

LIVING DIALOGUE

CHRISTIAN-BUDDHIST-MARXIST DIALOGUE IN THE *PRAXIS*

OF

SEVAKA YOHAN DEVANANDA

1957 – 1987

By

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

The Sri Lankan Anglican priest, John Cooray, founded an indigenous religious community, *Devasaranaramaya* (Monastery of Divine Refuge) in 1957 as the result of a vision and a protest in response to two events that took place in 1956, a decisive year in Sri Lanka's history less than ten years after independence from Britain: the rise of ethno-centric nationalism and socialism, as well as the publication of the controversial Buddhist Commission Report that challenged the presence and mission of the Christian Church in the island nation. In 1964 on taking life vows he adopted the name Yohan Devananda and the title *Sevaka* (Servant). *Devasaranaramaya* based its theology and common life on engagement in a 'living dialogue' with Buddhism and Marxism. It was his incarnational theology with its kenotic implications that enabled Devananda to engage in such a dialogue and to do so through an intentional monastic lifestyle coupled with a radical activism for social transformation in rural Sri Lanka. Indeed even his choice of title, *Sevaka*, was an intentional step towards *kenosis* by which he sought to identify with the people he served together with others who practised renunciation and self-emptying while working for an egalitarian and just society. He viewed incarnation (John 1: 14) and *kenosis* (Philippians 2: 7) as necessary first steps to identification and inculturation. Consequently, Devananda moved from his traditional ecclesiastical origins in an entirely new direction and became part of the 'Radical Tradition' in Sri Lanka's theological enterprise, that necessitated engagement with liberation theology that in turn resulted in Devananda's own version of the 'Action-Reflection' paradigm that characterised his prophetic ministry and several interventions into the socio-political arena during a critical period in Sri Lanka's post-colonial history. This research project seeks to evaluate Devananda's legacy and contribution to the Sri Lanka Church's tryst with contextual theology.

INTRODUCTION

The decades following the granting of independence or self-governance to Ceylon by the British on 4th February 1948 were ones of great socio-economic and political upheaval in the island nation. Less than a decade after independence a new and more radical form of ethno-religious and linguistic nationalism coupled with utopian socialism had emerged in reaction to the developments of the colonial period in which Christianity and western liberal values had gained much ground. This contributed to the gradual marginalisation of smaller communities.

Although perhaps the oldest democracy in Asia with universal adult franchise having been granted as early as 1931, Ceylon was none the less victim to many of the post-colonial problems faced by countries that had been ruled by the European colonial powers. Many problems hampered the new Dominion's development into full nationhood and dominated the political landscape of the island for several years, contributing to an attempted *coup d'état*, two Marxist nationalist youth uprisings and a protracted thirty-year civil war between successive governments and separatist rebels in the north of the island fighting for an independent homeland for the Tamil people.

A Buddhist renaissance had begun in the late 19th century led by scholar monks and lay Theosophists that provided impetus to a parallel movement for political rights and independence from British rule (Rambukwella: 2018). This movement took on an ultra-nationalist outlook due to the influence of leaders such as Anagarika Dharmapala who had strong anti-Christian and anti-Muslim views and developed what has come to be termed 'Protestant Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism'. This form of ethno-religious nationalism came to dominate matters in the years that followed independence, and by 1956 a cultural

revolution of sorts took place – one that emphasised the superiority in language and culture of the Sinhala race and in religion of Theravada Buddhism that had existed in Ceylon from the pre-Christian era (de Silva: 2005; de Silva: 2009; Wickramasinghe: 2006; Ivan: 2009; Harris: 2006; Ross Carter: 1979).

In 1956 Buddhists celebrated the 2500th birth anniversary of the Buddha,¹ and to coincide with this historic event the Buddhist Commission of Inquiry that had been appointed in 1954 by the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress published its Report which effectively sought to curtail the activities of the Christian Church in Ceylon. In the same year the Sri Lanka Freedom Party led by Mr S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike came to power in a landslide general election victory based on an ultra-nationalist agenda that included a clarion call for ‘Sinhala Only’, a pledge to restore Buddhism to its place of primacy in the country, as well as a socialist economic programme that sought to maximise state control of industry and also to redress the problems faced by the rural farming communities.

The Christian Church in all its various shapes and forms was perceived to be part of colonialism and the renewed emphasis on Buddhism resulted in the Christian Church facing several challenges including the nationalisation of the majority of schools and other institutions run by the Church – a process that reached its regrettable climax in 1962 with the overnight state take-over of nearly all mission schools throughout the island.

Christians were suspected of not being loyal to the long-term interests of the new nation that was emerging after 450 years of European colonial rule (Tambiah: 1992). It was a time of great uncertainty for Christians and as Jayasiri Peiris has observed,

¹ Known as *Buddha Jayanti*

Churches in general and the Church of Ceylon in particular, had to undergo a process of unlearning and relearning how to live with people of other faiths. (Wingate et al: 1998, pp. 337 – 341)

Christians were also perceived as being aligned with the elite ruling class with very little or no connection to the people at the grassroots, mainly due to their privileged birth and the education they received in the mission schools (Jayawardene: 2007). They soon became scapegoats of the emergent ethno-religious nationalism that followed the 1956 election, a situation that worsened after the failed *coup d'état* of 1962 that was led by senior military and police officers, many of whom were Christians (Pinto: 2015, pp. 256 – 402).

In the immediate aftermath of receiving self-governance Ceylon was also, by the mid-1950s, in the throes of other socio-economic challenges. Ethno-religious politics aside there were also issues relating to socio-economic policies and even disenfranchisement of whole communities such as the so-called 'Plantation Tamil' or 'Indian Tamil' community that were denied their voting rights as early as 1948 (Hoole: 2022).

The entire sphere of education in the newly independent dominion was also going through a major transformation following the far-reaching Kannangara Reforms that were to transform the island's education policy for decades to come with their egalitarian focus and nationalist agenda (Jayasuriya: 2018).

There were also other social inequalities that had emerged during the colonial era that politicians like S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the 'expedient utopian' (Manor: 1989) exploited for political gain (Wickramasinghe: 2014, 234-235).

The emergence of the Left Movement with its extreme socialist vision brought the plight of the workers, the peasants and the marginalised poor to the forefront of politics and by the time Bandaranaike's widow, Sirimavo, was elected Prime Minister following his assassination in 1959, Ceylon was on the path to becoming a socialist country with a radical programme of nationalisation that sought to redress social imbalances created during the colonial era (Wickramasinghe: 2006, pp. 302 – 320).

It was in the midst of these socio-political currents and a cultural revolution of sorts that a young freshly ordained Anglican clergyman named John Cooray set out to establish an indigenous monastic community in a rural village in the North-Western Province where he began to engage in, what he termed, a 'Living Dialogue' with economically marginalised Buddhist peasants and youth. This Living Dialogue soon evolved into one that brought engagement not just between Christians and Buddhists but also with emergent Marxists and thus a unique tripartite dialogue began.

Early Life and Formation

John Cooray was born on 31st May 1928 at his ancestral home ‘Haslemere’ in a neighbourhood where the social elite of Colombo lived. His upbringing was therefore privileged, and he lacked for nothing. He attended Royal College the leading government run school for boys in Ceylon, from 1933 to 1947 where he had a brilliant academic and cricketing career.

His family belonged to the Anglican Church of Ceylon and worshipped at the Parish Church of St Michael and All Angels, Colombo, where Cooray had his early formation within the Anglo-Catholic tradition. Though located in a wealthy neighbourhood the parish also included a small urban village named Polwatte.² The community was thus a mix of both affluent and poor, and comprised congregations worshipping in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Lionel Peiris SSF, another member of Cooray’s family, has pointed out that St Michael’s was not just a church with a decidedly Anglo-Catholic liturgical and spiritual tradition but also one that was heavily influenced by Christian Socialism due to the English priests who served there as Vicars.³ One of them is recorded as having stated that “*St Michael’s should be increasingly known as the Church of the Poor and the Church for the Poor*”(The Story of St Michael’s: 2012, 25). This was evident for example during the ministry of the first resident Sinhalese priest, the Rev’d P. B. Moonemalle, who worked tirelessly to improve the lot of the poor in the parish, especially the *dhobi*⁴ community. He

² Literally ‘Coconut Garden’. It was an area of Colombo in which Anglican presence had been established as early as 1844 by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (Story of St Michael’s Church: 2012, 19).

³ In an interview with the writer on Friday 25th August 2023.

⁴ Laundry workers

was succeeded by the Rev'd G. B. Ekenayake⁵ who was one of two Anglicans who advised the laundrymen when they launched a historic strike in 1896, the second recorded trade union action in Sri Lanka's history (Jayawardene: 2004, 103-104). According to Lionel Peiris, many later Sri Lankan Christian Socialists, including Cooray, were nurtured in that tradition while they were members of St Michael's Church through the catechising of priests like Ekenayake. Cooray's formation in Christian Socialism was further expanded by his encounters with 'sacramental' or 'Anglo-Catholic' Socialism while he was a student in England.⁶

Despite their high society status, based partly on British favour towards their business interests, the Coorays were sympathetic to the nationalist movement. Their patriarch, Sir James Peiris, Cooray's maternal grandfather, was a prominent leader of the Ceylon National Congress that was founded in 1919 (Keble: 1950, 21ff). Though anglophile in their manners and habits, having had the best of education provided by English schools in Ceylon and universities in England, men and women of this influential social grouping had also been imbued and fired by liberal political thinking while at university. Many of them took to politics and worked for independence.⁷ It was this legacy of national consciousness that Cooray inherited and that remained with him throughout his life.

⁵ A Cambridge graduate who later taught Hebrew at Cuddesdon College, Oxford.

⁶ He would have encountered the Church Social Union (CSU) founded in 1889 in Oxford by Charles Gore, Henry Scott Holland and others, as well as the Guild of St Matthew founded in 1877 by Stewart Headlam with its overtly radical allegiance to socialist teachings. He would have heard the legendary tales of the Anglo-Catholic 'slum priests' Arthur Stanton, Charles Lowder and Robert Dolling who were all advocates of some form of socialism in the spirit of the Incarnation which they saw as God's supreme act of solidarity and identification with the downtrodden and marginalised of the world. Cooray experienced first-hand how these men and movements had impacted English society, laying the foundation for the welfare state that emerged after World War II thanks in no small measure to the efforts of Christian Socialists such as William Temple.

⁷ Sir James Peiris, was to Ceylon's independence movement what G. K. Gokhale and Sir Pheroseshah Mehta were to India's freedom struggle: a moderate who believed in using constitutional means to win independence and therefore rejected extremist methods such as violence (Keble: 1950; Surya Sena: 1978).

Formative Influences

In 1948 Cooray entered Selwyn College, Cambridge and graduated in 1950 with a 1st Class Honours degree in History. At some point during his formative years Cooray had discerned a sense of vocation to the Anglican priesthood and, on graduating in 1951, he joined Cuddesdon Theological College, Oxford on the advice of his uncle, Lakdasa de Mel, who was an *alumnus*.⁸

Cuddesdon, during the period that Cooray was an ordinand in training there (1951 to 1953), was considered the premier theological college of not just the Church of England but also of the Anglican Communion. It was moderately Anglo-Catholic in its liturgy but by Cooray's time was Liberal Catholic in theology (Chadwick: 1954; Chapman: 2004).⁹ Liberal Catholicism has been described as a form of "*critical orthodoxy*" (Nichols: 1993, 131).

Another formative influence was the Anglican Religious Life, a result of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism (Rowell: 1983; Devananda: 1987). Cooray knew of a failed attempt to begin a branch of the Society of St John the Evangelist in Ceylon¹⁰ but as an active member of his parish had been associated with the Sisters of the Society of St Margaret¹¹ who ran Bishop's College for Girls and also served the Diocese in many other

⁸ The first Ceylonese to be an Anglican Bishop as Assistant Bishop of Colombo in 1945 and then first Bishop of Bishop of the new Diocese of Kurunagala from 1950 to 1962. He was elected the last Metropolitan of the Church of the Province of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon and served from 1962 to 1970.

⁹ Due in part to Charles Gore who had been Vice Principal there from 1880 to 1883 and in 1889 edited the controversial volume of essays titled *Lux Mundi* (Nichols: 1993, 130). Liberal Catholics fused a Catholic understanding of ecclesiology, liturgy and sacramentality with the new liberal theology that had emerged in second half of the 19th century. This fusion enabled Anglicans of a Catholic disposition to worship with all the ritual and ceremonial they wanted while at the same time holding theological opinions that were Modernist.

¹⁰ The first post-reformation Religious Community for men the SSJE known as the Cowley Fathers was founded by R. M. Benson in 1866 at Cowley, Oxford.

¹¹ Founded by J. M. Neale at East Grinstead in 1855 and invited to start a branch in Ceylon by the 4th Bishop of Colombo in 1887.

ways¹². Cooray was inspired by the monastic spirit and particularly the Benedictine principle *ora et labore* that was part of the *praxis* of the Religious Life. He realised its value for mission in countries like his own. This led him to study the Rule of St Benedict as well as the Monastic Tradition of St Anthony of Egypt with its emphasis on *kenosis* and asceticism (Devananda: 1987, 7).

Cooray was also influenced by and keenly supported the process of indigenisation. This process has been defined

as an ecclesiological principle ... rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation that is central to Anglican thinking and can be considered as the basis for contextual Anglicanism in Sri Lanka. (Billimoria:2016, 220-221)

Cooray's kinsman, Lakdasa de Mel, was the pioneer of indigenisation in the Anglican Church in Ceylon and, as Bishop of Kurunagala, had initiated a programme that sought to indigenise liturgy and worship, as well as church architecture and theology in that Diocese. He articulated his vision in the Thirty-Third Hale Memorial Sermon that he delivered at the Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in 1956 (Billimoria:2016, 227). Cooray however, went beyond indigenisation to embrace the more radical process of contextualisation.¹³

Thus, by the time he returned to Ceylon in 1953 and sought ordination Cooray had been influenced by several trends of thought that would be radically different to the context of the Anglican Church of Ceylon, where a traditional form of Anglo-Catholicism or

¹² See *The Story of Devasevikaramaya 1962 – 2012*, the indigenous monastic order for women that Devananda helped Bishop de Mel to start in the Diocese of Kurunagala, with a Rule of Life loosely based on that of the Society of St Margaret.

¹³ *Contextualisation demands interaction between the Gospel and the cultural context in which the Gospel is preached and proclaimed. In other words, contextualisation is not just about Christianising the indigenous context or inculturating the way things are done in a given cultural context but rather it is a process that takes into account all aspects of that cultural context, be it political, economic or social and engaging in a mutually enriching dialogue. (Billimoria: 2021)*

Evangelicalism had been the legacy of the two Missionary Societies¹⁴ and the early Bishops of Colombo who had all been of high church or tractarian disposition.

Ordination and Parish Ministry

Cooray was ordained a Deacon in Holy Trinity Church, Kurunagala in 1953 and was appointed Curate of that Parish. His ordination as a Priest followed a year later. In 1955 Bishop Lakdasa de Mel appointed him to be Vicar of the Church of Ss. Peter and Paul, Hewadiwela¹⁵, with the charge of also looking after the Church of the Ascension, Kudagama and Christ Church, Siyambalangamuwa in the Diocese of Kurunagala. These appointments surprised many who had thought that a gifted Oxbridge educated priest would be better used by the Diocese. But this was not the pioneering Bishop's vision. He hoped to strengthen Anglican presence in the area and decided that Cooray would be the ideal man to take forward his plans for a new model of mission and ministry (Wikramanayake: 1974, 18-19).

Cooray found the experience transformative. He mastered the Sinhala language and soon gained much insight into the life experience of the rural community that he served. It was while he was at Hewadiwela that the germ of an idea began to grow, one that would lead to an experiment in monastic living with a difference.

¹⁴ The Church Missionary Society and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel

¹⁵ A parish in a rural village near the town of Rambukkana in the Central Province of the island

Devasarana Aramaya

In 1957 with the blessings of his Bishop, Cooray founded the *Devasarana Aramaya*¹⁶ at Hewadiwela and gathered a small group of like-minded persons around him to worship, pray and work together.

His main inspiration for this new Community at this stage was the Christian Monastic Tradition associated with pioneers such as St Anthony of Egypt and St Benedict of Nursia that he had studied as a student in England. (Devananda:1987, 7) Additionally, given that Hewadiwela was in an area dominated by Buddhism, Cooray also looked to the Buddhist *Aramaya*¹⁷ Tradition where Buddhist monks lived together in communities associated with Buddhist Temples and places of meditation having renounced the world and all its attractions and learned to depend entirely on the beneficence and *dhana*¹⁸ of their adherents for their sustenance and survival. Cooray's experience of the influence of Buddhism on his monastic vision was not too dissimilar to that of his contemporary Thomas Merton¹⁹. Both Merton and Cooray believed that greater openness to religions such as Buddhism enabled a more qualitative monastic experience (Anderson & Cattoi:2023, 177). But the visionary Cooray went beyond Buddhism as well.

The *Ashram* Movement in India was significant in the history of the indigenisation of Christianity in South Asia. *Ashrams* are places of religious contemplation with a monastic ethos in which devotees combine contemplation with physical work to reach the

¹⁶ The Monastery of Divine Refuge

¹⁷ Buddhist Monastery

¹⁸ Offerings made to monks

¹⁹ An American Trappist monk, theologian, mystic and social activist who spent years studying other faiths and was by the time of his death in 1975 regarded throughout the Christian Church as one of the most influential scholars of inter-faith dialogue.

ultimate goal of spiritual perfection.²⁰ The Indian Christian Ashram model had already influenced the founding of two communities in Ceylon: Sevak S. Selvaratnam had established an *Ashram* at Chunnakam in Jaffna, in the north of Ceylon named *Christ Seva Ashram*²¹ in 1939 (Medis:1995) and in the deep south of the island two lay women, Constance Jayawardene and Beryl Weerasuriya, had begun *Divya Seva Asramaya*²² in the village of Urubokka in 1944 (Fernando:2020, 27 – 31). Cooray visited these two places, but even this was not enough.

Jeffrey Abayasekera, an early *Sevaka Apekshaka*,²³ has written that Cooray drank deeply from the Hindu *Ashram*²⁴ tradition during a year-long pilgrimage of self-discovery spent in India in 1959 (Abayasekera:2004, 13). Writing on the 30th anniversary of the founding of *Devasaranaramaya* in 1987, Cooray himself has affirmed this influence (Devananda:1987, 7-8). During his pilgrimage he visited many *Ashrams* based on indigenous Hindu models (Devananda:1989). The first of these was the *Christukula*²⁵ that had been founded in 1921 at Tirupattur in South India by Dr Savarirayan Jesudason and Dr Ernest Forrester-Paton (Jesudason:2003) together with a group of English and Indian missionaries that included the SPG priest, J. C. Winslow. Cooray also visited Winslow's

²⁰ Devananda has written that the origins of the Ashram Movement in India were Hindu and that it was a method adopted by Robert de Nobili in his bid to make Christian mission in India more relevant to the existing culture during the 17th century. He shows that de Nobili's attempt was to fuse traditions of east and west in founding a Christian ashram in Madurai, South India... (Devananda: 1987, 8). While admitting that the experiment had failed due to opposition from the Church's hierarchy, he writes that it was a notable effort of immense significance which had an impact on the Church and still remains an inspiration (Devananda: 1987, p. 9). While the early Bengali Indian freedom fighter Brahmabandhab Upadhyay is believed to have been the originator of the more modern Christian Ashram Movement with his Ashram on the banks of the Narmada River in North India, Paul M. Collins has written that the essence of the Movement goes back even further to Syro-Malabari priests in 1831 (Collins: 2006, 122-123).

²¹ Monastery of the Servants of Christ

²² Community of Divine Love

²³ Novice

²⁴ The word '*Ashram*' is derived from the Sanskrit word '*sramah*' that means 'to toil or work'. 'Ashram', The Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=ashram>

²⁵ The Family of Christ Asharam

Christa Prema Seva Ashram that had been founded as the *Christa Seva Sangh*²⁶ at Amhednagar in 1922 (Ralston:1987; Noreen:1994) and had been renamed when relocated to Poona in 1927. There he encountered a small group of English and Indian Christians living in community following a Rule of Life loosely based on the Anglican Franciscan Order with which Winslow had a particular affinity. Apart from his visit to these 'Protestant' *ashrams* Cooray also visited the Roman Catholic Ashram in India, *Saccidananda Ashram Shantivanam*, that had been established in 1950 on the banks of the Chauvery River by Dom Henri Le Saux, a French Benedictine monk who had taken the name Abhishiktananda.²⁷

Cooray returned to Ceylon in a more transformed state of being due to his experience while on pilgrimage. He realised that *Devasaranaramaya* could not venture into the form he now wanted to introduce within a traditional parish setting and so, with the blessings of the Bishop, he moved the Community in 1960 to fourteen acres of coconut land donated by the Bishop at Ibbagamuwa in the North-Central Province. The Bishop also released Cooray from parochial duties to focus entirely on this visionary task of establishing a movement that would get alongside people (Devandanda:1987, 8).

Devasaranaramaya was the plant which grew from the good seed planted in India and Chunnakam. Yet there were other influences too which fertilized the venture at Ibbagamuwa, not least the inspired leadership given to the Diocese of Kurunagala by the late founder Bishop, Lakdasa de Mel in the field of indigenization and dialogue with members of the Buddhist Sangha. (Abayasekera:2004, 14)

²⁶ Brotherhood of the Servants of Christ

²⁷ The Bliss of the Anointed One. Helen Ralston in her masterful study of Christian Ashrams has written, "In choosing to call the ashram *Saccidananda*, the Hindu term for Brahman, the Absolute, who is conceived as Sat (Being), Cit (Consciousness), and Ananda (Bliss), the founders expressed their intention of identifying with the Hindu quest for the Absolute, and of relating their quest with their own experience of God, in Christ, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity." (Ralston:1987, p. 92).

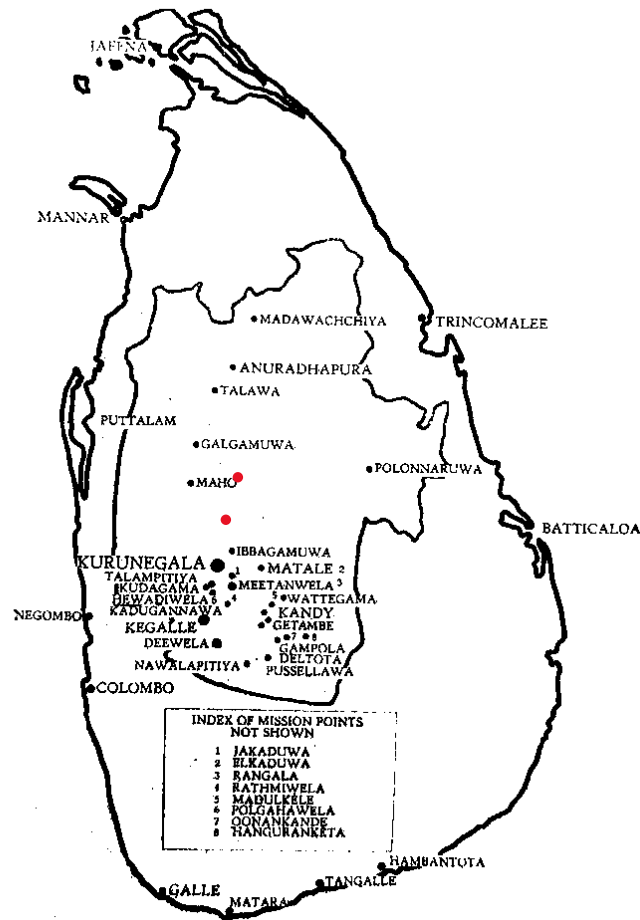


Figure 1: Area of the Diocese of Kurunagala

Move to Ibbagamuwa, and Life Vows

In the new surroundings at Ibbagamuwa Cooray continued to discern God's purposes both for him and for *Devasaranaramaya*. Gradually through the process of contemplative prayer as well as reflection on the Incarnation and the *kenosis* of the Son of God that his theological formation had introduced to his thinking, he felt confronted by the call of God to complete monastic renunciation to grow deeper in his dependence upon God (Devananda:2007, 67). Consequently, he renounced his birth name and all that it symbolised and took life vows. He now called himself Yohan Devananda and like Sevak Selvaratnam opted to use the title '*Sevaka*'²⁸.

²⁸ Servant

Through the 1960s he focused on developing dialogue and good relations with the Buddhists in the region, including a number of influential monks. Thus began the first phase of his 'Living Dialogue', between Christianity and Buddhism. The second phase was to be far more problematic and while he had started to engage with Marxist ideology in the turbulent decade of the 1960s it was following the tragic events of 1971 that Devananda actively espoused a synergy between the teachings of the Buddha and Christ and the ideology of Marx.

After having achieved self-governance from the British in 1948 there was much hope that Ceylon's socio-political and economic journey would be one that resulted in justice and prosperity for all. Within a decade, in 1956, that dream had been dashed when a form of linguistic and religious ultra-nationalism coupled with a brand of utopian socialism emerged that resulted in a fragmentation of society. The 1960s witnessed serious economic problems in the country and many in the rural areas struggled for survival. During this period *the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer, victims of a neo-colonialist, capitalist, economic and social system* (Abayasekera:2002, p. 17). The decade also witnessed youth unrest and uprisings all over the globe even as the cold war between the capitalist west led by the United States of America and the communist east led by Soviet Russia struggled to dominate world affairs and many countries, including Ceylon tried to remain non-aligned to either of the power blocs. Ceylon was governed during these tumultuous years by the socialist United Front government, but the socio-economic problems faced by the people continued. There are several scholars who believe that the radical education reforms of the 1930s that were implemented in the 1950s and other welfare reforms of the same period actually led to the conflagration of 1971: the success of

some policies rather than their failure being among the causes (Wickramasinghe: 2006, 209-234; Wickramasinghe: 2014, 211-246 & 290-346).

1971 and after...

1971 was a pivotal turning point in both Devananda's life and the life of the Community, as from this point onwards they were inextricably linked with political radicalism (Amarasuriya:2023, 223-224).

The socio-political crises in Ceylon came to a head in April 1971 when the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramune*²⁹ led a violent youth insurrection that completely disrupted normal life in the island. The United Front government had no qualms about brutally crushing the uprising with the unchecked force. Many rural youths found refuge in the premises of *Devasaranaramaya* and Devananda took great risks to offer them sanctuary and protection from government forces (Amarasuriya: 2022, 223). Devananda *made no secret of his sympathies for the JVP mission in 1971, and for those imprisoned after the failed insurrection* (Amarasuriya: 2022, 223-224).

The character and ethos of *Devasaranaramaya* changed drastically with 1971. The Community now moved from a mere monastic community engaging in action-reflection to become a centre for common action that drew on the teachings of all living faiths on liberation as well as on Marxist socialist ideology. The Bishop of Kurunagala, who was the Trustee of the *Devasaranaramaya* property, made an amendment to the Trust Deed to enable the setting up of the *Devasarana Collective Farm* on the premises, which was officially inaugurated on the Feast of St Barnabas, 11th June 1971. Bishop Lakshman

²⁹ The JVP or the Peoples' Liberation Front

Wickremesinghe's visionary generous response was a watershed moment in the history of *Devasarana* (Abayasekera:2002, 18).

The evolution did not end there. The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are known as the Development Decades. It is significant that *Devasaranaramaya* expanded its activities to include Rural Development especially in the field of Agriculture and did so as part of a common front with Buddhists and Marxists. To achieve this the Constitution of *Devasaranaramaya* was amended to include Clause 6 titled *Devasarana Development Center*. The *Aramaya* would set up the Development Centre as an independent foundation within its premises. It was further stated that this Centre would operate as a non-governmental, non-profit making, voluntary organisation committed to working for community organisation and development. It was also emphasised that while the Development Centre would not be involved in Party politics or espouse any political causes aligned to any political parties it would work independently and fundamentally on behalf of the people to build a just society committed to *ahimsa* (non-violence) and peace.

The changes also witnessed a different involvement for Devananda, not a parting of the ways, but a new state of being for a monastic, that of married life. Devananda renounced his celibate life and married the feminist theologian and social activist Malini Weerasinghe³⁰ in 1985. Despite the fact that both single and married members had begun live together in the *Devasarana* Community after 1971, Devananda opted not to do so. Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe released him from his vows and permitted him to accept the appointment as first Director of the Lay Training Institute of the Theological College of Lanka at Pilimatalawa, near Kandy. Sarath Fernando, one of the leading lay

³⁰ One of the first women to ordained an Anglican Priest in Sri Lanka in 2006 and the first woman Canon of the Anglican Cathedral in Colombo

members of the community was left in charge of *Devasarana*. In hindsight this appears to have been a mistake as with Devananda's departure much of the spiritual dimension of *Devasarana* went with him and the Movement now took on the guise of a Non-Governmental Organisation engaged in development more than a monastic movement that engaged in action-reflection for social transformation. Although Sarath Fernando was *de facto* community leader there was a collective leadership that was very effective in furthering the goals and aspirations of the Movement. This collective leadership included both men and women, Christian and non-Christian, who were ultimately responsible to the people. The leadership inspired and guided the implementation of policies, decision making and all the activities of *Devasarana*. As Devananda said in later years,

The emergence of this collective leadership from the masses has been the most encouraging feature of the Devasarana history. (Devananda:1989, p, 15)

'Thirty Years Alongside People'

In 1987 the *Devasarana* Movement celebrated thirty years of existence and in connection with the anniversary Devananda edited a book titled *Living Dialogue: Thirty Years Alongside People* in which he gave a historic overview of how the Movement had originated and of all that had been possible over the journey spanning three decades. Devananda's *modus operandi* was exactly that – being alongside people. In evaluating the witness of those thirty-years Devananda recognised that it was the action – reflection *praxis* model that had enabled *Devasarana* to journey alongside the people (Devananda:1989, 12).

In coming alongside the people and walking with them incarnationally Devananda ensured something radical in the changes that took place. Elizabeth Harris has described this transformation:

as the members of the ashram came closer to the lives of the people in Ibbagamuwa, they were, to use a term from liberation theology, conscientized, particularly by the young people, whose concerns centred on the economics and political rather than the religious. Devasaran aramaya, therefore, eventually lost the 'aramaya' ending, becoming Devasarana, a multi-faith community committed to uncovering what both Buddhism and Christianity had to say about social justice. (Harris: 2017, 54-82)

Realising perhaps how things had drifted from the original objectives, when the Movement celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2007, in a bid perhaps to rediscover the spirit of the *Aramaya* side of its heritage and identity the name *Devasaranaramaya* was used once more (Devananda: 2007).

CHAPTER 2 THEOLOGICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

Devananda's *praxis* as we have seen was influenced by a convergence of theology, both classical and radical, with Buddhist teachings on equality as well as socialist and Marxist ideology. These theological and ideological presuppositions undergirded his action – reflection praxis and all that he did through his religious community, through the Collective Farm and the Development Centre.

The Centrality of the Incarnation and *Kenosis*

The Doctrine of the Incarnation is one of the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith and from at least the patristic period of church history was held up as a sign of orthodoxy (Louth:2015, 139-140).

In the 19th and 20th centuries the Incarnation became central to the understanding of theological anthropology. Some Anglican theologians began to apply the doctrine to their understanding of mission. If the Incarnation of the Word of God did not unite humanity and the divine, then it was not possible that God was concerned about the value of human life or the inherent dignity of every human being created in God's image and likeness. These theologians believed that to uphold the dignity of the human person belief that God *became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1: 14) was imperative. They laid the foundation for a particularly Anglican Social Theology which came to recognise the Incarnation as the fundamental basis for social justice (Brown et al:2014; Spencer:2017) providing the primary impetus for any involvement in social and political activism in the cause of building the Kingdom of God (Orens:2003). Kenneth Leech for example, concludes that

the Incarnation is more than an assertion about the reality of the flesh and materiality of Christ; it is a governing principle of the Church's life, of God's relationship with the world, of the structure of all spiritual life and experience.(Leech:1985, p. 245)

For Devananda too, this understanding of the Incarnation was fundamental and formed the basis for his spirituality as well as his socio-economic and political activism. The only possible conclusion that Devananda could reach was that ALL human life has been made holy by the incarnation and thus in the lives of all human beings, especially the poor, the marginalised, the downtrodden and the oppressed, Christians would encounter Jesus himself. A foundational biblical text for him was Matthew 25: 31-46 (Leech:2003, 141-144).

Devananda's view of the Incarnation was not complete without a similar acceptance of what is called the *kenosis* theory, one of the primary Christological concepts espoused by Charles Gore, among others.³¹ It was his understanding of *kenosis* that compelled Devananda to renounce his life of privilege. Self-emptying as part of renunciation in the deepest sense that the eastern spiritual traditions viewed it, was seen by Devananda as an expression of Incarnation and of *kenosis* (McCormack:2015, 445-446). This belief became fundamental for Devananda's spirituality and *praxis* as he sought to develop a 'Living Dialogue'. His study of Buddhism and his dialogue with Buddhist scholars would have helped him relate his idea of *kenosis* with the Theravada Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (non-self) and even the Mahayana Buddhist emphasis on *sunyata* (emptiness) (Rahula:1959, 51-66; Harris:1998).

When Devananda first encountered Liberation Theology during the 1960s his view on the Incarnation as the fundamental doctrine was further strengthened. South American Liberation Theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, Jon Segundo, Leonardo

³¹ As Nichols has explained "Since Christ was God-in-manhood, it is certain that he possessed the divine, as well as the human, consciousness and nature. But Gore held that the self-sacrifice of the Incarnation lay particularly in Christ's refraining to exercise what he possessed so that he could live under the conditions of true manhood." (Nichols: 1993, 139).

Boff and Clodovis Boff, and others took the Doctrine of the Incarnation as their starting point for a theology that was radical and formed the basis for a liberative praxis (Gutierrez:1973; Sobrino:1978; Boff:1980; Nickoloff:1996; De La Torre:2015; Barger:2018). For Devananda and other Asian theologians like him, God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, has a '*preferential option for the poor*', the oppressed and the marginalised. Just as Jesus Christ identified with such people and communities so should his followers do in every age. Just as Jesus Christ emptied himself and took on the form of a servant (Philippians 2) so should his followers. Just as Jesus Christ was the God who pitched God's tent among us by taking flesh and being incarnate in the world of matter (John 1: 14) so his followers must be incarnated in the world.

This sort of self-emptying and self-sacrifice was fundamental to any Community wanting to live incarnationally alongside the people. It was a kenotic act that was taken a step further by Devananda as he developed his theology of inter-religious dialogue (Devananda:1987, 27).

Theology of Dialogue

Devananda embarked on a process of dialogue with Buddhists because he believed that

an understanding of the religious character of social life is most important in searching for solutions to social problems. Any special activity or social analysis begun on the limited premise that 'religion is aimed at personal liberation' can never be comprehensive.(Devananda:1987, 65)

If this was the case, then obviously it would follow that there would be need for serious dialogue between the different religions and belief systems in order for the adherents of different religions to work together for social transformation.

Martha T. Frederiks, in her research article titled *Kenosis as a Model for Interreligious Dialogue* has shown how Christians have had many different models to relate to people of other living faiths over time. She identifies four dominant models: *the models of expansion, of diakonia, of presence and of dialogue* (Frederiks:2005). In her examination of the fourth model, dialogue, she writes that it is the model

which advocates an attitude of openness and respect to people of other faiths and the willingness of Christians to be challenged and changed in the encounter with people of other faiths, be it that the encounter takes place in an organised setting, be it that the encounter is the consequence of living in a plural religious society.(Frederiks:2005, 6)

For Frederiks, dialogue requires the recognition of ‘the other’ primarily *as a fellow pilgrim in the journey of life and as person who through his/her religion has some grasp of God, however partial the grasp may be* (Frederiks:2005, 7). But despite her appreciation of dialogue as a model of relating to people of other faiths, she goes on to develop a fifth model, the model of *kenosis*.

Devananda believed that real dialogue was also a dialogue of love that held together what Nagypal Szaboles has called *the socio-political dialogue of action and the experiential dialogue of life and participation* that is achieved through the three steps of *coexistence, convivence and cooperation*.³² Devananda’s praxis involved these three steps very clearly as his writings show (Devananda:1976; Devananda:1987; Devananda:1989; Devananda:2007).

³² Szaboles has explained the three steps thus: *On the level of coexistence, the groups aims for tolerance, understanding, respect and appreciation through the elimination of mutual prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings, improper and inadequate words, judgements and actions. The territory of convivence offers serious reflection, reception and advancement through the open exchange of experience and witness of faith, love and hope; using honest cross-questioning and respectful listening. Thirdly, cooperation contributes to various solutions of conflicts through the promotion of consciousness and perfection; through the service of our neighbour in common human tasks, while strengthening the good and fighting against sin.* (Szabolcs: 2003/1, 8)

Dialogue with people of other faiths had dominated the agendas of international conferences since the Tambaram Conference of 1938. One of Devananda's³³ theological mentors, Paul D. Devanandan, caused a sensation at the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi when he presented a paper titled '*Called to Witness*', that raised the issue of Christian mission and witness in a multi-faith world. Later in 1967, there was a theological consultation organised by the WCC in Kandy, Sri Lanka on the theme 'Christians in Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths'. In the statement that was issued following the consultation, dialogue was defined *as an authentic style of living in pluralistic milieu, which transcended simple co-existence* (Philip:1999). Dialogue was seen *as a positive effort to attain a deeper understanding of the truth through mutual awareness of one another's conviction and witness* (Philip: 1999). Philip also cites the Report on Renewal in Mission of the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC held in 1968 that recognised the need

for dialogue with people of other faiths, or no faith, arising out of the common humanity which we share with others.(Philip: 1999)

The early development of the Theology of Dialogue included an understanding that mission included social action. The International Missionary Conference held in Tambaram, in December 1938 had been a watershed moment for another reason as well, for it had been the first time there was an acknowledgement of the link between evangelism and social action. The report of the conference states that the

gospel carries with it the vision and hope of social transformation and of the realization of such ends as justice, freedom and peace. Therefore, no church can escape the responsibility of making active efforts to serve the community.(Tambaram Report:1939, 36)

³³ Lionel Peiris SSF believes John Cooray chose the name 'Devananda' in 1960 out of admiration for P. D. Devanandan

This influenced the WCC's emphasis on dialogue as did M. M. Thomas of India who saw dialogue as a prerequisite of social transformation by adherents of all faith communities working on a common platform. In his *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, Thomas showed that a recognition of a community's common humanity was an essential context for social activism. This required and would be achieved only through meaningful dialogue. He wrote,

One thing is absolutely clear. Participation in the struggle of Asian peoples for a fuller human life in state, society and culture, in a real partnership with men of other faiths and no faith, is the only context for realizing the true being of the Church and exercising Church's ministry and mission.(Thomas: 1967, 104)

N. Abeyasinghe has identified two forms of Christian – Buddhist Dialogue in Sri Lanka: the first is a form of dialogue that aims at finding links and similarities between Buddhism and Christianity so that the Christian Gospel could be communicated couched in a Buddhist form. The second is far more radical and it is a form of dialogue by which Christians actually seek *to learn from Buddhism, to examine its phenomenology and values* and join with Buddhists *in their struggle for the integral liberation of man* (Abeyasinghe:1985, 116). It is with this second form, the mutual enrichment model or what has come to be termed *the Dialogue of Mutual Flourishing and Generous Love* (Hedges:2016; Hedges:2018), that Devananda fully identified with from the earliest days of *Devasarana*.

In a 2004 essay the Indian theologian Michael Amaladoss SJ advanced the view that dialogue evolved from that between religions to one that included ideologies as well. Referring to the Asian context in which theologians and ordained and lay Christians activists often referred to the process of mission and evangelisation as 'a threefold dialogue' he went on to explore how dialogue between religions and secular ideologies that

sought to build an alternative model of society became a contextual reality. (Amaladoss: 2004, 296 – 298) Yohan Devananda anticipated this changing context in the field of dialogue at *Devasarana* when he began to engage with Marxism, long before it became a trend in the field of dialogue in South Asia. Thus, Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi has identified Devananda's experiments in dialogue as two pronged: initially a response to the challenge of inter-religious dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, but at a later stage dialogue with Marxist ideology in response to a myriad of socio-political and economic concerns when he began to engage in practical action on behalf of peasant farmers in the North-Western Province of Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi:2012, 128-130). He was instrumental in also founding, with other co-religionists, the *Vimukti Dharma Kendraya*³⁴, that engaged in this tripartite dialogue.

The emblem of *Devasaranaramaya* designed in 1960 by Devananda, was adopted to depict its commitment to dialogue between at least three of the major religions of Ceylon. It was the *dharmachakra*³⁵ enfolding a cross within the center of which was symbol of Eastern spirituality, the Hindu OM. In 1971 when the *Aramaya* evolved into a Collective Farm, a Commune of sorts, the symbol was modified to replace the OM with the hammer and sickle of Marxism. This symbolised the expansion of the dialogue from just between religions to one between two religions and an ideology. Thus, religion and ideology came together to work for development, justice and liberation.³⁶

³⁴ Centre for Liberation and Dhamma

³⁵ The wheel of the *Dhamma*

³⁶ These two symbols are visual aids to understand the living dialogue between Christianity, Buddhism and Marxism that lies at the heart of Devasarana's vision, mission, core values and ethos. The two symbols today form two sides of a common emblem for the Movement.

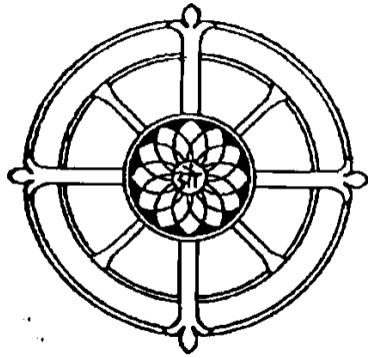


Figure 2: Original emblem, *circa* 1960

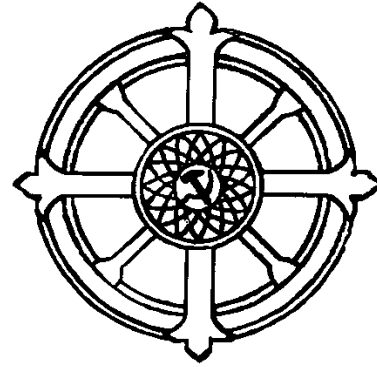


Figure 3: Modified emblem, *circa* 1971

One of the results of dialogue at *Devasarana* was that it led to self-criticism derived from his reading of Marxism with which Devananda had become enthralled as a student. In an article published in the *Sathyodaya Bulletin* of another Sri Lankan Christian Marxist theologian Paul Caspersz, Devananda articulates his vision of a Christian Marxist view of things:

In the attempt to discover the impact of the proclamation of the Kingdom on reality, he would consider it better if both Marxists and Christians face up to the weakness in the human situation and see how both the resources of Marxism and the Christianity can cope with these positively. (Devananda: 1974, 7-8)

His reliance on Marxist thought has been recognised by Abeyasinghe as

the key to his analysis of and theological solution to problems like the involvement of priests in politics, Asian theology, the liberation struggle etc. The development of Devasaranaramaya from a purely religious beginning to a movement spearheading social action, the promotion of liberation and the defence of human rights has taken place through its association with people and its initial option for the rural sector of the Church. It claims to have no party affiliations and its special focus of action is the peasantry of Sri Lanka. It also works in collaboration with the All Ceylon Peasant Congress. (Abeyasinghe: 1974, 108-109)

Writing in his seminal study of Christian – Buddhist Dialogue, *If they had met* in 1968, Devananda insisted that such self-criticism was a necessary prerequisite for any real

detachment or self-emptying (Devananda: 1968, 28). He goes on to explain that this self-criticism exposes the fact that

Christ stands for something far wider and bigger than the image of Christ that the Church has so often presented to the world. We Christians and our little divided Churches have to 'die to ourselves'.(Devananda: 1968, 82)

Herein is incarnation and *kenosis*. In what was a scathing indictment of the institutional Church Devananda shows one area where the Church needed to die unto itself in the following graphic manner:

the Church today is largely composed of Sadducees and Pharisees; Sadducees who are largely concerned with the institutional Church and how to keep the machinery running; and the Pharisees, who are largely concerned with details of personal piety and observance of antique customs based on medieval theorizing.(Devananda: 1968, 85)

Devananda also recognised that when dialogue flowed from self-criticism that another weakness was exposed in the Christian

there is still, perhaps, too much theological triumphalism in our language and not infrequent resort to apologetical tricks.(Devananda: 1968, 4)

Another foundational concept that underpinned Devananda's Theology of Dialogue was the Theology of the Cosmic Christ. This concept gained much currency at the World Council of Churches Assembly in 1961 held in New Delhi. It has since been embraced by many Asian theologians. Raimundo Panikkar for instance, in his *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* wrote that because the Cosmic Christ already indwells Hindus, the task of the Church is only to help draw Christ out of them not to present Christ to them. In other words what was important was a recognition that non-Christians already have Christ within them, but they just do not recognise or realise that they do. This supports theologians who enter dialogue with people of other living faiths.³⁷ One of the leading exponents of the

³⁷ Paul D. Devananda and M M Thomas, both prominent theologians in India who Yohan Devananda knew, expanded the teaching on the Cosmic Christ almost into a type of secular humanism. Thomas for instance, interpreted salvation as the human being finding his or her authentic humanity in order that none of the harsh

Cosmic Christ in Sri Lanka was Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe of Kurungala.³⁸

Delivering the second Lambeth Inter-Faith Lecture in 1979 under the title ‘Togetherness and Uniqueness – Living Faiths in Inter-Relation’ Wickremesinghe articulated a vision of dialogue that was entirely resonant with that of *Devasarana* (Devananda:1983, 5). In that landmark lecture Wickremesinghe articulated a vision of inter-faith dialogue that sought to reshape the way Christian mission was to be engaged in within a multi-religious society like Sri Lanka. He pointed out that such dialog facilitated nation building and social reconstruction becoming what he called “*the catalyst of new attitudes and relationships. People of different faiths have discovered each other as neighbours and fellow citizens*” (Wickremesinghe:1979). He went on to echo Devananda’s thinking by stating categorically that

people of different faiths have not only discovered themselves as neighbours and fellow citizens in Sri Lanka; they have also discovered themselves as fellow wayfarers engaged in a common search. The emphasis has shifted away from stressing one’s exclusive doctrines to a mutual acknowledgement of values and spiritual insights held in common, in a world increasingly dominated by secularism. All are recognized as searching for a way of liberation from ‘I’ consciousness and for an interiorized relationship with Transcendent Reality.(Wickremesinghe: 1979)

He then proposed a model of dialogue different to the traditional confessional dialogue, one that is far more inclusive and which enables those who engage in it

to learn from the insights and values contained in other religious visions, and to move towards a fuller comprehension of their own definite vision...They recognize both the uniqueness of a fundamental vision of Transcendent Reality and the learning that results from the togetherness of shared life.(Wickremesinghe: 1979)

He concluded with a new Christology for the times, one that embraces a vision of the Cosmic Christ.

social realities faced by them could suppress it – not injustice, not conflict and war and not poverty or discrimination.

³⁸ The *Uphadyaya* or Guardian of *Devasarana*

The Radical Tradition

Devananda did not write theological tomes which makes it difficult to analyse the essence of his theological thought. However, over the years he did write small monographs that give insights into his theological genius and proves beyond a doubt that he moved from a traditional understanding of systematic theology to a very different theological position towards what Abeyasinghe has called 'The Radical Tradition' of theological reflection in Sri Lanka (Abeyasinghe:1985).

By the 1960s while Liberation Theology was gaining ground in Latin America, it began to express itself in a different form through the movement in Asia to define an Asian Christian Theology. In 1966, a young Anglican Priest, Kenneth Fernando, spoke to the Synod of Clergy on a landmark conference that he and others from Sri Lanka had attended in Bangalore, India on the theme *The Significance of the New Emerging Theology*. This Conference had recognised the role of the New Theology and New Theologians.³⁹ One of those 'New Theologians', Aloysius Pieris SJ, has written of the Asian understanding of Liberation Theology in these terms:

For us Asians then, liberation theology is thoroughly Western, and yet, so radically renewed by the challenges of the Third World, that it has relevance for Asia which the classical theology does not have...In the Churches of the East this new method has already begun to compete with the traditional theology. What the Latin Americans claim, and what we Asians must readily grant, is that it is not perhaps a new theology, but a theological method, indeed the correct method of doing theology. (Pieris:1981, 172)

Pieris further points out why the new theologians opt for socialism or Marxism as they call

for a definite social order in which oppressive structures are changed radically, even violently, in order to allow every person to be fully human, the assumption being that no one is liberated unless everyone is. (Pieris:1981, 173)

³⁹ *The Bishop's Charge and Proceedings of Synod of the Clergy of the Diocese of Colombo*, 1966, pp. 30 & 31

Devananda was influenced by these new theological trends and later on in life described his theological position in his last work as *lower case theology* (Devananda:2008). He calls this process a Theology of ‘awakening’, a theology that awakens not just in the intellectual faculty of the human experience but *affects the total personality – mental, spiritual, physical* (Devananda:2008, i). This ties in with his fundamental theological presupposition that all theology must move from the theoretical to the practical and have practical liberative consequences particularly for the poor and the oppressed. This also fits in with Pieris’ thesis that the Church in Asia

must be humble enough to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian Religiosity and bold enough to be baptized on the Cross of Asian Poverty.” (Pieris:1981; Pieris:1988, 45-50)

Like the exponents of the new theology Devananda believed that if theology was to be liberative then it would need to engage with the Marxist tool of social analysis. This approach resulted in Devananda being labelled as radical, but he embraced that epithet gladly given that he believed that radical meant ‘going back to the root’ and hence his appeal to the prophetic tradition of the Holy Scriptures as well as to the Patristics of both East and West as important points of reference for the methodology of his theological reflection. As part of this methodology he utilised the Marxist questions and counter-questions. Ulrich Dornberg in his brief analysis of Devananda’s theological method has written,

The biblical ‘metanoia’ and Maoist self-criticism appear to have mutually stimulated each other in him and have become a hermeneutic principle. Self-criticism and social change are two sides of the same coin. (Dornberg:1992, 147)

‘Indigenous Marxian Socialism’

Part of the Radical Tradition was the development of a living dialogue between Christianity and Marxism. This dialogue was not new. The first serious attempt at such a dialogue had been made after 1963 when a series of meetings had been held that drew thinkers from both the Christian and Marxist worlds together for discussions (Hebblethwaite: 1977). This initiative followed Pope John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, in which he had first broached the idea of a dialogue between Roman Catholics and those of no faith and of atheistic movement such as Marxism (McLellan:1968, 462 – 467). Despite papal endorsement and the desire to breakdown traditional taboos, admittedly the discussions that were to follow were unofficial and were not between representatives of the ‘establishment’ of either tradition but rather of people on the margins of both, who were looking for ways to co-exist and for common platforms. For the mainstream of both, it was a “never the twain shall meet” situation! Around the same time however, while there was this dialogue taking place between representatives of Christianity and Marxism in the western world at the height of what was the Cold War, there was synergy established between Christian theology and Marxist ideology in the Liberation Theology of South America. That synergy resulted in some elements in the Roman Catholic Church and other denominations, including the Anglican Communion, taking Marxist ideology more seriously than before, especially in parts of the world that were emerging out of the colonial encounter and into new nationhood such as Sri Lanka.

Devananda’s Christian Socialism found new impetus from this dialogue and soon he was an advocate of similar approaches at *Devasarana*, but this a tripartite dialogue between Christianity, Buddhism and Marxism that he believed was the need of the hour.

He was further encouraged by Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe. In delivering the Dr D. T. Niles Memorial Lecture to the Christian Conference of Asia in 1980 under the title 'Living in Christ with People', Wickremesinghe called for the conceptualisation of *the ideology, programme and strategy covered by the term 'indigenous Marxian socialism'* (Wickremesinghe:1980). His inspiration was undoubtedly the work of Devananda and Devasarana. In fact, on his death Devananda wrote a biography of his friend and colleague in which he appreciated the Bishop's stance.(Devananda:1983, 2-3)

For Devananda Marxism was a very significant ideological basis for his action – reflection programme. But it was the sort of Marxism that Wickremesinghe espoused that interested and inspired him:

The option we Christians have to make in the conflict between the two ideologies in our situation has to be shaped by our Christian vision: Jesus as the friend of sinners and outcasts, as the prophetic contestant and martyr denouncing groups and overturning the structures which oppress and alienate people, so as to build a righteous human order, and as the self-sacrificing satyagrahi seeking to convert and reconcile his enemy by steadfastly resisting him with the spiritual power of vicarious suffering love. These three images of Jesus must be held in dialectical relation with each other and control our ideological option.(Devananda: 1983, 3)

Devananda's espousal of Marxism earned him notoriety and he was described in a news report in the 'Satipatha' Sinhala weekly newspaper in 1975 as 'a violent red revolutionary' while *Devasaranaramaya* was described as 'this Sama Samaja Marxist Revolutionary Clique' (Devananda:1976, 31). The insidious nature of the news report was that it was written with the intent of inflaming religious violence as it blatantly accused Devananda and his comrades of criticising and undermining Buddhism. Devananda's response to the news report appeared in the form of a pamphlet in both the Sinhala and English languages. It affirmed the living dialogue taking place between Christianity, Buddhism and Marxism at *Devasaranaramaya* by making it known that he and his

community had *a deep respect for Buddhism* (Devananda:1976, 32). He went on to describe the programme that *Devasaranaramaya* was engaged in as one that valued both ancient faiths, belief systems and religions as much as modern political ideologies in their liberative roles and emphasis on radical almost revolutionary social transformation

The Buddha, the Christ, the Prophet Mohammed and Karl Marx were all essentially revolutionary characters. They brought new ideas and new energy to the people and society around them, and they vigorously resisted the powers of evil and reaction.(Devananda: 1976, 32)

While responding to the critics Devananda also unambiguously ‘nailed his colours to the mast’ by defending ‘revolution’ stating that revolution did not always require violent action as there was a need for “*a revolution of mind and spirit as well as a revolution of structures, of laws and institutions.*” For him religious faith and revolution were complimentary and belonged together.

Revolution is now on the agenda of mankind. We cannot leave it to those whose vision is bound by narrow secular perspectives. In the steps of the great revolutionaries of the past and of the present, we have to bring to bear on it a wide and deep vision. And this vision must be constantly subjected to criticism. Through it all, the movement for development, justice and liberation must go forward, whatever the opposition.(Devananda: 1976, 33)

Why did Devananda and Wickremesinghe and others in the ‘Radical Tradition’ call for the ideology, strategy and programme known as ‘indigenous Marxist socialism’? Simply because by that time in Sri Lanka’s socio-economic and political history indigenous welfare capitalism had been exposed in all its stark nakedness as having been incapable of solving the new nation’s social problems. Despite all the socialist rhetoric of the 1960s and early 1970s as well as the capitalist promises of the post-1978 liberalized economy wealth was still concentrated in the hands of a few, as was power and privilege.

Whereas indigenous socialism, influenced by rather than dominated by Marxism, provides a better opportunity for the vast majority of people in Asia, to possess personal dignity, to be treated justly, experience well-being and fulfillment both personally and in community.(Devananda: 1983, 3)

For Devananda, as for Wickremesinghe,

programme-strategies run by Marxist cadres, alone cannot remove the distortions of racism, sexism, elitism and authoritarianism... Christ-centred theory and social action must creatively interact upon each other. Our images of Jesus held in dialectical tension must guide our vision, motivation and action, and be in dynamic interpenetration with Marxian ideology, programming and strategy. (Devananda:1983, 4)

It was this creative interplay between Christian-Buddhist Dialogue on the one hand and Christian-Buddhist-Marxist Dialogue on the other that formed the basis for Devananda's and Devasarana's praxis and the action – reflection paradigm.

Praxis

The word *praxis* entered the vocabulary of the Christian Church with the emergence of Liberation Theology in the 1960s. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, ‘the Father of Liberation Theology’, *Praxis implies a transformative activity that is influenced and illumined by Christian love* (Nickoloff:1996, 56). Lilian Calles Barger has written that

Praxis, involving both reflection and action in the environment of BECs (Base Ecclesial Communities), became part of the construction of a new liberationist hermeneutic. (Barger:2018, 77)

Writers such as Gutierrez and Boff have shown how within the Christian community orthopraxis or right action has often been undermined by a preoccupation with orthodoxy or right belief (Gutierrez:1971, 10; Boff:1980, 46-47) In fact Gutierrez cites the Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx’ analysis of what the discovery of orthopraxis has meant for the Church:

And this, it seems to me, has been the greatest transformation which has taken place in the Christian conception of existence...It is evident that thought is also necessary for action. But the Church has for centuries devoted her attention to formulating truths and meanwhile did almost nothing to better the world. In other words, the Church focused on orthodoxy and left orthopraxis in the hands of nonmembers and nonbelievers. (Gutierrez:1971, 10)

Theory, or in the case of matters of religion, orthodoxy or right belief, is the foundation of a life of faith. But theory alone was not sufficient. Even the biblical norm as in the Epistle of James is that “*faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead...For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.*” (James 2:17 & 26) Thus Gutierrez and other liberation theologians believed and taught that theological theory when used as a part of liberative *praxis* showed “a new way to be human, a permanent cultural revolution.” (Barger: 2018, 29) in such a context the task of liberation theology was to actionise the truth and not just proclaim it in words.

This task involved a process of reflection and action very similar to the ‘See-Judge-Act’ method of critical analysis introduced by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and developed by Pope John XXIII in his encyclicals on Catholic Social Teaching. This method called for observation of “*the reality of the contemporary situation and the world around us*” followed by a right judgement of that situation “*according to the standards of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church*” and then action to fulfil the demands of the Gospel and the values of the reign of God. (Cuff: 2019, 153)

For liberation theologians such as Paulo Freire *praxis* was founded on Marxist philosophy and was “*reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it...a central defining feature of human life and a necessary condition of freedom.*” (Freire: 1972, 52; Freire: 1994) Thus the reflection and action can be seen as the two sides of the coin – two fundamental sides of *praxis*.

Regrettably over a period of time a dichotomy between theory and practice had become normative in the institutional Church. This was partly due to the writings of the Greek philosophers such as Aristotle who had made a clear distinction between *theoria* (theories and ideas) and *praxis* (action or practise). *Praxis* was not activity devoid of or divorced from reflection, but rather intentional action based on a moral imperative to do what was right in the cause of the common good of all human beings, especially the poor and the marginalised.

It was this historical imbalance that activists like Yohan Devananda sought to correct. For him and for the *Devasarana* Movement that grew out of the early experiment with monastic life in an indigenous Religious Community, there was a need to come back

over and over again to the need for translating theory into practice, the realisation of the need to be a Community of *praxis* – involved in a never-ending cycle of action and reflection, of seeing, judging and acting.

The *Devasarana* Community kept engaging with the question of how they could get alongside the people of rural Sri Lanka, share in their daily problems and struggles, really get to know them and appreciate them in their strengths as well as their weaknesses, learn from them and help them-and work together with them in concrete ways for justice in society. (Devananda:1992)

The Cycle of Action – Reflection: Examples

The life of the *Devasaranaramaya* Community was one that was saturated with prayer, contemplation and theological reflection that translated into liberative *praxis*. Devananda's vision was that

Action and contemplation can and must be held together by a certain spirit or grace...Contemplation is tested and deepened by action, and action likewise tested and deepened by contemplation.(Devananda:1976, 6)

The little Chapel in which liturgy and worship were conducted indigenously was like crucible to its silver and the potter to his clay. It was the springboard for mission (Wikramanayake:1974, 21). Abayasekera, who was part of the *Devasarana* Community for two years has described the daily round of life as one that balanced

worship, study, manual work, visiting people in the neighbourhood (including Buddhist monks) and occasionally giving talks or leading a Bible Study at church gatherings.(Abayasekera:2002, 16)

Using the springboard of prayer, worship and reflection Devananda spearheaded action, engagement and interventions in the life of the people in the community that lived around *Devasaranaramaya*. Believing as he did in the Incarnation, Devananda sought to

incarnate the Gospel in the areas that he worked and ministered in. His social consciousness, steeped as it was in his Christian Socialist views propelled him to work for the downtrodden, the oppressed and the economically marginalised. His efforts were not in vain. Those among whom he served began to take his presence in their community seriously and they began to engage with him positively as they recognised his sincere efforts and desire to serve them. Thus began the dialogue between them.

Seminars and conferences were organised where the people in the vicinity of the Ashram and elsewhere were able to come and share their concerns both individual and corporate. He developed friendships with the leading Buddhist monks who joined him when he met the people. The dialogue led to reflection and this in turn led to action and activism on behalf of the people. (Abayasekera:2002, 21)

As a monastic community *Devasaranaramaya* obviously focused a great deal on contemplative activities but these activities dealing with the interior spiritual life were only means to an end – they drew people on a ‘journey to the center’ so that they could then return to the margins and engage in activity and action.

Following the conflagration of 1971 Devananda penned his most famous poem titled *Violent Lanka* (Devananda:1977) in which he expressed his thinking about the underlying causes of the youth insurrection, the violence that was unleashed and what could be done to bring into being the structural and systemic changes necessary to ensure that such a situation never occurred again. Writing in the Preface to the 2nd Edition in 1972, Devananda articulated his sympathy with the insurrection clearly (Devananda: 1977, ii).

Despite his obvious advocacy of the radical youth involved in the insurrection and the JVP, his relationship with extreme Marxist views that the party espoused in later years alienated him from the movement, and *Devasarana* in the 1980s became a base for others too who parted ways with the JVP (Amarasuriya:2022, 224-227).

The transformation of the monastic community into a Collective Farm, almost a commune, in the early 1970s, and then the inclusion of a Development Centre was all a result of the living dialogue that demanded activities and involvements that were part of liberative *praxis*. Devananda himself assessing the impact of the Collective Farm wrote in 1997 that through

many failures and some achievements, the experiment of the collective farm taught Devasarana many lessons in the whole task of building true community life. A new way of life in common, new forms of production relationships and a new style of leadership needed to be evolved. Here the collective principle had to be basic not in order to stifle individual initiative, but to enable it to be exercised for the common good. (Devananda:1997, 12)

In 1989 he wrote of the Collective Farm became an effective means of becoming more involved in the life of the peasant community. It led to advocacy for other marginalised groups of people such as women and minority ethnic communities at a time when the civil war raged in the north of the island. (Devananda: 1989, 13) Despite all the projects that *Devasarana* initiated for the good of the poor in the community, such as farms, credit societies, cottage industries, medical clinics and pre-schools, at that early stage at least Devananda did not want the Movement to be restricted to projects alone. He wanted it to be movement oriented rather than project oriented. The living dialogue between Buddhism Christianity and Marxism helped him to achieve this goal to a great extent.(Devananda: 1989, 13)

The new way of being was not without its challenges. Speaking in Jakarta in 1989

Devananda explained the change:

In the beginning, the pattern of life and work was monastic, with its regular times, forms and practices, even though the intention of new creation had been there from the beginning. Then, while being faithful to the original vision and principles, a new rhythm of life and work was explored where there was more freedom and flexibility to respond to the actual condition of society, particularly to the challenge of the poor and the need to make the option for the poor. With increasing involvements there were increasing difficulties and problems. The spiritual dimension was ever more necessary. But new and deeper spiritual resources had to be found. This meant a continuing search for and continuing discovery - a continuing formation with all the failures and frustrations involved - of a "spirituality for our times". (Devananda:1989, p. 14)

This social experiment that started with a living dialogue now sought a new spirituality, one consonant with the principles of dialogue. Other than for Devananda himself all others in what had now become a commune, were adherents of Buddhism and so the foundational principle of dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism now became all the more relevant and important. Given the exploitation faced by the peasant farmers *Devasarana* also now looked at becoming a movement that engaged in working for social justice. (Abayasekera:2002, 19)

For Devananda this living dialogue and new spirituality was not something restricted to mere theoretical discourse. He said in 1989 that what took place at *Devasarana*

was not thought out or planned in arm-chairs. It is not an abstract academic exercise. It arose out of participation in the struggle of the people for justice. Thus it is a living dialogue of people of various faiths and ideologies involved in a common struggle. (Devananda 1989, p. 13)

What this place of encounter offered was something truly different in terms of an experiment that was part of and yet cut off from the established Church – a frontier movement on the margins that engaged in socio-political and religious interventions and

initiatives that were at one time considered normative and that for those who were involved were founded upon faith as well as a moral imperative. It was a radical movement that included not just a radical form of Christianity but also radical politics. It anticipated the liberation *praxis* of the radical theology that was to be born in South America in the 1960s. Harini Amarasuriya in her study of Devananda and *Devasarana* has written that while most discussions consider the relationship between religion and politics as having a violent dimension by which *religion instigates extremism and intolerance against the 'other'*, *Devasaranaramaya* offered an alternative narrative:

The story of Devasaranaramaya and its associates is not simply about religiously inspired non-governmental public action...the issues they chose to work on, and the methods they used to address these issues were inspired by (mostly Marxist) political ideology and practice... that usually entailed personal struggles, sacrifices, and marginalization from the mainstream institutions of the religious faiths to which they belonged.(Amarasuriya:2022, 222)

Devananda was one of many at that time who thought and acted like this. The Christian Workers' Fellowship to which he belonged was another movement on the margins that took up Christian Socialist thought and political activism. In the CWF's pamphlet *Christian Worker and the Trade Union* for example, one of the founders of the movement, Devananda's friend and comrade, Vijaya Vidyasagara has written that the claim the Christ makes is a total claim. This claim makes demands on the way society is organised and wealth and property are distributed.(Vidyasagara: 1958, 217-218)

While Devananda and *Devasarana* advocated this stance during the first 30 years of existence during which time the *Ashram* gave way to the Collective Farm and that too later spawned the Development Centre, the religious gradually gave way to the political creating an imbalance that was the downfall of the movement as it made its way down the path to being just another NGO engaged in development projects.

The post-1971 developments also made the *Ashram* premises a safe haven for members of a breakaway group from the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramune* that had led the 1971 insurrection. This group assumed a new identity as the *Janatha Sangamaya*⁴⁰ and started to live and meet at *Devasaranaramaya*. When the JVP reorganised itself in an even more radical form and began the 1987/1989 insurrection, *Devasaranaramaya* was targeted as sheltering traitors to the cause. The *Ashram* premises became not just a sanctuary for members of the *Janatha Sangamaya* being hunted by the JVP and its extreme wing the DJV, but the government's armed forces also turned their attention to the place suspecting Devananda of having links with the insurgents. This seriously affected the credibility of both the Community and its Founder.

In addition to this there was also a sad conflict between Devananda and Sarath Fernando, a founder member of the *Janatha Sanghamaya*, who had been appointed Moderator and Director of the Development Centre in succession to Devananda in 1984. They had several disagreements over time and 1989 proved to be a watershed moment when both were asked to withdraw from direct involvement with *Devasaranaramaya*. A new leader for the Community was appointed in 1995. Yet Devananda was held in such high esteem by the Community that he never really severed ties with the Movement he had pioneered despite moving away.

The Action – Reflection *praxis* of *Devasaranaramaya* and the later *Devasarana* Movement, based firmly on the living dialogue between Christianity, Buddhism and Marxism achieved much in the first thirty years of its life. The next thirty years witnessed engagement with the manifold issues involved with the internecine civil war that raged in

⁴⁰ The Peoples' Society

the north of the country between government forces and Tamil separatist militants fighting for a separate homeland in the north and east of the country. This engagement was through a new organisation that Devananda formed called the World Solidarity Forum on Sri Lanka for Justice and Peace in 1990. (Report of the World Solidarity Forum Meeting in Thailand:1990) Devananda brought with him to this new initiative of consultation his many years of experience in dialogue as well as the action-reflection *praxis* paradigm. The new dimension was that of what he called ‘solidarity action’. Steeped as he was in Catholic social thought as well as the theology of liberation, Devananda recognised the value of solidarity action as part of the commitment of his Movement towards the common good of all. The foundational principles of *Devasarana*’s living dialogue had always taught that the gospel imperative of mutuality and solidarity demanded of every Christian that they should consider every other human being not just as their neighbour but as another self. This necessarily demanded *generous love* and would result in *mutual flourishing*. The common good involved working for peace with justice for all and to this end Devananda now committed himself and the *Devasarana* Movement through the World Solidarity Forum. He called for mutual understanding and common action towards conflict resolution. (Devananda, 1992) It was the application of the *praxis* of action-reflection that Devananda made use of in his later work as well.

When *Devasaranaramaya* celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2007, Devananda composed a special aspiration prayer⁴¹ that encapsulates the totality of what the movement stood for and represented. (Devananda:2007, 21-22)

⁴¹ See Appendix 2 for the complete text

The action-reflection paradigm and new spirituality reached its climax in the *New World Liturgy* that Devananda crafted in 1973 after many years of experimentation with different forms of indigenised liturgical worship.

***The New World Liturgy*⁴²: Liturgical Expression of Living Dialogue**

Devananda loved the liturgy, but not in an aesthetic or mystical sense. He had become disillusioned with traditional liturgy and now recognised the need for a radical departure from the mainstream (Devananda: 1989, 14).

The fruit of this liturgical commitment was to be seen in his *New World Liturgy* that evolved through a series of *Vandana* liturgies in the late 1960s and was finally published in 1973. Writing in the 25th anniversary souvenir of the Diocese of Kurunagala in 1975, Devananda referred to *Devasaranaramaya*'s commitment to liturgical life and the rhythm of work and prayer, action and reflection that characterised the Ashram and included a description of the *New World Liturgy*.⁴³ The inspiration for the *New World Liturgy* lay in Devananda's association with another people's movement in Sri Lanka, the Christian Workers' Fellowship founded in 1958 by a group of Christian socialists (Abayasekera:2016). Abayasekera refers to the 'creative liturgical interaction' that existed between the Christian Workers Fellowship and *Devasaranaramaya* from the very beginning (Abayasekera:2016).

⁴² First published in 1973 and revised in 1979. See Appendix 1 for the complete revised text.

⁴³ *A new Sinhala Office Book – the Vandana Potha – was worked out for the regular chanting of the Opus Dei, the work of God (1967). A new form of the Eucharist was also evolved (1960). These were basically Christian but enabled the participation of Buddhists and Marxists in dialogue. Later, a radical New World liturgy (Nava Lo Vandana), which may be called a para-liturgical form, was created to enable full participation by people of all religions and ideologies (1973). The common theme or concern is the movement for development, justice and liberation – its joys and struggles – its heights and depths. These liturgies were the articulation and crystallization of years of living dialogue, and are an attempt to integrate the values of the past with the values of the new world... Various known as the Eucharist (i.e. the Thanksgiving), the Holy Communion, the Last Supper, and the Mass. Friends of other religions will be welcome to be present at this though only Christians will participate in the ceremonial sharing of the food. Their presence will not in any way compromise their loyalty to their own religions. (Devananda:1975ii)*

It was out of the desire for true dialogue tempered by Marxist self-criticism that in 1973 Devananda devised *The New World Liturgy*, a truly radical departure from the norm in which the Ministry of the Word included not just readings from the Holy Bible but also readings from the sacred scriptures of other living faiths as well as from secular ideology. Abeyasinghe in offering a commentary on *The New World Liturgy* writes that as a result of this innovation the liturgy

becomes the worship of those who share the same vision for the liberation of man, whether that vision is derived from the religions or Marx or Mao Tse Tung or anyone else...The basic themes running through this liturgy are conversion and revolution. (Abeyasinghe:1985, 107)

Wesley Ariarajah writes that *The New World Liturgy* was crafted to combine contemplation, prayer and reflection with action as well as a withdrawal from the world in order to engage with the world again after worship (Ariarajah: 2018, 80) – what the Eastern Orthodox Christians call ‘*The Liturgy after the Liturgy*’ (Bria:1996) wherein there is engagement with the world and solidarity with the poor, the excluded and the marginalised through acts of service.

Ulrich Dornberg in his study of Christians, contextual theology and social change in Sri Lanka views Devananda’s *hermeneutical stance of the mutual engagement between self-criticism and social change as the basis of the New World Liturgy* (Billimoria:2020, 36). He recognises both ‘conversion and revolution’ in the Liturgy, where theology is *an expression of the search for authenticity, for integration of religion with life, meditation with action, peace with justice* (Dornberg:1992, 147).

An analysis of the text of the *New World Liturgy* will show just how radical for the times it was.

The Liturgy begins with an antiphonal declaration about Truth. This is followed by an act of showing 'Honour' in which the worshipper gives honour to the Hindu sages *for their earnest seeking of the ultimate reality and for their experience of the divine powers*, the Buddha *for showing us the power of a liberated and awakened mind and the necessity of self-control and discipline*, Jesus Christ *for showing us the power of self-sacrificing love and the joy of serving one another*, Prophet Mohammed *for showing us the zeal of devotion and the meaning of comradeship in practise*, and Karl Marx *for his discoveries concerning the planning and organization of society on the basis of justice and efficiency* (Devananda:1973, 1979). The section goes on to honour creative artists and scientists, all wise statesmen and leaders, all saints and martyrs, ordinary people, workers and peasants, teachers and students, parents and children (Devananda:1973, 1979, 1-3).

The Penitential Rite titled 'Awareness' helps those engaged in the worship to acknowledge responsibility for sin and evil in the world around them in all their different forms and manifestations including in *homes and schools, temples and churches* (Devananda: 1973, 1979). There is also acknowledgement of the failure to love and respect one another and of the exploitation of others as well as the need for *new life true community and real joy, liberation reconciliation and peace*.

There is no Absolution but a section titled 'Seeking' that begins with the leader saying *we seek to change our lives and to change the organization of society* to which those gathered respond with the words *in order to help build a new society and a new humanity a new heaven and a new earth*. The leader then says *we seek a revolution of mind and spirit a revolution in the structures of society a revolution in human relationships* to which the people respond *we seek a revolution of relationships between leaders and people*

administrators and workers teachers and pupils parents and children priests and laity. The seeking continues in a similar vein ending with a common declaration we seek day by day to translate principles into practice as far as we can alongside the people according to dharma. (Devananda:1973, 1979)

The ‘Dialogue’ follows and comprises readings from the ancient religions, modern ideologies and any other relevant writings, preaching of a sermon, or dialogue and discussion, self-criticism and mutual criticism.

This is followed by the *Preparation of Gifts* received from the people for sharing in worship and then the *Celebration and Sharing of Food* which is the climax of the Liturgy. Here again there are quotations from the great religions and from Marx, Che Guevara and Mao. During the sharing of food and drink there is an aspiration that is proclaimed in silence that declares what those engaged in the liturgy aspire to accomplish beyond the liturgy – that ‘liturgy after the liturgy’ for which the worship has been a springboard: *We seek a new heaven and a new earth, a new society and a new humanity, and commit ourselves to the struggle to achieve this.* (Devananda: 1973, 1979)

The Liturgy ends with the gathered community dispersing to live out what they have proclaimed in the act of worship. Periods of silence permeate the Liturgy for quiet reflection and it is a Liturgy that includes people of all religious beliefs or none in the true spirit of the *praxis* of ‘Living Dialogue’.

CONCLUSION

Devasaranaramaya is no more the place of encounter and living dialogue it was in the first thirty years since its founding. Sadly, the *Ashram* and the Collective Farm are no more, and the Development Centre is but a shadow of its former self existing from project to project almost in a desperate attempt for self-preservation. As Amarasuriya writes,

There is hardly a glimpse of its heady days of activism, resistance, and dissent to be seen anymore at Devasarana. (Amarasuriya:2022, 227)

Sevaka Yohan Devananda died in 2016 but even before his death the movement he had started had begun to flounder and came to be perceived by critics as just another Non-Governmental Organisation struggling to remain relevant by being involved in community development work and advocacy in the region, albeit in a far more limited way than it had been in the first thirty years.

Today the ownership of the *Ashram* property is being disputed in a protracted legal battle between the Trustees and the *Devasarana* Development Centre leadership (Amarasuriya: 2022, 221).

There is no resident community any longer, other than for two lay sisters of the ecumenical Order known as *Meth Piyasa* set up in 2001 by Devananda and his wife Malini as an experiment in wider ecumenical and inter-religious semi monastic living.

All the buildings including the unique Chapel, a model of indigenisation, are in a severely dilapidated state and the entire property overgrown and unkept, including the grave of its founder.

What caused the decline? There were forces that worked together in differing degrees to make movements such as this redundant.

The clash of personalities among the leadership, in-fighting within the Community, issues with regular funding for the various programmes that had to be organised as well as of course the far-reaching changes that took place in the political landscape of Sri Lanka in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

Within the institutional Church too the support that had been forthcoming from courageous Church leaders such as Bishop Lakdasa de Mel and Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe was no longer discernible. Fundamentalist Christianity began to flourish from the early 1980s and within historic ecclesial communities such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches Pentecostalism manifested itself as the Charismatic Movement with an emphasis on personal salvation and individualistic faith which soon became the primary focus marking a shift away from the dimension of social responsibility and witness. Such a change of ecclesial priorities resulted in a stress on ‘sharing the Gospel’ in terms of evangelism without an emphasis on any form of social action or involvement. The Church began to focus on preparing people for heaven and the after-life than challenging them to live transformative lives in the here and now. There was no room within such an ecclesiastical context for prophetic movements such as *Devasaranaramaya* or for prophetic dissidents such as Sevaka Yohan Devananda.

Movements such as *Devasaranaramaya* emerged in response to a particular socio-cultural and political context and reality. The living dialogue between Christianity, Buddhism and later Marxism that the community advocated answered a particular need of

the times when there was suspicion of and prejudice against Christianity among the Buddhist community in particular. For scholars such as Elizabeth J. Harris who have researched and written much on Christian-Buddhist relations in Sri Lanka before and after 1948, Devananda and the *Devasarana* movement represented that peculiar group of Christians who worked tirelessly for rapprochement in the face of resistance (Harris:2023, 134 – 147; Tilakaratne:2020, 8-9).

Is there then a role for such movements in the contemporary Church and in Sri Lankan society? What is the challenge of Devananda and *Devasaranaramaya*? Is there a challenge at all or are people and movements like them destined to be things of the past?

In the social and cultural milieu of today there is still need for such people and movements. People and movements that take up the cause of social justice out of a spiritual and moral imperative to communicate the love of God in Christ. People and movements that work in solidarity with the marginalised, the oppressed, the persecuted, the downtrodden, whose *praxis* is based on their understanding of God's 'preferential option for the poor', and the poor here being not just the economically marginalised. People and movements that engage in the struggle to work for the common good of all people and to maintain the basic rights and the dignity of every human being created in the image and likeness of God. Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Church still needs such men and movements as our nation and people continue to struggle with modern manifestations of the same life denying forces that existed in the days when Devananda and *Devasaranaramaya* were active.

For instance in a country that has witnessed so much prejudice and suspicion over the past decades between majority and minority communities on the basis of race and ethnicity, faith and religious persuasion, caste and class, gender and today even in respect of the rights of long excluded and marginalized communities such as tea plantation workers, the *malaiyaha makkal*, as well as those who identify as LGBTQI+ the story of *Devasaranaramaya* poses a potent challenge – the right to live in peace with equality, justice and with dignity.

Thus the challenge of Devananda and his liberation praxis of action -reflection within the wider context of the living dialogue between Christianity, Buddhism and an indigenous Marxist socialism, continues to be one that requires our response. In the words of Aloysius Pieris,

What, then, is the locus of this praxis? Certainly not the 'Christian life lived within the Church in the presence of non-Christians', rather, it is the God-experience (which is the other side of the concern for humanity) of God's own people living beyond the church. It is among non-Christians that the church is called to lose itself in total participation. That is to say, theology in Asia is the Christic apocalypse of the non-Christian experiences of liberation.(Pieris:1988, 32)

The last word must obviously be Devananda's:

So the living dialogue must go on. Here the theistic religions- Hinduism, Christianity and Islam – and the philosophies of Buddhism, secular humanism and Marxism, can be united in the search for 'a spirituality for our times.' The dialogue has to be rooted in ancient verities but free and flexible to respond to new and creative forces arising out of changing conditions...In the common search for a new spirituality with Buddhists, secular humanists and Marxists, theists must be prepared to shed, or at least be detached enough to reinterpret, certain transcendental theological forms and concepts, which are not of the essence of dharma or doctrine. But, always, there must be unrelenting search for the truth – not only 'beyond-the-beyond' but 'beyond in the midst' – 'even further beyond and ever deeper within'! And always, it must be through 'praxis, action-reflection and living dialogue.(Devananda:1989, 21)

Writing in 1971 as a commentary on his poem 'Violent Lanka', Devananda expressed a hope that is still the hope of many:

the final word must be one of hope for the future – invincible hope, unflinching determination, and patience! Even at the starkest moment of tragedy there has always been hope, for it is not a meaningless struggle – it is part of the struggle for the liberation of man, and that struggle will always go forward, whatever the setbacks, as long as there are people who believe in it. Every conversation, every encounter that develops this understanding can be a step forward, an opportunity for the confirmation of hope, a promise for the future.(Devananda:1977, 28)

APPENDIX 1
THE NEW WORLD LITURGY (1st Published 1973, Revised 1979)
Truth Overcomes

Lead	Seek the truth
Response	Listen to the truth
L	Love the truth
R	Serve the truth
L	Teach the truth
R	Live the truth
L	Defend the truth
R	Unto death

Silence
Honour

Lead	We honour the Hindu sages for their earnest seeking of the ultimate reality and for their experience of the divine powers.
Response	We honour the Buddha for showing us the power of a liberated and awakened mind and the necessity of self-control and discipline
L	We honour Jesus Christ for showing us the power of self-sacrificing love and the joy of serving one another
R	We honour the Prophet Mohammed for showing us the zeal of devotion and the meaning of comradeship in practice

- L We honour
Karl Marx
for his discoveries
concerning the planning
and organization
of society
on the basis
of justice and efficiency
- R We honour
all creative artists
and scientists
and all wise statesmen and leaders
who have stirred
people's imaginations
enriched their lives
and extended their vision
- L We honour
all saints and martyrs
sages and prophets
who have laboured
to serve others
and realise ideals
of love, justice and peace
among the peoples of the world
- R We honour
ordinary people
workers and peasants
teachers and students, parents and
children, for their toil and sacrifice
comradeship and humanity
struggles and triumphs
in building and sustaining
the common life of the masses
throughout the ages

Silence

Awareness

- Lead** We acknowledge
our responsibility
for sin and evil
in the world
in our country

in our work-places
in our homes and schools
in our temples and churches

Response	We acknowledge our want of faith hope and love
L	We acknowledge our pride vanity and self-indulgence
R	We acknowledge our selfishness and narrowness of spirit and our exploitation of others
L	We acknowledge our failures and omissions in care and service of others in care and service of persons as persons
R	We acknowledge divisions among us failures and omissions in corporate action for justice for the oppressed
L	We need cleansing and forgiveness and humility of spirit
R	We need new life true community and real joy

All	We need liberation reconciliation and peace	<i>Silence</i> Seeking
Leader	We seek to change our lives and to change the organization of society	
Response	In order to help build a new society and a new humanity a new heaven and a new earth	
L	We seek a revolution of mind and spirit a revolution in the structures of society a revolution in human relationships	
R	We seek a revolution of relationships between leaders and people administrators and workers teachers and pupils parents and children priests and laity	
L	We seek liberation for all those who are oppressed	
R	We seek to commit ourselves to the struggle for liberation	

L	We seek a new order of love, justice and peace that all may care
R	We seek sharing of power and resources of leadership and responsibility
All	We seek day by day to translate principles into practice as far as we can alongside the people according to dharma

Silence

Dialogue

Reading from the ancient religions, modern ideologies and any other relevant writings, preaching of a sermon, or dialogue and discussion, self-criticism and mutual criticism may follow here. Alternatively, this may take place before the Liturgy commences. It may end with any formal or informal symbolic actions, greetings of love and peace, singing of hymns or songs, a period of silence, etc.

The Preparation of Gifts

The bringing up of gifts and symbols should be done during or after the singing. They may be brought up in procession to the accompaniment of dance, drums, etc, or in silence.

The food brought up to be shared may be rice and tea, or any food and drink in common use. Other gifts of creation and labour and symbols and implements of associations and organizations may be brought up by representatives of workers, peasants, students, etc.

A collection may be taken for the poor and needy or for a special cause.

Celebration and Sharing of Food

Lead (one person)	We now recall the sources and resources of creation and liberation. We celebrate the words and actions of great leaders of mankind. We celebrate the struggles and triumphs in history of the common people. We share food
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and drink as a sign of our sharing of life – its joys and sufferings, its sacrifice and struggles, its peace and communion.

- | | |
|----------|---|
| Lead | From the unreal
lead me
to the real
from the darkness
lead me
to light
from death
lead me to immortality
(Upanishad) |
| Response | Go now monks
and wander
for the good of the people
for the happiness of the people
out of compassion
for the world
(The Buddha) |
| L | I have come
that men
may have life
and may have it in all its fullness
(Jesus Christ) |
| R | The Spirit of the Lord
has been given to me
he has sent me
to bring good news to the poor
to proclaim freedom to prisoners
to the blind new sight
to the oppressed liberation
(Jesus Christ) |
| L | From God
we come
and unto Him
we return
(The Prophet Mohammed) |
| R | From each
according to his ability |

to each
according to his need
(Karl Marx)

L The true revolutionary
 is guided
 by a great feeling of love
 (Che Guevara)

R Wherever there is struggle
 there is sacrifice
 and when we die
 for the people
 it is a worthy death
 (Mao Tse Tung)

All The masses
 are the real heroes
 we should go to the masses
 and learn from them
 synthesize and articulate their experience
 and help them
 to achieve liberation and happiness
 (Mao Tse Tung)

The food and drink is passed from hand to hand.

While this is being done the meaning of this whole common action may be proclaimed by various persons present spontaneously in their own words or in the words given below. It may also be done in silence or to the accompaniment of music or singing.

Through this common action we understand and work together with the powerful creative and liberating forces at work in history.

They are forces of nature and art, science and religion, matter and spirit, forces seen and unseen, human and divine.

These forces bring order out of chaos, light into the darkness, freedom from slavery, and comradeship from selfishness.

Our sharing of food is a sign of the sharing of all resources – of land and property, food, shelter and clothing, and all gifts and talents.

The great fact of the universe is love. Through development, justice, and liberation we seek and claim the joy of comradeship and communion.

A monumental and relentless struggle has to be waged against the evils of oppression and exploitation, corruption and want.

This sharing of food and participation in a common meal symbolizes the calling of all humanity to join in this great struggle in a spirit of faith, sacrifice and

commitment.

We seek a new heaven and a new earth, a new society and a new humanity, and commit ourselves to the struggle to achieve this.

After the sharing of the food and drink, representatives of workers, peasants, students, etc. may come up to receive back the symbols and implements of their work and organizations and go out in procession.

The National Anthem and/or the Internationale, or any other hymn or song may be sung.

(Note: The periods of silence in the Liturgy should follow what precedes naturally without announcement and may be ended by the use of a small bell. This bell will, at the same time, also be the sign for the next lead group to follow on together. The bell could also be used to signify the beginning and end of the Liturgy.)

OM SHANTI SHALOM VIMUKTI

APPENDIX 2

A 50TH ANNIVERSARY ASPIRATION

lover god, living liberator, spirit of creative energy, gracious dharma, primal fire, silent
presence, crystal fountain sacred breath, daily bread, wonderful counsellor,
source of peace, broken, crucified, lord servant
we love you with all our being
we worship you with all our being
we praise you with all our being
we thank you with all our being
forgive us, cleanse us, revive us, renew us, restore us
enable us to continually discover
new humanity new society
the devasarana vision
in a spirit of sacrificial service
building
a community of stillness
open
to the divine imperative
searching deep within for inner resources
renewing the self
ever further beyond and ever deeper within
rooted in the life of the people
listening
to the people setting the agenda
for the sharing of power and resources
through the struggle for
development, justice, liberation and peace
searching for equality, sharing, ahimsa, service
in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious plural society
in a movement of action – reflection
self-criticism and mutual criticism
a dialogue of ancient religions and modern ideologies
gender and environment perspectives
international dimensions
a collective process
of building persons
people and leaders
through mutual learning and teaching
giving and receiving
everyone working, everyone learning, everyone teaching
working and praying

lover god, source, guide and goal of all that is,
mother, father, child, friend, comrade, guru, healer, liberator,
lord and servant of all.

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