

THE FIRST WORLD HINDU CONFERENCE

In the last issue of INTER-RELIGIO it was reported that Thomas Immoos had attended the First World Hindu Conference as the sole Christian representative. Despite the intention of the organizers to help prevent a breakup of the Tamil and Singalese States, political sentiments proved too strong as the following report makes clear. Since the time of that meeting, tensions have heightened. A member of President Junius Jayewardene's United National Party was assassinated, and numbers of Catholic clergy have been detained on suspicion of aiding the separatist movement.

From April 21 to April 25 of this year, the First World Hindu Conference was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, under official government sponsorship. (A similar conference has been held previously in Madras, back in 1977, with the initiative coming from the private sector.) What should be noted in particular here is that it was the Ministry for Hindu and Tamil Affairs within the Sri Lanka government that was behind the organization of the event. The opening ceremony took place, in the presence of President Junius Jayewardene and the diplomatic corps, in the Bandaranaike Memorial Hall, a structure fully equipped with all the conveniences of a modern convention center which the Peoples Republic of China had donated and constructed.

From the outset it was clear that the entire event was heavy laden with national political significance. The Tamils comprise a minority of some 5 million of the island's total population of 15 million. They have been settled in the regions to the north and east for over 2,000 years. In the course of their long history they established great kingdoms whose influence spread all the way into the southern regions. The English colonial masters, as soon as they learned that the Singalese were not well suited to work in their tea gardens, brought up hundreds of thousands of Tamils from southern India. Under foreign domination, the Tamils were the favored ones.

Then came independence. After an initial period in which those who spoke English were in control of the nation, and they were made up in large part of Christian intellectuals who had come into contact with Westminster democracy during their experiences in colonial service, a coalition of Buddhist Singalese came into power. Singalese was adopted as a national language, and the minority groups (in addition to some 5 million Hindu Tamils, there were about 900,000 Christians and the same number again of Muslims) were discriminated against.

For the Christians this was particularly trying. Conditions were made so difficult for them that they could no longer continue their schools, which were first-rate, so that most of them came to be taken over by the state, complete with all the physical facilities. Many, especially Protest-

ant Christians, simply left the country. Today, however, the Tamils have taken up the cause of founding their own state with ever increasing enthusiasm, their leaders having despaired of securing them their rightful place in the present discriminatory government structures. In the north a civil war has been waging for several years now—the state leading troops made up of Singalese and Malay Muslims into the field against the Tamil terrorists. Twelve representatives of the Tamil party form a political opposition to the current regime.

In the last round of elections, President Jayewardene succeeded in roundly defeating Mrs. Bandaranaike, who had compromised her position through mismanagement, corruption, and strong leftist tendencies. Of course he has it in mind to win the coming elections, and thereby seeks to win over the Tamils to his side and to avert breakouts of confrontation with his present government. To this end the broadening of the Ministry for Rural Reconstruction to include the Tamil question and the issue of Hindu religion, as also the calling of this conference, were viewed as positive steps. The conference was originally slated to take place already in January but then had to be postponed; according to the rumors floating about, there had been a group of pilgrims from India murdered in January.

The conference was attended by some 1,000 people. Aside from the Indians, there was a strong contingency present from Nepal, the only country in which Hinduism is recognized as a state religion, representatives from Bali and East Africa, as well as academics from western countries working in Indology and religious studies.

From the first, the proceedings were charged with high tension. For the Tamils in Sri Lanka, it was a charismatic event. A minority suffering from constant discrimination suddenly found itself recognized by government leadership and brought to the attention of the world. In religious ceremonies conducted in the conference hall, in temples, and in schools, as well as in the actual lectures themselves, they strove for three days to make their religious culture felt. The chairman of the conference, K. Lakshmana Jyer, complained of a certain deficiency in the overall level of the talks, but it soon became clear that it was less a matter of scholarship, and more one of giving witness and displaying devotion to a cause. There were, of course, exceptions. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, the greatest living master of the southern Indian art of the dance, singlehandedly took on a dance program for the first day, and showed herself, in a discussion of the relations between temple and dance, to be a first-class scholar highly knowledgeable in the sources and history of her art.

Over a period of three days presentations were made alternatively in English and Tamil, with demonstrations and exhibits of various sorts. The closing ceremony was presided over by the Prime Minister, Mr. R. Premadasa. One felt it odd already from the opening that while the chairman of the Buddhist Society—a demonstration of the strongest internal political power represented at the conference—and the head of the Muslims took the floor to speak, no Christian had been invited to say a few words.

Later the foreign participants were taken in several groups to visit the most important archaeological and religious sites of the splendid island country, where it is said Adam and Eve first came to make their home after having been expelled from the Garden of Paradise.

I found the rich tradition of the song striking. In the bus a father with his son was able to recite for hours on end long religious hymns. In a temple in the mountain district, where the tea gardens are to be found, women sang intermittently with a male leader melodious and wonderful rhythmic songs in praise of Shiva. One felt as if one had been transported back to the birth of the Greek tragedies from the Dorian chorus.

The conference showed at the same time what a complicated picture Hinduism is overall. The Vishnu venerator from the north and the worshipers of Shiva from the south stood in sharpest contrast to one another. In the north the consciousness of the existence of a God had developed from out of profoundly penetrating philosophical deliberations, and those who share that orientation looked full scornfully at the 'idol-worshipers" from the south. In addition there was no end to the Homeric quarrels that broke out. The undertow of such opposition was hard to detect for the outsider, so that it was never clear on the basis of what criteria the participants and their topics had been selected. (I was obviously the only Christian there. My presentation dealt with Hindu themes in Japanese drama, focusing on Noh as psychodrama.) At the conclusion of the proceedings, the Sri Lanka government announced the foundation of a Center for the Study of Hinduism, which resulted in another tumultuous outburst. The delegations ought to have been consulted in advance, and the mood of unwillingness to increase dependence on the state (which already comes into the picture because of the discrimination suffered by the Tamils) taken into account. One could feel the political background to it all. It was further noticeable that the Hindus were unhappy that their religion had not been raised to a national religion in its homeland (which would immediately lead to the breakup of the Indian Union) .One could also hear reports that the Tamils of southern India were eager to form their own nation.

The conference not only brought to the fore the problems of one religious tradition and its particular concrete context, but also gave participants a sense of its practical wisdom and religious experience.

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[This report has been translated from the German original, slated to appear in a future number of the Zeitschrift fur Missions- wissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft.]

Errata: A number of minor errors crept into the general report published in the last issue of *INTER-RELIGIO* and we are grateful to those who took the trouble to point them out. They have all been corrected for a reprinting of the article in a future issue of the East Asian Pastoral Review