

Memorial Service for Dr. S.J. Samartha St. Mark's Cathedral

*O V Jathanna**

Dear friends,

Dr. Stanley Samartha's family has asked me to say a few words at this memorial service, representing the Karnataka Theological College, Mangalore, the United Theological College, Bangalore, and Theological Education in India, in general.

Dr. S.J. Samartha comes from the coastal Karnataka and was reared in the Basel, mission tradition and piety. At the same time, he was a person who strove to cross the frontiers all his life, without alienating himself from his roots. He found himself in the intersection¹ of cultures and religions. His self-understanding was that of being unmistakably an Indian and distinctively a Christian.² His theological thinking was initially shaped by the United Theological College, Bangalore, where he was a student from 1941-1945. He was particularly influenced by P.D. Devanandan and Marcus Ward. His theological horizon was further widened through his studies in New York, Hartford (Conn.) and Basel, where he studied under some of the most well-known theologians and biblical scholars of the last century.

After a brief period in the pastoral ministry in Udupi, he was appointed in 1947 to the faculty of the BEM Theological Seminary in Mangalore, which was established in 1847. There he served as a lecturer for two years, and, after his studies abroad, he became the first full-fledged Indian principal of the seminary for 8 years. He played a vital role in affiliating the seminary to the Senate of Serampore College. This enabled the students there to obtain the L.Th. Diploma, paving the way for their higher theological studies. This was a significant contribution, in terms of the vision for the future pastoral and theological leadership in Karnataka. The affiliation is seen as a new phase in the history of this seminary. During these years, Dr. Samartha was also active in the SCM, YMCA, NCC, the Senate of Serampore College, including its text books programme, called Christian Students Library, which eventually produced 42 basic text books and commentaries.

In 1960, Dr. Samartha was invited by the UTC Council to join its faculty. There he succeeded his teacher, P.D. Devanandan, as professor of Philosophy and History of Religions. He was also the first Director of the Division of Research and Post-graduate Studies of the

* Rev Dr O V Jathanna is the Principal of United Theology College, Bangalore.

College. Those who studied under him remember him as a remarkable and effective teacher, with his well prepared, clearly expressed easy-to-remember lectures, which were both challenging and enriching. During this period he involved himself in seminars and dialogues organized by the CISRS. These were on the Indian understanding of Jesus Christ, contemporary religious thought in India, village religion and the like. His dialogical interaction with people of other faiths grew during this time. He left UTC in 1966 to become the Principal of Serampore College, Serampore, and later went to Geneva to the World Council of Churches. After coming back from Geneva in 1981, he continued to teach courses and to guide students in thesis writing at UTC in the areas of both theology and religions, as a Visiting Professor. He also actively participated in the collaborative doctoral programme of the Senate of Serampore College and UTC, i.e., SATHRI, and guided a number of doctoral students.³

Dr. Samartha's contribution as a theological educator is not limited to his time that he spent as a theological teacher or as a Principal in a theological College. In fact, theological education, in the broader sense of the term, was his life-vocation. All his writings and his thinking point to this. He was deeply concerned about the quality of theological education for continuing the Mission of God, as disciples of Jesus Christ, especially in the Indian and Asian context. A relevant and effective theological education should be committed to, and rooted in, the faith in Jesus Christ and be open to the insights, resources and challenges coming from our religio-cultural heritage. While he always advocated a relevant indigenous Christian theology, he was keenly aware of the dangers and pitfalls of becoming too narrowly focused on local issues, forgetting the great themes of Christian faith and its rich, ecumenical heritage. So also, while acknowledging the need for developing Indian Christian theology in dialogue with the so-called little traditions, he was of the opinion that we should not forget the rich heritage of Sanskritic tradition, simply because of some of the negative aspects of that tradition. He was very much concerned that the Indian Church should surmount its ghetto mentality and become outgoing. This is important, if it has to take deep roots theologically in the Indian soil and if it has to remain faithful to the mission to which it has been called. Inter-religious dialogue for him was an integral part of Christian mission itself-mission of bearing witness to, and being the channels of God's love as it was manifested especially in the life, death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Dialogue meant to him a silent revolution in terms of attitudinal change, and willingness to listen to one another and to allow the other person to be his/her own spokes-person. It is the willingness to see God at work everywhere, without giving up the integrity of the Christian faith and witness. He felt that it was the tendency of Christians to erect fences around Jesus Christ by claiming him all for the themselves that keeps others from seeing him in his true light and significance. For Dr. Samartha it was like the hands of Uzza in the O.T. trying to protect the honour of God. He saw the uniqueness of Jesus' unique ability to evoke wide - ranging positive responses from people of other faiths and ideologies. In this Jesus was *advitiya*, the unique one. Hence, he felt that as Indian Christians we need to listen to others and take their perception of Jesus Christ seriously. For him theological education has to be pastorally effective, in terms of the preaching, teaching and nurturing ministries of the church. It has to enable Christians to live with others in mutual trust and respect, so that mission can be carried out not only for others but also together with others. An important aspect of this pastoral concern comes out clearly in his last published work.⁴ In this, the primary concern is not the understanding of the problem of suffering, but the existential-theological concern of being sustained by faith and

sustained in faith in the face of suffering, in the light of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His theological thinking is characterized by his attempt to hold together commitment and openness, knowing that God is always more than our limited and finite perceptions of God.⁵

The questions that he raised and the insights that he left behind will continue to challenge us and encourage us as we continue our faith journey and theological reflections in the days and years to come. His faith in and commitment to Christ led him to chart a territory that was less traversed. He has provided us with a few sketches and landmarks.

Let us continue these concerns in ways that would be appropriate for the future by way of creative and critical interaction with his thought. This would be in the service of the mission and ministry to which all of us are called, so that all may experience new life in all its abundance that is made available for all in Jesus Christ.

It is my prayer that God grant Dr. Samartha's family, particularly to Mrs. Iris Samaratha, their relatives and friends, numerous former students and colleagues of Dr. Samartha the abiding peace that Jesus promised, which surpasses all human understanding. May the enabling, enlightening and comforting presence of the crucified and the risen Lord be with us all as we continue our faith journey.

NOTES

1. S.J. Samartha, *Between Two Culture: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralistic World* (Geneva: WCC, 1996), p. vii.
2. Eeuwout Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness: The Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions in the Work of Stanley J. Samartha* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B.V., 1992), p. 19. I also made use of this book for some of the biographical data.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-33. Godwin Shiri (ed), *Wholeness in Christ: The Legacy of the Basel Mission in India* (Mangalore: KATHRI, 1985), pp. 26-106.
4. S.J. Samartha, *I could not Go to Church on Good Friday: A Testament of Faith* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2000).
5. This is based on my reading of Dr. Samartha's various, listening to his talks and comments on various occasion as well as the personal conversations that we had, especially since 1981.