate leaders to support and maintain an active peace. Since it recognizes that a holistic effort is needed for full peace to occur, Sarvodaya also works at the district, divisional, and national levels, however, it is most recognized for its advances at the grassroots. **What is evident from the work is the reservoir of untapped goodwill that exists between the religious communities at the grassroots level.** When religious leaders are brought together in structured initiatives they begin to better understand each other and to work together.

A Research paper written on Faith-based Peace Building Efforts in Sri Lanka has made the following observation on Sarvodaya’s efforts.

“Peace work at the grass roots level must, therefore, include a means of empowering the people and improving their lives. While the institutional peace organizations recognize in their efforts to address specific needs of the people, an organization that has taken this precept further is The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. Working intensively at the grassroots level, Sarvodaya believes in “peace through development,” and uses the concept of a common human spirituality to heal hostile relations and create a community-based solidarity.

“Although infused with Buddhist values, Sarvodaya works through a cross-cultural, inter-religious attempt to bottom-up peace building. Since it views peace as one of many human needs, it organizes programs in which peace and village-level developments go hand in hand.

During these programs, people from many religious and ethnic backgrounds convene to work on a common project that both enhances their community, and build strong human ties. Since people overlook barriers such as race, religion or political affiliation to solve a mutual problem, it establishes a sense of a common humanity and allows for an empathetic understanding of the other to take place.

“Sarvodaya work highlights the positive effects of a grassroots movement for peace. Working in more than 15,000 villages all across the country (including the war-stricken North-and East), Sarvodaya has been able to persuade both the people and their immediate leaders to support and maintain an active peace. Since it recognizes that a holistic effort is needed for full peace to occur, Sarvodaya also works at the pradeshiya sabha (divisional council), district, zonal and national levels. However it is most recognized for its advances at the grassroots.”

If I may very briefly mention, from the Sarvodaya experience spanning over half a century a theoretical framework with practical programs which can be implemented at Individual, Family, Urban and Rural Community, National and World levels have been formulated and leaders at different levels are trained at the Sarvodaya Institute of Higher Learning at Bandaragama. These programs are targeted at Total Personality Awakening (Purna Paurushodaya, Family Awakening (Kutumbodaya), Urban and Village Awakening (Nagarodaya and Gramodaya), National Awakening (Deshodaya) and World Awakening (Vishvodaya). The Sarvodaya Movement is already working from village level to world level with the vision, mission, principles, programs and structures, which are all being tried out for a non-violent transformation of our human society. We do not want to pollute these spiritual goals with the craze for power, wealth and popularity.

Out of numerous national level programs we have implemented mobilizing people in the 15000 village communities we are working with, for national peace and reconciliation, I will mention only four in this presentation:

One: When in 1983 July the worst ever racial violence took place our Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena (Peace Brigade) members fearlessly took to the streets to mitigate violent actions against the helpless victims by organizing refugee camps in co-operation with the government in all parts of the country. Sarvodaya started what came to be known as the 5R Program, namely, Relief, Rehabilitation, Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Reawakening programs. From 1983 up to

2009 we implemented the 5R program, which benefited several thousands of affected Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim people right through disturbed and war times. During the Tsunami we extended this 5R program to North and East also including Mulatiu, Kilinochchi and Jaffna districts.

Two: In 1983 August we organized the first ever National Peace and Reconciliation Conference which lasted for two days at the BMICH with the participation of the Maha Nayake Theros of all four Buddhist Nikayas, Hindu Swamys, Christian Church leaders, Islamic religious dignitaries and over one thousand two hundred other participants. A Peace Plan was formulated and signed, and was handed over to the then Head of State H.E.President J.R.Jayewardene. Similar Inter-faith conferences were held right through the war period and even after the war ended the last being about three months ago again held at B.M.I.C.H.

Three: In December 1983 for the first time in Sri Lanka Sarvodaya organized a Mass Interfaith Meditation program in the sacred city of Kataragama where thousands of clergy and laymen belonging to different faiths participated including Prime Minister Hon.R.Premadasa. After the mass meditation program nearly 30,000 joined the Peace Walk (Sama Pada Yatra) we started from Kataragama Krivehera to Nagadipa in Jaffna. After we marched in silent meditation a distance of 13 miles H.E. President J.R.Jayewardene came to Tissamaharama and made a request to us to postpone the peace meditation march as he was informed by his intelligence services that we would be attacked on the way which may lead to a another round of communal violence. With great reluctance we postponed it but after two days we travelled in small groups across villages and concluded it at Nagadipa walking through Jaffna under very tense circumstances but without any incident. But the young Japanese monk who stayed back in Jaffna against our advice and continued walking beating his Peace Drum was brutally shot down from behind by the terrorists and was killed.

Four: Sarvodaya continued its mass interfaith meditation sessions and peace meditational walks in all districts, in all major cities including Colombo, Kandy, Matara, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloe and Ampara and in all major places of religious worship from 1983 to 2013 without an interruption. Over 100,000 participated in each of the interfaith mass meditation programs held in BMICH grounds and Vihara Maha Devi Park in Colombo. The highest number nearly 900,000 participated in the meditation held at the sacred city of Anuradhapura and this program

became the first such spiritual endeavour for peace where many nations joined the program in their own country locations through the internet for peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

In peace and reconciliatory work there should be commitment and continuity. There should not be any compromise with Truth and Non-violence. Power political and sectarian agendas of religions and races should give in to the supreme goal of awakening of all through Metta – Boundless Loving Kindness.

The experience in both Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the world of political struggle makes it evident that when the path of conflict is taken there is no natural end, only constant escalation. Stopping the spiral of conflict requires a conscious act of will and a strategy for de-escalation. It requires a vision of a transformative process, which will lead to the good of everyone. And it calls for faith that people and institutions will in fact change. **One of the greatest challenges in peacemaking is to see the opponent in a new light, as having part of the truth, whether terrorist or government, which is necessary to bring wholeness and peace.** There can be no positive transformation without engaging with the opponent and making them a part of the solution. This is where the Sarvodaya philosophy, which lays emphasis on the Awakening of All, has special relevance.

Religious leaders operate with distinct advantages when it comes to conflict resolution and peace-building to the degree that they espouse universal values that stress the wellbeing of all. Indeed, Sri Lanka's religious leadership has access to several critical resources that could assist peace building initiatives in Sri Lanka, not least religious doctrines that teach universality and the wisdom that the "the world is one family to the wise". The extensive, well-established religious networks and institutions in Sri Lanka are valuable channels of communication and action. In fact, religious leaders generally have extensive reach and influence in Sri Lankan society, as the majority of the population belongs to a religious community, and are thus accessible through religious infrastructure.

Religion-based efforts hold immense potential to create peace in Sri Lanka. With the moral authority to decry conflict, and the social networks to mobilize support and public action, religious groups could spread the message of peace in effective and sustainable ways. In particular, inter-religious initiatives, which aim to bridge ethno-religious divides and establish a

discourse of understanding (even in the face of severe opposition), provide hope that a desire for reconciliation is strong and ever growing.

It is also important to note that the leadership of religiously involved personalities is constant and durable, especially when contrasted with the country's political leaders who are vulnerable to the pressures of a democratic electorate, and thus change more frequently. National religious leaders are long-term contributors to the people's awakening and upliftment, who have been present throughout the lengthy lifecycle of Sri Lanka's conflict. As a result, they are well poised to provide much needed continuity in approaches and commitment to peace building initiatives and advocacy in Sri Lanka. The religious clergy maintains a very close relationship with the people of the country. Thus, they are well situated to undertake observatory and educational roles to discourage violence, corruption, human rights violations or other behavior, which impedes viable and sustainable peace-building initiatives.

I believe that in many ways, such work may be more effective in changing attitudes and at promoting peace than similar work among those at the political level. The general population, by and large, have no concrete roles or agendas that prevent them from committing to a whole-hearted stand for peace. Peace through the grassroots is also comparatively more stable, since it builds up a movement rather than trying to persuade multiple levels of the political, social, and religious hierarchies from the leadership and down. Most importantly, working at the grassroots bypasses the need to work through those political structures that foster divisiveness; at the same time, it promotes a change in the hearts of the people, who together have the power to elect the political leaders and change the state of the nation.

Anicca (Impermanance), Dukkha (Suffering) and Anatta (Non-self) were the spiritual guidelines our leaders have followed through centuries. These are common to all religious teachings. However, unfortunately, most of our present day leaders including the religious leaders appear to be following the opposite path, namely, upholding the Nicca (Permanence), Sukha (Affluence), and Atta (Egoism) as their guiding philosophy. Ordinary people blindly follow them. What a tragedy for this Dhammadipa? Can we reverse this trend in the name of Peace and Reconciliation?

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