

# 'Building an Alternative World: Affirming the Dignity of Children'

Multi-faith perspectives - shared at a World Social Forum Seminar

Mumbai, India, January 2004

## Speakers

Eunice Santana - Puerto Rico

Farid Esack - South Africa

Kalayanee Phonparkobsin - Thailand

Swami Agnivesh - India

Mohinder Singh - India

## Moderator

Mathews George Chunakara (WCC) - India



World Council of Churches  
Diakonia and Solidarity Team

## INTRODUCTION

As part of the ecumenical contribution to the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January 2004, the World Council of Churches' Diakonia and Solidarity Team facilitated a seminar on the topic *'Building an Alternative World: Affirming the Dignity of Children'*.

The main objective of the seminar was to provide space for ***multi-faith reflection*** on how to affirm the dignity of children by seeking for alternatives to the world of globalisation, where globalisation is understood in the

context of its negative impact upon the lives of children and seen as an underlying factor to many of the obstacles facing children in our world today, such as

- child labour,
- child trafficking,
- sexual exploitation,
- inadequate social systems,
- and family disintegration, etc.

At the seminar, five speakers from five different faiths were asked to reflect, with reference to their



World Council of Churches  
Diakonia and Solidarity Team

experiences and faith context, upon the following two questions:

*1. In the context of globalisation, what are the alternative methods and approaches for building a world which upholds children's dignity?*

*2. What can faith movements do to build this alternative world where the dignity of children is affirmed?*

The speakers' reflections upon these two questions were followed by an engaging and animated time of interaction and discussion between the speakers and those attending the seminar, who numbered around 100.

*We hope that this short booklet highlighting the multi-faith perspectives which were shared at this seminar will be useful and meaningful for all working in solidarity with children and striving for an alternative and life affirming world.*

*- WCC Asia Desk*



World Council of Churches  
Diakonia and Solidarity Team



## A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

*-Eunice Santana*

Eunice Santana began by stating that all religions affirm the dignity of children and she commending this initiative for dialogue. *"In light of the plight of children and their invisibility it is essential for us to come together and seek ways of collaborating to uphold their dignity as well as to listen to their voices and see their faces."*

She mentioned that through the WCC she has participated in various activities with children in which they themselves have told their stories, have called for direct participation and have also exhibited organisational skills way beyond the

expectations of the adults. Through these experiences many adults have come to appreciate children's understanding of their own lives, their needs, their self-esteem and their aspirations. WCC also made it possible for representatives from the sector of working children to be present and to speak for themselves at an important meeting of the International Labour Organisation. Providing opportunities for the participation of children is an essential component in affirming their dignity.

Eunice provided some statistics concerning the plight of children world-wide where many are victims of brutal violence, discrimination and human rights violations, and stressed the fact that in countries in

which the majority of the population profess the Christian faith these situations, which are an affront to God and in essence negate many of the principles which Christians claim to believe, persist. The cardinal principles of Christianity affirm that children should be treated with dignity as all humans are made in the image of God. Furthermore, justice, equality, inclusion, sharing, love, appreciation for diversity, community building and respect are essential elements for peaceful and dignifying human co-existence. *'It is essential to engage in dialogue first with my own religion'*, she confessed.

She provided examples from the biblical context as illustrations of how the dignity

of children is affirmed. She cited the simple and obvious fact, *"one which ought to have a greater impact on the Christian world and the way children are treated"*: the fact that the Emmanuel, Jesus himself, came into the world as a child, a vulnerable defenceless baby. Furthermore, she made reference to Jesus' interaction with children and statements made by him regarding children. Among these was reference to the text in which Jesus welcomes the children to him and the one in which he calls his disciples to emulate children. *"Adults need to become like children,"* she suggested. At the same time, she stressed the fact that children need to be accepted and treated as such -children- and not as immature or unfinished adults.

Eunice affirmed that children wish to be included and wish that their contributions be acknowledged and appreciated. They do not want to be viewed only as victims even under very difficult circumstances, and we, as adults, should listen to such wishes and respect their concerns.

She recommended that in continuation of this dialogue, we should consider inviting children from different religions to participate. *"It is imperative that we work with our own constituencies, building upon what our own religions provide, and that we share and work together more earnestly in the search for alternatives from a broader, more inclusive, universal perspective"*, she concluded.

## A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

- *Farid Esack*

Farid Esack began by reflecting on the common reaction of disengaged, yet emotionally charged, pity when coming into contact with people on the margins of society. He illustrated this with an example from his own personal experience of teaching a disabled boy in South Africa. He found that he had had to reassess his initial reaction of dismayed angst about how to go about teaching this child. Over a period of time however they were able to work together to find ways to facilitate the boy's learning and their relationship became a deep, natural and equal one. Farid pointed out that such reactions to people from

marginalised groups, such as women and children, are commonplace and often manifest themselves as a form of pity or 'feeling sorry' for them, tinged with an uncertainty about what to do.

As women's and children's issues are often tied together, the 'infantalisation' of women and children's issues is frequent. Rather than talking of children's or women's rights, the issues facing women and children are viewed with a patronising, and, albeit often inadvertently, oppressive sympathy.

The discourse of religious communities often takes such lines, where words of generosity or charity towards women and children become cold and which, in effect,



deny the rights of such people. An emphasis on powerlessness does nothing to restore power but rather continues to systematically rob the powerless women and children of their rightful power.

Farid Esack commented that the link between this trend of thinking and that of globalisation, another type of systematic marginalisation, was rarely made. Discourse of dignity, as well as a critique of globalisation, should be based upon the core value of justice.

Farid felt that there was no difference between the actual roles that various religions should play in this pursuit for justice., despite the fact that motivations

may be inspired by different sources, such as by Jesus or Mohammed. He underlined the price that religions must pay for not having done, and not doing, enough to work for justice. He spoke of the obsession that all religions seemed to have with power and, using the example of Mohammed who, the child of a single mother and brought up by his grandfather, was born into the world completely vulnerable, urged for the need of religions to embrace vulnerability. It is only through vulnerability that one can discover humanity, a concept which is completely opposite to the discourse of globalisation. In seeking to affirm the dignity of children, religions need to develop a theology which fully embraces children and the vulnerability of children.

## A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

- *Kalayanee Phonparkobsin*

Ms. Kalayanee Phonparkobsin was presenting a paper on behalf of **Asst. Prof. Sarintip Satheerasilapin** from Mahidol University, Thailand.

She began by describing both the positive and negative impacts of globalisation and went on to link this with the situation of children in the world today where some children have the opportunity to fulfil their potential physically, intellectually, and spiritually, but many others do not have such opportunities and are marginalised, exploited and abused.

She wondered however whether the lives of these 'privileged' children, with access to education, play, modern technology and reachable dreams, could all really be considered as 'good lives'? To illustrate this, she shared that the Buddhist temple used to be the centre of Thai life, including education, but that modernisation has shifted its locus to the periphery. Nowadays however, state education is facing severe criticism for its failure to develop children as humans, and for its promotion of superficial and consumerist attitudes among students, both of which contribute to social problems such as student prostitution, and the formation of teen gangs for criminal purposes like kidnap, rape and robbery.

She spoke of the belief that all children have dignity because they have the 'Buddha Nature'; the potential to free their mind from defilement—to be spiritually developed. She explained that the Buddhist idea of *Kalyanamittata* as meant 'people or social environments which encourage learning and develop communication and relations with people through goodwill'. Parents, teachers, and monks, for example, are all considered *Kalyanamittata*.

Many monks have initiated the re-introduction of such religious doctrines and practices into Thai life, offering training programs which focus on the issues such as Sila (moral conduct); Samadhi (concentration); and Panna (Wisdom).

These monks have had the idea of creating 'virtual communities', groups of people with a social bond but without the same geographical setting. Participants usually comprise of three groups: temple, family, and school. A monk is the leader; children or students the beneficiary; parents and teachers the benefactor.

Because such innovative ideas are not easily accepted, the support of the community is vital. Kalayanee gave the example of Wat Panyanantaram temple, where the abbot does not hold festivals or funerals because he wants to use the temple's area mainly for educational, not ritual, purposes. The drawback is that, without such rituals and

festivals, he has found it difficult to gain support from the surrounding communities.

Prof. Sarintip Satheerasilapin's paper offered the idea of the building of such virtual communities as an alternative approach to globalisation. Virtual communities are not about reinvention, as they have already been built voluntarily and effectively through the Buddhist Teachings on *Kalyanamittata*. The first component of the auroras of a good life or the dawn of education can guarantee children's good lives. 'Thus, having good lives can lead children to self-actualisation, knowing themselves, and they can live accordingly to the dignity that is their own,' she concluded.

## A HINDU PERSPECTIVE

- *Swami Agnivesh*

Swami Agnivesh brought attention to the fact that children have no organised voice in society and, as they also do not have voting power, they are all too often ignored by governments and leaders of society. He spoke of the situation of child labourers and of violence perpetrated against children as some of the few examples of governments and leaders not doing enough for children. He highlighted the lack of access to basic education or India's children and cited that 80-100 million children in India did not go to school. He called this economic terrorism which, he added, was far worse than political terrorism.

However, he emphasised that religious leaders also had no moral right to stand up and say that they were doing any better, as most action was too little and often taken in spite of religion rather than because of it. He gave the illustration of Hindu priests offering milk to gods when children do not have any milk to drink. He mentioned that for each of the 500,000 villages in India, there were twelve Swamis and questioned what these Swamis are doing for children. He doubted in fact whether any religion is really practising their true religion and looking out for the children of the world - *'the little gods of the world'*.

Swamiji explained that he could not expect political leaders to help children when

religious leaders have failed and continue to fail time and time again. In fact, it is often religions which, through their dogmas and theologies, subjugate people such as women, children and dalits.

He called for a resolve amongst people of faith to be committed instead to love and truth, compassion and justice. *'It is these things which are the essence of God,'* he said. People do not need structures and dogmas to worship God. God can be found in us and in our actions based on the search for justice. He called for religions to fulfil their mandate to serve the poor and needy and to do much, much more for the plight of children.

## A SIKH PERSPECTIVE

- *Mohinder Singh*

Mohinder Singh pointed out that whatever the economic or communal carnage that occurs in a society, it is always the women and children who are the most affected.

He urged faith communities to work together to uphold the dignity of children through targeting the root causes of such economic and communal carnage, and if carnage did occur to work together to ensure that the rights of women and children are protected.

## FLOOR DISCUSSION

During the general discussion, there was further reflection on the issue of vulnerability. Farid Esack said that in order to empower the vulnerable, someone has to lose some power. For example, for women to be empowered, men must give up some of their power. However, one must be careful not to put too much emphasis on the 'disthrowing' of others. Religions need to analyse why they have so much power, so much money. They need to be ready to give up this power, to redistribute this power, not through means of 'charity' which does not achieve much in the long run, but rather through the revision of social structures.

Eunice Santana spoke of how religions must stop looking through the eyes of the powerful but need a different way of viewing powerlessness. Powerlessness should not be seen as a lack of power, rather it is a different logic. When there is focus on unity, there is power and then this 'power of the powerless' can be channelled to achieve change.

WCC programme executive for Latin America and the Caribbean, Marta Palma, observed that since all the major world religions emphasise children's dignity, more inter-religious effort and networking is needed to effectively protect the rights and dignity of children.

Other participants at the seminar shared this view. For Rahul Vyas, a Hindu delegate of a Gujarat-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), Child Health Integration Through Livelihood and Development, religious bodies could do much to improve the conditions of children world over. Religious leaders and institutions should mobilise society and even governments to address more seriously the issues affecting children.

Representing the Bangalore-based NGO Navajeevan Mahila Pragathi Kendra, Sister Cecily said that progressive religious bodies must combat fundamentalist forces existing within their societies and Sanawar Khan, an activist working with children in Pakistan,

reported that fundamentalist forces have gained considerable popular support in Pakistan, to the detriment of constructive work in the society, and making life difficult for NGOs. He felt that religious institutions should join the global debate on the role of religion in society.

Other participants agreed that progressive religious institutions ought to remain in constant discourse with each other in order to make the world a better place for humanity and therefore for children.



## MAIN FOLLOW-UP POINTS

The overall sense of the seminar and the areas identified for follow-up can be summarised in two points:

### ➤ **A Challenge to Religious Communities**

There was an overall sense of challenge to faith communities to do much more in way of working together towards changing the situation of many of today's children and to speak out against the negative effects of globalisation upon them.

### ➤ **The Need to Transform this Challenge into Action**

The question now facing WCC and other faith communities is how to be active in the process of changing this 'willingness' of working together, which was evident at the seminar, into practical methodologies to build up inter-faith coalitions and networks to uphold the dignity of children.