

## Humanist, Scholar, Priest

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Most people in Ceylon today remember Thani Nayagam as an ardent advocate of the Tamil cause. They may not know the primal sources of this advocacy. For this it would be necessary to make a careful study of his writings on Tamil culture in general and on the National Question in particular. Such a study shows that he became an ardent advocate of the Tamil cause for the basic and over-riding reason that he was an ardent humanist. He was not a sectarian. He was never a chauvinist. His range of vision was not a narrow one. He was dedicated first and last to all that makes human beings human. Intellectually, culturally, even emotionally, Father Thani was an internationalist. He felt he was heir to all the human cultures of this multi-cultural land and he felt deeply when one of its cultures was threatened. It happened to be the one to which he as a Tamil had a special claim. He saw it as a claim not only to love the Tamil culture, but also to protect and promote it.

"Every Ceylonese should admit that because the Sinhala language is spoken only in Ceylon and because excessive bilingualism may prove detrimental to the interests of Sinhala culture, the Sinhala language and culture need special protection and encouragement. But must these protective measures be achieved....by the violation and confiscation of the national and official status of the Tamil language?", he asked in May 1956, the fateful month which preceded the presentation in Parliament of the Sinhala only language bill.

During the same period he wrote: "A last appeal may be made to the MEP (ruling party) leaders not to place the party before the country, and its stability, progress and unity.." And, prophetically, he continued: "To imagine that the Tamil-speaking population will gradually accept the measure is wishful thinking. History does not offer even one such example of a people accepting a language imposed against its own will".

In 1956 Father Thani took his stand with all the Tamils in the country who not only thought that the country was one but who were not even able to think that it could ever in modern times be more than one. By 1976 the situation had deteriorated and the Tamils were asking for a separate state. By then Father Thani had retired through ill-health from the hurly-burly of publications and public life. There is therefore no written record of what he thought about the demand for Eelam.

We can only surmise. His specialization was not politics. One does not know whether he would have subscribed to the view of political scientists that a national



minority has the right to self-determination, extendable even to secession. But as one who knew Father Thani since 1945 I know that a division of the country would have caused him infinite pain.

He once said that he regretted that, owing to the circumstances of his professional career, he did not have numerous friends among the Sinhalese. Yet, there are several evidences in his writings not only of his knowledge but also of his deep admiration and reverence for Sinhala Buddhist culture.

Never at home in the field of political struggle, Father Thani would never have wanted to be considered a radical and would have resented the charge of extremism. Yet, there is enough proof that his fundamental options were for the victims of injustice and oppression. Let us briefly adduce some evidence in two areas.

He was against caste and class discrimination. In *Pædagogica Historica* an international journal of the history of education, he wrote approvingly in 1963, referring to Buddhism: "The monastic systems, on the contrary, discouraged in the entrants pride of birth and station, and were egalitarian....of the early Buddhist monks and nuns, about one-tenth were from the lower classes".

He would have been a supporter of any demand for the equal rights of women. He wrote in 1968 that a great deal of religious literature concerning the nature and character of women reflected the views of ascetic male celibates whose self-repression and lack of "gentile humanism" in his own gentle manner he castigated.

His humanism rested on the twin bedrock of an amiable personality and the highest standards of scholarship. After humanistic and philosophical studies he took his Doctorate in Divinity with the highest distinction in Rome in 1939 at the age of 26, his M.A. and M.Litt. in Tamil language and literature at Annamalai University, then a Doctorate in Education in London. For eight years until 1960 he was a lecturer in the Department of Education at Peradeniya. Between 1961 and 1969 he was Professor of Indian Studies and Head of the Department at the University of Malaya. For two years there he was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. His lecture tours as well as his research activities took him round the world. He was in the line of great priests and monks of our time and of every time who have immersed themselves in the secular because to them the secular was suffused with the sacred.

Throughout his successful career Father Thani remained a priest. He saw his mission as a priest completely integrated with his deep humanism and his dedication to knowledge and truth. If he will be remembered by most for having revealed to his contemporaries the human face of language and literature, only a few will know, even among his brother priests, that in that human face he had seen another—which he also wanted to reveal—the human face of God.

— Fr Paul Caspersz S. J.