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No part of this report has been written with the intent to exacerbate tensions between ethnic and religious communities. On the contrary, its entire content is purely designed to nurture a better understanding between all human beings without exception. Any inaccuracy or point of contention within it should be entirely and solely attributed to the shortcomings of its author.

The Fruits and Wonders of Our Dialogue with Buddhism Through a Cultural Tour & Workshop in Sri Lanka (August 9th-17th, 2011)

Last August as I left for a Jesuit workshop taking place at the Tulana Center located in Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka, i.e. the Resplendent Island, I did not really know what to expect. At first, the minister of the community I belong to in Seoul balked –once more– at providing the funding necessary to allow me to take off; convincing him to change his mind had required some sophisticated diplomacy. I knew that, despite a very heavy schedule in South Korea, I did not want to miss the rare opportunity of meeting some of the few Jesuits in the world who, like me, specialized in Buddhism. I also knew that the opportunity to enjoy a guided visit of that stronghold of Theravada Buddhism would not come back again soon and that unless I went, nobody would represent South Korea at the workshop. Moreover, as all of the participants were encouraged to attend with some people with whom we could start building a worldwide Jesuit network of men and women involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, I had invited Pastor Yongun CHOI, one of my doctoral students. Nevertheless, since no one can ever predict with certainty what the results of a workshop will be, I was silently wondering about the outcome of the trip. Even more so since the preparation of the August meeting had required an impressive amount of email exchanges, including some confusing and tedious red tape, linked in part to the Sri Lankan political situation that still left unanswered many crucial questions on the unfolding of the journey.

The result of a brain storm on Sri Lanka would naturally vary considerably from person to person. Besides the hills and mountains covered with tea plantations that are well known throughout the world, the answers would reflect, to a certain extent at least, the personality and preoccupations of each of us. Pastor CHOI, for instance, had heard that precious stones were available at a reasonable price in Sri Lanka. As a result, he had set as one of his top priorities to bring a gem back home for his wife, whom he had left alone at his Seoul apartment to take care of their four young children –a good intention perfectly in line with the Buddha's recommendation that a husband do things to make his spouse happy.

Personally, as a professor who teaches a general introduction to Buddhism for the undergraduate students of Sogang University every year, what first crossed my mind at the thought of visiting Sri Lanka was the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (ab. Tooth Temple), situated in the city of Kandy, on the shore of a beautiful lake. It is in that temple that a tooth presumably belonging to the Buddha Śākyamuni himself had been enshrined, in a magnificent

golden holy of holies surrounded by a large number of elephant tusks.² What came next to my mind was the northern city of Anuradhapura, the center of Sri Lankan Buddhism, where one can find the Mahavihara (meaning “Great Temple” in Pali), which was established by King Devanampiya Tissa (247-207 BCE), when Mahinda was sent to Sri Lanka by his father, Emperor Aśoka (ca. 304–232 BCE), to teach Buddhism to the royal court of the southern island. According to the tradition, Mahinda’s sister, Sanghamitta, would have come also sometime later, taking along with her one of the branches of the Bodhigaya bodhi tree and she would have planted it somewhere on the site of the Mahavihara. As a result, the sacred tree that can still be seen within the Mahavihara compound today is considered by the faithful as an outgrowth of the very tree under which Siddhārta Gautama (563-483 BCE) achieved full awakening some twenty five centuries ago. It also is in Anuradhapura that lay the ruins of the Abhayagiri Temple, founded some two hundred years after the Mahavihara, as a result of a quarrel over whether monks could visit their families or not. When foreign invaders captured Anuradhapura in the tenth century, they destroyed both monasteries. After those invaders were finally expelled in 1071, only the Mahavihara was rebuilt which has supposedly remained ever since as the center not only of Sri Lankan Buddhism but also of Theravada scholarship.³

I had read in a tourist guide hastily bought in a bookstore during a stopover in Singapore that the Vedda (hunters) were the original inhabitants of the island, but that today less than 2000 were said to exist. The sheer survival of those descendants of the late Stone Age society that existed on the island since 16,000 BCE is amazing; it allows us to understand better how deeply rooted in history the ethnic conflicts that have taken place for the control of the land on the island have been. I had also read that Sri Lanka had become independent from the British rule in 1956, after more than four and a half centuries of colonization by three successive European powers.

Despite that eventful and turbulent historical background, one of the most striking characteristics of every single person who welcomed us in Sri Lanka, from the time of our late night arrival at the airport until our departure from the island, was their remarkable sense of hospitality, undoubtedly inspired in large part not only by Buddhism (70%), but also by Hinduism (15%), Islam (9%) and, of course, Christianity (6%). We were met upon arrival, accompanied throughout the journey, and waved goodbye to when it ended by the tireless Father Lawrence SOOSAI S.J. Anything we wanted to do, like the sightseeing of Tooth Temple and of Anuradhapura, or of Polonnaruwa –the medieval capital of Sri Lanka– he and our hosts tirelessly helped us achieve. We discovered that Kandy in the South, Anuradhapura in the north and Polonnaruwa in the east define together the limits of the so-called Sri Lankan cultural triangle within which both pilgrims and tourists can enjoy an unrestricted access to the religious and cultural settings of ancient Sri Lanka. Moreover, thanks to the idea of Father Noel SHETH S.J., from Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth University in Puna, our ‘guardian angel’ also took us around some higher education Buddhist institutions, especially in Kandy, and a number of Buddhist bookshops where plenty of excellent works on both Theravāda and Mahāyāna literature were available at amazingly cheap prices. It was truly astonishing to be so warmly welcomed in a country that had been torn apart by a cruel civil war during the three decades preceding May 2009.⁴ In fact, the military check points manned by very young soldiers that could still be seen everywhere last August kept reminding us of those recent events. Nevertheless, huge crowds of tourists are back to the Resplendent Island. Needless to say, however, that beyond the warm smiles of our Sri Lankan hosts, the memory of the tragic events that have damaged the social fabric of the nation for more than thirty years remains extremely vivid in the minds of everyone.⁵ However, as we kept observing, it is against that tragic backdrop of religious and ethnic conflicts that many Sri Lankans keep striving courageously, sometimes risking their lives, to conform their existence to the lofty ideals of peace embodied and taught by the Buddha and /or Christ.

Without excluding so many other people which the shortness of this report does not allow time to mention, here are two striking examples of such edifying lives.

It would be hard, for instance, to forget the simplicity and the generosity with which the staff of the Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA⁶), located in Kandy, welcomed us, invited us to work together in the future –through all kinds of exchanges– and helped us to get seats to attend the very famous Esala Perahera (July/August Procession).⁷ That hospitality is all the more remarkable when one keeps in mind the long and extremely sad chapters of the history of Buddhist-Christian encounters in Sri Lanka under the successive colonial rules of the Portuguese (1540-1658), the Dutch (1658-1795) and the British (1795-1956). Given the exceptional open mindedness displayed by the SIBA, it would be wise on our part to explore as thoroughly as possible how to develop a strong partnership with this institution in the future. For instance, we may consider as concrete possibilities student exchanges, proposing the courses that we can give and, whenever it is possible, taking the courses that we are interested in. Let us not forget that Father SOOSAI is already doing his doctoral degree at the SIBA and that he is in an excellent position to help any Jesuit willing to take part in this partnership.

Equally unforgettable is the impressive personality of Father Alosius Pieris, a man whose whole existence takes place at the crossroads of Buddhism and Christianity, as the Tulana center which he founded shows in so many ways –beginning with a chapel clearly evoking the Deer Park (Sarnath) where the Buddha did the First Turning of the Dharma Wheel near the city of Benares. Among many things that would deserve to be mentioned, A. Pieris has managed to help Rev. T. Sunangala THERA to complete a doctoral degree at the Ateneo de Manila in the Philippines, thus making him the first Sri Lankan Buddhist monk to ever receive such a degree. It is also well worth saying that Fr. Pieris has purposely chosen as his successor for the head of the Tulana center a Sri Lankan of mixed origin by birth, i.e. a man who is Tamil and Sinhalese both culturally and genetically. These two examples exemplify the efforts made by men and women of goodwill, deeply inspired by the words of the Buddha and of Christ, to overcome all kinds of discrimination in favor of a world where every creature can find its place.

Let us add, as a complement to the above instances, that the Sri Lankan Jesuit provincial belongs to the Tamil minority of the island, thus clearly showing that the Jesuit samgha is not based on racial identity but on the fact that its members are all called by Christ, no matter to what race they may belong. The parallel with the Buddha who considered every human being as “ārya” i.e. “noble” independent of the social caste he belonged to by birth, is clear.

Similarly, the encounter between all the Jesuits who took part in the Tulana workshop mostly took place beyond racial and nationalistic distinctions, illustrating some of the best of the spirit of the Society of Jesus. Jojo FUNG’s participation, as a specialist of shamanism, was most welcomed. Generally speaking, we would have needed far more time to go deep into the significance of each presentation and of each of the meditative exercises proposed. Although we all specialized in Buddhism, within the larger Jesuit samgha, we obviously have extremely diverse –and potentially conflicting– approaches of the tradition founded by the Buddha. However, since such diversity constitutes an invaluable wealth, we should not be afraid of it. Although our yearly gathering remains in its infancy, it obviously has a promising future and it surely is of the utmost importance for the pastoral work of each one of the Jesuits specializing in Buddhism.

Pastor CHOI was warmly welcomed by the Jesuit samgha and fit in the workshop very well. After some running around and tough negotiations, he finally managed to find a blue sapphire to his liking to bring back home for his wife. She is very happy with the gem –as the Buddha had predicted– even though her husband had to pay more for it than expected. In addition to

that precious stone, Pastor CHOI and I also managed to load on the plane returning to Korea – without extra charge– some forty kilograms of publications bought from Sri Lankan Buddhist bookstores, including a Pali primer from which we are now very enthusiastically studying Pali together once a week. However as did all of the other participants, we also brought back from the workshop another kind of treasure: a stronger desire, inspired by all the courageous and outstanding people that we have met, to live a life aiming at the embodiment of the ideals of universal peace and harmony ferried by Gautama the Buddha and Jesus the Christ. As A. Pieris puts it, no matter how tough it may be in the midst of the chaotic world we live in, it amounts to letting the encounter of Love and Wisdom –i.e. the priceless gem of an awakened life in the Spirit– take place in our hearts.

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¹ “May all beings be happy”, literally “May there be every happiness”, a traditional Pali sentence by which one expresses one’s good will toward others.

² The Tooth Temple was damaged when a bomb was detonated by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or the Tamil Tigers) near its main entrance in 1998. S. J. Tambiah may help us to understand, at least in part, the complex backdrop against which that event took place: “In Sri Lanka, the doctrine of identifying state with Buddhism and society created difficulties in the postcolonial era, when the larger society included non-Buddhist and non-Sinhalese speaking minorities. The ideology leads to an intolerant dogma that excludes other religions and languages from equal membership within the polity.” See *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, London/ New York/ Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 520.

³ Those two monasteries had been fierce rivals during an entire millennium, to such an extent that “whenever one won the ruler over to its cause, it plundered and looted the buildings and property of the other.” It was only in the tenth century that the invasion and the capture of the capital Anuradhapura by kings from southern India put a definitive end to that pattern. See Kenneth K. S. Ch’en, *Buddhism, the Light of Asia*, Barron’s Educational Series, 1967, p. 123-124.

⁴ The war ended on the 18th of May 2009, when Velupillai Prabhakaran (b. in 1954), the founder and leader of the LTTE, was killed during a last ditch fight that took place in the Jaffna Peninsula’s mangrove island of Nandikadal between his organization and the Sri Lankan army. At least 70.000 people died during the conflict.

⁵ Many outside observers think that the crushing humiliation of the Tamil people characterizing the government’s victory is not a viable solution to allow the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority (18% of the pop.) to live in peace together forever. On the contrary and unfortunately, it would just be a matter of time before the same very old problem starts festering all over again. To many, the triumphant smile of Mahinda Rajapaksa (b. in 1945), today’s president of Sri Lanka, as it can be seen on thousand rupee bills commemorating his victory over the LTTE, bears something outrageously provocative.

⁶ Email: admissions.siba@gmail.com or sibageneral@gmail.com / Website: www.siba.lk

⁷ A procession to honor the sacred relic enshrined in the Tooth Temple; as the largest religious festival in Sri Lanka and, perhaps, in Asia, it also involves the participation of all the major Hindu temples of the area and a great number of huge elephants, the tallest of all carrying the Buddha’s tooth (actually a replica of the one enshrined in the Tooth Temple by fear of terrorist attacks).