

Theology of Public Life: Sri Lankan Experience of the City Life and the Christian Hope

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From its Latin root, 'city' (civitas) is closely associated with 'civilization' (civilis) where city life is equated with civilized life. In the history of humankind, construction of cities was the result of societal progression. Unfortunately, in the course of the human history, cities and city life became precarious for humanity. The Bible, too, seems not very positive about cities. The Old Testament narrative of Babel and the history of Sodom and Gomorrah highlights the negative aspects of urban life. Jerusalem lost its divine protection when it became a great city in the worldly sense. Jesus condemned the cities of his time, namely, Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. This shows that though cities and city life mark the growth of humankind, they also represent the decadence of human civilization. Sri Lankan cities are not exceptional to this fact. The spiritual wellbeing of the world religious traditions, once visible in these cities, is slowly fading away. This paper, along with the positive effects, analyses in detail the severe negative effects of Sri Lankan city life from a Christian perspective. The hypothesis is that though cities empower life with many facilities, they have apparently reduced the human being to be a material commodity. The objective of this study is to explore how Christianity, in terms of its faith, beliefs and practices could mediate hope in the context of such negative elements of urbanity. Inductive, observatory and deductive methods are used to achieve this end. The benefit of this study in the terrains of public theology is the application of the Christian values of equality, individual dignity and rights, non-exclusion, and spiritual wellbeing combined with the experience of transcendence to the Sri Lankan experience of cities and city life.

Introduction

In the history of humankind, the construction of cities is considered a remarkable point in the process of civilization. The archaeological

evidences from the excavated ancient cities indicate that those civilizations possessed the requisite engineering knowledge to build them and thus the cities signify the highest state of human progression (Possehl 2002, 101). From its Latin root, 'city' (civitas) is closely associated with civilization (civilis) where city life is identified with civilized life. Similarly, the term 'citizen' also was adopted in use from these roots in Latin.

Unfortunately, it is evident from the history that in the course of time, city life became precarious for humanity. Cities and city life which denoted the height of human civilization became also the causes of the latter's decadence. The Bible presents a nuanced view of cities, acknowledging both their potential for moral corruption and their importance as centers of community life. However, in general, there is an impression that it is not very positive about cities. Certain narratives in the Bible depict cities in a negative light; the story of Babel and the history of Sodom and Gomorrah seem to indicate this fact. Jerusalem which was depicted as a holy city and the center of religious worship in the Old Testament lost its divine protection when it became secular, accentuating on its pomp and pageantry (Jeremiah 6:8). In the New Testament it is narrated that on certain occasions, Jesus seems to condemn the great cities of his time. This shows that though cities and city life marked the growth of humankind, they also pointed to the decadence of human civilization (Wirth 1938, 16).

Sri Lankan cities are not exception to this perception. The fading away of the spiritual wellbeing bequeathed from the world religious traditions is observable in the cities of Sri Lanka. This paper, along with the positive and negative effects, studies the Sri Lankan experience of cities and city life from the Christian perspective. In a caste-based and gender-biased background of Sri Lanka, social and gender discriminations are felt apparently less in its cities. However, it is an inevitable fact that the cities have become the potential spots of moral corruption. The marketisation of life, cut-throat competitions and underworld activities are some of the ruthless negative effects that challenge the Christian values. Though cities empower human life with many facilities, they also have apparently diminished the dignity of the human beings. Therefore, in the terrains of public theology this paper tries to analyze how Christian hope can be permeated to the Sri Lankan experience of cities and city life.

1. Cities and Human Civilization

The Latin 'civitas' is root for the English noun 'city' and it is closely associated with 'civilis' which refers to 'civilization' in English. It gives an idea that the progression of humankind was closely associated with the creation of cities and the civilized life was identified with city life. Thus, cities have become closely associated with the multifaceted advancement of human race.

According to Devaneyya Pavanar, one of the famous etymologists from India, the word 'civilization' became identified with the word 'city' in the process of the progress of humankind. Since the city contained within it the massive buildings, well-built roads, places of worship, halls, markets and shops, administrative blocks, parks and other entertainment facilities, and other advanced facilities for human life, obviously it was considered a highly developed center and it was reckoned as the climax of human civilization (Devaneyya Pavanar 2019, 10). In so far as civilization was intended to include all the elements associated with city life, the definition of civilization encompassed all the components of a city.

According to Adam Ferguson, civilization is the awakening of the human race. It signified the characteristics of the human race from the development of material things to the entire progress of all aspects pertaining to human life (Adam Ferguson 1767, 24). Albert Schweitzer defined civilization as the overall advancement of human race from its rudimentary level to its sophisticated comfort height and this is manifested in city life. The different types of construction of cities were regarded as fundamental to measuring and comparing different civilizations (Albert Schweitzer 1987, 32). So civilized life was thought to be the lifestyle of the city dwellers.

2. Precarious Effects of Cities and City Life

Cities are the sophisticated comfort zones which symbolize the pinnacle of human civilization in many ways. The cities have been the hubs of innovation and catalysts for progress (UNESCO 2021, 23). This phenomenon could be observed in all the civilizations of the world during various historical epochs. The construction of cities represents not only an achievement in engineering and architecture but also in social organization and cooperation.

However, the association of city life with civilized life became inappropriate with the establishment of highly complicated urbane cities. Cities and city life which represented the height of human civilization became also the causes for the decadence of the latter, and to be associated with economic, legal, salutary, and moral precarity (Brian Campbell & Christian Laheij 2021, 283). Civilizations which expanded their domains and influence far and wide and established sophisticated and comfortable cities for their citizens later became easy prey for other stronger civilizations. The cities which manifested the glories of a particular civilization were all smashed in the course of the time by other emerging stronger civilizations. The Egyptian city of Ramses was captured and destroyed by the Hittites, the Assyrian city of Nineveh was destroyed by the Babylonians and Babylon was overrun by the Persians, etc.

It is a historical trajectory where cities, once symbols of human achievement and progress, eventually became associated with the decline and decadence of the civilizations. The cities identified with civilization became precarious for authentic human progress and ultimately for the whole humankind. This is a common phenomenon with regard to the cities and city life (Philo, Parr & Hester 2019, 155). When cities were established during the golden eras of different civilizations (and later during the phase of industrial revolution), populations flocked towards them. However, later they were disappointed with cities and city life due to the loss of peace, healthy life, humanness and human relations (Gutkind 1962, 19). Consequently, people in the cities started recognizing rural life as decent, peaceful and healthy (Wirth 1938, 18).

3. Did God Appreciate the Human Cities?

Biblical Perspective of Cities

The city is an ambiguous symbol in the Bible (Rogerson, John Vincent 2009, 4). The Book of Genesis narrates that Cain, the fratricide, founded the first city (Genesis 4:17). The prehistoric narration of the Babel story is the first account where God did not approve the building of the bogus-gloried city by the humans to glorify themselves (Sean Benesh 2015, 55). Later, Sodom and Gomorrah, the great cities during the time of Abraham, came under the wrath of Yahweh and were destroyed (Ellul 1970, 24). The city of Jerusalem was a place chosen by God. Yet it became a place of misdeed and injustice. When it lost its spiritual nature and got into

secular mundane life, Yahweh permitted it to be destroyed by foreign invasions (Galambush, 1992, 28). Jesus condemned the great cities of his time Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (Luke 10: 13-15). Thus, the Biblical narrations depict that though the cities show the growth of humanity in the material sense, they also represent the perilous situation for virtuous living.

4. Cities and City Life in Sri Lanka

This paper focuses on the Sri Lankan experience of cities and city life and analyses from a Christian perspective, the positive and negative effects of the same with the purpose of finding out what hope can Christianity mediate. A brief background introduction to the Sri Lankan situation would facilitate the following study.

Sri Lanka is a small island lying near the southern tip of India. It is separated from India by the narrow Palk's Straight in the Indian Ocean, 18 nautical miles away from India. The length of the island from North to South is 435 km and the width from West to East is 225 km. Total area is 65,610 square km. The population consisting of Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Malays, Burghers and Eurasians is almost 22 million according to the census of 2023. Though it is a small island, it has three main ethnic groups; Sinhalese 74.9%, Tamils 15.4%, Moors 9.2% and others 0.5%. It also has all the four major religions of the world: Buddhists 70.2%, Hindus 12.6%, Muslims 9.7% Christians 7.3%, and others 0.2%.

Sri Lanka was ruled by western colonial powers from 1505 to 1948, first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch and lastly by the British. After its independence in 1948, the country underwent a civil war for three decades which took place between the two ethnic groups, majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils. The civil war that came to an end in 2009 caused the loss of thousands of lives, destruction of resources and properties and left the country without any hope for development. As a result, the country is facing now a severe economic crisis partly due to the civil war and partly due to the political mismanagement of the country after the completion of the civil war and the Covid 19 pandemic.

In order to make a study of the Sri Lankan experience of cities and city life, three important cities which could substantially give the experience of Sri Lankan city life are selected: Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka and the

regional capital of the Southern Sri Lanka, Jaffna, the regional capital of the Northern Sri Lanka, and Kandy, the regional capital of the Central Sri Lanka and the religious capital of Sri Lanka. Among them Colombo is primarily a European creation established after colonization, whereas Jaffna and Kandy are very ancient and traditional cities. After a brief description of each selected city, the Sri Lankan experience of cities and city life will be dealt with.

4.1. City of Colombo

Colombo is primarily a post-colonial city with a rich colonial heritage which was made by the Portuguese into a trading centre when they arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505. The Dutch expanded it and used it to export spices. The British further developed it, and made it into a city and an administrative centre.

Currently, Colombo is the political and commercial capital, the largest city with most important commercial centers and a major gateway to Sri Lanka. It is the heart of Sri Lanka, with a lifestyle that is unique to the melting pot of culture, architecture, modern amenities and art. Colombo is a metropolitan city with colonial heritage which has business as its main occupation (Niriella 2012, 6). It is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and pluri-religious city. It is the most crowded city in Sri Lanka with a population of around 750,000 in the city proper. The population of Colombo is a mix of numerous ethnic groups, mainly Sinhalese, Moors and Tamils. There are also small communities of Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, Malay and Indian people as well as numerous European expatriates living in the city. Colombo living is all about bringing cultures, religions, experiences and people together in a single locus.

4.2. City of Jaffna

Jaffna is a city located on the Northern tip of Sri Lanka. Traditionally it is considered the capital of the Northern region. It was the capital of the Tamil kingdom that existed in the north of Sri Lanka for centuries before it was conquered by Europeans, and the city still has many distinctive Tamil cultural characteristics. That is why it is also called as Tamil cultural capital (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Jaffna').

The name Jaffna is an adaptation of a Tamil phrase meaning 'land of the lute.' Jaffna and the surrounding region were part of the Indian sub-

continent from the 5th century BC. Therefore, it has its longstanding socio-cultural and lingo affinity with the Southern Indian region (Indrapala 2005, 34). Still the city has a lot of Indian influence, which can be seen in the buildings, streets patterns, way of dressing and food style which is different from central and south of Sri Lanka. The autonomous Jaffna kingdom fell under Portuguese rule in 1619 and later it was captured by the Dutch in 1658. The British held Jaffna after 1795 until they relinquished the control of Sri Lanka in 1948.

Historically, residents of Jaffna city were majority Tamils, Moors (Muslims), Europeans and Eurasian Burghers. Over time, the composition changed with Tamils and Moors predominating while others being assimilated or moved away.

During colonial times, Jaffna was Sri Lanka's second largest city. The population of Jaffna, like the rest of the North and East regions, has been heavily affected by the civil war which has left more scars of war. Many of its Tamil residents migrated to other parts of the country or outside of the country due to the civil war. Jaffna is still in the post civil war situation and trying to recover from the drastic effects of war. The city's small Moor and Sinhalese population have either been forcibly expelled or fled during the civil war. As a consequence, the city's population is significantly lower than it was 30 years ago. The present population is nearly 90,000.

The popular religion of Jaffna is Saivism, a branch of Hinduism. There are also Christians and Muslims who share city's population. Farming and fishing are main occupation of the people; however, within the city there are also good number of people engaged in business and other artisan enterprises.

4.3. City of Kandy

Kandy is another major city in Sri Lanka located in the Central Province at an altitude of 487 meters above sea level and is surrounded by ranges of mountains which cross an area of tropical plantations. It is still very much a focal point of Sri Lankan culture. It was the capital of last generation of Sri Lanka's kings until it fell into the hands of British in 1815. Though there is no royalty anymore, families linked to royal family and aristocrats are still associated with high status in the city of Kandy (Peebles 2006, 209).

Kandy is both an administrative and religious city and is also the capital of the Central Province. Since it is the home of the Temple of the Tooth Relic (Sri Dalada Maligawa with the legend of the tooth relic of Buddha), one of the most sacred places of worship in the Buddhist world, it is also called the religious capital of Sri Lanka. As a way of proving this fact, throughout this holy city, a number of Buddhist temples, monuments and monasteries can be found.

Kandy is a city inhabited by the majority Sinhalese; there are sizable communities belonging to other ethnic groups, such as Tamils and Moors. The city remains an important religious centre and a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists of the Theravada School. There are also considerable number of Christians, Hindus and Muslims having their worship places in the city. The main income of the city is earned by tourism and estates where mainly tea and other spices are cultivated. The connection of caste and job is still stronger in Kandy and at events such as the Kandy Perahera which is an annual festival honoring gods and the Buddha, the various castes still perform traditional functions (John D'Oyly 1833, 212).

5. Sri Lankan Experience of Cities and City Life

A general and optimistic understanding is that the cities have contributed immensely to the growth of humankind and eventually city life was celebrated as the ideal living and as a result all the people want to enjoy it.

In Sri Lanka, urban areas typically offer greater access to educational institutions, job opportunities, modern amenities and diverse cultural experiences. Cities can provide a sense of security and convenience, with well-developed infrastructure and services. Children living in the city can get good education, because there are better schools in the cities than in the villages. When a person falls ill, there are hospitals with multiple facilities in the city to get treatment. There are large shop complexes, banks, offices, cinemas, hostels, clubs, hotels, etc., in and around the city. People in the city have better transport facilities than the villagers. Electricity, highway, communication, telecommunication, water and sewage facilities are there in the city. So, people can lead a comfortable and enjoyable life in cities (Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2018, 5).

However, those who live in the cities celebrate the village life as associated with tranquility, close-knit communities and intimately linked to nature.

On the contrary those who live in the villages crave for city life giving the reasons that the city life is safe, comfortable and provides more choices in the selection of education, jobs, food and clothing. Nevertheless, both city life and village life in Sri Lanka have advantages and disadvantages. Urban areas may face issues such as congestion, pollution, high living costs and social inequalities. Meanwhile, rural communities may grapple with limited access to resources, infrastructure deficiencies, and economic disparities. (Lodric 2009, 14) The contrasting perceptions of city life and village life are common across many cultures and countries including Sri Lanka.

6. Sri Lankan Cities and the Sri Lankan Identity

Colombo, Jaffna and Kandy are the selected cities of Sri Lanka for this study and they do really contribute to sustain the Sri Lankan identity. The unique and primary character of Sri Lankan society is pluralistic: plurality in religions, traditions, cultures, languages, mentality, etc. It has a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic population with groupings based predominantly along linguistic and religious lines. The linguistically different groupings are the Sinhalese and the Tamils; the Moors, although they speak Tamil, group themselves by their Islamic religion (Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2018, 33). Such plurality, whether accepted or tolerated, is maintained in all these cities.

In Colombo and Kandy, though the Sinhala ethnicity together with its predominant Buddhist religion and Sinhala language enjoy superiority, other minority ethnic groups with their proper religions and language have their subsistence. In Jaffna, though Tamil ethnicity together with Hindu religion and Tamil language is predominant, other ethnic groups with their religions and language do have their equal presence. Thus, these cities give emphatic evidence for Sri Lankan identity as a pluralistic state.

These cities also contribute immensely to the economic revenues of Sri Lanka. Colombo as a metropolitan, commercial and industrial city is crucial for the sustainable economy of the country. Jaffna, a city with farming and fishing as main occupation of the people, is contributing for the fiscal revenue of the country through the traditional agriculture-based economy. Kandy, as a city of tourism and estate plantation is

another great source of financial wellbeing of the country. Thus, these three cities contribute in their own way to sustain the economy of Sri Lanka.

Literacy is another feature which makes Sri Lanka a prominent country in the South Asian region. Its literacy rate in 2020 was 92.38%, a 0.13% increase from 2019 (Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2018, 36). The literacy rate of the country is sustained by these three cities in a substantial manner. All three cities have their national and international schools, and State and Private Higher Education Institutes. Thus, these three cities contribute in their own way to sustain the literacy rate of Sri Lanka.

7. Sri Lankan Cities and the Socio-Cultural Situation

Cities in Sri Lanka play a significant role in sustaining the country's social and cultural traditions. The cities are hubs of cultural diversity, bringing together people from various ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds. In cities like Colombo and Kandy, for example, one can find a blend of Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, and other communities, each contributing to the cultural diversity of Sri Lanka (Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2018, 38). These urban centers house important cultural landmarks, museums, and historical sites that serve as repositories of Sri Lankan rich heritage. Institutions like the National Museum of Colombo and historical sites, such as, the Sri Dalada Maligawa with the legend of the tooth relic of Buddha in Kandy, Navalar Cultural Centre in Jaffna are some of the centers that contribute to the preservation and promotion of traditional art, architecture, and historical narratives of the country.

The cities host a variety of cultural events and festivals throughout the year, celebrating religious, traditional, and contemporary themes. The Buddhist Vesak celebrations and festivals like the Esala Perahera in Kandy, the Navam Perahera in Colombo, the Hindu religious festivals in Jaffna and Colombo and the Christian celebrations of the Church feasts in Colombo and Jaffna provide opportunities for communities to come together, showcase their religio-cultural practices, and pass down traditions to future generations.

Further, compared to the villages, Sri Lankan cities provide multiform of entertainments to its dwellers. There are cinemas, recreation centers, and transport and communication facilities in and around the city. Thus, people in the city lead a comfortable and enjoyable life and such entertainments and comforts are not available to the village dwellers.

The cities are home to educational institutions and libraries that play a vital role in educating the public about Sri Lanka's literacy. The universities such as the University of Colombo, the University of Peradeniya in Kandy and the University of Jaffna offer courses in history, anthropology, and cultural studies to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the traditions of Sri Lanka. In this manner, the cities in Sri Lanka serve as dynamic centers of cultural vitality, where traditions are upheld, adapted, and shared among diverse communities, contributing to the country's social cohesion and cultural resilience.

At the same time, the caste system is still strongly prevalent in Sri Lanka. Though the Muslims do not have caste bias, it is still present among the Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities. The Sinhalese are the dominant ethnic group in Sri Lanka. Most of them are Buddhists and they make up about three quarters of population of Sri Lanka. Although Buddhism opposes the caste system and Buddha himself spoke out against it, the caste system still exists in Buddhist-Sinhalese-controlled Sri Lanka. The caste system among the Sinhalese has its roots in the feudal system of the past in which almost all castes came into being on the basis of their service to the king and local aristocrats (Chapin & Silva 2001, 191).

The Tamils are the largest minority in Sri Lanka. Most of them are Hindus and they have their own caste system based on the four large caste clusters, called *Varnas*. Caste is arguably more important to the Tamils than to the Sinhalese. Among the Tamils there is a division of Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils. The Indian Tamils, who are regarded as different from the Sri Lankan Tamils, are considered predominantly members of low caste who were brought by the British colonizers from Southern India to work in the estate plantation. The caste system of the Sri Lankan Tamils resembles the system of the Sinhalese, but the individual Tamil castes differ from the Sinhalese castes (Russell R. Ross & Andrea Matles Savada 1988, 10).

Within their separate caste hierarchies, Sinhalese and Tamil communities are fragmented through customs that separate higher from lower orders. Enforcement of caste system among the Sinhalese and Tamils is more powerful in the rural villages than in the cities. There is a strong pressure in villages for people to marry within their castes and abide by caste rules to keep the families and communities unified and ensure the equitable distribution of inherited resources and property. However, in a caste-based background of Sri Lanka, caste discrimination is very much less in its cities (Ekanayake & Guruge 2016, 105). People from various castes are able to live amicably without discrimination in the cities. Inter-caste marriages also are common in the cities which is strictly forbidden in the villages of Sri Lanka (Russell R. Ross & Andrea Matles Savada 1988, 77).

Traditional Sri Lankan society, both Sinhala and Tamil, is patriarchal and therefore male-dominated. Men are the breadwinners who are expected to provide food, clothing, housing and other necessities for their families. Women are responsible for cooking, raising children, and taking care of housework (Wijewardhana & Dias 2021, 134). The job of the men folk is to protect women and children and provide them with material support, and in this role, they dominate all aspects of business and public life. All ethnic groups preserve clear distinctions in the roles of the sexes.

Though the patriarchy is still prevalent in the villages, the gender biased situation caused by it is gradually getting diminished in the cities of Sri Lanka. Womenfolk experience a better level of freedom in the cities of Sri Lanka than in villages due to education and empowerment activities carried out by different Non-Governmental Organizations (Wijewardhana & Dias 2021, 138).

Sri Lankan cities have fairly liberal policies when compared to the rural villages. People in the cities enjoy freedom to express their ideas publicly, to select their field of education, to support the political party they choose, to dress as they would like, to decide on the food pattern, to opt for their religion and way of worshipping and to choose their life partner and make their families. Such liberal outlook to life is not in practice in the villages: the elders in the family or clan dictate to the younger generation what and how to speak, what to study, which political party to support, how to dress (only traditional and cultural clothing), what to eat, which religion to follow and how and when to worship, and whom to marry. The extended family system is still prevalent and endorsed in the villages as opposed to

the nuclear family system of the cities (Gunawardane 2016, 54). Thus, city life has sanctioned many facilities, freedom of choice and many other comforts to its dwellers which are not enjoyed in the village life.

8. Evils of the Cities and City Life

While cities in Sri Lanka offer numerous opportunities and advantages, they also face several challenges and issues that can negatively impact the quality of life for their residents. Though cities do have many facilities, they also have their woes. The urban areas, particularly cities like Colombo and Kandy, often suffer from overcrowding and congestion. High population density leads to traffic congestion, long commuting times, and overcrowded public services are making daily life stressful for many residents.

Air and noise pollution are significant problems in the Sri Lankan cities. The high volume of vehicles, industrial activities, and inadequate waste management contribute to poor air quality, which can have adverse health effects. Noise pollution from traffic, construction, and other urban activities affects the wellbeing of the residents and leads to environmental degradation as well. The cost of living in cities is generally higher than in rural areas of Sri Lanka. Housing, food, transportation, and other essentials tend to be more expensive, which can strain household budgets, especially for the low and middle class families.

The Sri Lankan cities often exhibit a stark contrast of class distinction. For example, some areas of the Colombo city are considered very rich and high-class and the residents enjoy a high standard of living while many of the suburbs are slums and informal settlements with limited access to basic services like clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. This inequality often creates social tension and sometimes leads to crime also. That is why the urban areas in Sri Lanka experience considerable rates of crime, including theft, burglary, and drug-related offenses. The anonymity of city life can sometimes contribute to a sense of insecurity among residents. Thus, the city life reduces the human being as a material thing and a commodity - not as a human person (Kelegama 2013, APB/Sri Lanka). Anxiety, depression, and stress are often associated with urban living. These are caused by the high work demands, noise, unemployment and underemployment, pollution, and social isolation.

The selected cities for this study are renowned for their predisposition to be religious and spiritual centers. The city of Kandy is the centre of Buddhism where the sacred tooth relic of Lord Buddha is kept and the city is filled with many Buddhist spiritual centers and places of worship. Similarly, the city of Jaffna is the center of Saivism where every nook and corner there are temples and spiritual centers. The city of Colombo which is the capital of Sri Lanka has the high quarters of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam which are the major religions of the world. However, these cities are not free from the evils of city life such as consumerism, family disorganization, domestic violence, suicide and underworld affairs which include the high use and trafficking of drugs and alcohol, mercenary murders, rapes, sexual abuse of children, prostitution, fundamentalism and sectarian communalism (Enrique Pantoja 2000, 45). In the city of Colombo, there was an attack on the Christian churches on the Easter Sunday of 2019, killing more than 300 people, injuring thousands and destroying many Christian churches and centers. It was conducted by the fanatic and fundamentalist Muslim group within the city limits (Jean Gough, 2019, UNICEF/Sri Lanka). Such fanatic fundamentalism is a common evil of the city life where the profound Asian spiritual tradition is taken for granted in the commercial impulse to emit poisonous 'spirits' of fanaticism and sectarianism (Keerthisiri Fernando 2017, 18).

In spite of the positive and progressive aspects that the cities provide for humanity, they are not free from other grave wretchedness like marketisation of life, cut-throat competitions, under-cover crimes, trafficking especially on women and children, child labour, ethnic discrimination, destruction of eco system, third-grade tourism, etc. These woes found in the cities reverse the honoured state of human civilization (Enrique Pantoja 2000, 47). This is the epochal crisis of the contemporary world. Though the cities empower life with many facilities, the miseries the cities have brought to humanity have to be addressed seriously.

While city life in Sri Lanka offers many benefits, these challenges highlight the need for comprehensive urban planning, sustainable development practices, and social policies aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of urbanization. Addressing these issues is crucial to improving the quality of life for all city dwellers.

9. What can Christianity Learn from the Sri Lankan Urbanity?

Sri Lanka is a country enriched with the spiritual wellsprings of Asia and its cities are notable for their multicultural and multi-religious fabric, accommodating the spiritual traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Such a situation leads to appreciate the pluralistic nature of the country, to interact harmoniously with the people of other religious, ethnic, lingual and cultural denominations and to strive towards justice, peace and the development of the country (Kelegama 2013, APB/Sri Lanka). This environment of religious coexistence offers a valuable model of harmonious living that can be beneficial for addressing contemporary urban challenges. It is an opportunity also for Christian leaders to engage in meaningful interreligious dialogues and contribute to share the rich faith traditions with others. The cities in Sri Lanka often witness interfaith dialogues and community events that promote mutual understanding and respect among different religious groups (UN-Habitat Sri Lanka 2018). Christian communities can actively participate to foster these dialogues, helping to build bridges between the ethnic groups which can lead to collaborative efforts in addressing social issues such as poverty, inequality, and violence.

The accommodative attitude towards other religions and their spiritual resources which is visible in the Sri Lankan cities can provide insights into addressing modern urban challenges such as mental health issues, family breakdowns, and contribute to the multicultural celebrations, environmental stewardship and promoting peace and reconciliation. It can also draw on the accommodative practices of other religions to advocate for forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace-building efforts in urban communities which are considered as urgent needs of the country in its post civil war situation (UN-Habitat Sri Lanka 2018). In this way, Christianity can learn from the Sri Lankan urbanity to contextualize its existence in order to communicate its values more harmoniously and effectively to respond to the diverse challenges of contemporary city life. This approach not only enriches the Christian community but also makes it an agent of hope for the urban population.

10. What Hope can Christianity Mediate to the Sri Lankan Cities?

At present, Buddhism is considered the proper religion of the Sinhalese and Hinduism that of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Muslims are also identified as Tamils; however, they group themselves by their Islamic religious identity. The Sinhalese follow either Buddhism or Christianity while the Tamils are either Hindus or Christians. Christianity is followed by both the Sinhalese and Tamils. Therefore, Christianity plays a bridging and mediator role between the two major ethnic groups as it has its members from both ethnic groups (Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2018, 33). This is an advantageous position for Christianity in Sri Lanka. The people of all faiths of the country look at it with the hope as the promoter and guarantor of peace, harmony and wellbeing (Kelegama 2013, APB/Sri Lanka). Thus, there is an immediate and outward cry extended to Christianity as a world religion with its longstanding traditions of spiritual richness to permeate the Sri Lankan cities with Christian values that leads to a hope of future. Christianity can mediate significant hope to the cities of Sri Lanka by addressing various social, economic, and spiritual needs through its teachings, community services, and collaborative efforts.

The work of the Christian organizations in Sri Lanka, like Caritas - Sri Lanka, illustrates the impact of Christian charity in addressing social issues which also provides educational opportunities and vocational training in the cities to empower individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to improve their socio-economic status (UN-Habitat Sri Lanka 2018).

Given Sri Lanka's history of ethnic and religious conflict, Christianity can play a pivotal role in promoting peace and reconciliation. By advocating for forgiveness, understanding, and non-violence, Christian leaders can help bridge the divisions between different communities and foster a culture of peace (UN-Habitat Sri Lanka 2018). Currently, Christianity in terms of its faith, beliefs and practices, is trying to permeate the main cities of Sri Lanka with Christian values by some visible practices: the Christian churches or chapels established in the cities provide opportunities for personal prayers and meditation for those in the city or those who visit the city for various purposes. They also serve as centers of spiritual guidance to provide individuals with a sense of purpose, hope,

and moral direction. This is an immediate and outward activity that Christianity is engaged with in order to permeate the Christian hope in the Sri Lankan cities at least in a minimal way to help the individuals navigate the challenges and perilous state of urban life and find meaning amidst the hustle and bustle.

Christian churches in urban communities also engage in environmental conservation efforts. They are involved in taking initiatives to promote the human role on the stewardship of the earth by promoting various programmes on sustainable living practices. The role of faith-based organizations in promoting environmental sustainability is well-documented in various studies (UN-Habitat Sri Lanka 2018). By these activities, Christianity can offer hope and practical solutions to many of the challenges faced by urban populations in Sri Lanka, contributing to a more compassionate, just, and sustainable urban environment.

Conclusion

The challenge posed before Christianity in Sri Lanka today is how it can mediate hope to the people to navigate the negative effects of urbanity. It has to permeate the cities with Christian values in order to protect human dignity and integrity.

The New Testament narration of Jesus' meeting with two persons in the city of Jericho could be considered a suitable conclusion for this study. First, Jesus met the blind Bartimaeus and restored his vision (Mk. 10:46-52); next, Jesus asked Zacchaeus to climb down from the tree and expressed his desire to stay with him (Lk. 19:1-10). These two meetings which took place in the great city of Jericho, symbolically extends an invitation to the cities to restore their vision and to climb down from their bogus pomp and pageantry. The cities of Sri Lanka are in need of a new vision and mission to face the new normal life situation.

The theology of public life promoted by 'Public Theology' proposes ways and means to recover from this epochal crisis created by the urbanity. Public theology is a dimension of all religion and theology that reflects upon the sphere of public life. It has been stimulating discourse and exchange on the public presence of Christianity. The ruthless negative effects of cities and city life are, therefore, within the prime concern of public theology and it has to be looked at from the background of the value system inculcated by Christianity.

The concern prompted by theologizing of the public life is an urgency to restore faith in a transcendental creator God by moving away from the material and consumerist ways of life of the cities because public theology is at the crossroads of Godhead and humanity. Theologizing the daily and ordinary human affairs, struggles and aspirations has to be based on the discernment of God's will and human expectations. Further, reinstating individual dignity and rights, promoting integral life situations in the urban contexts where humans and nature could mutually contribute for an eco-friendly life, and creating awareness about the values of indigenous culture in the urban contexts to preserve them from destruction under the influx of globalization are some other needs of the hour. In this purview, Sri Lankan cities and city life are studied in the terrains of public theology to permeate them with the Christian hope.

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