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Judah and Benjamin
Evolving a Theology of Peace in Sri Lanka

Shirley Lal Wijesinghe

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Article abstract

This article presents a Sri Lankan hermeneutic of the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) in relation to grassroots peacemaking in Sri Lanka. On a global scale, peacemaking at the grassroots level is a rare phenomenon outside of the confines of small groups. Conflicts are often aggravated and even reach the point of armed struggles due to conditions of dispossession. These eventually lead to war economies which are ultimately beneficial to the rich. Sri Lanka could achieve sustainable peace if solidarity could be created among the dispossessed of the ethnic divide. Genesis 37-50 reveals four challenges to peacemaking in Sri Lanka, namely, (i) constituting Benjamin or creating solidarity among the dispossessed of the ethnic divide, (ii) highlighting the importance of brotherhood/sisterhood for the survival of the nation which is jeopardized by the existing economic policies which are beneficial to the national and global elite, (iii) understanding peace as renunciation, and (iv) understanding and interpreting forgiveness.

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Judah and Benjamin

Evolving a Theology of Peace in Sri Lanka

Shirley Lal WIJESINGHE[*]
Western Classical Culture and Christian Culture
University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has been the biggest challenge faced by the inhabitants of this island nation over the course of the 20th century, and now in the 21st century as well[1]. Over sixty thousand persons have died due to the civil strife. Millions have been left homeless. Violence, brutality, suicide, and terror have marked daily life. This constant encounter with evil by the youth and the young at the threshold of their lives brutalizes their psyche. It will take many generations to heal from the damages ensued by these acts of violence and the machinery of terror. It has been shown that many of the world's communal struggles are linked to or even created by the Western Colonialism of the last five hundred years. The conflicts in the Philippines, South Africa, Sudan, Palestine-Israel, Guatemala,

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[*]   Shirley Lal Wijesinghe is professor in the Department of Western Classical Culture and Christian Culture in the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. He also coordinates an ecumenical course in Contextual Theology at the Asian Institute of Missiology, Colombo, Sri Lanka. He has served as a resource person on contextual hermeneutics in India, Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Italy, Senegal, USA and Chile.
1.   This is a revised version of a paper presented at the consultation « Sri Lankan Theology : Retrospect and Prospect » organized by the Theological College of Pilimatalawa, Sri Lanka, in June 2006. Since then the nature of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict took the form of a massive armed struggle between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan security forces, during which the LTTE was defeated. As a result about 280,000 Tamils have been reduced to the state of refugees living in camps in the North, and thousands of Sinhalese and Tamils have been widowed and orphaned. The wounds are too fresh to enter into a dialogue with the victims without which there is no possibility for a valid theological reflection. Hence I remain with the present version and with the conviction that however hard it may be non-violent struggles offer a greater future and a deeper spirituality to humanity.

Northern Ireland, Rwanda and Sri Lanka are some of the countries in crisis directly related to Western colonization.

The Portuguese invaded and colonized some parts of the coastal belt of Sri Lanka beginning in 1505. They were ousted by the Dutch in 1648. Subsequently the Dutch were replaced by the British in 1796 and they gained control over the entire island in 1815. Minority groups such as Christians and Tamils had access to better educational facilities, especially during British rule at the expense of other communities, particularly the Sinhala Buddhists. Since equal opportunities were not offered to all communities or made available to all, those who benefited from the Christian missionary education filled government posts created by the British. This does not mean that the entire Tamil community and the entire Christian community benefited from the missionary education. The Tamils living in Vanni and many of the Christians in the fishing community along the Western Coast were as badly neglected as the Rajarata farmer or the Uva farmer families. This is an important factor to bear in mind while trying to understand the dynamics of the present conflict.

Up to this point, we have spoken about the Tamils living in the Northern and Eastern parts of the island. There is another group of Tamils living mainly in the highlands, who were brought to Sri Lanka from India by the British in the early nineteenth century to work in the colonial plantations. Much like many small-scale farmers and fishermen, the majority of Tamils in the upcountry plantation sector remain poor. A mechanism was enforced to make sure that they did not mingle with the Sinhala farmer population living around the plantations. It is also important to mention that the lands were acquired from the Sinhala population living in the hills. There was an era when masses of people in this country did not follow the land registration laws scrupulously. In consequence, there were many lands owned by the people yet without government-recognized title deeds. The hill country Sinhalese lost much of their lands when they could not produce title deeds written according to the norms required by the British government.

The Tamil migrant worker families brought from South India were poor and most of the hill country Sinhalese farmers were also poor. These two populations never met as there was a mechanism in force to keep the plantation worker secluded from the Sinhalese. The crèches, schools and hospitals were part of the plantation infra-structure. Hence the plantation Tamils of Indian origin did not study together with the Sinhalese and most of their health problems were resolved without having to visit the dispensaries or the hospitals visited by the Sinhalese. Most of the Indian Tamils

were either of Hindu or Christian origin and as a result they hardly met the Sinhalese Buddhists. Neither did they meet the Sinhala Christians as Christian worship was available in the estate or the plantation premises. The population of the hill country spoke Sinhalese and the plantation workers conversed in Tamil. In a way, the language difference kept them apart. Yet the language difference cannot be counted as a main factor. The post-independence period has proved that the Tamils working in the hill country plantation sector once liberated from the « Estate Seclusion » could excel and work hand in hand with the Sinhalese.

The British colonial rule also provided upward mobility to the existing feudal lords and even created a new generation of rich. The Senanayake and Bandaranaike families who ruled post-independence Sri Lanka belonged to this feudal class. The Sinhalese Buddhist rich class also gained significant advantages under the British colonial administration.

Many Muslims from the Indian Deccan region migrated to Sri Lanka during the British period. As a result, the Muslim population in Sri Lanka grew significantly. At that time the class structure of the Muslim community remained visible with a minority among the Muslims being rich and the majority among them being poor.

The independence of Sri Lanka from colonial fetters in 1948 was something long overdue. But the crucial question is the problem of advantage and disadvantage. The colonial politics and the economic system favoured the Sinhalese Buddhist, Tamil, Christian, Muslim and other national *elite*. In other words, cutting across the ethnic, religious, and denominational divide, the elites prospered at the expense of the poor masses of people.

1. Independence for Whom?

Although the elite and the proletariat celebrated independence from the colonial rule, the situation of the poor masses remained the same. The Sinhala Buddhist small-scale farmers, the Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim small-scale fishermen, the plantation workers and other categories of poor did not benefit much from the policies of the British trained local rulers.

In a power struggle between the Senanayake and Bandaranaike families (both Sinhala- Buddhist) S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike played a master-stroke by mustering the Sinhalese-Buddhist poverty-stricken majority under the Sanga-Veda-Guru-Govi-Kamkaru umbrella (Buddhist clergy-Native medical practitioners-teachers-farmers-labourers) as a strategy to win the 1956 elections. He addressed the Sinhalese-Buddhist proletariat at the

expense of the Tamil, Christian, Hindu and Muslim poor. Just as the British policies kept the poor plantation workers away from the poor Sinhalese-Buddhist farmers, the Bandaranaike policies estranged the poor from the poor. The creation of the Sanga-Veda-Guru-Govi-Kamkaru front produced disastrous consequences at on the political, economic and cultural levels. The Buddhist clergy were made to forget their counterparts in the Tamil community - the Tamil Buddhist monks of the past - who contributed much to the Buddhist cultural heritage in Sri Lanka by their writings and right livelihood. When the Jaffna library was burnt in 1982, many works written by Tamil scholar monks as well as by Sinhala scholar monks were reduced to ashes. The irreparable rift between the indigenous medical professionals from the Sinhala and Tamil communities, the loss of solidarity between the Sinhala and Tamil teacher generations were far from being beneficial to the development of the nation.

The "nineteen-fifty-six" was a golden opportunity to break away from the cultural alienation of the nation – an opportunity for the possible re-Sinhalisation and re-Tamilisation of the nation and a subsequent cross fertilization of the riches of these cultural traditions – all this without losing sight of the positive values of the Western cultural heritage. If the opportunity had been seized, it would have put Sri Lanka far ahead of its Asian neighbours. The lack of national leaders with a broad vision, who could embrace the entire ethnic, religious and cultural divide, has brought the population to a crashing point. Neither the Tamils nor the Sinhalese have produced *national* politicians or *national* religious leaders who could transcend petty tribalism[2]. The same is true of the Muslims. This problematic haunts the post-independence history of the nation. The top level peace negotiations in the first decade of the 21st century prove this point.

Unfortunately for Sri Lanka, the best was not to be. The introduction of the « Sinhala Only » policy was disastrous and it was hated by the Tamils (cf. Loganathan 1996, 5-13). They not only hated the political machinery of discrimination but also the entire Sinhala population. The educational policy of « Standardisation » was introduced in 1972 and it resulted in the reduction of the ratio of Tamil students pursuing university education (cf. Loganathan 1996, 47-49). It is important to note that this measure was a disadvantage to all urban youth irrespective of ethnicity studying in pres-

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2.   I owe the insight to Mr. Victor Ivan, the editor of *Ravaya*. Unlike Sri Lanka, the neighbouring India produced national leaders who could embrace the entire Indian divide.

tigious schools . In fact, the Tamil Vanni was at a greater advantage vis-à-vis Tamil Jaffna with this measure. Unfortunately, the poor standards of instruction in the Mannar and Vavuniya districts at that time deprived the Tamil students from Vanni gaining advantage over the urban elite[3]. The same is true of the students of the plantation sector.

The « Sinhala Only » bill, the colonization scheme and the policy of « standardization » became repressive measures against the Tamil population. The non-violent protests were the medium of communication at one stage. The breached treaties brought hopelessness and despair. The violent struggle sent the precious youth of the nation to their graves or to houses for the disabled. During the time of heavy fighting between the two sides, the poor Tamils in Vanni died of Malaria. In the choice between the power and the poor, the government as well as the militia preferred arms to medicine.

The ethnic war in Sri Lanka is a clear example of poor killing the poor. As far as the economic options are concerned the elitist economic policies prevail in the North and the South. The rich strata of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims reap the harvests from the benefits of the repressive globalised economy ; the poor, irrespective of the ethnic or the religious divide, struggle for the basics. Whether in war or peace, the rich benefit from the situation whereas the poor are continually victimized. The rich strata of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims educate their children in the English medium in international schools hoping to train the next generation to compete for the elitist posts. Most of the rich of the war torn regions had the facility to migrate abroad or to Colombo and most of the poor who have no such choice are condemned to uncertainty. The war is fought by the poor of both communities to assure prosperity to the rich of both communities.

The Western colonial policies favoured the rich, similarly the economy of the post-independence period provided opportunities for the same rich to thrive. This is irrespective of the ethnic or the religious divide and irrespective of war or peace.

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3.   « Even 'standardization' which led to the rise of a militant youth movement in Jaffna, aroused very little interest in other Tamil districts. The simple reason being, although Tamil dominated Districts like Vavuniya and Mannar would have normally benefited from the District Quota system, the total lack of facilities for the teaching of science subjects lead to a situation where places reserved for students from those districts, went unfilled. This situation was equally applicable to other backward districts in the Sinhala areas. » (Loganathan 1986, 49)

2. Genesis 37-50

The context described above is the existential setting to read Gen 37-50. I agree with the scholarship which attempts to demonstrate that the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob traditions are independent of the Exodus traditions. The Exodus experience is probably linked to another patriarch called Israel who is not identical with Jacob (Van Cangh 1991). Furthermore, I leave open the question of source-criticism of Gen 37-50.

The present analysis adopts the methodology of narrative-critical exegesis which includes narrative, stylistic and semantic analysis. Much has been written on the subject (Ska 1990, 95-103) and I have borrowed extensively from Coats, Alonso Schökel and Ska (Coats 1983; Alonso Schökel 1985; Ska 1986; cf. also Fischer 2001). It is to be noted that narrative-critical exegesis is favoured here without losing sight of the importance of historical criticism (Ruppert, 1985; Schmitt 1985; Schmidt 1986; Scharbert 1987; Golka 2004). The historical-critical studies on Gen 37-50 could reveal the struggles between the Northern and Southern tribes as well as the tensions between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The present text probably contains layers of redaction. The redactional history of Gen 37-50 could unearth important dimensions of political theologies in the Bible. The narrative-critical exegesis could be considered as a complementary contribution to refine the historical-critical research.

In the narrative sequence of the book of Genesis, the chapters 37-50 are preceded by the section on the theology of pre-history (Gen 1-11), and by the Abraham and Jacob cycles (Gen 12-36). In these sections a clear pattern promoting the younger against the elder is visible. The Cain-Abel, Ishmael-Isaac, Esau-Jacob and Leah-Rachel controversies favour the younger personage. This is a blow to a power structure. In the story of the blessing of the patriarchs, the position of the eldest is described as « [M]y might, and the first fruits of my strength, pre-eminent in pride and pre-eminent in power. » (Genesis 49,3). The pattern of favouring the younger against the elder is a critique of an encompassing power structure. The killing of the first-born in the land of Egypt is another example of a symbolic narrative describing the destruction of a power-structure in favour of a group of powerless slaves. The theological symbolism of the « poor against power » woven into the book of Genesis marks Gen 37-50 as well. Genesis 37 does not begin with Judah and Benjamin but with the then youngest versus the rest of the elder brothers. Joseph is seventeen years old (Gen 37,2) and he is described as the « son of [Jacob's] old age ». Contrary to the previous

stories found in the book of Genesis, the younger son in Gen 37 disappears. This is the narrative setting which prepares the rest of the Joseph story to unfold itself. After the sudden break in the story by the narrative of Gen 38 where Judah figures prominently, the reader meets Joseph in Genesis 39 and follows him through his hardships to the heights in Gen 41, 37-45. The « rise » of Joseph to the position of the « second-in-command » in Egypt will remain hidden to the family. The expectations of the reader to visualize a day of encounter between Joseph and the brothers rise high with the end note in Gen 41, 57, informing the reader that « all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth. » If all the earth had to come to Joseph, then the brothers of Joseph had to meet him.

After the episode in Gen 37, the brothers meet Joseph in Gen 42 in their first journey to Egypt. In Gen 42-44, Joseph re-creates the mood of Gen 37. (For the exegesis of the chapters Gen 37-45, cf. Coats 1983, 259-296 ; Alonso Schökel 1985, 257-303 ; Ska 1986, 1-30 ; cf. also Gunkel 1917, 401-462 ; von Rad 1972, 348-400 ; Speiser 1979, 288-341 ; Westermann 1982, 20-164 ; Wenham 1994, 343-433 ; Hamilton 1995, 403-587 ; Cotter 2003, 263-318 ; Ebach 2007, 52-414). In Gen 37, the power structure was defined in terms of elder brothers vs. Joseph. The power structure in Gen 42-44 is determined by the elder brothers vs. Benjamin who is now in the role of the youngest. The least in a power structure can be victimized and sacrificed. They can be made to disappear and be forgotten. Joseph lived through this experience of discrimination and exclusion in Gen 37. The same situation is forcibly created in Gen 42-44 (Fischer 2001, 249). The intention of Joseph is neither revealed to the Egyptians nor to the brothers. The reader too remains uninformed. It is discovered as the story unfolds itself. To create the mood of Gen 37, Joseph imprisons Simeon and forces the brothers to bring down Benjamin. « If you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined in your prison ... and bring your youngest brother to me. » (Gen 42,19-20). « And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. » (Gen 42,24). Judah and Benjamin will figure prominently in the second journey of the brothers to Egypt.
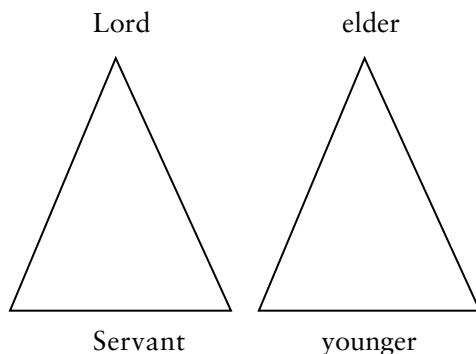
3. Judah and Benjamin

The father reckons that Reuben has failed as leader. In answer to Reuben's request of releasing Benjamin to be taken down to Egypt, Jacob clarifies his

position : « My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he only is left. » (Gen 42, 38). The need for food for the survival of the family leads to a compromise on the part of Jacob, but this time under a different leadership (Alonso Schökel 1985, 287 ; Ska 1986, 22). Judah intervenes as the new leader and pleads with his father offering himself as surety for Benjamin : « And Judah said to Israel his father, 'Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die ... I will be surety for him ; of my hand you shall require him. » (Gen 43,8-9).

There is a power structure operative among the brothers which victimizes the weak. In place of equals it creates the polar positions of "the greatest" and "the least". This is depicted in the seating order at the banquet offered by the vizier of Egypt as well as in the order followed in emptying the sacks full of grain after they were caught with the silver cup. The seating order is described in the following words : « And they sat before him, first born according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth. » (Gen 43,33). In the episode reporting the return of the brothers back to the land of Canaan, the unexpected happens. The visitors are accused of stealing the silver cup of the lord of the land. The search is conducted beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. The hierarchy of power persists among the brothers. Benjamin is isolated by the strategy of Joseph : « Only the man in whose hand the cup has been found shall be my slave ; but as for you, go up in peace to your father. » (Gen 44,17). The situation of Joseph in Gen 37 is repeated here. The youngest is pitted against the elder brothers. Joseph places himself as the judge and the reader waits to discover whether the same fate will befall Benjamin reducing him to the position of a slave like Joseph in the land of Egypt. In Gen 37, it was said that « Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children. » (Gen 37,3) ; similarly Benjamin is favoured by him : « And his father loves him. » (44,20). The love of the father triggered hatred on the part of the brothers in Gen 37 (37,4) which subsequently led them to make Joseph disappear. The reader has to follow the thread of the narrative to learn whether Benjamin will also disappear from the world of the brothers into the hand of the vizier of Egypt as a slave. In Gen 44,18-34, Judah acting as the eldest reverses the hierarchy : « Now therefore, let your servant, I pray you remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord ; and let the lad go back with his brothers. » (Gen 44,33). The vocabulary in Gen 44,18-34 is dominated by the semantic fields of master-servant relationships and elder-younger relationships. Judah addresses Joseph as the « lord », and calls himself « servant ». The name Benjamin does not appear in the speech
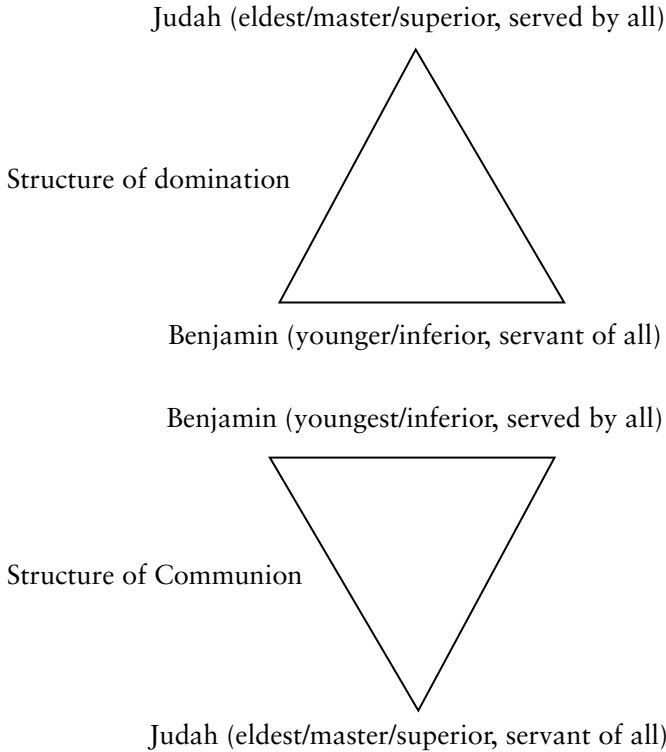
of Judah, instead he is identified as the « younger one » (Gen 45,20), younger brother (45,23.26.26), and lad (45,22.30.31.32.33.33.34). The vocabulary of master-servant relationships and elder-younger relationships denote a structure of domination. It is a structure where the stronger dominates the weaker and the weaker is considered insignificant by the stronger (Ska 1986, 26-27).

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      Lord              elder

       /\                /\
      /  \              /  \
     /    \            /    \
    /      \          /      \
   /        \        /        \
  /_____\      /_____\

    Servant           younger
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A contrast system of values appears in the attitude of Jacob and Joseph towards Benjamin. In Gen 42,4 we read that Jacob does not send down Benjamin to Egypt lest harm might befall him. Furthermore, Jacob reiterates this position in Gen 42,38 when Reuben pleads for Benjamin. In the speech of Judah also the fact of Jacob's favour towards Benjamin is highlighted: « The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die. » (Gen 42,22). The same sentiments are expressed in Gen 44,34. Joseph's favour towards Benjamin is dramatized by the narrator in Gen 43,29-30: « And he lifted up his eyes, and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, 'Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!' Then Joseph made haste, for his heart yearned for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there. » At the banquet Benjamin receives five times more than the other brothers (Gen 43, 34).

In the contrast system of values held by Jacob and Joseph, the weakest becomes the most significant. These conflicting ideologies merge in the monologue of Judah. The narrative climax is in Gen 44,33: « Now therefore, let your servant, I pray you remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord; and let the lad go back with his brothers. » In his monologue Judah gradually identifies himself with the contrast system of values promoted by Jacob and Joseph. Judah acting as the eldest offers himself as a slave on

behalf of Benjamin. Here is a shift from a structure of domination to a structure of communion or a structure of brotherhood/sisterhood.

Judah (eldest/master/superior, served by all)

Structure of domination

Benjamin (younger/inferior, servant of all)

Benjamin (youngest/inferior, served by all)

Structure of Communion

Judah (eldest/master/superior, servant of all)

A structure of communion is a community of equals. People are equal in human dignity but not in their talents and capacities. In a structure of communion equal human dignity is assured by the community dynamics of stronger persons serving the weaker among them. This pattern is opposed to the dynamics of the structures of domination where the weak are forced to serve the strong (Wijesinghe 1993, 30-38).

Recapitulating, the monologue of Judah (Gen 44,18-34) demonstrates that Benjamin is the lad, the youngest, the youngest brother. According to the elder-younger hierarchy of domination, Benjamin as the youngest could be manipulated. He could be taken as an object to appease the lord of the land. He is the last to sit in a row of seats when the brothers are invited to sit at a banqueting table. He is the last when they empty their sacks before a royal steward. On the contrary, according to another set of principles held by the father and Joseph, he is the most important among all. The

reader can see how Judah identifies himself with the contrast principle. Judah has placed himself as a slave to the lord of the land in place of the youngest. The roles are reversed. The weak youngest is no more at the service of the strong eldest, but on the contrary the powerful eldest is at the service of the powerless youngest. The contrast system of values gives a future to Jacob's family. Now they are « brothers ».

4. Evolving[4] a Theology of Peace

The ethnic war has been disastrous. The loss of life and property is taken for granted. Being killed by the military or the militants has become a part of daily life. This situation is unacceptable. Some of those who are seriously involved in peace endeavours have often attempted to theorize their experiences. They seek resources for their commitment and struggle in social sciences, comparative peace processes, universal literature, and in texts considered sacred by the people[5]. In the course of the last two decades, many discussions were based on the theology of reconciliation found in Genesis 37-50. The dynamics of the text has stirred fruitful reflections among many Christian and inter-religious groups in Sri Lanka, such as *Kitu Dana Pubuduwa*, *Kitusara*, presbyterium of the diocese of Badulla, Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux, Christian Workers' Fellowship, International Movement for the Catholic Students and *Lakrivi*. I wish to present some elements of the dynamics of Genesis 37-50 which could be considered as important to evolve a theology of peace in Sri Lanka under the following headings: (i) constituting Benjamin, (ii) money vs. brotherhood/sisterhood, (iii) peace as renunciation, and (iv) interpreting forgiveness.

4.1 Constituting Benjamin

The Tamils in Sri Lanka have been victimized due to repressive measures like the « Sinhala Only Bill. » But the majority of victims who are economically deprived and excluded from sharing in the country's riches are the Sinhala-Buddhists. As stated above, the poor exist among the entire ethnic and religious divide. This datum makes peacemaking complicated and difficult. The Sinhala-Buddhist majority seeing a high percentage of

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4.   The inductive process of theologizing from the grassroots is indicated by the expression «evolving theology». It connotes a living dialogue between the context and the text of the Bible.
5.   Peacemakers draw inspiration from the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Islamic scripture.

Tamils occupying white color jobs tend to think that there were no griev-
ances amongst Tamils. Similarly the Tamil community observing the par-
tial treatment of the government in favour of the Sinhalese majority failed
to take into account the pitiful state of the masses of poor among the
Sinhala population. The situation is further complicated with the Muslim
factor[6]. The complicated social situation, local political crises, religious
ideologies, geo-politics and the discriminatory policies of the international
monetary institutions call for a comprehensive search in view of sustainable
peace.

Reporting to the research partners of the Maryknoll project on
« Grassroots Peacemaking among Christian Communities », John Brewer *et
al.* explain the two-polar nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

> All the modes of differentiation after the plantation, such as religion, ethnic
> status, social class and levels of cultural civility began to coalesce around
> two polarities. The vanquished were Catholic, Gaelic-Irish, seen as savage
> and uncivilised, and were now economically dispossessed if not already
> poor ; the planters were Protestant, Scots-English, saw themselves as cultur-
> ally civilised. (2001, 7).

On the contrary, the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka is far more complex.
The Tamils as well as the Sinhalese have centuries of culture behind them.
Both groups have produced an educated elite. There are high caste families
and low caste families as well as the rich and the poor among both Tamils
and the Sinhalese. The genesis of today's ethnic war began as a tussle
between the elite Sinhala politicians and the elite Tamil politicians. The
dissonance aggravated as a result of the ambition and the power struggle
among the Sinhalese political elite targeting the Sinhala vote. The ambi-
tion of the elite has been transformed into a deadly war fought mainly by
the economically deprived of the ethnic divide. The irony is that while the
struggle continues in its ambiguous original complexity, the English speak-
ing elite, irrespective of whether they are Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim flour-
ish in a country where millions are hunger-struck. The malnourished belong
to Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities. The war is financed by the
elite but fought by the poor of all communities. The poverty-stricken con-
ditions produce combatants to the military and to the militant groups. The

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6.   In Sri Lanka "Muslim" is a religious as well as an ethnic identity. Most of the Muslims
      are Tamil speaking and there were serious conflicts between the Muslims and the
      Tamil militants in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

spiral of evil is linked to the complexity created by the discriminatory measures against the Tamils and the impoverishment of the masses.

The search for a permanent solution to the ethnic question in a structure of domination is a fallacy. The grassroots peacemaking involves constituting Benjamin. It means a massive effort to bring together the small-scale farmers belonging to Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities. In their constant struggle against the local, regional and multi-national oppression, they will recognize the importance of language rights, educational rights and land rights for the Tamils. Soon they will discover that « water » will become a discriminatory measure against the poor. The privatization of water will create a situation where the small-scale farmers will no longer be able to continue farming. Irrespective of ethnic identity, these farmer families will be forced to leave their habitat and settle down in city slums. Being divided along the ethnic or religious lines will be a severe obstacle in the struggle against the forces of global poverty-making.

Constituting Benjamin will also involve creating solidarity among the local fishermen. Some of the best beaches of Tamil small-scale fishermen have been occupied by the military. The Sinhalese fishermen who make a living in the Eastern coast have been attacked and chased away by the militants. A body is needed to consolidate the power of small-scale fishermen against the ethnic repression as well as the economic exploitation at the local, national and international level. They have been robbed of their livelihood by massive foreign trawlers.

These are two examples among many other possibilities of constituting Benjamin. It is creating solidarity among the poor across the ethnic divide. A systematically guided reflection could make them indispensable agents of peace and development. The poor often idealize development as reaching elite positions in a structure of domination (Freire 2000, 45-46). A guided reflection is needed to strive for an alternative structure of communion. This is essential in constituting Benjamin.

Studying peace building approaches, John Paul Lederach identifies three levels of peacemaking. He explains the Top Level, Middle Range and Grassroots approaches are in detail (Lederach 1997, 38-43). While top level peacemaking is led by highly visible military, political and religious leaders, the middle range peace efforts are undertaken by the religious groups, academic institutions, humanitarian organizations, significant leadership in sectors such as education, business, agriculture, health etc. The grassroots peacemaking is often undertaken by the local associations, refugee camp leaders, local peace commissions etc. For example, John

Brewer categorizes dozens of grassroots initiatives contributing significantly to the peace process in Northern Ireland under six main types. They are ecumenical activity, mediation, cross-community activities, self-identified peace groups and initiatives, anti-sectarianism, and dealing with the problems of post violence (Brewer 2003, 75). Grassroots level peace efforts were forbidden by the military and the militants and as a result such initiatives did not blossom in Sri Lanka. *Kithusara*, *Sadhujanarava*, Boy Scouts of Vavuniya, Nugelanda Farmers, Peace Committee of Batticaloa, *Sarasavi Diyaniyo*, *Sunila* Women's Development Movement, *Rukada*, and *Bingusara* are among the active grassroots groups involved in peacemaking in the last two decades (Wijesinghe 2003a, 174-176). A movement of the farmers with a large membership from Rajarata, Uva, Vanni, Jaffna, Eastern Province and the South would have made a significant difference to the Sri Lankan peace process. Similarly, a front formed of fishermen from Galle, Hambantota, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Jaffna, Mannar, Puttlam, Chilaw, Negombo and Kalutara would have been an important forum for peace. Perhaps there are cultural factors which hinder the formation of such forums. The vestiges of pre-colonial feudal mentality still lingering in the minds of the people could be a reason. A nation-wide farmer solidarity and similar forums could be very effective grassroots peacemakers as well as perhaps middle-range peace negotiators. Hence constituting Benjamin could give a future to peacemaking in Sri Lanka and will be an asset to neutralize the market policies thrust upon the third world by the international monetary institutions which are executed by the national governments.

4.2 Money vs. Brotherhood/Sisterhood

The semantic fields of money, food and brotherhood/sisterhood in Genesis 37-50 are significant indicators to help us interpret the text. In Gen 42-44, the narrative weaves the vocabulary of money, food and brotherhood/sisterhood to demonstrate that food is assured by brotherhood and not by commercial exchanges. In other words the survival of Jacob's family depends on fraternal relationships and not on the expenditure drawn from an accumulated wealth. After imprisoning the brothers for three days, Joseph brings them out. He isolates Simeon and imprisons him until the brothers could bring back Benjamin. Before sending the rest back to the land of Canaan, Joseph gives orders to fill their bags with grain and to replace the money (Gen 42,25). The returned money haunts the family

(Gen 42,27-28.35). On their second journey to Egypt, the brothers are asked to take double the money. « Take double the money with you ; carry back with you money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks ; perhaps it was an oversight. » (Gen 43,12). On their second arrival Joseph brings them to his house intending to invite them to the mid-day meal. This gesture threatens them. « And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, 'It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may seek occasion against us and fall upon us, to make slaves of us and seize our asses. » (Gen 43,18). In vv. 19-23, they explain to the steward of Joseph that they are not responsible for the money found in their sacks. Gen 44,1-2 records that money is returned for the second time (Ska 1986, 23-24).

The question at stake is the survival of the family of Jacob. The future of Israel is in danger. The peril is the world-wide famine which will affect Jacob's family as well. The survival will depend on the quantities of grain available for consumption. This is the reading of the crisis by Jacob as well as the brothers of Joseph. This reading is vehemently contested by Joseph in Gen 42-43. The future of Israel will depend on brotherhood/sisterhood and not on food. Grain could be bought for money, but brotherhood/sisterhood or communion cannot be assured by accumulated wealth. Joseph returns the money to reverse the notion that the survival of Jacob or the future of Israel depends on the availability of accumulated wealth, which could be exchanged for food. Joseph's brothers receive food in abundance as a sign of Joseph's fraternal love. Israel, which bases its survival on accumulated wealth, is similar to spies who are bent on exploitation. As discussed above, the survival of Jacob is assured by Judah being reduced to the status of slavery in the place of the least.

The ethnic strife in Sri Lanka gradually deteriorated into a bloody war. Although similar ethnic conflicts exist in some countries of global North - in the First World — such as Canada and Belgium, they do not wage wars as these nations are rich. The Sinhalese and Tamils go to war because of poverty. Hence it is important to note that ethnic animosities alone are not sufficient to ignite wars. The ethnic and religious strife in the South or the Third World is linked to the scale of national poverty and to the degree of unjust distribution of wealth. The syndrome of rich countries becoming richer and poor countries poorer was aggravated during the post-second world war era. The phenomenon of the scandalous differences in the income among the citizens of a nation is a serious malaise. Sri Lanka is

notorious in this regard. These realities of unjust distribution of resources and uneven ownership of production cause wars in the global South. Ultimately the enemy is « laissez faire » capitalism.

The globalization of the economy in the making reduces human beings to the status of a marketable product (Houtart 2005, 13-43). The process of economy becoming an end in itself dehumanizes the entire human family (Houtart 2005, 76-116). Demanded by the international monetary agencies, the structural adjustment program was forced upon Sri Lanka. The privatization of profit making enterprises over the last thirty years has contributed to the impoverishment of the Sri Lankan masses significantly. One of the telling examples in this regard is related to milk. The policy of distributing fresh cow milk free of charge by the government to the children belonging to poor families was abolished to pave the way for the Nestle Company to sell its powdered milk products. The families living below the poverty line cannot afford the luxury of Nestle powdered milk. As a result malnutrition is rampant among the poor children. This is a Sri Lankan story of capital accumulation against brotherhood/sisterhood. This has to be understood against the global context where the rich countries subsidise the expenses of their own children.

In a world where the surplus milk and wheat are destroyed to foster economic competition, the question of capitalist logic against brotherhood/sisterhood is raised. The entire system is ailing and operates on oppression and violence[7].

This analysis is needed to comprehend the Tamil-Sinhala question in its proper perspective. « The Other » becomes the enemy in a poverty-stricken milieu. The development combined with the equal distribution of wealth is a *sine-qua-non* for sustainable peace in Sri Lanka. The capitalist logic against brotherhood/sisterhood is prevalent in the international economic systems of globalization. This system is gradually eroding peace in the Third World. Sustainable peace in the face of the Tamil-Sinhala struggle will depend on evolving an economy based on the principles related to brotherhood/sisterhood.

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7. « It is enough to recall some historical aspects of the unequal relation of the world market : wars, destructions and slavery accompanied mercantile capitalism ; colonialism and neo-colonialism were the companions of industrial capitalism ; growing monopolies of investments, science, armaments are characterizing present day globalization » (Houtart 2004, 45).

4.3 Peace as Renunciation

Taking Gen 43,1-45,28 as a reading unit, one could observe the turning point in Gen 44,14-17 (Coats 1983, 292; Ska 1986, 25-26). It is the decisive moment of the episode. The brothers are offered the possibility of going back to Canaan with the food but without Benjamin. They are forced to choose between food and the family. The reversal of order is narrated in Gen 44,33. Judah opts to be enslaved in place of Benjamin. Peace is achieved through a hard process of renunciation. Judah acting as the eldest in the family decides to stay back as a slave to the vizier of Egypt so that Benjamin could be released from slavery. In the discourse of Judah, Benjamin is called the « lad » (x 6), « child » (x 1), the « youngest » (x 4). The vocabulary indicates the position of Benjamin in the family. He is inferior to all. The reversal is effected by Judah's proposal. He renounces his freedom and willingly submits himself to slavery in order to liberate Benjamin.

Renunciation is a crucial element in establishing sustainable peace. The bone structure of a peace process is renunciation and it is the most difficult aspect of peacemaking. It is the great moment of liberation and it could be understood in terms of the Exodus of the First Testament, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of the New Testament and *mahaabinishkramanaya* of Buddhism. It is also the moment when a person or a group sees that « The Other » is more important than one's self or one's own clan, tribe, ethnic or religious group. Opting to forget oneself in order to enhance the other is this transcendental moment. The renunciation is a reality of the world of gratuity, and gifting. In the Sinhala-Tamil conflict, very little has been worked out in this direction. Of course this touches the domain of religions and salvific ideologies. Both Sinhalese and Tamils will need to « passover » from the level of « rights » to the arena of gratuity and gifting. (cf. Pieris 1996). This could be achieved by the absorption of the religious resources available in this land.

In the final analysis « justpeace[8] » cannot be achieved without the assurance of an equal ownership of the means of production. There are many stories of ethnic reconciliation at the level of grassroots peace efforts. The « peace zone » established by the Ampara, Nugelanda Tamil-Sinhala farmers during the height of animosities, is one such example of grassroots peacemaking in Sri Lanka. The process was facilitated by Reverend Nirmal

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8.   The term "justpeace" has been introduced by John Paul Lederach (cf. Lederach 2003, 259).

Mendis of the *Lanka Sabha* (the Anglican Church). Another success story is the reconciliation among the Tamil community of Batticaloa and the Muslim community living South of Batticaloa mediated by the Peace Committee of Batticaloa and the Eastern Rehabilitation Organisation (cf. Wijesinghe 2003a, 177-180). Yet these achievements will not stand the test of time until economic justice is meted out to all communities. It is important to envision the possibility of assuring equal ownership of the means of production to all as the ultimate goal of peacemaking. The theology of assuring equal ownership of the means of production to all citizens is extensively treated in the Jubilee law of the First Testament developed in Leviticus 25 (for an extensive bibliography, cf. Lefebvre 2003). Justpeace or sustainable peace depends on economic justice to all. The solution lies in a massive process leading to personal and structural renunciation of the accumulated ownership of the national and global means of production. It is more than the act of canceling the international debt. People and nations suffer indebtedness mainly because of the failure to share the ownership of production systems.

4.4 Interpreting forgiveness[9]

The narrator of the Joseph story shows glimpses of the exposure, recognition and acceptance of « Truth » in Gen 42,13b.21.22 ; and 44,20.27. Gen 42,21 is revealing in this regard : « Then they said to one another, 'In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we would not listen' ». The evildoing of Gen 37 is exposed, recognized and accepted (Fischer 2001, 249-251). The theology of the text does not delve deep into this problem. Instead the focus is on interpreting forgiveness. « I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here ; for God sent me before you to preserve

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9. The expression «interpreting forgiveness» is a new concept, trying to break free from former expressions such as «manifesting forgiveness», that do not appear anymore to carry the meaning that some dramatic situations require. The quest for truth regarding the past crimes is of paramount importance to post-conflict societies. But such truth is meant to be a means to an end which is reconciliation. The generosity of the victim could transcend such naked unpalatable truth by interpreting forgiveness. This magnanimous disposition converts a milieu of cruelty into a milieu of reconciliation. One classical example is the forgiving interpretation of Joseph who tells his brothers that they did not sell him, but God sent him for their own advantage.

life. » (Gen 45,4-5). After the death of Jacob, the brothers fear that Joseph would hate them. In the issuing discussion Joseph affirms them : « As for you, you meant evil against me ; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. » (Gen 50,20).

The problem of the exposure, recognition and acceptance of truth is vital to peace processes. But that alone is insufficient for sustainable peace. John Paul Lederach explains these dynamics drawing from a Nicaraguan experience. The Nicaraguan conciliators used to pray Psalm 85 at the beginning of each village meeting. This psalm reveals four qualities constitutive of reconciliation, namely « Truth », « Mercy », « Peace » and « Justice ». According to the Spanish translation v.10 is read as « Truth and mercy have met together ; peace and justice have kissed (cf. Lederach 1997, 28).

> Let's think for a moment of how the core concepts in the psalmist's paradoxes might be formulated in terms of contemporary conflict. Truth is the longing for acknowledgment of wrong and the validation of painful loss and experiences, but it is coupled with Mercy, which articulates the need for acceptance, letting go, and a new beginning. Justice represents the search for individual and group rights, for social restructuring and for restitution, but it is linked with Peace, which underscores the need for interdependence, well-being, and security. ... Reconciliation, I am suggesting, involves the creation of the social space where both truth and forgiveness are validated and joined together, rather than being forced into an encounter in which one must win over the other or envisioned as fragmented and separated parts (Lederach 1997, 29).

The historical memory of the Sinhalese is haunted by the invaders from South India who devastated the Sinhala civilization. History taught in schools, visits to the ruins in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa for example could revive the memories of the South Indian enemy and identified with the present Northern population. The truth of the South Indian invasions is a stark reality (Wijesinghe 2003b, 389). Yet historical memories are selective. In reference to historical memories one observes that often the comprehensive picture is not taken into consideration. The Tamil Buddhist population in the history of this nation, the Tamil scholar Buddhist monks, South Indian kings invited to rule the Kandian kingdom, and such kings protecting Buddhism do not figure prominently in the collective memory.

Similarly the collective memory of the Tamil population is haunted by the « Sinhala Only » bill, the breached pacts, and the black July incidents which killed thousands of innocent Tamils living in the South (Wijesinghe 2003b, 389). The riots in 1983 were a shame on this nation with its his-

torical heritage of over 2500 years, with its very high literacy rate, and with its adherents belonging to four major world religions. The barbarity of the incidents in July 1983 cannot be erased from the history of this nation. These events could erase the memory of centuries of harmony among Sinhalese and Tamils as well as the memories of a number of Sinhalese who saved many Tamils at the risk of their own lives during the riots.

The atrocities committed by all parties over the course of last two decades lie exposed on the tables of truth. The cemeteries of the deceased combatants, the memorials, the pictures of the dead hung in the main halls of the houses are not only tributes to the precious lives sacrificed, but also the truth of horror now visible to all who pass by. Where do we go from here? Separatism, Federalism, Unitary State, etc. are on the agenda with the options of going back to war or returning to the negotiating table. In this struggle Sri Lankan « Benjamin » is spared only by the hard task of negotiations. Returning to war will muster youth from among the poor of the Sinhalese and the Tamils to kill each other. Human history demonstrates that it is possible for the future generations of this land to develop a brilliant formula to live together in harmony regretting the foolishness of their forefathers of the 20th Century. Such a future could be realized only by transcending the shame of the exposed truth. In other words, exposing the truth of atrocities, torture and massacres in themselves do not lead to healing. The people also will have to search for resources to transcend the shame of the exposed truth and rise above it. It calls for creative interpretations of forgiveness. The people of this land are yet to arrive at creative interpretations of forgiveness which would lead the entire nation towards harmony. The ground situation is far from being satisfactory in reaching this goal.

The post-violence societies have the burden of dealing with stark realities related to *Truth*. Listening to the radio, watching television interviews, reading newspapers and exchanging views on the conflict in Sri Lanka, one begins to be convinced that Sri Lanka is ill prepared to confront a post-violence situation. The burning issues confronted by post-violence societies such as the tension between 'truth' and 'reconciliation', the tension between 'justice' and 'peace', experiences of victimhood, the problem of remembrance and commemoration, the social integration of former combatants, and the development of 'citizenship education' for the new society (Brewer 2004, 90-91) are not adequately discussed. After two decades of violence, Sri Lanka experienced an absence of war since the 22nd of

February 2002[10]. The lack of trained personnel who could make the best of such an opportunity has perhaps brought Sri Lanka to the brink of war once again. Exposure, recognition, and acceptance of « truth » are basic factors to achieving sustainable peace[11]. Yet Sri Lanka needs to evolve an interpretation of forgiveness which transcends the level of wounds. Integrating wounded position is part of the growth process, but endless lingering on wounds stifles the nation. Rising beyond the wounds and evolving a formula of liberation is an important dimension in establishing sustainable peace. The superabundant religious resources of this nation including the heritage of popular religiosity will aid interpreting forgiveness beyond the woundedness. Though not visibly articulated, the masses of Sri Lankan population reached a level above their pain in the course of last few years. Visible and creative interpretations of forgiveness embracing the « other » would assure the future of a people.

Having discussed the history of confrontation and struggle between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka, I have attempted to reflect upon the dynamics of peace theology drawn from Gen 37-50. Constituting Benjamin, money vs. brotherhood/sisterhood, peace as renunciation, and interpreting forgiveness are the major themes treated in this study. Comprehending the ethnic question in its complexity is indispensable in creating sustainable peace and a hopeful future to the people of this land. This is basically a Christian reflection providing religious symbols to foster peace initiatives undertaken by Christian as well as inter-religious communities.

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10. The fighting between the military and the LTTE resumed in July 2006 and ended in May 2010 with the destruction of the war machinery of the LTTE by the government forces.

11. In this respect, cf. the massive effort to recover the historical memory in Guatemala, which is an example for the post-violence healing processes (Guatemala Never Again! 1999).

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Résumé

Cet article présente une herméneutique sri lankaise du récit de Joseph (Gn 37-50) en lien avec une tentative de paix authentique au Sri Lanka. De façon générale, une paix authentique est un phénomène rare en dehors des limites de groupes restreints. Les conflits tendent à s'aggraver, au point d'atteindre le niveau de conflits armés en contexte de pauvreté. Ils s'accompagnent souvent d'économies de guerre dont profitent ultimement les riches. Le Sri Lanka pourrait obtenir une paix durable si une solidarité pouvait être créée parmi les dépossédés des diverses ethnies. Gn 37-50 révèle quatre défis à la paix au Sri Lanka : 1) constituer Benjamin ou créer une solidarité parmi les dépossédés ; 2) souligner l'importance de la fraternité/sororité pour la survie de la nation menacée par les économies politiques existantes qui bénéficient à l'élite nationale et globale ; 3) comprendre la paix comme renonciation ; et 4) comprendre et manifester le pardon.

Abstract

This article presents a Sri Lankan hermeneutic of the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) in relation to grassroots peacemaking in Sri Lanka. On a global scale, peacemaking at the grassroots level is a rare phenomenon outside of the confines of small groups. Conflicts are often aggravated and even reach the point of armed struggles due to conditions of dispossession. These eventually lead to war economies which are ultimately beneficial to the rich. Sri Lanka could achieve sustainable peace if solidarity could be created among the dispossessed of the ethnic divide. Genesis 37-50 reveals four challenges to peacemaking in Sri Lanka, namely, (i) constituting Benjamin or creating solidarity among the dispossessed of the ethnic divide, (ii) highlighting the importance of brotherhood/sisterhood for the survival of the nation which is jeopardized by the existing economic policies which are beneficial to the national and global elite, (iii) understanding peace as renunciation, and (iv) understanding and interpreting forgiveness.