

Challenges and Opportunities for Theological Education in Sri Lanka

Revd R T B Abeysinghe,

Lecturer, Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa, Sri Lanka

The Anglican Church in Sri Lanka

It is widely believed that Christianity existed in Sri Lanka in the first century. This is attributed to the apostle Thomas who is also the patron saint of the land, who according to legend preached in Sri Lanka. A church in Gintupitiya in the Colombo suburbs is named after him. Records suggest that Christians in Kerala (also evangelized by St Thomas) and Persian Christians (communities who formed the Nestorian schism based on the doctrine of two persons of God and Jesus)¹ existed in Sri Lanka before the advent of Western powers in the 16th century. This is further evidenced by the location of Sri Lanka as a port which continuously brought traders from other parts of the world, some of whom contributed to the continuation and enrichment of the faith. One fact that has been detailed a number of times in the search for Christianity before the colonizers has been the Anuradhapura Cross which was found in the 6th century.²

When the Portuguese invaded Sri Lanka there were conversions to Roman Catholicism which means that today almost 83% of all Christian faith adherents in the land are Roman Catholics. The Dutch missionaries in the 17th century were able to convert almost 21% of the population to Christianity. They also built the first Protestant church of the country in Wolvendhal in Galle in 1749.³ In attendance at worship this number has now decreased, attributed to the absence of the vivid sense of worship with the stimulation of the five senses that is present in the Roman Catholic rite.

When the British came to Sri Lanka several denominations took ground, primarily Anglicanism, Methodism, the Baptists, Presbyterians, Salvation Army and the American

¹ Aprem, Mar. (2013) Early Christianity in Sri Lanka and India and Issues of Identity. *All things Assyrian*, (online) Available at <http://www.aina.org/ata/20130903031249.html> (Accessed 7 November 2020).

² Hocart A. M.,(1924). *The Ratana Pāsāda, the Western Monasteries of Anuradhapura, Excavations in the Citadel, The so-called Tomb of King Duttagamani, Privy Stones.*(1st ed). Archeological Department (Ceylon):Colombo, 51–52.

³ Paranavithana, K.D. (2002). *Wolvendaal Church - Dutch Reformed Church in Sri Lanka - 360 years of history.* (online). Available at <http://www.lankalibrary.com/geo/dutch/church.htm> (7 November 2020)

Ceylon Mission mainly through the work of the Church Missionary Society and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.⁴ Today these denominations belong to the National Christian Council and several independent churches form the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka. Even though a minority, the Christian faith has continued to impact the country significantly through governance, education, arts, social work and heritage.⁵

Anglican presence in Sri Lanka dates from the arrival of the first Colonial Chaplain, Cordiner, in 1799 under the Bishop of London. Consequent to the Anglican Churches of South India, North India and Pakistan becoming part of United Churches in their respective countries and the Anglican Dioceses of Burma becoming an autonomous Province, the wider historic Province of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon ceased to exist. This situation resulted in the two Dioceses of the Church of Ceylon, namely, the Diocese of Colombo and Diocese of Kurunagala, becoming what is known as ‘extra provincial Dioceses’. The Diocese of Kurunagala was established in 1950 and was recognized legally in 1972. The Dioceses of Colombo and Kurunagala together, constitute the Church of Ceylon.⁶

The Church of Ceylon today comprise of over two hundred institutions including parishes, schools, children and elders homes, farms, vocational training centers, social outreach centers and mission centers spread over each province and district in the country. From its inception the Church of Ceylon had to grapple with the multi-natured situation in the country. The Church membership is made up of Tamil, Sinhala and Burgher communities who speak English, Tamil and Sinhalese languages. It also boasts of varied and diverse socio-economic backgrounds ranging from the private schooled elite to the labourers and farmers of the country.

The first work of the missionaries was the translation of the prayer book (Book of Common Prayer) which is an essential element in Anglican worship. In Sinhala it was published in

⁴ Balding. J.W., (1922) *One hundred years in Ceylon, or, The centenary volume of the Church Missionary Society in Ceylon, 1818-1918*. Madras: Printed at the Diocesan Press, 63-68

⁵ Pinto.L (2013). *A Brief History Of Christianity In Sri Lanka*. (online) Available at <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/a-brief-history-of-christianity-in-sri-lanka/> (7 November 2020)

⁶ Diocese of Colombo (2015). *History of the Church of Ceylon Diocese of Colombo*. (online). Available at <https://www.dioceseofcolombo.lk/diocese/history> (Accessed 7 November 2020)

1820, and various other editions⁷ were later produced up to 1955. The editions are also part of the attempt that was made to inculturate faith practice. It was not uncommon to find local idiom and ethos in the prayers and practice of the later edited prayer books. The Tamil version was imported from South India. This practice shows a translation model⁸ of inculturation.⁹ However from a secular view point the ‘independent voice’ of the Church was not heard.

Christianity was interpreted on western lines, and in non-indigenous concepts. The missionaries imposed on their adherents in Sri Lanka the conventional forms of Western Christianity almost in their entirety, oblivious of the value of indigenous art forms – music, drumming, dance and architecture – to Christian worship.¹⁰

The first motivation for Contextual Liturgies in Sri Lanka was in 1933 with the ‘Ceylon Liturgy’. However, the adopting of this process is credited to Bishop Lakdasa De Mel, the first Sri Lankan Anglican Bishop and last Metropolitan of India. He writes that

the early Church was incredibly daring in baptising the national culture into Christ... [hu]man’s religion had to enter into his environment and culture, taking over places, seasons and customs associated with pre-Christian religious observances and with inspired intuition turning them to Christian profit... [s]he who fears to make a mistake ends by making nothing... The wide accommodating charity of primitive days has given way to self-conscious dread of syncretism which testifies to the lack of spiritual powers within.¹¹

Therefore in De Mel’s thinking the aspect of foreignness had to be replaced by an authentic Ceylonese Christianity.¹² Elizabeth Harris reviews the whole movement and sees it as a

21 Griffiths, D.N. (2002), *The Bibliography of the Book of Common Prayer 1549-1999*, London: the British Library.

⁸ A translation model has as its concern the preservation of the tradition while adapting faith expressions to a particular context. Stephen Bevans, *CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY* 2020 available at https://na.eventscloud.com/file_uploads/ff735620c88c86884c33857af8c51fde_GS2.pdf (accessed on 7th November)

⁹ Tovey, P. (2004), *Inculturation of Christian Worship*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 4.

¹⁰ De Silva, K. M. (1981). *A History of Sri Lanka*. Los Angeles: [University of California Press](http://www.libraryoftheology.org/), 221

¹¹ De Mel, Lakdasa, (1956), *The Christian Liturgy in Ceylon*, The Thirty Third Hale Memorial Sermon Chicago: Seabury.

¹² De Mel, L. (1956), *The Christian Liturgy in Ceylon*, Hale Memorial Sermon, http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/lk/demel_liturgy1956.html (Accessed 10 November 2020).

Christian rapprochement with Buddhism.¹³ The movement has not been systematically examined but this was considerably improved by a recent publication by the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, which brings together many examples of this movement.¹⁴

The first three Sri Lankan Anglican Bishops emphasized that *we are not only Sri Lankan Christians: we are also Christian Sri Lankans*.¹⁵ The rationale for a cultural, emotional, traditional, societal orientation is expressed in the following long quote by a recent bishop:

Worship in the Church of Ceylon is solemn and participatory and includes cultural elements such as drumming, dancing, indigenous lyrics, the prostration, use of the rotti or chapathi as the host, and the lighting of the traditional oil lamp. Clergy preside barefooted; and sesath (colourful banners on colourful poles which symbolize the presence of the monarchy) are carried in Liturgical processions and adorn the sanctuary to indicate that worship is directed to Christ the King. In some congregations and on special occasions such as ordinations worship is tri-lingual. In many congregations it is bi-lingual. Music is provided from either an organ or eastern instruments such as the tabla, serapina and sitar. A contemporary feature in the Canon of the Eucharist is the reference to “Sages” along with the Law and the Prophets as vehicles of God’s revelation to humans.¹⁶

Theological Education and Challenges

In the pre independence era clergy training was done at the Cathedral Institute in Colombo (a training centre) and Bishop’s college in Calcutta and it was only in 1963 just under 60 years back that the ecumenical Theological College of Lanka came into being. It was the first ecumenical project of the Protestant churches in the country and its degrees are being accredited by the Senate of Serampore University in India. Highlighted below are a few of the challenges that are faced in the field of Theological Education in Sri Lanka.

¹³ Harris, E. (2016), Art, Liturgy and the Transformation of Memory: Christian Rapprochement with Bhuddism in Post-Independence Sri Lanka, *Religions of South Asia*, 10.1 pp 50-78.

¹⁴National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (2014), *Jesus Christ: Sri Lankan Expressions*, Colombo: National Christian Council of Sri Lanka.

¹⁵

¹⁶ De Chickera, Duleep (2013), ‘The Church of Ceylon (Extra Provincial to the Archbishop of Canterbury)’, Markham, Ian S., et al *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell

1. The Human Resource and Investment

The dearth of scholars and academics has been a dire need in past decades and continuing to this day. From independence the Anglican church can count on less than four doctoral scholars who have been part of the theological academia. At present there is a renewed interest for past students at the Theological College to be moulded into future academics. The problem of not having qualified faculty is affecting all of the Protestant churches but more so the Anglican Church as it seeks a broader scope in fields such as liberation theology, worship, education, nation building and social outreach. Also the expertise of relevant scholars can become stagnant as they are unable to spend time in research and publication. This inevitably affects the students at College and then the parishes they will serve and ultimately the congregations and regions they will serve. Investment towards the future is indeed the need of the hour in this case.¹⁷

2. Capacity Building and Linking

Secondly the absence of studies after the basic degree in Sri Lanka is a prolonged issue. At most time students will lose their momentum and completely halt their studies. On other occasions ministers will venture into other qualifications among these Buddhist studies as an alternative. There has also been the issue that Serampore University has not been recognized as a degree awarding institute in Sri Lanka which makes ministers work even harder to earn a secular degree and then pursue secular studies.¹⁸ Recently one university had accepted its BTh into a qualifying MA but further study is not possible in that university. Therefore the entire academy suffers in this way. To this day Biblical and Theological study scholars are either visiting faculty from abroad or from the Roman Catholic seminary. And further study will also include links and networks for the Anglican Church. At present there are no longstanding links where prospective ministers can be sent for their training and at most times a long wait must be endured by candidates before following through with higher studies. At the Theological College of Lanka we are grateful to Queens Foundation in the UK who have reached out with a programme which is in essence funded by the Methodist church in Britain. It has made possible split-location studies but we are yet to see qualified alumni from the programme.

¹⁷ Principals Report (2020/21). Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa.

¹⁸ Graeme C Jackson, *Basil Portrait of a Missionary* (Wellawatte: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2003)

3. Issues of content

The number of local resources is also a challenge. Whilst we emphasize a home grown education the lack of publications in the local languages makes it difficult for students to continue their studies. This shortage is also due to the policies of the college which emphasize local thinking and ‘de colonizing’ the mind. But as the decades go by the use of English has become very strong; both in secondary and tertiary education and literature in the local languages has become scarce. At one point a translation programme was introduced but this has also been halted. Most of the literature that is available is in English and many ministers in training find the language difficult to digest when undergoing the intensive study programme. It is difficult to allocate space towards this element.

When discussing resources, most of what we are able to bring to our students are from Serampore University. So while being thankful for them for being our partners through these many years an effort is underway for the only ecumenical seminary in Sri Lanka to be a degree developing and awarding institute.¹⁹ This would enable a more localized curriculum with a focus towards the Sri Lankan context.

Opportunities for Theological Education

Naturally alleviating most of the concerns mentioned above would strengthen Theological Education in Sri Lanka. There are also opportunities that can enrich the theological academy, such as the following:

1. Multi-Culturalism

Our country is a ‘multi religious’ one and has been for millennia. All faiths in the country were in fact imported, which includes Buddhism and Hinduism which are followed by a major portion of citizens. Sri Lanka is also one of the few countries which have a majority Buddhist population and a ‘religion’ which is not actually a ‘faith’ in itself.²⁰ The task of theologizing within a context, which is agnostic and sometimes atheistic, can be a daunting

¹⁹ Principals Report (2020/21). Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa.

²⁰ Billimoria, Marc, (2016), ‘Christian Liturgy in Sri Lanka’ in Chapman M, Clerk. S, & Percy M, (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, Oxford: OUP

task. Christians have learned to be in a lived-out faith relationship with their majoritarian brothers and sisters of different faiths. Many are the aspects that Christians have tried to inculcate in their faith lives in this context.²¹

Then, to have a look at the Anglican Church and its mission in the country, it is obvious that this church dwells heavily on the inclusivist end in the spectrum. Thereby the relationships, liturgies and worship of the church have been decorated with local literature, tunes, arts, customs and rituals. Local stories, chants, dances, architecture and ethos have found a place in how the church worships and practices its faith in context. Therefore this theologizing in religiosity opens up much opportunity to make a contribution towards the theological academy.

2. Post colonialism and Asian Emotionalism

For nearly four hundred and fifty years Sri Lanka was under foreign rule. Being under foreign rule influences many aspects of life. Christianity was present in Sri Lanka even before this but not as an organized religion - Sri Lanka underwent a re-planting stage with the advent of Western powers. Faith administration under the Portuguese, Dutch and the British was a totally different experience for the Ceylonese. It was a different experience for the reason that it was now the faith of the administration. Before this the country was ruled by Buddhist and Hindu kings and both of these could also be called colonial rulings. But now what was in stark contrast was that the Christian faith was embodied in a foreign culture as well.²²

Further, Sri Lanka shares with many developing countries the social issues discussed immediately above and the multicultural aspect. As an Asian country we feel that Sri Lanka also shares something that became a contrast from the times of Western influence, which can be the emphasis laid on emotionalism in life. This is not saying that other persons in other geographical areas are of a robotic nature without emotions! But people here tend to be less rational and involve much sentimentality in the operations of life. The ‘mystery’ or the ‘mystic’ that first gave enthusiasm to travelers to seek India, Japan or Iran can be understood in this manner. African cultures will also have some sort of correspondence with this.

²¹ Ariarajah, S. Wesley (2018). *Moving Beyond the Impasse: Reorienting Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

²² Vidyasagara, Vijaya (2007). *Christian Ministry to the Workers: Challenges and Opportunities*, Colombo: Diocese of Colombo.

In the modern day in a global village the theological academy is finding enrichment from both the historical past and the local context, finding a unique mix and blessing. For many years indeed the Church suffered from Anglo Saxon captivity²³ and hence its theological thinking was heavily moulded along Western lines. Yet with a rejuvenation in local culture the Church has seemingly come to a point where there is a unique mixture of the two elements.

3. Liberation oriented theology

Sri Lanka is a developing nation. It has to its merit several accomplishments in education and healthcare. It is titled as a middle income country and has a lesser poverty rate than capitalist countries, essentially because of its socialist policies. Some may question each word in the name 'The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka' based on its modern history. However, the Sri Lankan identity as a friendly nation with a low cost of living and adequate law to keep it in the high human development index category can be seen as a positive.

Along these lines the suffering of a large portion of the country such as the fisher folk, farmers, labourers, plantation sector works and the post war context in the northern part of the country are but a few of the canvasses on which theological thinking takes place. Following the many well known liberation theologies across Asia, Sri Lanka has been making headway in bringing into light its own perspectives on the subject.²⁴

4. Risk taking and progressiveness

Risk taking is not the monopoly of any geographical location or any particular denomination. Yet there are some communities that seem to have entered this arena quite late and for that reason seem to be over enthusiastic about engaging in the same. Phillip Tovey a liturgical scholar mentions that the first Sri Lankan liturgy that came out in 1933 was revolutionary. It was so because it looked eastward and broke with the West. This liturgy was one of the two in the entire Anglican Communion that deemed such a break to be right. In structure and

²³ Sykes, Stephen and Booty, John, (1988), *The Study of Anglicanism*, 1st edn., London: SPCK.

²⁴ Dornberg, Ulrich (1992) *Searching Through the Crisis: Christians, Social Change in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s*. Colombo: Logos

wording the liturgy followed influences from Eastern liturgies and musical settings for the first time, including reflections of indigenous folk and boat and farm songs.²⁵

Of the two liturgies worth mentioning at this point, the first was referenced earlier as the May Day mass. It was unique in the sense that symbolism changed the entire worship to place it in a labourer's setting and with reference to his/her struggles and liberation. The second noteworthy liturgy came from a monastic community called Devasaranaramaya. The risk-taking element is quite visible in the collect for purity where homage is paid to Christ, the Buddha, the Prophet Mohammed, Marx and many other Hindu sages of enlightenment. Our second Bishop mentioned above endorsed this version for public use, convincing some of his critics that he was possessed! The mere mention of Marxist components in liturgies at a time when a Marxist led revolution was seizing power from the government and in which tens of thousands of youth were losing their lives was a controversy to say the least.

In the modern day, the Anglican Church in Sri Lanka is well aware of the 'changing scenes' in the theological academy. It is also realizing that investment for the future is one that will take much courage and effort. Many prospective ministers, scholars and thinkers are working on their own streams and are now ready to expand into new horizons.²⁶ On the other hand this intention must be supported by policies that enable the theological academy to have space for systematic study, research, networking, publications etc. So thinkers, scholars and practitioners must be allowed space to become academics enriching the field. And the church must be supported in this cause by partnership and links which enable such scholarship and training.

Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa
Diocese of Kurunagala, Church of Ceylon, Sri Lanka
Candlemas 2022

²⁵ De Chickera, Duleep (2013), 'The Church of Ceylon (Extra Provincial to the Archbishop of Canterbury)', Markham, Ian S., et al *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell

²⁶ Abeysinghe R.T.B (2020) *Sri Lankan Theology*: Amazon.