CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CO-EXISTENCE:
A Sri Lankan Christian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

God has revealed himself in many different ways and this has given rise to various religious traditions. The principal function of religion is to be a link (*re+ligare*) with God. However, in the history of the world, the religions have deviated from this noble purpose. The present world order with its conflicts, violence, injustice, discrimination, anti-life concepts and unjust practices raises the fundamental question: "Are the religions contributing to human wellbeing and harmony or have they given rise to various forms of extremism and violence that will eventually destroy the world?"

Sri Lanka, a small island-nation, contains four religious traditions existing side by side and, therefore, provides an opportunity to explore how interfaith dialogue and collaboration can contribute to the harmonious coexistence of a multi-religious society. This article discusses the ground reality of religious plurality in Sri Lanka and concludes that religious plurality can provide an opportunity for coexistence among religious traditions.

KEY WORDS**:** Plurality, diversity, interreligious dialogue, coexistence

INTRODUCTION

"He is not a member of our religion"; "She belongs to that sect"; "They are from the majority religion". These expressions represent the tendency today, especially in South Asia, to label people according to their religious beliefs or their membership of a particular sect. This divisive mentality is the principal cause of the growth of separatist forces, religious riots and violence in the world today. For this reason, a serious inquiry should be

made into the nature of religion, which is a basic ingredient of every society that has taken shape in human history.

Since God cannot be limited to the confines of a single religion and has revealed Godself in many ways and through many persons and events, religious pluralism is a reasonable theological position. In fact, religious plurality has become a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and an obvious reality in the contemporary world in which there is a great need for tolerance and coexistence. Religious pluralism, though not a recent trend in theology, has surfaced in modern times together with other trends in the theology of religion. The medieval Christian theological prototype, which emphasized the 'theology of religion' has been transformed into the 'theology of religions'. In other words, the ancient Christian approach has shifted and now recognizes the presence of other religious traditions and theologies in a more positive way. This new Christian approach is the fruit of the Second Vatican Council (hereafter Vat II), which gave expression to a new willingness to accept other religions as legitimate paths to the sacred.

This article begins by describing the multi-religious context of Sri Lanka and proceeds to analyze relevant concepts and theories proposed by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (hereafter FABC).

THE CONTEXT OF SRI LANKA

According to the ancient history of Sri Lanka up to the first millennium CE, there were two ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, namely, Sinhalese and Tamil and two religions, namely, Buddhism and Hinduism. Muslims arrived on the island as traders and with them Islam became part of the indigenous context. The Portuguese introduced Catholicism in the early 16th century while other Europeans later brought Protestant traditions to the island. Even though some historians point to the lack of evidence of an established Christian community during this specific period, Nestorian Christians

were present in Sri Lanka during the 6th century CE[1] but were not established formally as a church. The historical records of Christianity in Sri Lanka began formally with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 when Lourenço de Almeida, a Portuguese captain, landed in Colombo.[2] Hence, for the last five centuries, the followers of these four major religious traditions have lived together on this small island.

Aloysius Pieris is one of Sri Lanka's eminent theologians who has done extensive work on the encounter between Buddhists and Christians. In his view, Christianity is only a 'little flock' in the context of the religious plurality of Asia.[3] This 'little flock' becomes a negligible minority when considered numerically in the multi-religious context of Sri Lanka. However, this numerically negligible 'little flock' arguably has been able to exert considerable impact on many areas of society in this country.

SRI LANKA'S PLURALITY

Sri Lanka was referred to as Ceylon from colonial times right up to 1972[4] and is an island situated at the southern tip of India and separated from India by the narrow *Palk's* strait in the Indian Ocean. The country contains three main ethnic groups: Sinhalese 73.8%, Tamils 18.2%, Muslims 7.5% and four world religions: Buddhists 70.19%, Hindus 12.6%, Muslims 9.7% Christians 7.4% as well as three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English (as the link language). This is the reason why this small island has an attraction

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[1]. Gnanaprakasar, S. (1924), *A History of the Catholic Church in Ceylon - Vol. 1.* Colombo: Messenger Press, pp. 10-12.

[2]. Perniola, V. (1989), *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Portuguese Period*, *1505 - 1565*, vol. 1, Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo Ltd., p. 23. There are other legends that prevail, that they first landed at a Southern location of the island now called Galle adrift a sea storm, but a year later anchored his fleet in Colombo which indeed was a long haul until ousted by the Dutch East India Company (1658).

[3]. Pieris, A. (1988), *Love Meets Wisdom*: *A Christian Experience of Buddhism,* New York: Orbis Books, p. 34.

[4]. With the adoption of a new Constitution in 1972, Ceylon officially became the Republic of Sri Lanka. "Lanka" is the *Pali* and Sanskrit name for island and "Sri" is an honorific prefix. Russell R. Ross - Andrea Matles Savada, (1988). *Sri Lanka: A Country Study*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 6.

for tourists and has been the subject of much study and research on the Eastern heritage, ethnography and religious traditions. Visitors and researchers can easily move from one environment to another, meet different people, hear different languages, witness different faiths being celebrated and experience a variety of cultures and traditions.

Sri Lanka was ruled by various Western colonizers since 1505. Firstly, by the Portuguese and subsequently by the Dutch and finally by the British who left the country in 1948 after Sri Lanka became an independent country. In the three decades up to 2009 a civil war has raged between the government apparatus representing the majority Sinhalese and the militant groups that were agitating for a separate State for the minority Tamil community. This conflict turned into a full blown war between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the two main ethnic groups each having its own distinct language, culture and its own separate region. Both also claim to have roots in the ancient civilizations of Asia but Sinhala and Tamil historians are sharply divided as to their heritage in Sri Lanka.

Three centuries after its birth in India, Buddhism came to Sri Lanka through *Mahinda* and *Sanghamitta*, the children of King *Ashoka* who was the patron of Buddhism and promoted its expansion in the Asian region. The *Mahāvaṃsa*, 'the Great Chronicle' written in *Pali* during the 5th or 6th century AD, eleven centuries after the Buddha, probably by a Buddhist monk named *Mahānāma*, is a meticulous and sentimental historical chronicle of Sri Lanka composed in the style of an epic poem and is continuously being updated. According to this chronicle, the Buddha on his death-bed told his followers that Buddhism must be the religion of Sri Lanka. This is the firm conviction that binds the Sinhalese with Buddhism. Sri Lankan Buddhism differs from other forms of Buddhist in Asia because of its unique characteristics derived from *Mahāvaṃsa* and *Theravada Buddhism,* which divinized the Buddha and elevated Buddhahood into a

religion.[5] *Mahayana* Buddhism is not so popular in Sri Lanka even though certain *Mahayana* traits[6] can be found among Buddhist practices in the country.

When the colonial masters left Sri Lanka in 1948, a long struggle began between the Sinhalese who wanted to establish their identity as the majority and the Tamils who sought to preserve their own separate identity. The Sinhala-only bill, the so-called 'one language policy', which was brought into effect in 1956, legalized the Sinhala language as the official language of the country (Act No. 33, of 1956). A further step was the amendment made to the Constitution of the country in 1978 stipulating that Sri Lanka was a Sinhala-Buddhist country without any recognition of the other minority ethnic groups and religions. In spite of the political shortsightedness that imposed a uniform system on the country, this island nation clearly remains a plural society.

THE SPECIAL STATUS OF BUDDHISM

It has been observed that any numerically large group tends to become dominant and powerful in pluralist societies because it enjoys key socio-political status and privileges. The majority religion in a multi-religious society becomes powerful and can even become oppressive.[7] Buddhists form 70% of the population of Sri Lanka and Article 9 of the Sri Lanka's Constitution gives Buddhism a special place as the State religion. Articles 10 and 14 affirm that the State of Sri Lanka should act as the guardian of Buddhism in order to protect it. Such a privileged status for one religious

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[5]. Tresidder, A. J. (1960), *Ceylon: An Introduction to the 'Resplendent Land'*. New York: D. Van Nostrand, p. 173.

[6]. Also was known as *Vaithulyavada*, especially during the time of the king *Voharikatissa* (215-237 CE), and the famous *Abhayagiri* monastery was the centre of these 'traits' more affiliated to the *Dharmaruci* school of thought.

[7]. Even within a religion, a numerically large sect becomes dominant and enjoys a higher status. For example, within Christianity in Sri Lanka, Roman Catholicism makes up the majority, which enjoys more socio-political power than other Christian communities or groups.

tradition in a plural setting has resulted in the impression that other religious traditions are on a lower level of importance.

As indicated earlier, the *Bodu Bala Sena*, *Ravana Balaya* and *Sinha Le* groups have been identified by the minority traditions as conflict prone factors in the post-war context of Sri Lanka. These groups have been involved in conflicts with Muslims and Christians. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) notes that they are a minority among other minorities and that they have become the victims of attacks. There has also been an alarming increase in the number of incidents against Muslims. Elevating Buddhism as the State religion has made Sri Lanka into a form of theocracy (*Buddhocracy*) and weakened democracy.

The end of the war in Sri Lanka (2009) marked the end of the ethnic war in the country but incidents of religious unrest and violence have been on the increase ever since that time. There are symptomatic rivalries emerging, which can be described as the manifestation of political Buddhism. Movements like the *Siva Poomi* (Land of the Lord *Siva*), a concept that has been fostered by the *Siva Senai* Party (Army of the Lord *Siva*) in order to declare the North of Sri Lanka the land of the Hindus, are further evidence of the rise of religious extremist thinking and influence. Some are of the view that these various extremist views and violence-pronged activities expose the failure of orthodox religious traditions and certain internal conflicts of identity. But the selfish motives of individuals and their institutions have also led to this dysfunctional situation. There are alarming inter-ethnic as well as intra-ethnic tensions among communities and, as a result, minorities among the minorities become more vulnerable.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

The majority Sinhala ethnic groups since independence have struggled to reclaim their lost identity. However, the majority of Buddhist clergymen feel that they are the custodians of the nation and are reluctant to accept the plurality that is evident in Sri Lanka. This mind-set has paved the way

for a conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, who felt that they were being treated as second class citizens. Calcification of the grievances of both the majority and the minority sections of society resulted in a separatist war by Tamil groups to which successive governments unleashed a counter-offensive. The three decades of devastating war that followed resulted in untold destruction. This war ended in 2009 with vast numbers of people being killed and with both sides 'still counting the dead'.[8] Since the end of the war, religious conflicts seem to have replaced the earlier conflict, which has caused new fears to emerge among the civilian population.

When Sri Lanka gained independence from the British, local identity politics resuscitated on the basis of the ethno-religious assertiveness of both the Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus. Sinhala Buddhists were inclined to consider Sri Lanka their distinctive homeland.[9] However, the Tamil community, as an ethnic minority, felt insecure especially after political power shifted to the majority ethnic community who mobilized their political power to establish hegemonic control over the whole country by eliminating what they considered were unfair advantages enjoyed by the Tamil ethnic minority in the field of education, professions, trade and politics.[10]

Viewing the social dynamics of the post-war politics of Sri Lanka, observers have noticed a shift in the pattern of conflict from ethno-oriented

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[8]. *Still Counting the Dead: Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War* is a book written by a British journalist Francis Harrison. The book contains her account of the devastating sufferings of Sri Lanka's civilian Tamil population during the war's final chapter. She describes the situation of hundreds of thousands of children, health officers, farmers, fishermen, clergymen and other civilians in early 2009, caught in between the crossfire the Tamil Tigers and the Army offensive. She invites the UN and other rights groups with her account on war-crimes committed.

[9]. Obeyesekere, G. O. (2006), "Buddhism, Ethnicity and Identity: A Problem in Buddhist History," *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, Deegalle, M., (ed.), London: Routledge, p. 134.

[10]. Kailasapathy, K. (1984), "Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness of the Tamil Community," *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka*, p. 108.

to religiously motivated hostility.[11] The rise of *Bodu Bala Sena* (Strong Army of the Buddhists), *Ravana Balaya* (Power of Ravana) and *Sinha Le* (Lion's Blood) movements and their ideologically-led campaigns have been disturbing and have aroused interreligious as well as intra-religious tensions among the communities.[12]

WHAT IS PLURALISM?

Etymologically, the term *pluralism* comes from the Latin *pluralis*, a word with the meaning of 'more than one' and thereby affirming diversity. The concept of pluralism is closely associated with the Enlightenment in the West and has led to various forms of social reform. German philosophers like Christian Wolff and Immanuel Kant began to adopt universal view-points that differed from those that were commonly accepted.

The term *pluralism* has subsequently been used in various academic disciplines. For instance, in politics, pluralism may refer to the existence and acceptance of multiple political parties. In economics, pluralism is associated with free and open market systems. In sociology, pluralism refers to a society consisting of various ethnic groups, cultures and languages.[13] In religious discourse, pluralism expresses the idea that religious differences can be overcome by respecting religious otherness.[14] Pluralism is an attitude that avoids stressing the differences between religions but emphasizes their core beliefs and values. Just as pluralism is

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[11]. Wickramasinghe, N. (2015), *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: History of Contested Identities*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, p. 37.

[12]. *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) is a Sinhala nationalist Buddhist group. The *Ravana Balaya* is a group led by some Buddhist monks in the name of '*Ravana*', a mythological king of ancient Sri Lanka. The organization alleges that it is protecting the national heritage. *Sinha Le* is also an extreme movement of the ultra-nationalists. The word *Sinha Le* is a conjunction of the two words 'Lion' and 'Blood' obviously trying to vindicate that the Sinhala race was born of Lion's Blood.

[13]. Ole, R. (1999), "Modes of Religious Pluralism under Conditions of Globalization". *International Journal on Multicultural Societies (IJMS)*, 1 (1), p. 21.

[14]. Race, A. (2015), *Thinking about Religious Pluralism: Shaping Theology of Religions for Our Times*, New York: Fortress Press, p. 44.

a general phenomenon that is vital for the secular, globalized world, religious pluralism has significance for the coexistence of religions in the modern world.

PLURALISM AND PLURALITY

In order to understand the deeper meaning of religious pluralism and religious plurality, we need to clarify the terms 'pluralism' and 'plurality' and to establish the conceptual difference between them.

Pluralism is a concept that affirms the possibility of the existence of diversity and miscellany with regard to things that are similar in nature. Pluralism is a concept referring to the fact that many things, types, ideas, events, institutions and parties can have a similar character or nature at any one time and place. In other words, pluralism accepts the existence of different realities and events of the same kind. Several but different realities can have the same goal. For example, there can be many political parties in a democratic setting that all work with the same motive of attaining power and ruling the country. Theoretical acceptance of this phenomenon is called pluralism. In short, as a concept, pluralism affirms the potential diversity of similar realities and points out the shortsightedness of affirming their uniformity.

Plurality is the actualization of pluralism. It manifests the diverse and miscellaneous nature of realities with the same nature and with the same goal existing in one place at the same time. Hence, pluralism is ideological and theoretical whereas plurality is concrete and practical. The former can ideologically accept and enjoy the existence of many types and ideas of the same nature and the latter is the ability to live with miscellany and to exercise the policy of 'unity in diversity'. The result of dichotomizing theory and praxis results in accepting pluralism but not tolerating plurality.

In the light of the understanding of these two terms, religious pluralism can be taken to refer to the conceptual and theoretical acceptance of many

religions in one place at the same time, thereby affirming the plurality of human efforts in the search for transcendence. In fact, the very multiplicity of religious traditions demonstrates the transcendence and all-encompassing nature of God. Religious plurality enables a person to accept the existence of many religious traditions and to accommodate them all without making a judgment as to the superiority or inferiority of any one of them. Hence, religious plurality involves a new understanding of the religions in the globalized world of today and leads to a sense of tolerance and harmonious coexistence.

OPENNESS TO GOD

The affirmation of religious pluralism leads to freedom of religion, which aims to provide the same rights of worship and public expression for each religion that exists in any region (Vat II, *Religious Freedom*, No. 4) and entails not competition but mutual cooperation.[15] Appreciation of religious pluralism will make it possible to treat other religions with respect and open mindedness instead of labeling them as evil.[16] In ordinary terms, this means being open to God and his revelation and leads to genuine spirituality.

Those who accept religious pluralism affirm that the profound differences in the great religious traditions are largely due to the different ways in which transcendental reality is experienced by the believers.[17] John Hick affirms this by saying:

> In this sense the absoluteness of Christianity is compatible with the absoluteness of Islam, or again of Hinduism, or Buddhism or Judaism, salvifically sufficient as these different messages and ways are for those who have been spiritually formed by them. But,

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[15]. Nah, D. S. (2012), *Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism: A Critical Evaluation of John Hick*, Minnesota: St. Paul, p. 2.

[16]. Dilipkumar, M. (2010), "The Logic of Religious Pluralism in India," *Globalization and Religious Pluralism*, Changang Guo, (ed.), China: Shanghai University, p. 154.

[17]. Rowe, W. L. (1999), "Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies*, 35 (2), p. 140.

since 'absolute' so strongly suggests uniqueness and the impossibility of being surpassed or even equaled, it seems inappropriate to apply it to this pluralistic conception. And in fact, this plural sense is the polar opposite of the religious absolutism that I want to discuss here. Let me approach it, however, through this opposite, namely religious pluralism.[18]

Religious pluralism, therefore, rejects religious absolutism and creates a new openness to God. In fact, religious plurality, which is considered as an intrinsic condition or natural phenomenon, can be found everywhere in the world.[19] In general, pluralism becomes a rational concept by use of the phrase: "agree to disagree."[20] That is to say, in a multi-religious context, though one does not believe in the doctrine and practices of another religion, there is an inner acceptance that the other's religion is inherently equal at least at the philosophical or conceptual level.[21]

There is a generally accepted assumption that diverse beliefs and religious traditions emerged as result of the diversity of human responses to divine revelation.[22] In line with this thinking is the suggestion that divine or ultimate reality reveals itself to human beings but social and cultural contexts have a profound influence on the way human beings understand revelation. Since cultural and social contexts influence our understanding of divine reality, the diverse religions of the world are the direct result of these different cultural and social contexts.[23] Moreover, one aspect of divine revelation may be understood in different ways by different

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[18]. Hick, J. (1985), *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 194.

[19]. Stark, R. *et al.*, (1995), "Pluralism and Piety: England and Wales, 1851," see. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34 (4), p. 432.

[20]. John Wesley was the first to put the phrase "agree to disagree" in print. See. *The United Methodist Church*, "On the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield," Global Ministries, p. 2.

[21]. Panikkar, R. (1984), "Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge," *Religious Pluralism*, (ed. Leroy S. Rouner), Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 111.

[22]. op. cit., Hick, J. (1985), p. 56.

[23]. op. cit., Race, (2015), p. 65.

people.[24] Hence, divine reality remains the same but it is understood differently by people according to their different capacities and their different social and cultural contexts. Thus, acceptance of religious pluralism and tolerance of religious plurality becomes a new way to allow God to be active in the world and to submit to the diverse manifestations of his will.

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

The way that each religion assists its followers to reach the divine is the contemporary manifestation of openness to God and his divine will and of willingness to accept all human beings as children of God. However, acceptance of religious pluralism can also lead to either exclusivism, inclusivism or syncretism. Exclusivism in religion teaches that their religion is the only way to salvation and rejects other religions categorically or suppresses them as false. Exclusivist attitudes result in religious fanaticism and religious fundamentalism, both of which can lead to violence in the name of religion. John Hick sees exclusivism as a form of religious absolutism and presents religious pluralism as the remedy for the wounds that such absolutism can cause.[25]

Another understanding of the relationship between religions is known as inclusivism, which accepts the truth of many beliefs and practices of another religion. According to the inclusivist approach to other religions, people of different religions can engage in dialogue and cooperation. Syncretism, however, is the attempt to adopt the creeds and practices of other religions and to blend various religious practices together in a new way. This is another way of saying that all the religions are one and the same and can lead to compromise between the values of different religious traditions.

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[24]. Nah, D. S. (2012), *Christian Theology and Religious Pluralism*, p. 12.
[25]. op. cit., Hick, J. (1985), p. 194.

NEED FOR DIALOGUE

Many researchers and analysts of Sri Lankan politics and social dynamics emphasize that the task of national reconciliation is to create harmony not only among ethnic communities but also among the religions. Ethnic and religious issues share many similar characteristics. Considering the rise of recent attacks on minority places of worship (mosques and churches of small Christian communities), there is an evident need for interreligious dialogue.[26] But the purpose of interreligious dialogue is understood differently by different groups. Sri Lanka needs to promote dialogue between religious groups that will develop a 'culture of peace' since the country is still in a post-war situation. S. J. Emmanuel, who is another eminent theologian in Sri Lanka, argues that, in the context of Asia, dialogue becomes an accepted methodology to develop knowledge and understanding of each other in a multi-religious society.[27]

PARAMETERS OF DIALOGUE

Socio-political and religious conflicts hinder inter-religious dialogue and derail peace among the religions. Lethargy or reluctance for dialogue among religions causes suspicion, which in turn contributes to political and religious conflicts. Religions have the social clout to interact with socio-political structures, which means that conflicts can be resolved by religiously motivated interventions.[28] But interreligious dialogue is not something that can be carried out from above by representatives and theologians coming from various faiths and religions. Rather, interreligious dialogue should emerge from below and from the grassroots. In most cases, interreligious dialogue is limited to ecumenical dialogues between Christian communities and theologians in the form of fellowship-

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[26]. De Chickera, D. (2017), "Bias in the Dias Affair," *The Ceylon Churchman*, 116 (20), p. 3.
[27]. Emmanuel, S. J. (1999), "Asian Mission for the next Millennium? Chances and Challenges," *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 36 (3), p. 37.
[28]. The role played by Christians during the post-apartheid era of South Africa is an example of how socio-political issues can be resolved by the religions.

meetings and a few common efforts related to socio-political concerns. Such meetings are largely of symbolic value only. As far as the European churches were concerned, dialogue is conceived more in view of the need for unity among the Christian denominations and in order to improve relationships with the Jews and the Arabs so as to bury the past and begin a new era. But in the Asian context, such dialogue must include the dialogue of life, which requires a willingness to recognize the salvific elements of other religions.

As personal expressions of faith, the religions are not in great danger of coming into direct conflict with each other but as organised religions, they can develop conflicts because their activities, privileges and areas of concern can lead to suspicion, jealousy and competition. For example, Buddhism has shaped the history and the culture of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.[29] Moreover, as a philosophy of life, Buddhism can be very attractive to seekers of peace and harmony. However, as a political expression, *Theravada* Buddhist is dominated by the clergy (the *Sangha*), which is an island-wide solidarity of Buddhist monks who demand certain privileges from the State.

A TRIPLE DIALOGUE

Aware of the multi-religious context and the innovative paradigms that were needed for inter-religious dialogue in Asia, the FABC proposed a triple-dialogue among the religions. During the FABC's 1st Plenary Assembly in 1974, a nascent perspective on such a triple-dialogue was developed, which comprised mutually respectful and critical encounters between Christianity and diverse, pluralistic cultures, as well as between Christianity and the rich religious traditions of Asia and between

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[29]. De Silva, L. (1976), "Theological Construction in a Buddhist Context," *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, (ed. Gerald H. Anderson), Maryknoll: Orbis, p. 37, Gombrich, R. F. & Obeyesekere, O. (1988), *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 21.

Christianity and the multitudes of the poor in Asian countries.[30] This call for a triple-dialogue has been repeatedly emphasized in both the 5th FABC Plenary Assembly held in 1990 and the 6th FABC Plenary Assembly held in 1995. In fact, the 5th FABC Plenary Assembly equated the triple-dialogue with the Christian missionary imperative: "Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in culture and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity and sharing."[31] The 6th FABC Plenary Assembly reiterated that Christianity in Asia must foster a three-fold dialogue: with the many different faiths of Asia, with the cultures of Asia, and with the poor multitude of Asia.

Such a triple model is well suited to Sri Lanka where the traditional Sinhala, Tamil and Moor cultures meet and cohabit and where four major religious traditions are practiced and celebrated. Moreover, Sri Lanka is a developing country with 70% of its population under the poverty line. For these reasons, Christians are encouraged to get involved in the triple dialogue that could result in enculturation, interreligious collaboration, the eradication of poverty and the well-being of its citizens. Such dialogue with cultures, religions and socio-political realities, even though demanding and challenging, would result in enabling Christians, who form a numerically small group, to bear emphatic witness to their mission to establish the kingdom of God.[32]

CONCLUSION

A common pilgrimage in the multi-religious context of Sri Lanka will become possible when the reign of God is placed at the center of Christian life. Becoming 'salt' and 'light' among the native population means to assist the adherents of other religions to articulate their own aspirations. In pursuing the goal of building up the reign of God, Christians must see the

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[30]. FABC, (1992), *Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Manila: Claretian Publications, Nos. 12 - 19.

[31]. FABC, (1997), *Documents from 1992 to 1996*, Manila: Claretian Publications, No. 3.

[32]. op. cit., Emmanuel, S. J., (1999), p. 45.

followers of other religions as their collaborators and allies in a common struggle against the enemies of the reign of God. The issue is not how other religious traditions can relate with Christianity but how God's reign can become present in society. The recognition of the presence of God's reign in other religions is not a denial of the Christian mission of evangelization but rather views it in the contemporary context.[33]

A true believer of any religion will accept and respect the God-experience and religious practices of other religions. The purpose of interfaith dialogue, which is based on mutual respect, toleration and cooperation among the religions, is to build an organic unity among diverse ethnic and religious groups. Pope Francis calls upon the religions to be "wombs of life, bearing the merciful love of God to a wounded and needy humanity; may they be doors of hope helping to penetrate the walls erected by pride and fear."[34]

All religions seek truth and encourage charitable deeds. Extremism within religion comes not from the core-teachings of any religion but from certain religious practitioners and their obsessive allegiance to particular traditions and historical interpretations. Religions are neither inherently violent nor inherently non-violent but they can promote either peace or violence. Religions need to abandon their preoccupation with ritual observations and return to the truth and significance of their message.

In the multi-religious context of Sri Lanka, Christians and other religious followers face a new challenge, which is to engage in interreligious dialogue. Such dialogue calls for a spirituality that arises from within each religion. Hence, each religious tradition needs to embrace the 'spirituality of dialogue', which will change the accepted understanding and function of religion. Instead of focussing on connecting and bonding (*re+ligare*) humanity *with* God, each religion can act as an interlocutor (*dia+logum*) *between* world religions. Such a new emphasis on dialogue may not bring

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[33]. Pieris, A. (1988), *Love Meets Wisdom*, p. 33.
[34]. Address of Pope Francis to the representatives of different religions, Rome, 3rd Nov. 2016.

quick and concrete results but is a realistic way to meet the challenges facing the modern world. ∎

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