

## **Aloysius Pieris S.J. (1934-2026): A Personal Appreciation and Obituary: written for the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies**

**Elizabeth J. Harris**

Aloysius Pieris, or Fr. Aloy, as many knew him, died at 6.00 a.m. Sri Lankan time on 22 March 2026, after a long period of increasing weakness and illness. He died, as he would have wished, at Tulana, the centre he founded in 1974 to facilitate discerning action (the meaning of the world 'tulana'), research and interreligious encounter, particularly with Buddhism. He would have been 92 on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April. During his life, face-to-face and through his writings, he touched the lives of thousands, as mentor, pastor, teacher, friend, academic adviser, indologist, liberation theologian and humanitarian.

Fr. Aloy was a mentor to me for forty years. In 1986, I arrived in Sri Lanka, as a Christian, to study Buddhism at the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies (PIPBS), funded by the World Council of Churches. I sought not only to have dialogue with Buddhism but to enter it so that I could see the world through Buddhist eyes. I went to Fr. Aloy for advice and he helped me to have confidence in what I was doing. I later learned that he had done something similar, when, as a young Jesuit who was fluent in Latin and Pali, he had completed a doctorate in Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka, learning at the feet of Buddhist teachers - the first Sri Lankan Roman Catholic priest to have done such a thing. He had also stayed incognito at a Buddhist *vihāra* (monastery/temple) and had been mistaken for a former Buddhist monk, because he spoke Pali with such ease. So, when, for instance, I shared with him that something was being broken within me, as I sought to let go of God-centred meditation in order to practice Buddhist methods, he responded, 'To walk through the desert without fear is to be truly a Christian'.

These words are still a source of inspiration. In 1988, after I had completed a Master's in Buddhist Studies, Fr. Aloy asked me to be his research assistant. Between 1988 and 1990, I went to Tulana almost daily and became part of the community there. During this time, he encouraged me to start a doctorate on the encounter between the British and Buddhism in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka, which had fuelled a form of Buddhist revivalism predicated on anti-Christian sentiment. He was convinced that research into this period, building on the work of scholars such as Kitsiri Malalgoda, was essential, if the level of mistrust that he and other Christians had encountered from Buddhists was to be understood. For instance, Fr. Aloy

had once been asked by a Buddhist, ‘Will you be another Spence Hardy?’ Revd. Robert Spence Hardy (1803-1868) was a Wesleyan Methodist missionary in Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century, who had accepted the hospitality of *vihāras* and translated Sinhala Buddhist texts, with the sole purpose of undermining Buddhism. I completed the doctorate in 1993 at the PIPBS, Fr. Aloy was then chosen as one of my examiners. I can safely say that I owe to Fr. Aloy the rest of my life as an academic.

I would not claim for myself any special status because of this. I was just one of the many people whom Fr. Aloy mentored, taught and inspired, with care, humour and an ‘impish’ (a word used of Aloy after his death by Darshan Ambalavanar) enthusiasm. All those who walked through the arches of Tulana’s central room were embraced with welcome and acceptance. Fr. Aloy would give time to all who came, even though he might have writing deadlines to meet. During the ethnic war and times of political repression, this extended to giving sanctuary to those who feared for their lives.

The material reality of Tulana - its stone, clay, water, books, art and greenness – embodied Fr. Aloy’s life and vision, and was almost an extension of his personality. In 1986, I wrote in an unpublished diary:

[Tulana’s] roofs, its mellow walls and its contours remind me of a temple. I found myself walking around it with a sense of reverence. There is an appreciation of beauty down to the last detail. Leaves and petals are sketched into the stone of the pathways around the newly built library and meditation room. Facing the door of the meditation room is a wooden elephant, perhaps three feet high. It carries a carved mother with her child. She is both madonna and female bodhisattva, as she sits, legs crossed, in lotus position, with the child pressed against her, as if part of her body [...]. To cross into the library, one steps across a rainwater pool, placing one’s foot on a circular stone, which hints of the lotus. (*Where Faiths Touch*, unpublished diary for 1986-1987)

Much has happened to Tulana since 1986, under the direction of Fr. Aloy. Three libraries developed, including an air-conditioned space for the antiquarian collection of the eminent historian, Simon Gregory Perera S.J. (1883-1950), which was both a source of pride and concern for Fr. Aloy, after the disappearance of a few priceless items. A conference facility was built and the whole complex was filled with works of art that visually communicate the spirituality and theology behind Fr. Aloy’s academic writings. In the late 1980s, for instance,

when two civil wars, one in the north and one in the south, were killing a generation of young people, the Buddhist artist, Kingsley Gunatilleke, created a Pietà on a grassy slope beyond the kitchen. The figure of Mary holds the dead body of her son, but she is also Mother Lanka carrying the broken bodies of dead Sri Lankan youth. Behind them, a tank and a cobra-shaped lamppost meet in a cross. Interpreting this, Fr Aloy wrote:

The lamppost has taken the shape of a cobra, a symbol of a dangerous force that can be tamed. Legend has it that a cobra coiled beneath the Buddha to keep him from the mud and covered him with its hood to protect him from the rain. Buddha's policy was one of taming perilous forces rather than antagonizing them. Youth militancy (Tamil as well as Sinhalese) represents a dangerous force that can serve Mother Lanka if its demands for justice are met. But state terrorism can never be tamed (Pieris 1996: 136).

Also by Gunatilleke is a baked clay mural in the main entrance room that depicts Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem, questioning his elders. These elders not only include Moses, but also the Buddha, Mahavira, Krishna, LaoTse, Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and unsung woman teachers. Perhaps more than any other piece of art at Tulana, it expressed Fr. Aloy's vision of our religious quest in a multi-religious word. He commented:

The whole history of human search for truth and freedom is a sacred temple in which the Word is being formed in the exchanges of many holy and learned people who have served humankind with their sacred findings. It is a dialogue in the Spirit.

Here we have the finest thesis on the primacy of the Word over the church and also on the nature of the Word as something/someone growing. (Pieris, *Fire and Water* 1996: 137).

Many hours of conversation between Pieris and Gunatilleke preceded the execution of these works of art. The same was true of those by the Buddhist monastic artist, Ven. Hatigamma Uttarananda, including one of Jesus washing the feet of his followers, placed in an Asian setting. At Tulana, all the works of art on Christian themes are by Buddhist artists and all the works on Buddhist themes are by Christian artists. This was no mere coincidence; it embodied Fr Aloy's conviction that Buddhists could help Christians see more clearly what was important in their faith in a form of symbiosis. There was, however, one condition: that those involved in this dialogue through art should be open to what Fr. Aloy called the

‘Unspoken Speaker’ – the Word that was embodied in those who were the victims of the powerful. For Fr. Aloy, interreligious dialogue about ultimate truth had no real value, unless it had an impact on the poor of the earth.

At one point, I asked Fr. Aloy what kept him within Christianity. ‘A God who identifies with the poor’ was his answer. The victims of the greed and violence of others were, for him, the body of Christ, and they were mainly non-Christians. And those who were closest to God, whether they were Christian or not, were those who did what God was interested in, namely the empowering of the poor and the victimised. The corollary of this was that the Christian Churches, if they were to be free from greed and patterns of domination, needed to be evangelised by the poor, not vice versa. These convictions meant that, toward the end of his life, when Sri Lanka was facing economic crisis and people in the vicinity of Tulana were suffering, he refused to have needed repairs done to the fabric of Tulana or to undergo expensive medical tests himself; any spare money had to be given to those who were in need of food.

Numerous doctorates have been written on Fr. Aloy’s thought and work. Numerous people have heard him lecture when he travelled throughout the world as a Visiting Professor. Three collections of his articles were published by Orbis in the 1980s and 1990s, through the agency of Paul Knitter (*An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 1988; *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, 1998; *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity*, 1996). Publishing books in the West, however, stopped for Fr. Aloy after he found, on a visit to Europe, that he couldn’t afford to buy his own works. Thereafter, he preferred to publish in Sri Lanka, through Tulana Publications or the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue in Colombo. In the early years of this century, he wrote prolifically in Indology and Christian spirituality but primarily for a local readership. His outputs included: *God’s Reign for God’s Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula*, 1998; *Mysticism of Service*, 2000; *Studies in the Philosophy and Literature of Pāli Ābhidhammika Buddhism*, 2004; *Prophetic Humour in Buddhism and Christianity: Doing Inter-Religious Studies in the Reverential Mode*, 2005; *Give Vatican II a Chance*, 2010; *The Genesis of an Asian Theology of Liberation: an Autobiographical Excursus on the Art of Theologizing in Asia*, 2013; *A monograph on the Cardiac Theory of Consciousness and Body-Mind Relationship in Post-Canonical Pāli Scholasticism*, 2024, and *Mind and Matter in Buddhist Epistemology* (2024). In addition to these, throughout his life, he wrote numerous articles. A felicitation volume

published in 2004 for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday listed 170, discounting translations into languages other than English.

Within this vast output, most particularly his expertise in Buddhist Abhidhamma, there is much for scholars to grapple with in the future. For me, however, the life of Fr. Aloy leaps beyond his academic thought, however profound its influence has been and will be. For instance, one of the activities Fr Aloy was most proud of in his life was his collaboration with Sr Greta Nalawatte, a Sister of Perpetual Help, in the founding of the Centre for Education for Hearing Impaired Children (CEHIC) in Dalugama, close to Tulana. He co-chaired the Board of CEHIC with a Buddhist monk. Education was given free to the children, many of whom were poor and Buddhist. Sr. Greta's auditory-verbal methods were focussed on enabling the children to become fully integrated into the national school system up to and including university level. The school became a beacon of such education. Finding money to pay the teachers, however, involved a constant journey of faith for Fr. Aloy, necessitating last-minute appeals to friends when the funds ran low.

Fr. Aloy had a capacity for friendship across religions that was second to none. He could move into the language and idioms of Buddhism as though they were his own, whilst remaining firmly rooted in his Christian faith. Faith in a God who sided with both the poor and those who embraced voluntary poverty sustained him and the Tulana community through the darkest times of Sri Lanka's history. Three memories come to me as I finish this appreciation of a remarkable man. The first is worship at Tulana during the ethnic war, when Psalm 23 was said every day as the prayer of the community because of the threats it faced, followed, almost paradoxically, by lightness, laughter and a glass of wine if it was available. The second is Fr. Aloy's delight in teaching the young, particularly Jesuits in formation, some of whom would come each week to Tulana for instruction. His very being would come alive in this context, as he weaved a theology that would equip the young to be truly Christian in a Buddhist environment. The third is my last conversation with him in February 2026. He was weak, chafing against the catheter he was wearing, but he was completely lucid. He spoke of truly moving into retirement, of saying 'No' to future requests for interviews, writing and new research. Sadly, this retirement was not given to him; he lived only a few more weeks. I wish he could have had longer.

Thank you, Fr. Aloy, for all you gave in your life. Thousands around the world are in your debt.