

Towards Religious Harmony

Wednesday, 02 April 2008

Harendra De Silva

Â

Christian evangelists are on a roll in Sri Lanka. During the past few decades many reactionary Christian organisations originating in the west have swept into Sri Lanka with the single aim of converting all non-Christians to Christianity. Having arrived in a "third world" country, their reasoning is that all niceties and norms of decency can be dispensed with; evangelism is carried out through whatever means necessary without any thought for the consequence, even if this means creating a religious conflict. Sri Lanka must be on high guard if she is to preserve her religious harmony, for looking around the world it can be seen that religious conflict has not been far behind wherever Christian evangelists have set up shop.

Moderate

Christians in the country have opposed the acts of the minority Christian fundamentalists, but this opposition has been much too soft and has been relegated to a few personalities. If the articles in various national papers are anything to go by, more often than not we come across members of the mainstream churches supporting and encouraging the evangelists and their insidious activities. By throwing their weight behind the Christian fundamentalists, moderate Christians are only doing what the fundamentalists want them to do: join in the offensive against other religions. Such an outcome does not bode well for the future of this country, and a deep reflection on the issue ought to be undertaken by moderate Christians siding with (or leaning towards) the evangelists.

It

is true that we have heard some sections of the Church condemn the insensitive and indecent activities of the evangelists, but nothing has been done to reign in those who continue with these provocative activities. No concrete steps have been taken to stop abusing the poverty and destitution of a war-scarred population in order convert them, and no concrete steps have been taken to stop once and for all the iconoclastic practice of smashing Buddhist and Hindu statues to signify total conversion to Christianity. We are left to believe that the public condemnation is merely a ploy to appear moderate and tolerant, and that the Church continues to support such activities in secret. But surely this cannot be true? For if it were, we have the makings of a religious imbroglio that could overshadow the current national conflict itself.

It

is unfortunate but true that the history of the Church in this island has not been one that it can be proud of. If truth be told, the mainstream churches, hand in hand with the colonials, engaged in vicious forms of evangelism, trying to convert all the non-Christian natives to Christianity and bring them to the "civilization" that the Europeans supposedly first brought to this country inhabited by brown-skinned "pagans." The Church played a leading role in trying to wean away the natives from their culture and national religion -

Buddhism or Hinduism, and used whatever means at their disposal to carry out this task. They shamelessly paid new converts to go around villages degrading Buddhism and they had no qualms about providing education through their schools if only the Buddhist and Hindu children would convert to Christianity. Churches were built on the desecrated remains of Buddhist and Hindu temples, and for a long time the inveterate enemies of the Church remained the two religions of Buddhism and Hinduism which were adhered to by the vast majority of Sri Lankans. So it is with much concern today that the people of this country regard the lack of action taken by the Church to arrest the activities of the evangelists. Is the Church falling back into its past history of openly attacking and trying to annihilate other religions? Is this the case in this "age of enlightenment", and if so, how can such an openly hostile attitude towards other religions be conducive towards religious harmony?

The established churches in Sri Lanka must be wary of providing support to the evangelists who are conducting an ideological war against non-Christian religions. By providing overt or covert support to the activities of the evangelists, the mainstream churches are only inviting the displeasure of the vast majority of Sri Lankans who do not look kindly upon the provocative methods of proselytism employed by the Christian fundamentalists. Many in this country are quite plainly fed up with the crusade of conversion that is being spearheaded by the evangelists, and want the hate campaign against non-Christian religions to end. If the Church were responsible and tolerant of other faiths, it ought to take into account the thoughts and feelings of the Sri Lankan people, instead of continuously ignoring them in order to satisfy the rather fanciful and intolerant dream of Christianizing not only Sri Lanka, but the entire world.

Christian fundamentalists have sown the seeds of religious discord in this country, and the fruit of their actions can only be disastrous. It is in the interests of the Sri Lankan nation to take immediate steps to neutralize the war waged by the Christian evangelists against non-Christian religions, and to reinstall and reinforce a climate of religious tolerance and understanding. Moderate Christians must understand that the religious harmony that was prevalent in Sri Lanka has been breached solely by the irresponsible activities of the evangelists, who care naught for the welfare of Sri Lanka, and who would do anything in their power to "harvest souls" for their God. By ignoring the principles of tolerance, love, compassion and understanding that are enunciated in the Bible, the evangelists are going against the teachings of Jesus Christ, and are trampling on accepted norms of decency. No good can come of it, and Sri Lanka should not have to undergo the trauma the Christian fundamentalists are thrusting upon her.

United together, Sri Lanka can shake off the unpleasant activities and attitudes of the Christian fundamentalists and move towards greater understanding and co-existence. By doing so, the country can stave off a possible religious war, and maintain its proud tradition of religious harmony. But as long as the Christian evangelists continue with their ideological war against non-Christian religions, and as long as some mainstream Christians support and aid the intolerant activities of the

evangelists, an end to religious rivalry and hostility will not be seen. The vast majority of Sri Lankans comprising Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, moderate Christians, free thinkers and atheists will not be happy over such a situation. They want the religious fanaticism of the Christian evangelists to end as soon as possible - before it creates debilitating religious rifts among society.

Opposing religious fundamentalism will be of benefit to Sri Lanka both now and for the future. To ignore evangelism today will likely lead to more hostile religious conflicts later on. This is something that Sri Lanka can ill afford after more than 20 years of national conflict. United together as Sri Lankans who appreciate religious harmony and co-existence, the intolerant worldview of the evangelists and their machinations can and should be defeated. The voice of the tolerant majority must be heard.