

# Rienzie Perera, Sri Lanka

Jo-Ann Q. Maglipon

When the programme says Sri Lankan Rienzie Perera, research director of the Life and Peace Institute in Sweden, is in the WACC 2001 Congress to provide "another perspective," it would be right to. Perera does not seem overly concerned with the road already taken. Clearly, he does not concern himself with finding new ways of retelling comfortable tenets.

Instead, his concern is the alternative route: the byways to examining belief, the business of upsetting certainties, the thoughtful look at the nuances of faith.

He talks, for instance, about a case study on the clergy of Argentina which concluded that the church hierarchy has blessed the murder of subversives. On the premise, presumably, that subversives created discord and kept the country in strife. To this, Perera objects strongly: "A church in alliance with the dominant culture continues the oppression and denies the gospel."

He goes on to say that there are strong theological reasons for the Argentine clergy even to refuse to endorse amnesty for military offenders seeking forgiveness but offering no repentance. As one brave bishop who refused to put down his signature said: "How could I have signed behind the backs of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo?"

Perera puts it another way: "How could a church claiming to be the body of Christ whose center is a broken and crucified man side with the powers who mutilate?"

However, he stops short of saying that religion can be used as ideology. He warns against it, in fact. Although unfleshed out in his brief speech, ideology, as he sees it, throws religion in a dangerous arena where truth may be more difficult to discern. In his words: "Ideology makes it difficult to see the golden calf."

Meantime in Europe, he says, comes another test of faith. This is the test of memory, of remembering that not so long ago they needed to flee to survive and that borders opened to give them room. Yet, says he: "In Europe today, there is no room in the inn for others." He suggests that Europeans, faced with asylum seekers for instance, remember the words: "Do this in memory of me."

The point leads him to say that justice, peace, and reconciliation are indeed at the center of the mission of the church. But more than that, he says, the faithful have to remember that this is a "costly mission that must be sustained by risk-taking spirituality." The costs include knowing that Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka today remain suspicious of Christians whose presence, they say, remind them of three Ms: Missionary, Military, Mercenary. And so knowing, must have the humility to accept that huge work remains if the discipleship should be carried out. The costs also include remembering that Christians have erred tragically on many occasions during the Crusades, against the Indians, against Galileo, and more. And so remembering, must know how to say: "Forgive us."