The Role of Buddhism in Sri Lanka’s Reconciliation Process

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Introduction

The conflict between the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan government and the armed Tamil separatists in the late 20th century is considered one of the longest running civil wars in Asia. The political and ethnic crisis began lurching in the post-colonial years after Sri Lanka claimed independence from the British in 1948, when the new government set about series of “Sinhala only” legislations regarding the national language, religion, education and employment opportunities. As existing social divide and unrest escalated, along with the failure of the successive governments to settle the grievances of the disadvantaged Tamil communities, the war broke out on 23 July 1983. It was marked by an intermittent insurgency against the government by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which fought to establish an independent Tamil state in the north and the east of the island. After a 26-year military campaign, however, the Sri Lankan military finally defeated the Tamil Tigers in 2009, bringing the three-decade long civil war to an end.

Throughout the war, it was frequently asserted that the struggle between the Sinhalese and the Tamils is about either ethnic or linguistic nationalism, but not a religious one. In the case of Sri Lanka, however, religion, ethnicity and language are not easily disentangled but rather entwined closely into community identities segregated across different parts of the country. As shown in the maps below, each component plays an important role in creating the fractured demographic picture of the island:
According to the 2012 Census, Sri Lanka was 70.2% Buddhist, 12.6% Hindu, 9.7% Muslim, and 7.5% Christian. The Buddhist community here belongs to the Theravada branch of the religion and is one of the oldest in the world, going back more than 2,000 years. Buddhism has played the central role as the religion of the Sinhalese majority for centuries and its imprint on the island has helped construct a unique Sinhala-Buddhist self-consciousness prevailing until today. This identity has been constituted through a synthesis of ancient and medieval traditional claims, especially in Sri Lankan’s most well-known chronicles like the fifth-century chronicle *Mahavamsa*, of which interpretations place the Sinhala-Buddhist people as the sole rightful heirs to the island (Bartholomeusz 1999, 173). Its revival in the colonial period later became intertwined in the rival political narrative against the British (Spencer 1990, 1-16), and continued to foster the call for the primacy of the Sinhalese in political, religious and cultural life throughout the civil war. With post-independence changes like capitalist transformations and new economic, political competition with Sinhalese-favored slogans and policies, Buddhism has
evolved into an embraced ideology closely associating Sinhala-Buddhists with the political history and territory of the island (Allen 1993, 188).

A few years have passed since peace was returned to the country, yet a lot of work remains to be done. The ongoing ethnic tensions, coupled with the wounds and casualties that the war left behind, pose enormous challenges to the government’s effort to promote reconciliation and development. Among the proposals and strategic developmental plans put forward, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) appointed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in May 2010 can be considered Sri Lanka’s first official attempt to look back at the war in a relatively critical manner. It is a commission of inquiry mandated to investigate the lessons that could be drawn from the war and several measures to be taken to prevent war and promote further national unity. Along with these governmental initiatives, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has also become crucial in addressing post-war societal issues, especially that of reconciliation and community healing between the varied ethnic groups. The reconciliation process from the viewpoint of these agents of change both governmental and non-governmental, ironically enough, leaves out a great part of the Buddhist thoughts and political narratives so deep-rooted in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict during and after the war. It is often claimed that religion in general and Buddhism in particular have little to do with the conflict and when it does, it is constrained as only part of the identity that makes up the majority Sinhalese people. In an effort to bring about true peace, however, it is important to recognize the critical role of Buddhism in constructing the post-war rehabilitation debate and effectively routing its peace-building principles into existing socio-economic and political initiatives. This study is dedicated to exploring that absence of Buddhism in the current reconciliation process despite its thriving influence in Sri Lankan societal and political life. By investigating
reconciliation efforts being made in relation to Buddhist ideas and methods, it attempts to address the way in which Buddhism can bring about a critique of contemporary life that might in turn have some effect in creating a new vision of society, one that is better geared towards tolerance and peace.

The first section of this essay will briefly discuss the literature surrounding the definitions of reconciliation formulated by scholars over the years, thereby assessing their relevance and practicality to the Sri Lankan post-war context. It is then followed by an examination of the reconciliation effort being made by the government and NGOs from a collection of scholarly materials, newspapers and interviews during a two-week research study in Sri Lanka. Finally, the essay will present some observations regarding the absence of Buddhist influence in this effort, and argue that Buddhism must not be excluded from the ongoing reconciliation process. Acknowledging its important role in both history and the contemporary post-war situation will assist agents of reconciliation in formulating proper peace strategies and effectively coping with current ethnic tensions.

**Literature review**

Reconciliation is one of the most elusive concepts in peace and conflict studies despite its increasingly common usage. To date, there has been little agreement on both its definition and scope, for there exists no single, one-size-fits-all reconciling solution to warfare. As is said by David Bloomfield in *Reconciliation after Conflict: A Handbook*, “Reconciliation is never a theoretical matter, but always happens in a specific context” (Bloomfield 2003, 16). In Sri Lanka, the dynamics and developments of the conflict seem to further complicate the matter, and how the war ended has much bearing on the process of reconciliation itself. After nearly three
decades of fighting and failed tries at peace talks, the government launched a number of major military offensives against the LTTE, driving them out of their controlled areas and leading to their defeat. The post-war situation in Sri Lanka is therefore a decisive military triumph for one side of the conflict, rather than a negotiated resolution. As a result, reconciliation as a process is not mediated but stands the risk of being imposed, neglected or devised (Thaheer et al. 2013, 10-11). According to Thaheer et al. (2013), “the parameters, the pace and the progress of reconciliation are now essentially determined by the State” (Thaheer et al. 2013: 12). The fundamental interpretations of the word indeed can and is predominating how the process is carried out. If to the Sri Lankan government, reconciliation means reconstruction and restoration to normalcy, other sides of the conflict such as the Tamil National Alliance and the international community, especially the United Nations Human Rights Council, are demanding more, the former for the devolution of political power, and the latter for restorative justice and accountability (Thaheer et al. 2013, 9-10). These conflicting ideas pose a huge obstacle upon the already complex, strenuous task of dealing with the past’s wounds and developing a shared vision of the Sri Lankan future. Consequently, the need for discourse and eventually consensus on an all-embracing notion of reconciliation fitting to the post-war context proves urgent to the situation we observe in this country. Given the complexity of the three given definitions of reconciliation, it might be prudent to use a somewhat dated but broad definition as provided by Johan Galtung (2005):

Reconciliation is a process aimed at putting an end to conflict between two parties. It includes a closure of hostile acts, a process of healing and rehabilitation of both perpetrators and victims. (Galtung 2005, 22-234)

Galtung’s definition can be considered the first proper step to reconciliation in the Sri Lankan context because it sees reconciliation as a process that is broad enough to include all
elements required to restore a relationship between separated parties of the conflict. It recognized the reality of a divided past and prioritizes the need for amendment and healing in a broken society. This definition can be furthered enriched by John Paul Lederach’s formula of reconciliation (1997), which determines the building of relationships between former adversaries as the core focus. The scholar maintains, “the traumas of the past and the hopes for the future must be formulated and brought together by discussing the issues of truth, forgiveness, justice and peace” (Lederach 1997, 30). These principal foundations are essential for the task of guiding, building and maintaining a healing process where each party learns to understand and respect one another for the common good. In another word, they can be seen as the building blocks for constructing a shared future, especially one of peace in Sri Lanka.

That being said, some scholars find ‘forgiveness’ to be a problematic concept in the political arena as it could undermine the desire for justice by victims (Raymond et al. 2002). Further, scholars argue that forgiveness in a personal sense does not require the involvement or even the knowledge of those who committed the perceived wrong-doing, hence the victims of politically-motivated violence find this difficult to contemplate (Rigby 2001, 12). There are also concerns expressed by human rights activists, who see truth and justice as critical to any attempt to deal with the past. Some even argue that reconciliation flows directly from justice (Quinn 2009). However, this by no means implies that reconciliation does not regard the need for truth and justice and prerequisites. Those who see forgiveness as an important feature of reconciliation do not urge to forget, but to forgive the past in order to move forward together (Raymond et al. 2002).

The current debate surrounding the methodology as well as the theoretical framework of reconciliation is multi-dimensional and far-reaching. While it is agreed that there is no clear-cut
path leading to reconciliation, scholars over the years have contributed enormously to its literature to broaden the concept and expand in details its various facets. Reconciliation in general is not an isolated act, but “both a goal – something to achieve – and a process – a means to achieve that goal” (Bloomfield 2003, 12). As a goal, Luc Huyse (2003) claims that reconciliation “prevents, once and for all, the use of the past as the seed of renewed conflict.” As a process, he continues, reconciliation can be thought of as containing two parts: a “backward-looking” operation, which encompasses the healing and repairing of past injustices, and a “forward-looking” operation, which encourages the moving on of individuals and society to a new development with peaceful dialogue and “adequate sharing of power” (Huyse 2003, 19). This process is usually a long, difficult and unpredictable one, involving different steps and stages. The scholar observes three principal stages to reconciliation:

1. Replacing fear by non-violent coexistence
2. When fear no longer rules: building confidence and trust
3. Towards empathy

To Huyse, peaceful coexistence, trust and empathy cannot develop sustainably if structural injustices in the political, legal and economic domains still persist. A reconciliation process must be supported by “the recognition of the essential codes of democracy” and “a just socio-economic order”, namely the gradual devolution of power, the creation of a just society where human rights are respected and the willingness to hold accountability for both the past and the future (Huyse 2003, 21). Grainne Kelly and Brandon Hamber (Kelly 2005, 21-36) seem to be on the same page, providing a broad formula of five components they consider vital to a successful process of reconciliation:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society
2. Acknowledging a dealing with the past
3. Building positive relationships
4. Significant cultural and attitudinal changes
5. Substantial social and political change

(Kelly and Hamber 2005, 28)

While this formula has once been criticized as likely irrelevant and problematic in the Sri Lanka situation where Sinhalese triumphalism is predominating the post-war scene, making the general Tamil community the enemy of the state (Thaheer et al 2013, 16), it offers a basic guideline to the reconciliation process in the societal angle, pushing for harmony and constructive relationships in society. This is a good starting point, considering how the Sri Lankan government is overly emphasizing economic development and reconstruction while neglecting the urge for accountability, social justice and political change. A meaningful recovery process should be comprehensive, cohesive and transparent as it involves all parties of the conflict. The role of the government, non-government institutions and the Sri Lankan community itself in this process should all be taken into account and never underestimated.

**Field research**

The field research was conducted in Kandy and Colombo, two major cities in southern Sri Lanka for a duration of two weeks, under the generous support of Colgate University’s Lampert Institute Fellowship. The primary objective of the research was to acquire scholarly materials and resources on peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka that are not available in the U.S. During the trip, I was able to make contacts with both local people and intellectuals in the field who were willing to share their knowledge and reference important works on the subject of post-
war reconciliation in several research centers and peace institutions, including the Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy and the International Center for Ethnic Studies. I also paid visits to publishing centers and prominent NGOs in the areas where government-issued documents, journals and local newspaper were available for the general public and for research purpose. The members of staff in all of these organizations were kind enough to offer me great assistance and important details on the projects that they were working on, to which I am immensely grateful.

Another objective of the field research, if conditions allow, was to conduct interviews with local people on the issue of reconciliation. My interaction and discussion with them led me to conclude that it was rather difficult to question people on such sensitive topics like ethnic tensions and post-war reconciliations in the country, considering the broad scope of the subject and the fact that the war had just ended a few years ago. Given the short duration of my stay, plus my language and geographic limitations – all interviews were conducted in English and in two Sinhalese-dominated cities – the interview results are predictably biased and statistically insignificant to back up my research findings. Nevertheless, they certainly offer an interesting look at how individuals experienced the war in different ways, and at the same time demonstrating that “the ‘reality’ of a people is what they perceive it to be” (Thaheer et al. 2013, 23). This study therefore was not to be a quantitative research, but rather a qualitative research relying upon available resources and documentation in Sri Lanka.

**Government’s approach to reconciliation**

Reconciliation is a long and difficult journey. The ending of the war in May 2009 opened up a historical opportunity for the government of Sri Lanka to bring about a just and lasting peace. In his victory speech in the Parliament recognizing the suffering of the war-affected
communities, President Mahinda Rajapaksa said, “It is necessary that we give to these people the freedoms that are the rights of the people in all other parts of our country… it is necessary that the political solutions they need should be brought closer to them faster than any country or government in the world would bring” (Rajapaksa 2009). In the same speech, he said that under the supervision of the President Task Force (PTF), the government was “committed to carry out accelerated development in the areas that were under terrorism, within the next three years” (Rajapaksa 2009). As a matter of fact, since the war ended, the government of Sri Lanka has taken a series of initiatives to make progress in the war devastated North and East. Resettlement of war-displaced communities is taking place, and the infrastructure development projects in these areas are well underway. In 2010, the President appointed the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) and its recommendations have been widely welcomed by the local and international civil society groups as a positive step towards reconciliation. The LLRC made broad range of recommendations with regards to governance, accountability issues, military operations, humanitarian law issues, human rights, resettlement and rehabilitation. Chapter 8 and chapter 9 of the LLRC are especially dedicated to providing observations and recommendations on issues impacting post-conflict reconciliation.

Reconciliation is, in fact, the principal objective of the report as the preamble explains the purpose of reconciliation exercise and the factors that determine it: “The ending of a nearly three decades of protracted and bloody conflict has opened many opportunities for bringing about reconciliation between the different communities, especially among the Sinhalese, Tamils and the Muslims. It becomes necessary to articulate a common vision of an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society… Acknowledging the losses and suffering of the past and providing mechanisms for recompense, social justice and for restoration of normalcy and
expressions of empathy and solidarity are steps aimed at redress. Relationship building following violent conflict, addressing issues of lack of trust, prejudice, and intolerance whilst accepting commonalities and differences is the essence of reconciliation” (Section 2, 8.136). Following this conception, three factors highlighted as vital for the process of reconciliation in the post-conflict situation are as follows:

- Establishing friendly relations among the ethnic groups
- Solving issues of mistrust, prejudice and intolerance
- Recognizing equalities and inequalities, similarities and differences

(National Peace Council 2013, 2)

Against the aforesaid background, the Commission makes several recommendations regarding levels and agents of reconciliation: a) A collective effort must be made by all Sri Lankans at three levels: i.e. at the level of the political leadership, at the level of civil society and at the level of the individual citizen (9.182) and b) The responsibility of being the prime mover of this process lies squarely with the government. Since reconciliation is a process and not a one-time event, the efforts towards that objective should be continuous and broad-based whilst being fully supported by the elected government (9.183). These principles fall squarely with some if not most of the definitions of a comprehensive reconciliation process already discussed in the Literature Review section. Following this approach, a number of issues affecting reconciliation that proves fitting and imperative to the post-war situation in Sri Lanka are further discussed in details in Chapter 9. Based on the guidelines laid down by *A Guidebook to the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission Report* (2013) by the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, a brief summary of these issues and the government’s recommendations is provided as below:
1. Permanent shelter, resettlement and livelihood issues: Implement housing programs and provide assistance to displaced communities during the war.

2. Infrastructure, transport, health and education: Accelerate infrastructure development, improve medical and teaching facilities, making them accessible to local people in war-affected areas.

3. Re-establishment of civilian administration: Fill up vacancies in civilian administration at the grassroots level (9.169).

4. Grievances of minorities (Tamils, Muslims, Sinhala villages adjacent to former conflict areas, Tamils of Indian origin): Recommendations made on rule of law and human rights are integral to the process of redressing grievances. The articulation of grievances by the Tamil people, especially, needs to be recognized and addressed directly and fairly as part of the discourse on the ethnic conflict and its causes (9.186, 9.187) A special institution to deal with citizens’ grievances is also needed in the face of the lack of good governance.

5. Principles of good governance and rule of law: Disarm illegal armed forces, conduct honest investigation and punishment of violent crimes, and carry out provisions for judicial review of legislation. The Commission also recommends the establishment of an Independent Public Service Commission to ensure no political interference in the public service and that recruitment and promotions in the public service are in conformity with the equality provisions in the Constitution (9.226).

6. Devolution of power: Strengthen local government institutions and hold political leaders accountable to the people. The progress of devolution should be people centric and promotes appropriate empowerment of the people at all levels.
7. Language policy: Promote tri-lingualism and compulsory teaching of Sinhala and Tamil, establish branches of Official Language Commission in Provinces, order bi-lingual officers in police stations on a 24-hour basis and require all government departments to have Tamil speaking officers.

8. Education: Introduce a merit based admission system, carry out a program of equitable distribution of educational facilities to prevent discrimination, promote mixed ethnicity schools, interaction programs, reconciliation clubs and peace education.

9. Inter-faith activities: Promote collective leadership from all religions, make firm actions against attacks on places of worship.

10. Art and culture: Promote greater awareness, linguistic and cultural affinities, encourage the translation of Sinhala writings into Tamil and vice versa, allow the national anthem to be sung in both languages.

11. Societal initiatives for reconciliation: Encourage reconciliation programs with the participation of all members of society, under the support of the government and relevant civil society groups (9.281). A separate event on the national day for the remembrance of victims of all communities is also suggested.

The implementation of these issues must be governed by the framework of values, norms and attitudinal changes that is clearly articulated by the Commission throughout the report. This framework is derived from three main sources – the core instruments of the human rights regime, the democratic system and the core spiritual values of the four main religions practiced in Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, as positive as these recommendations may sound, the implementation progress has been constantly called into question. The Commission does not deal with the follow up to the report and the implementation of the recommendations as a separate set of issues, as
this was not part of its mandate. It therefore does not comment on the administrative action needed to translate the recommendations into a plan of action and to monitor and evaluate performance at the ground level. Indeed, a few years after the issuance of the LLRC, critics already argue that “the government’s commitment to reconciliation doesn’t seem to go beyond infrastructure and economic development projects” (Thaheer et al. 2013, 4). Although there is a heavy focus on material reconstruction and industrial development in the northeast of the country, “the attention on social reconstruction falls short of the desired levels” (Herath 2010, 75). As emphasized earlier, an overarching reconciliation process cannot ignore “social reconstruction of amicable inter-ethnic relationships and other mechanisms which would assist people to negotiate and resolve the past animosities,” nor “a political process in which people look in retrospect, discuss the past violence, and agree on a path to peaceful conflict transformation” (Herath 2010, 76). In these respects, the government seems to be making very slow progress, raising questions about the genuineness of the LLRC and where its interests lie.

The LLRC has been further criticized by international human rights groups, the UN Panel of Experts and others due to its limited mandate, alleged lack of independence and its failure to meet minimum international standards or offer protection to witnesses (United Nations, 2011). Despite repeated calls from the international community, the Sri Lankan government has “failed to undertake any meaningful steps to investigate serious allegations of laws-of-war violations” (Human Rights Watch, 2010). According to criticism, previous commissions of inquiry established by the Sri Lankan government has failed to achieve anything other than delaying criminal investigations and had been plagued by government interference (BBC News, 2010). Even though Sri Lankan government rejected the UN’s war report calling it “fundamentally flawed” and “patently biased” (BBC News, 2011), there is plenty of evidence showing its lack of
commitment and mandate to investigate war crimes in the last stages of the conflict. The independence of the commission, for instance, has been questioned due to the fact that its members were appointed by the Sri Lankan government, one of the parties accused of committing war crimes. Most of its members were retired senior government employees, and some even held senior government positions during the final stages of the war when they publicly defended the conduct of the government and military against allegations of war crimes (International Amnesty et al., 2010). As a consequence of the above concerns, Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch have declined in a joint letter to appear before the Commission (International Amnesty et al., 2010). The International Community also passed two consecutive resolutions against Sri Lanka in 2012 and 2013 at the UNHRC, urging the government to make necessary amendment and deliver its promises (Thaheer et al. 2014, 4).

**NGOs’ approach to reconciliation**

Given the current situation of the national peace process of Sri Lanka, NGOs in and outside the country stand the risk of seeing their relevance at only a symbolic level. As they see it, it is very difficult to contribute to the larger peace process when the government does not share their vision of peace, or worse, adapts a negative stance to the work they do. Nevertheless, NGOs over the past decades have done more than striving to keep the peace discourse alive. They have branched out to promote peace and reconciliation at all levels and with a variety of approaches, forming stable linkages with other civil society groups in and outside of the country. The level of commitment and engagement with the Sri Lankan people on a daily life basis, as can be seen, truly highlights their potential and effectiveness in making changes. The examples of three NGOs that are discussed below, the Sarvodaya Center, the National Peace Council and the
Association of War Affected Women, which are some of the most active peace organizations in the country, will illustrate this involvement in the peace making process. A brief overview with details on their missions and activities will be presented based on findings from a collection of contacts, conversations and studies of their documentation during the two-week field research in Kandy and Colombo of Sri Lanka.

**Sarvodaya Center**

Considered the largest people’s organization in Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya Center has a history of around 50 years working towards peace-building, conflict resolution, community building and civilian empowerment. Founded by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, the organization was built on a set of philosophical tenets drawn from Buddhist and Gandhian thoughts. It boasts of an expansive network of divisional units district offices and educational institutes reaching over 15,000 Sri Lankan villages, with a huge number of volunteers working throughout the country (Sarvodaya.org, 2015). One of its divisions, Shanthi Sena, is dedicated to youth education, development and mobilization for peace-building projects. With the aim of transforming the attitudes and the role of the youth to suit the present Sri Lankan context, this division is putting the utmost emphasis on providing the youth leadership that can effectively contribute to the process of developing, rebuilding and reconciling in a society envisaged by the Sarvodaya vision: “…to create an active youth leadership enriched with social, economic, and political consciousness to work towards the eradication of violence in a non-violent way” (Shanthi Sena Brochure, 1). Shanthi Sena is collaborating with international organizations like the United Religious Initiative and the Asian Youth Center to promote and support their agenda of building ethnic and religious harmony. Following these organizations’ initiatives, it expands their activities to a number of cities through its Cooperation Circles in Sri Lanka and forms close
linkages with the people. Shanthi Sena was awarded the Human Rights Award by the French Republic in 1994 as recognition for its significant contribution domestically and internationally (Shanthi Sena Brochure, 4).

Shanthi Sena as the youth wing of Sarvodaya has been known for its direct and grassroots approach as it engages closely with the communities. Over the years, it has organized a number of programs for Sri Lankan youth such as Youth Leadership Development Training, Training Program on Active Citizenship, Conflict Transformation and Peace Education and Inter Ethnic, Inter Religious and Inter District Workshops. It also provides training in First Aid, Health Education and Environmental Conservation, meanwhile helping establish healthcare centers like Suwadhana Sewa (Shanthi Sena Brochure, 3). These activities are able to equip the youth with necessary knowledge and skills to become active, responsible Sri Lankan citizens and more importantly, spread messages of peace and love. With the right attitude and approach, they contribute remarkably to the process of ethnic and religious reconciliation by inculcating in young minds a sense of open-mindedness and connectedness to other Sri Lankans. The Inter District Youth Exchange Programs, for instance, have been successful in initiating and establishing friendly relationships between different ethnic, religious and social groups in Sri Lanka. Under these programs, the youth of similar ages from the North and East are offered an opportunity to meet and to live with families who were willing to provide them hospitality in the South, and vice versa. During the stay, they engage in a number of friendship-building exercises, volunteer services and sharing of ideas and political discourses (Shanthi Sena Newsletter, 3). The “village to village – heart to heart” theme brought forth through these youth exchange programs, especially, has proved to be very successful in the post war reconciliation process. Young people from all parts of the country would come together in residential camps where they
learn about each other’s language and culture, share their thoughts on contemporary national issues and receive training or advice from civil society leaders. These programs have attracted a great turnout for the past six years, and it was revealed that “unexpected level of comradeship has been forged by these hosts and guests” (Sarvodaya Annual Report 2011-12, 16-17). Their experience of co-living and discussing social, political problems together has the power to remove former mistrust, animosity and form a concerted effort to build a peaceful, prosperous Sri Lanka in the future.

**National Peace Council**

The National Peace Council (NPC) was established as an independent and impartial national non-governmental organization in 1995. Its mission is “to work in partnership with different target groups with an aim to educate, advocate and mobilize the building of a rights-conscious society of citizens that work towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, reconciliation and equal opportunities for all” (Peace-srilanka.org, 2015). With a goal of establishing a long-term, viable solution to ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka, NPC is committed to creating a culture of peace, which upholds the values of non-violence, respect for human rights and free expression of ideas. In a concerted effort to strengthen public support for a negotiated political settlement, NPC has formulated its mandate to support its activity of advocacy, research, training and dialogue, which are aimed at mobilizing the people towards peace and conflict transformation.

NPC presents itself in a variety of regions and areas of concern as it adopts a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to post-war reconciliation. The main projects implemented by NPC in the recent years include the Reconciling Inter Religious and Inter Ethnic Differences Project, Women in Healing Project, Promoting Accountability and Preventing
Torture by Strengthening Survivors of Torture in Asia Project and Write to Reconcile Project. NPC carries out its workshops, seminars, conferences, exchange visits and advocacy through the issuance of media releases, commentaries and interviews to the national and international media. These activities, as revealed in NPC’s Annual Report 2014, “has impacts on increasing the general public’s knowledge of pluralistic values, good governance and human rights, providing information on ground reality to opinion formers and decision makers and providing linkage between the ethnic and religious communities through structured interactions...” (NPC Annual Report 2014, 10). As a peace organization with engagement and reconciliation as its core philosophy, it has through many its activities sought to rebuild relations among different ethnic and religious communities, helping to create a sense of peaceful coexistence and national unity.

NPC also takes advantage of its expansive network of international experts and scholars in approaching domestic issues, and tighten its relationships with likeminded organizations in the Asian region such as Asia Plateau in India, Asia Justice and Rights in Indonesia and Relief International in Myanmar (NPC Annual Report 2014, 10). Through a number of exchange conferences and dialogues, it is able to not only share Sri Lanka’s experience and lessons from the war with the international community but also gain a global understanding of the issues, thereby acquiring knowledge and necessary skills to cope with them locally and nationally. NPC’s active advocacy and coherent linkages in and outside of the country, as can be seen, helps facilitate and ignite both discussions and actions on conflict resolutions and a future of sustainable peace. It not only penetrates the communities through grassroots mobilization and training, but also serves as middle-level agent to advocate and direct resources to domestic institutions.
**Association of War Affected Women**

The Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) was established in August 2000 to create space for war affected women specifically mothers and wives of servicemen missing in action, and of those who are missing, to come together across the divide to work for peace. It is intended to bring together Sri Lankan women across conflict lines to work towards women’s advancement, human rights, democracy and conflict resolution (AWAW Annual Report 2014, 1). AWAW basically works in all parts of Sri Lanka, with national and regional civil society organizations, as well as with political parties and politicians. It also partners with international institutions such as the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Women’s Campaign International (WCI), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and global universities like McGill University in Montreal, Canada (AWAW Brochure, 2).

With the aim of promoting women’s full participation in Sri Lanka’s socioeconomic, cultural, political and human development processes, as well as enhancing security for women and girls in post-war Sri Lanka, AWAW has been carrying out intensive training of women to become local level law enforcement officers, civil security committee members and health officials with an emphasis on women’s protection and wellbeing. It also works to establish regional committees in order to build up networks with trained law enforcement officers, religious leaders and the health sector representatives to ensure Sri Lankan women’s security and safety (AWAW Annual Report 2014). In the political arena, AWAW proves to be extremely active in training women in selected provinces and districts to run for political office. Its partnership with IRI and WCI in particular has successfully produced a number of highly skilled, competent candidates with the capability to adapt, contribute and make an impact in Sri Lankan politics.
The scope of AWAW’s activities and influence, like NPC, is not restricted only to the local, grassroots level. It initiatives of advocacy for democracy and women’s equality expands regionally and nationally, as it makes effective use of international support to organize large-scale conferences and dialogues on targeted issues. Some of AWAW’s most notable activities include a two-day interactive dialogue “Women’s Space in the Political Arena: Proposals from the Parliamentary Caucus” under the generous support of the Office of the Public Diplomacy of the U.S. Embassy (AWAW Annual Report 2014, 8-9), and a Women Defining Politics conference cohosted by IRI (Iri.org, 2015). These meeting brought together women representing all levels of political involvement in Sri Lanka as well as prominent women leaders from throughout Asia to discuss challenges and identify ways to increase women’s political participation and influence. In the process, AWAW has also been working towards full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, a landmark international legal framework that addresses not only the impact of war on women but also women’s critical role in conflict resolutions and sustainable peace in post-war Sri Lanka (AWAW Brochure, 2). As can be seen, its multilevel operation and network in and out of the country has earned AWAW a solid standing as an important agent in both domestic and international activist communities. By spreading a direct and powerful message of peace and equality through an inclusive process to make a change, AWAW is making a significant impact on Sri Lanka’s society in general and the political scene in particular regarding democracy and women’s rights, thereby contributing immensely to the process of conflict resolution, peace-building and development in the post-war situation.
Sri Lankan people’s experiences

As mentioned before, the interviews conducted during the two-week study in Sri Lanka are restricted to the Kandy city area and its small scale indicates little representation of the Sri Lankan population with regards to the issue of reconciliation. Nevertheless, the diversity in the interviewees’ backgrounds as well as their attitudes towards the current post-war situation offers an interesting glance at the various ways in which individuals are affected by the war. The stories of three people in Kandy, as followed, will reveal specifically how they perceive reconciliation as an ongoing process malleable to changes and the responsibilities of the parties involved. Their experiences as part of the Sri Lankan community reflect the voices from the inside with valuable thoughts and aspiration for a better future where peace is sustained.

The first interviewee, Mr. A, is a Buddhist Sinhalese in his mid 60s. A civil engineer working for the government, Mr. A enjoys a relatively high standing in society and a stable family with his wife and two daughters, all of whom also having successful careers. Although the family was not directly affected by the war, they experienced severe restrictions of movement in Kandy city during the years when hostility between the two sides intensified, and fear of terrorist attacks were spread among the people. Mr. A himself also experienced the bombings and evacuation when he was working in a war-affected eastern area, Weli Oya, back in 2000. It took three months, he recounted, for the government military to defeat the LTTE and regain control in the province, and for him to eventually return and finish his job. When asked about ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils now and then, Mr. A said: “I believe they mainly existed between the government and the LTTE, or the Tamil terrorist faction. The breakout of the war brought with it many violent incidents and attacks, which might raise serious suspicion between the two ethnic groups in even in the South. But since the LTTE was wiped out
by the government in 2009, things have been returned to its normalcy” (Interview June 21, 2015). Mr. A’s family’s relationship with some Tamil residents around town has always been friendly, as they treat one another with kindness and respect. To him, “there is no longer ethnic discrimination in the present constitution; discrimination may still exist here and there, but it is rather hard to discern in the Kandyan community” (Interview June 21, 2015).

Mr. A was concerned yet optimistic about the post-war situation of Sri Lanka. He expressed high opinion of the government and other NGOs heading up North to support and promote development and rehabilitation in the affected areas. The new government, he said, was especially more active in promoting reconciliation as he cited the translation of the national anthem to both languages as a praiseworthy indicator of the progress. At the same time, Mr. A recognized lingering wounds of the war among the Tamils when he claimed that at least 1 out of 10 Tamils had friends or families directly affected by the war, and that the Tamil population was still disadvantaged in one way or another as a minority. “It’s easy to win a war, but it’s not easy to win peace.” To maintain true peace, he believed that the government must win the hearts of the people and eliminate ethnic discrimination once and for all. If and only if both communities agree to take an honest look at the past and start to understand, sympathize with each other, reconciliation will succeed (Interview June 21, 2015).

The second interviewee is Mr. P, a 51 year-old man currently working as the program coordinator of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), one of Sri Lanka’s leading research center based in both Colombo and Kandy. Originally a Sinhalese Buddhist with devout Buddhist parents, he converted to Catholicism in 2003, claiming to have found the path of truth in the teachings of Jesus. Mr. P first experienced the war in 1983 when he was in his 20s looking for employment around Kandy. Although the city was relatively safe, he had similar memory of
the tension and fear among people especially in public places. The Black July riots by the Sinhalese in 1983, which came across as a backlash of the killing of 13 Sinhalese soldiers in Jaffna by the LTTE, left a strong, vivid impression in him:

Kandy was rather calm at the time, and we only had a daily curfew at 1:30 for safety reasons. One day when the curfew was about to start, two busloads of people suddenly showed up and started smashing Tamil shops around the city. It was told that the “underworld” Sinhalese gangs were behind these riots, robbing and destroying Tamils’ properties to avenge the recent incident up north. The building where I used to live also had Tamil residents, so we decided to lock them up in a room to protect them before the men came in. Kandy was burning with Tamil tears and blood, but the army just stood by. It seems obvious to me that the government did not rise to the occasion but simply condoned the violent acts in silence. In some instances, it was reported that the state helped Sinhalese rioters by transporting them in government vehicles and giving them information so they could more easily find Tamil targets.

(Interview June 24, 2015)

His experience with the riots made Mr. P further question Buddhism and its followers who preached peace but whose actions indicated otherwise. Those Buddhist Sinhalese not directly involved in the riots also turned a blind eye to the situation, showing the indifference towards their own people. This is one of the reasons why Mr. P remained uncertain and critical of the post-war ethnic relations in Sri Lanka: “Although the Sinhalese are not as paranoid of the Tamils as during the war, some groups of nationalistic, chauvinistic Sinhalese certainly feel a sense of triumphalism as the winners and present rulers of the country. The way the Rajapaksa government behaved after the war only added to the inferiority complex of the Tamils who already felt marginalized as second-class citizens” (Interview June 24, 2015). In his opinion, the government did not make a real effort to restore a sense of security and respect in the northern and eastern Tamil areas. As Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism continued to penetrate throughout
society, he claimed, the Sinhalese dominated government had no true intention to reconcile but would remain careful and suspicious of other minorities.

Loyal to his religious teachings, Mr. P claimed to practice peace within himself, peace with his neighbors and peace with God. He perceived more harmony and ethnic diversity in the churches he frequented, in comparison to most Buddhist temples where only Sinhalese people dominated. To Mr. P, the inherent linkages between religion, ethnicity and nationalism in the Sri Lankan Buddhist Sinhalese identity pose difficult challenges to the task of raising the voice of the minorities: “During Mahinda Rajapaksa’s campaign, even temples were turned into his political platform where he delivered speeches and propagated his agenda to appeal to the majority. A great number of monks who are also Buddhist nationalists see nothing wrong in promoting and maintaining the supreme role of Buddhism in Sri Lanka” (Interview June 24, 2015). The superiority complex of the majority, it seems, continues to grow in society even after the war, leaving little space for the minority to assert their rights and concerns. Commenting on the prospect for peace in the future, Mr. P held: “Peace is sustainable as long as political leaders are genuinely into peace-keeping and reconciliation instead of merely preserving their own power and political support. It requires honest political leadership from all parties” (Interview June 24, 2015). In his opinion, the country needed an equal distribution of both political and economic resources for all ethnic groups. While the issue of ethnic tensions took time to resolve, the government could do more to increase general living standards, security and equal prospect for personal development of every Sri Lankan citizen.

Mr. P’s emphasis on the important role of the Sri Lankan government resonates in a way or another with how Mr. D, our third and last interviewee, views the post-war situation. A man of Tamil origin currently residing in Kandy, Mr. D works as a Tamil language coordinator and
trilingual translator for the government and various institutions around the country. The way Mr. D sees it, tremendous responsibility lies in the hand of the government and fortunately, the new government led by President Maithripala Sirisena in 2015 does promise more prospects for reconciliation and peacekeeping. It is carrying out a great number of projects on renovating the war-affected areas and repairing ethnic fracture in the North and the East of the island. “Whoever that is ruling the country knows very well of the fact that they cannot do so without the support of the Tamil people, considering political stability and electoral prospect” (Interview June 25, 2015). Today, he claimed, you could freely travel anywhere in Sri Lanka and people are very friendly to each other. More and more scholars as well as students are heading north (Jaffna) to volunteer and do research studies on the area.

While ethnic tensions seem to be alleviating, Mr. D acknowledges that the foremost obstacle to bridging the gap between the communities is the language difference. “Language is (the) key to communication and understanding, without which the process of reconciliation remains biased, incomplete if not impossible” (Interview June 25, 2015). As such, the Sri Lankan constitution now recognizes both Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages, and government officials are expected to have full proficiency in both languages. Mr. D described his experience with a variety of language learning and literature translation programs funded by the state in which he had been participating:

A language coordinator and teacher myself, I used to go to Colombo every Saturday morning to conduct classes for doctors and nurses from different hospitals. My work also got me to discuss and experience how language learning took place at schools around the city. A serious problem I observed through the years, however, was that most Sinhalese teachers who taught Tamil did not have enough proficiency, and the students only learned the language because they were required to do so. They tended to cram for exams to fulfill the requirement and simply forget everything after. This was not so true for
Tamil people in Jaffna, where these kinds of programs were going quite well. People there were eager to learn and work hard so they could communicate with people from the South.

(Interview June 25, 2015)

Aside from the language issue, the question of land in the post-war context also presents a big challenge to be resolved. In this respect, Mr. D again claimed that the government was the only entity that had the power to handle people’s concern and redistribute the land being lost. It is the government, not NGOs or other international institutions, that is responsible for giving out compensation for the needed, especially in Jaffna, to help them move on with their lives. Most of the work therefore depends on the competence of the present government and whether they have the will to “prioritize the prosperity of the people and the country in order to make the best effort” (Interview June 25, 2015). As the aftermath of the war left Sri Lanka with many difficulties, separationism between the two communities being one of them, Mr. D believed there was a lot of government work to be done but unfortunately it was being done in a very slow pace.

**Buddhism’s role in reconciliation**

The investigation of reconciliation efforts being made in post-war Sri Lanka so far has revealed a gap in the reconciliation debate where visions of religious traditions on conflict resolution and conflict transformation can significantly contribute. Although the Sri Lankan civil war was not fought on religious lines, specific peace-building perspectives and principles constructed from religions like Buddhism should be consulted and routed effectively into political and social initiatives, which in turn will help construct a society of peace and compassion. Throughout its long history, Buddhism has been known as a religion of nonviolence, and it has historically played an important role in conflict resolution and peace-
building effort around the world. Its principles and methods of peace and reconciliation, as applied to every modern context, centers on the transforming human attitudes towards the greater good of society.

In order to understand the Buddhist approach to conflict resolution, we first need to study how the concept of “reconciliation” is defined in Buddhism. In “Reconciliation, Right & Wrong” written by Thanissaro Bhikkhu as part of the book *Purity of Heart: Essays on the Buddhist Path* (2006), the difference between the Buddha’s insight on forgiveness and reconciliation is well distinguished. On the one hand, forgiveness (*khama*), which literally means “the earth”, indicates an earth-like mind that is “nonreactive” and “unperturbed” (Bhikkhu 2006, 44). When we forgive a wrongdoing, we decide not to retaliate and more importantly, to liberate our feelings of resentment. It is truly an act of self-transformation from a negative mental state of anger to a positive mental state of goodwill even towards those who have hurt us, those who have offended us and even our enemies. On the other hand, reconciliation (*patisaraniya-kamma*) means “a return to amicability,” which requires more than forgiveness. It requires the reestablishing of trust and respect between opposing sides through a truthful process of understanding the past and discussing a shared vision of a non-violent, friendly relationship in the future (Bhikkhu 2006, 44). To reconcile with our former enemy and to gain their trust, we have to show them respect, admit our mistakes as wrong and promise to exercise restrain in mutual terms. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu points out, there is much to learn from the detailed methods the Buddha formulated himself to encourage right reconciliation among his followers. These methods are contained in the Pali Vinaya’s instructions for how monks should confess their offenses and seek reconciliation with one another, how they should settle protracted disputes, and how schism in the Sangha should be harmonized. Although directed to monks, these instructions “embody
principles that apply to anyone seeking reconciliation of differences, whether personal or political” (Bhikkhu 2006, 45). The first and foremost step in these instructions, as mentioned, is an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. To encourage a wrongdoer to see reconciliation as a winning rather than losing proposition, the Buddha praised the honest acceptance of blame as an honorable rather than a shameful act: “He, who by good deeds covers the evil he has done, illuminates this world like the moon freed from clouds” (Dhammapada XIII: 173). The ability to recognize one’s mistakes and admit them to others is essential and cannot be truer in Sri Lanka’s post-war reconciliation, where the government’s accountability remains an issue of heavy criticism from in and outside of the country. For a meaningful healing process to take place, the government must first enable an independent, trustworthy mechanism or investigation into war crimes with regard to violation of international humanitarian laws and human rights laws – an important point that the LLRC fails to achieve. This would be a huge yet difficult step of reflecting on the past for the sake of building a better future, and it is only possible when it understand the foundation of true reconciliation as outlined by the Buddhist vision and are willing to commit to it wholeheartedly.

These Buddhism-based standards create a context of values that encourage both parties entering into a reconciliation to employ right speech and to engage in an honest, responsible conflict inquiry and self-reflection basic to all Dhamma practice. A meaningful process of reconciliation, upon this foundation, will require a transformation of attitudes and civic functioning so as to ensure an environment where peace and national unity is sustained. The following principles which reflect the teachings of the Buddha can prove useful and effective in resolving political conflict and promoting peace in the long run.
**Good governance**

Having good governance is one of the most important factors and the forerunner of the entire cause of preventing conflict. It has the ability to overcome most of root sources of the conflict, whether social, political or economic. In the Cakkavatti Sutta, the distinguishing characteristic of a “universal monarch” (*raja cakkavatti*) is explained as one who rules “the Earth to the extent of its ocean boundaries, having conquered territories not by force of arms but by righteousness” (Digha Nikaya: DN 26). This means that the quality of the ruler is the crucial factor in Buddhist perspectives on a good and just government. How this form of government is realized can be studied in light of the Buddha’s teachings, specifically his recommendations entitled “Ten Royal Virtues” (*Dasa-Raja-Dhamma*) which label the hall marks of good leadership as followed:

1. **Dana** (charity): The ruler should not be greedy for wealth, but should consider the welfare of the people.

2. **Sila** (morality): The ruler should never destroy life, cheat, steal or exploit others, commit adultery, utter falsehood and take intoxicating drinks. That is, he or she must at least observe the Five Precepts of the layperson.

3. **Pariccaga** (altruism): The ruler must be prepared to sacrifice everything for the good of the people.

4. **Ajjava** (honesty): The ruler must perform his duties with loyalty and sincerity towards the people.

5. **Maddava** (gentleness): The ruler must have a kind, genial temperament meanwhile avoiding arrogance.
6. **Tapā** (austerity): The ruler must lead a simple life with self-control and should not indulge in luxury.

7. **Akkodha** (non-anger): The ruler should be free from hatred and ill-will.

8. **Avihimsa** (non-violence): The ruler should promote peace by avoiding or preventing war and everything that involves violence and the destruction of life.

9. **Khanti** (forbearance): The ruler should practice patience and be able to bear hardships and difficulties.

10. **Avirodha** (uprightness): The ruler should not oppose the will of the people, avoid prejudice and promote harmony and order.

   *(Dasā-Raṇa-Dhamma)*

In the modern context, the term ‘ruler’ or ‘king’ should be replaced by the term ‘government.’ The Ten Royal Virtues therefore apply to all those who constitute the government, including the head of the state, ministers, political leaders, legislative and administrative officers. If governmental leaders of all levels undertake these virtues, it may help to develop a great platform for seeking a stable solution to reconciliation in a favorable social, political and economic environment.

With the right attitudes and approaches, a good government should also put in place free and fair process of law to provide care and protection to citizens of all ethnic and religious groups. Similar to the procedures laid down for Buddhist monastic tribunals, the objectives to be achieved through impartial rules of law are outlined in the Vinaya Pitaka: ‘When a dispute arises, the king (or other judge) is expected to ‘pay equal attention to both parties’, to ‘hear arguments of each side and decide according to what is right.’ Throughout the investigation the judge is expected to scrupulously avoid the four avenues to injustice *(cattari agatigamanani)*
such as prejudice (*chanda*), hatred (*dosa*), fear (*bhaya*) and ignorance (*moha*)” (Vinaya Pitaka I: 324). In the same way to achieve equality and justice, every citizen should be given a fair public hearing by an independent and impartial trial to resolve their concerns and reestablish trust in the government. An independent judicial branch without political interference can prove to be essential in this case, and the interests of the citizens, as opposed to selfish group interests, always have to be recognized and respected.

**Social security and human rights**

Reconciliation requires that the government make effort to ensure the wellbeing of the people and extend its protection by implementing appropriate social, political and economic policies. In the most basic level, social security means the guarantee of life and property. The Dhammapada categorically states that “all beings desire happiness,” “life is dear to every living being” and that “having taken one’s own self for comparison (with other beings) one should neither harm nor kill” (Dhammapada X: 129, 130, 131). Likewise, the Brahman Kutadanta’s advice to King Mahavijita mentioned in the Kutadanta Sutta also stresses the importance of equal distribution of economic resources to avoid political conflict among the people. His advice to the king was that not only the destitute should be assisted, but also those who were self-employed, or hired to carry out various functions (Digha Nikaya I: 331). Buddhism recognizes the fundamental equality of all human beings regardless of their religion, caste or ethnicity, and recognizes that human beings are equal in dignity and rights. Consequently, to facilitate reconciliation and peace especially in the Sri Lankan context, the protection of life and properties should be granted equally to every citizen without any form of discrimination. In the same manner as “righteous conduct” and “impartial conduct” should be part of the ruler’s responsibility towards his citizens (Digha Nikaya II), the Sri Lankan government should serve
the better good of all Sri Lankan citizens rather than that of the majority Sinhalese. It must learn better from its mistake of the past and start to respond to the voice of the long neglected minorities by enacting fair policies regarding language, education, employment opportunities and political participation. Fortunately, this change of attitude is slowly taking place and has been empowering the voice of the minorities to play a part in Sri Lanka’s effort of healing and rebuilding a peaceful society.

That being said, for the process of reconciling as well as promoting national prosperity and unity to become inclusive and meaningful, the issue of human rights must be promptly addressed. The freedom of speech, for instance, must be in place to guarantee the right of individual to express their views openly. Buddha’s well-known advice to the Kalamas, a group of people in the Kosala kingdom, may be cited as a good example to show how Buddhism upholds the freedom of expression: “… do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary lore or with what has come down in scriptures or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with a liking for a view after pondering it or with someone else’s ability... When you know in yourself these things are unprofitable, liable to censure, condemned by the wise… (and) lead to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them… When you know in yourself these things are profitable, blameless, commended by the wise... (and) lead to welfare and happiness, then you should practice them and abide in them” (Anguttara Nikaya III: 66). The Buddha begins by assuring the Kalamas that under such circumstances it is proper for them to doubt, an assurance which encourages free inquiry. From the Buddhist point of view, the right to freedom of expression carries an obligation that one should ensure one’s opinions are formed carefully after taking all relevant factors into
consideration. Therefore, this right must be exercised responsibly by the ruler, political parties and individuals so as not to cause harm or violence to others.

In the case of Sri Lanka, voices of the minorities like victims of violence or those from the former war zones should be encouraged because they contribute significantly to a truthful investigation of the past. Stories of their experiences and perception on the war can be made known through words of mouth, personal sharing, dialogues, academic talks or written publications, and they should have no restrictions in doing so. Projects such as the “Write to Reconcile” Anthology under the National Peace Council’s support is an excellent example of story-telling, by bringing together a number of emerging Sri Lankan writers who were interested in writing fiction, memoir and poetry on the issue of conflict, peace, reconciliation, memory and trauma, as they relate to Sri Lanka’s civil war and the post war period. The diversity and complexity with which the civil war might be presented to the public eye in examples like this will have a powerful impact on the citizens’ consciousness, reminding them that there is more to winning and losing, and that the country still has a long journey towards achieving harmony and sustainable peace. In addition, it is also important that constructive opinions and criticism on the reconciliation effort made by the government as well as NGOs be taken into account so that the reconciliation process becomes balanced and enhanced. The international community’s assessment of the LLRC, in particular, should be received in a positive light, for it can serve as guidelines for the government to improve its mandate, maintain international law/human rights standards, and carry out honest, independent criminal investigations. With the right approach, the government will be able to take advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment and capabilities to the people, meanwhile appealing for further assistance from in and outside of the country to accelerate the process.
Role of religious texts, religious leaders and organizations

Religion has always played a major role in the lives of the Sri Lankan people, and it certainly provides a fertile source of authority and inspiration to draw on in times of crisis. To begin with, mining the scriptures, myths and narratives is a good starting place for instructive lessons and parallels: concepts of forgiveness, empowerment, justice and compassion can be found in the scriptures of most religions, not only throughout Buddhist literature but also in the Bible and the Qur’an. The use of scriptures to find parallels in other traditions can be a powerful way of illustrating that what unites people of different faiths is greater than what divides them. In its applicability, the work of interfaith groups and exchange programs in Sri Lanka should emphasize on breaking down stereotypes of the other, encouraging shared community projects, and teaching ethical principles of the world’s religions. Despite their many doctrinal differences, much common ground exists at the level of ethics, and followers of different faiths will very often agree about the just and right course of action in a given set of circumstances despite having different theological grounds for their views. The document *Declaration Towards a Global Ethic*, which emerged from a declaration by a Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993, is a good example of an ethical consensus among religions. Like other traditions, Buddhism with its role as the religion of the majority has much to contribute to the universal concepts of trust, respect, forgiveness, tolerance and peaceful coexistence. It also represents an all-loving and non-violent way of life, which can serve as a valuable source of common ground for interfaith study and understanding.

Beside from scriptures, learners and practitioners of peacemaking can follow the path of local as well as international Buddhist monks who work tirelessly for peace, some of whom having been recognized on the world stage. Some of the most prominent monks with
international acclaim such as the Dalai Lama, Matthieu Ricard and Thich Nhat Hanh are extremely active peace activists who have written a number of books and given lectures in many countries, at the same time initiating peace talks and mindfulness retreats around the world. These monks serve as all-well rounded, peace-loving role models who worked across faith, ethnic and other divides to resolve global conflict, prevent violence, advocate for justice and promote inter-ethnic reconciliation. That being said, noteworthy positive transformations to support peace and reconciliation can also effectively take place in the local level, specifically in forms of dialogues and training in inter-religious peacemaking. This is already happening in Sri Lanka, where religious leaders including monks in different provinces are being trained in conflict analysis and peace program design and implementation. In particular, the United States Institute of Peace has been “supporting a network of over 100 Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu religious leaders who receive training in conflict analysis, peacebuilding, and reconciliation while participating in inter and inter-faith dialogues as a way to continue to deepen the relationships between members and strengthen the network” (Buildingpeace.org, 2015). These actors, with the support of local religious organizations, can successfully contribute to peacebuilding by directly mediating between parties in conflict, engaging in conflict prevention, promoting human rights and democratic governance, and organizing post-conflict reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

So far, we have discussed a number of ways in which Buddhist visions and methods of peacebuilding can be of immense value to developing social, political and economic initiatives for promoting reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Examples of how they are implemented in full operation, however, are observed in nowhere more evidently than leading Buddhist organizations around the country. Organizations such as International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Zen
Peacemakers, Sarvodaya Center and Buddhist Peace Fellowship have relied upon principal Buddhist visions to develop their agenda and platform of activities, including conferences and workshops on sustainable development, community building and peace education. As a specific example, the Sarvodaya Center – one of the subjects of inquiry during the field research – has initiated a *Sarvodaya Peace Plan* which centers on three factors guiding the society, namely Consciousness, Economy and Power to promote conflict resolution (Sarvodaya Proposal). To end the spiritual, economic, social and political conditions that lead to war and violence, it says, the following criteria for each of these factors need to be fulfilled:

*Consciousness*: encourage a spiritual awakening, moral development and inner peace in society; support inclusivity and “we are one” thinking; remove the consciousness of war and violence as a means to resolve conflict; promote a sense of wellbeing and forgiveness leading to feelings of peace and brotherhood; and create a clear vision of a positive future leading to a sense of belonging (Sarvodaya Proposal, 6-7). This education of the personality can be achieved through promoting group activities in a diverse manner. The Sarvodaya Movement, as it turns out, has succeeded in “breaking social and political barriers bringing the temple, kovil, mosque and the church together making all of them centers for the promotion of common spiritual values, so that unity in diversity becomes a living reality” (Ariyaratne 1996, 94) The youth wing of Sarvodaya, Shanti Sena, has also been successful with youth training, inter-ethnic, inter-religious dialogues and inter-district youth exchange programs, which bring young people from different communities closer to build trust and mutual understanding.

*Economics*: build a rural-based economic system in which all of our basic needs are met; develop a sense of “enough” and reduce the gap between the rich and the poor (Sarvodaya Proposal, 6-7). Sarvodaya under its mission advocates “the sharing of labor and other voluntarily
gifted resources for the personal and social awakening of all beginning with individuals and families at the community level” (Ariyaratne 1996, 231). Shramadana Camps, which provides an environment for this sharing among the people, have resulted in both positive physical output and social benefit every year (Ariyaratne 1996, 236). The slogan “no poverty no affluence society” indicates the middle path advocated by the Buddha, an attitude towards building a society that does not need to destroy nature, value systems or cultures. (Ariyaratne 1996, 243)

*Power:* support power at the lowest possible level by encouraging village self-governance; empower village level democracy (Sarvodaya Proposal, 6-7). Sarvodaya makes a strong call for decentralization, claiming that non-violence, peace and happiness “can best be nurtured and sustained at decentralized levels such as the individual, the family and the small community” (Ariyaratne 1996, 239) It promotes small group activities in which the people make themselves conscious of their economic and social problems, therefore planning their own programs to solve such problems themselves. In this society, they are aware of their rights and privileges at the grassroots level, and practice democratic process even in small and medium group activities (Ariyaratne 1996, 240).

Sarvodaya’s visions and program of work derives its inspiration from the Buddha’s teaching, as it carefully selects practical aspects of the Buddhist philosophy and reformulates it to suit modern social situations. A lot of its focus has been on a people-centric development process, which includes social, economic, political, spiritual, psychological and cultural areas of human life. As opposed to the government’s definition and effort of reconciliation, Sarvodaya’s concept of reconciliation in the light of Buddhist teachings is not a one sided process looking only at economic and infrastructural improvement. Rather, the people should be in a position to
“participate and share the fruits of development as far as possible” (Ariyaratne 1996, 242) meanwhile having the authority to control and resolve their concerns in an independent manner.

**Conclusion**

In brief, this research has demonstrated the various efforts made by the Sri Lankan government and non-governmental organizations in terms of peacebuilding and reconciliation in a transitional state. Upon introducing a number of concepts of ‘reconciliation,’ this study examines the extent and methods by which the process of reconciliation is carried out, and how Sri Lankan individuals react to the changes taking place. On the one hand, the government which possesses the ability to enforce top-down, wide-reaching improvements seems to have made little progress aside from infrastructure and economic development. A critical assessment of its LLRC Report by parties in and outside of Sri Lanka has demonstrated its failure to meet minimum international standards and put into place an effective plan that leads to true reconciliation. On the other hand, the NGOs included in the study show a much higher level of commitment and engagement with the Sri Lankan people to bring in a meaningful reconciliation process with a variety of advocacy work and inter-ethnic, interreligious activities. Their potential and effectiveness in making changes, however, depends greatly on the government’s commitment, dedication and competence in delivering positive reconciliation outcomes.

By presenting the current reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka, the study observes a lack of Buddhist values and ideal teachings in the process that can and should become an essential factor in transforming human attitudes towards the greater good for society, by means of good governance, sufficient social security and effectively putting the use of religious scriptures into practice. Buddhist leaders and organizations with years long experience of promoting peace
among people have much to offer in terms of their visions and methods to various respects of reconciliation in every step as illustrated in the study above. Regardless of people’s diverse beliefs, it is important to acknowledge that the teaching of the Buddha is universal and can be applied universally even without reference to Buddhism for the benefit of many. It contains a rich philosophical system which should not be subordinated to parochial political views, but rather be inculcated into people’s mentality to be transformed into effective social, political and economic initiatives.

Throughout the research period, it is important to acknowledge the narrow scope of my travel and of the groups of people I interacted with for the duration of two weeks in Sri Lanka. Although this was not to be a quantitative research, it would have been enriched by a longer period of investigation that would have enabled me to travel to the areas of the conflict such as the north and the east. These travels would have allowed me to meet more Tamils, Muslims, Christians and to hear from the other victims of the war, hence presenting a more nuanced and less biased views of war experiences and of how reconciliation was taking place in different parts of the country. Another weakness of this research which is more difficult to discern lies in the language problem. The fact that English was the only possible means of communication and the medium through which research materials were obtained and investigated must have left out a great part of local stories and literature surrounding the civil war. A great number of these were translated materials, and the exchanges with local Sri Lankans were restricted to an intellectual circle where English was taken for granted and erudition was a must. This problematic issue could have been greatly reduced by a collaboration with a local scholar who is fluent in Sinhala, Tamil as well as English in collecting data and conducting personal interviews over a long period
of time. The outcome would be a more inclusive research process that provides useful information to explore a limited number of cases in depth and carry out cross-case comparisons and analysis of the post-war situation in Sri Lanka.

From the knowledge produced by the research study presented above, future research should seek to explore in details a number of issues affecting post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka such as the current government structure, displacements, land issues or language issues that can be backed up by valid statistics. Information and analysis on the lives of other minorities like Christians and Muslims throughout the war should also be thoroughly examined, since they have been frequently excluded from the discourse on Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict for the past few decades. Finally, the discussion on the role of Buddhism in the post-war situation can become more contextualized with a comprehensive review of the history of Buddhism unique and distinct to Sri Lanka, with details on a variety of local beliefs, traditions and practice. These developments would be constructive additions to presenting a more complete picture of post-war Sri Lanka, which in turn will contribute to the dialogue and course of reconciliation already taking place.
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