

IS SAMARTHA'S CONCEPT RELEVANT TO THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IN NORTH AMERICA?

What should be the Christian approach to people of other faiths? This question has come to the forefront in North America, particularly after September 11, 2001. However, this question has appeared in many ecumenical circles in the last nine decades.

One of the people who has contributed much in these discussions is the late Rev. Dr. Stanley J. Samartha. Born in a Christian family, Samartha wrote, "My father was a pastor and mother was a primary school teacher . . . My close friends in the primary school in the little village of Perdur were two Hindus and two Muslims-one the son of a cobbler who supplied leather pouches for our catapults free of charge. I have kept in touch with them over the years, visiting the village during my travels to India from Geneva."¹ Later through his involvement in the Student Christian Movement, he was exposed to other Christian traditions. With the advantage of having been raised in a Christian family and with an exposure to people of other faiths and other Christian traditions in his formative years, Samartha got his theological education both in the east and the west, studying under theologians such as Devanandan, Tillich and Barth. It was no surprise, therefore, when Samartha gave a clarion call to the churches in India, nearly forty years ago, by asking the important question, "What does it mean today to affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior?"² Samartha continued to wrestle with this question throughout his career as a pastor, teacher, and theologian, until his death in 2001.

Samartha's contribution in this area can be addressed in three segments³ by classifying them as follows:

Pre-WCC days of Samartha
WCC days of Samartha
Post-WCC days of Samartha

Those who are very familiar with the works of Samartha can easily agree with Professor Mudler who said, "I have the impression that after his return to India in 1980 Samartha felt freer to develop his ideas about what might be called a pluralistic model of theology."⁴

¹ Stanley J. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in Pluralistic World* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), pp.3-4.

²S. J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Inter-religious Dialogue Series), No.6 (Madras: CLS, 1974), p.5.

³ The writer has already proposed these three stages in his unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, *Stanley J. Samartha's Contribution to the Interfaith Dialogue*, submitted to the Drew University, Madison, NJ, 1987.

⁴ Dick Mulder, "Dr. S. Samartha's Time at the World Council of Churches," *Current Dialogue*, Issue 38, (December 2001), (found on World Council of Churches website).

As one of his former students and colleagues, Dr. Ariarajah has aptly said, Samartha was an “English gentleman” with an unmistakable Indian heart and spirit!⁵ What one can infer from these statements is that Samartha was indeed writing from his heart and mind during his pre- and post-WCC days. Additionally, while he was in the WCC he showed his respect for all the institutions and the confessional families of the WCC by keeping his theological feelings and thinking under control to a certain extent in order to provide a common voice for the churches within the WCC family. This is evident in his book *Between the Cultures*. Samartha would not have said some of the things he said in this book while he was on the staff of WCC. So in all fairness to Samartha, it is important to look at his works in these three stages.

In his pre-WCC days, Samartha was more Christocentric than Theocentric in his ideas and articulation of them. During this period, one might say, he voiced a call for a strong Christology in one’s conversations with people of other faiths. Samartha, advocated vigorously that the centrality of Jesus Christ should be upheld and affirmed, but at the same time encouraged Christians to take into consideration the writings of Hindu philosophers and others about Christ in developing a Christology. Advancing his arguments for this kind of development of Christology, Samartha gave a clarion call to Christians to enter into dialogue with Hindus by asking about the Christian understanding of incarnation and the Hindu understanding of *avatar*.

During this period, Samartha, was very clear in saying that the credibility of Jesus as Savior and the demonstration of the salvation offered by Jesus should be clearly demonstrated in the witness of the Church. However, he also challenged Christians to realize that people like Radhakrishnan and Raja Ram Mohan Roy have demonstrated the impact of the person and work of Christ in their thinking and writings. Samartha claimed that through the works of these two and others, one can see that Christ is already present in Hindu religion and thought. Perhaps Samartha was ahead of his time in claiming that Christians should not be in competition with Hindus in replacing Hindu deficiency with Christian uniqueness, but should look out for the possibilities of working with Hindus in seeking together the fullness of Christ and His work. Here Samartha challenged the Christian Church to examine the terminologies used by others such as Gandhi: *Ramarajya*, (kingdom of truth, righteousness, harmony and love) and Aurobindo: *loka sangraha*, (the gathering of the world). He suggested the possibility of Christians working with Hindus in fulfilling these dreams and visions as the children of God. Again Samartha was very clear in saying that the centrality of Jesus Christ should not be ignored or compromised in any dialogue. Perhaps one of the innovative contributions of Samartha was to point out that Hinduism is a very individualistic religion and that belonging to it is not one’s choice but an inheritance through birth. Even though he did not say it, here Samartha was alluding to the fact that it is a possible for a Hindu to be a follower of Jesus Christ without giving up his or her own religion.

⁵S. Wesley Ariarajah, “Some Glimpses into the Theology of Dr Stanley Samartha, *Current Dialogue*, Issue 38, (December 2001), (found in World Council of churches website).

During his WCC days, Samartha articulated his understanding of dialogue in a much better way by saying that dialogue should neither lead to syncretism nor be used as a tool for Christian mission. Additionally, he argued that dialogue should lead people of other faiths to come together in worship or in addressing the concerns and needs of the society. Furthermore, it was in this period that Samartha identified the theological issues involved in dialogue such as one's understanding of the Holy Spirit, Mission and the Kingdom of God.

Claiming courageously that the Spirit of God is not the "...monopolistic possession of the Judeo-Christian tradition,"⁶ Samartha argued that one can easily identify the works of the Holy Spirit outside the walls of the Christian Church. He also asked his fellow Christians to think of the possibilities of the work of the Holy Spirit in the struggles of Gandhi and Fidel Castro. Even though Samartha did not use the term "prevenient grace," he was very much at home with John Wesley's understanding of the concept. Perhaps one of the reasons for Samartha's understanding of this may have been the influence of the work of Stanley Jones who was a missionary in India for a long time and who was also very much at home with people of other faiths. One may recall that Samartha's teacher, Paul Devanandan, was also exposed to the thoughts of Stanley Jones.

Samartha's understanding of Mission is also closely tied to his understanding of the Holy Spirit. In explaining his understanding of Mission, Samartha argued that while carrying out the mission of God one must recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in the renewal movements of other religions without losing his or her commitment to Jesus Christ. Samartha said, "God's mission cannot be limited by temporal factors, and while the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit cannot be bound by visible communal walls, Christian mission has a beginning in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, in His life, death, resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit."⁷ It is in developing his understanding of Mission that Samartha calls for replacing the word "mission" with "witness." It is Samartha's conviction that using this word would help Christians not only claim the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their ministry but also help them bring the message of hope to people struggling with various issues and situations.

At this juncture, Samartha also made an attempt to move from his understanding of "Christocentric theology" to "Theocentric theology." Even though he did not develop it fully during his WCC Days, he started sowing the seeds on this thought by claiming that the teaching of Christ in the Sermon of the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, and His parables, all point to the fact that Christ's purpose was to extend the Kingdom of God and to extend His own Kingdom. Samartha argued, "To say that conversion is 'conversion to God' and not 'change of community' makes little sense in a situation where the two are identified and where it is not easy

⁶S. J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Interreligious Relationships* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), p.163.

⁷ Ibid, p.79.

to be sure that the latter is preceded by the former.”⁸

Even though Samartha’s writings were powerful during his post-WCC days, he also clearly delineated himself from “Christocentric theology” to “theocentric theology” during this period. Two things might have contributed to this shift. First, as others have also indicated, during his WCC days, Samartha had the moral responsibility of keeping his thinking in line with the theological and ecclesiological thinking of the WCC. Second, during this period, the dynamics of his ministry situation had been completely changed. Samartha writes, “On our return to Bangalore we settled in a multi-religious neighborhood, which helped me greatly to enter into the experience of dialogue-in-community about which I had talked and written during my ecumenical years. Within a radius of less than ten kilometers there are several churches, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, temples, mosques and *gurdwaras*. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference’s well-known National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Center (NBCLC), founded by the late Fr. Amalorpavadass, is within walking distance.”⁹

Perhaps during this period, Samartha started practicing this theology at the grass root level. He lifted up the fact that in a multi-religious setting such as India, when negative statements are made by one religion against the other, it leads to a politicization of religions. He claimed that the politicization of religions has a tendency to tear the fabric of society. Dialogue will help to bring harmony and peace among religions and also enable people to establish harmony with one another in addressing human needs. Such dialogue should be carried out without any fear of converting one another to each other’s faith. In order to do this effectively, Samartha saw the need for a new definition of evangelism, “... retelling of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, sharing with people the good tidings about him with joy and humility.”¹⁰

Calling for a better understanding of evangelism and also claiming that Mission is wider than Evangelism, Samartha said that in countries such as India, churches should see that Christians make an attempt to transform the society by using “...images of light, salt and leaven, of the seed growing by itself in secret...”¹¹

⁸ Ibid, p.134.

⁹ Stanley J. Samartha, *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), p. 134.

¹⁰S. J. Samartha, *Courage for Witness*, Sermon preached on Aug. 4, 1985, at the United Theological College. Bangalore, India, p.1.

¹¹ Ibid, p.2.

Perhaps because of this type of broader understanding of Evangelism, Samartha set the stage for a revision of Christology in India by claiming, “Granting that the roots of all Christologies go back to Jesus Christ, the question must be asked: Who is this Jesus Christ? How and what do we know of Him? Where do we encounter him today? What differences does faith in God through Christ make to our knowledge of God, our understanding of the human, and to our relationship to nature? In particular, what difference does it make to our relationship to neighbors of other faiths in an interdependent world? While it is obviously impossible to give a systematic and comprehensive answer to such questions, a beginning has to be made to indicate the direction which a revised Christology should take in a religiously plural world.¹² In answering these questions, Samartha challenged his readers to be fully committed to Christ and to realize that only theocentric theology will help us to explore the possibilities of recognizing Christ in revelations outside the church.

So the question before us is: Is Samartha’s concept relevant to the Christian Mission in North America? Does it fit in with the framework of Wesley’s theology, particularly in relation to Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World? Even though Wesley was not placed in context like Samartha in relation to people of other faiths, Samartha certainly was right on track with Wesley, particularly during his Pre-WCC and WCC days. Wesley’s sermon on Catholic Spirit would certainly challenge readers to love their neighbors as themselves and also to join others in mission where hearts and minds are alike. Therefore, as Samartha suggested, if Christian churches would join people of other faiths in addressing human needs and in bringing a message of hope to human struggles, one would certainly see the Catholic Spirit at work. Wesley would not have any problem in accepting Samartha’s understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit among the people of other faiths.

Would Samartha’s approach work in North America, particularly as the churches face increasing numbers of people from other faiths moving into their neighborhoods and living among them? Samartha’s idea of “witnessology,” like leaven and salt, may work well in North America. Perhaps this could be termed “silent evangelism.” This type of evangelism has proven to be very successful, at least for Mother Teresa. Even though Mother Teresa did not preach to anyone, many came to accept Christ because of her strong Christian witness. Evangelism is very powerful when the story of Christ is shared with joy and humility as Samartha indicated.

Although questions exist concerning the productivity of the Theocentric theology as Samartha interprets it, perhaps it is here that Methodists need to conduct a litmus test of this concept by using the Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason.

¹²S. J. Samartha. *One Christ-Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1991, pp. 112-113.