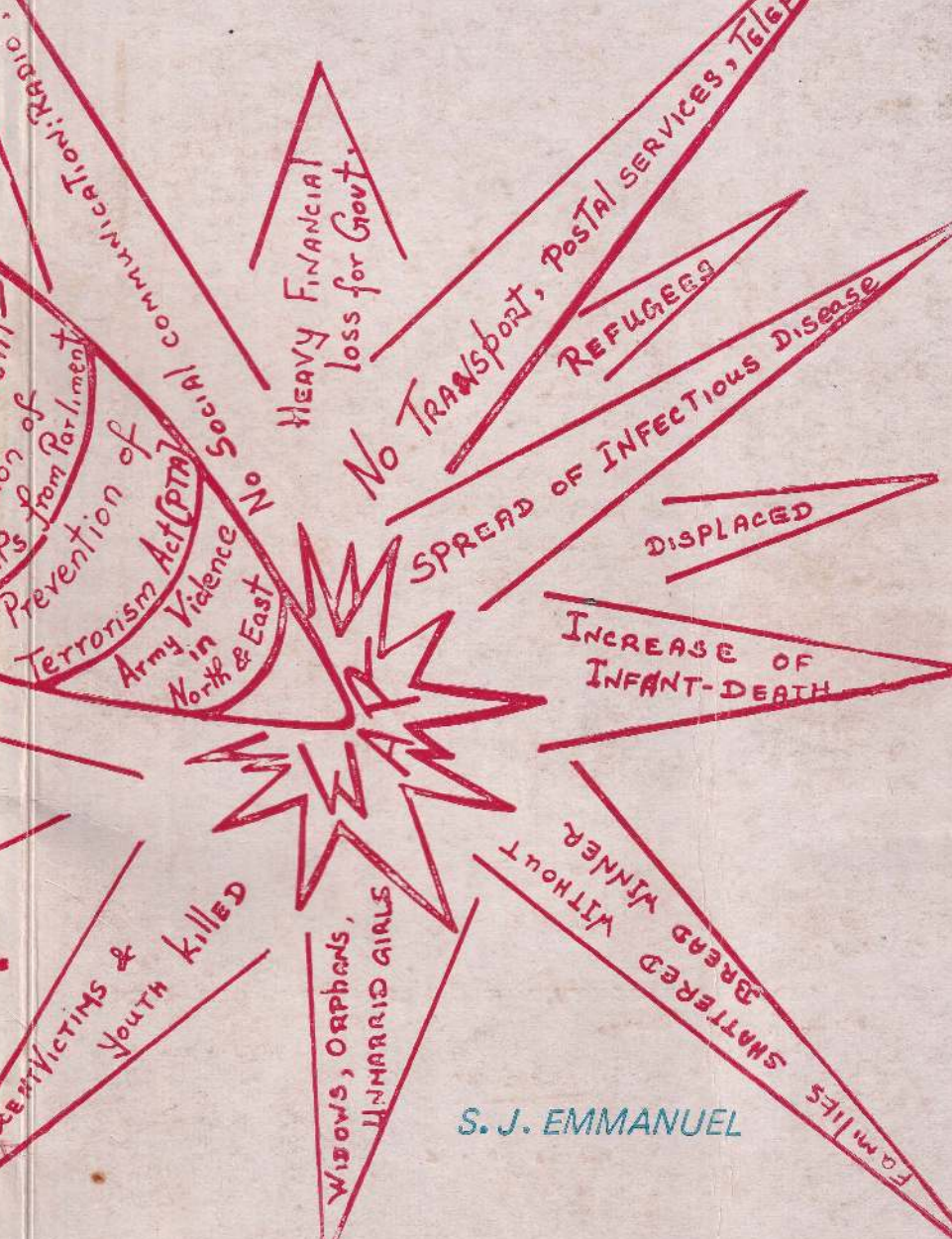


# Church, Politics & War in Shri Lanka

(THEOLOGISING CONTEXTUALLY AMIDST A WAR)



S. J. EMMANUEL

*When I give food to the poor, they call me a Saint.  
When I ask why the poor do not have their food, they call me  
a Communist.*

— Dom Helder Camera

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to  
my beloved mother  
whose death was hastened  
by the embargo on proper food  
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# CHURCH, POLITICS & WAR

## IN SHRI LANKA

(THEOLOGISING CONTEXTUALLY AMIDST A WAR)

BY

S. J. EMMANUEL

## PREFACE

**S**hri Lanka, the honored pearl of the Indian Ocean, is a beautiful island with attractions for a variety of people from all over the world. It has immense potentialities for a peaceful living of different races, religions and cultures and of becoming an Asian model for harmonious living together of all heterogeneous realities.

But leaders of all colours and shades have ruined it. Selfish colonial masters, communal and self-seeking politicians, Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalists, non-prophetic Church leaders and many others could be blamed. But laying blame will neither build nor pave the way towards unity and peace.

A sane and sensible review of the events of the last five decades, a courageous and sincere acceptance of our mistakes and a genuine change of heart are urgently needed to avert disaster on this isle of Paradise. Prophetic and courageous leaders must emerge from all sectors of life in this country and converge into a new leadership for unity and peace.

For the Christians, to understand correctly their envious position in the country and to play their strategic role for unity and peace in the island, a shift in theological thinking is indispensable, especially for the leaders. This modest contribution is meant to promote that shift.

My sincere gratitude goes to Bishop D. J. Ambalavanar for kindly consenting to write a forward to this tract. Besides being an able Christian leader in Jaffna for over two decades, he has shared the sufferings of the people in their struggle, and has remained a courageous spokesman here and abroad for the just cause of the Tamils. He was the most competent for the task. May God raise such Christian leaders among us.

My gratitude goes also to the printers, designers and block-makers who worked under very difficult conditions in Jaffna.

**S. J. Emmanuel**

19-03-1994

St. Francis Xavier's Seminary,  
Columbuthurai,  
Jaffna - Shri Lanka.



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## FORWARD

I am happy to write a brief Forward to this excellent Theological Tract for our Times written by one of the ablest minds produced by the Catholic Church of Shri Lanka.

Father S. J. Emmanuel has been a theological educator for the greater part of his life. He is now the Rector of St. Francis Xavier's Catholic Major Seminary in Jaffna and Vicar General of the R. C. Diocese of Jaffna, combining in himself the role of a theologian and churchman. This unique combination equips him admirably to write not from an ivory tower but from the perspective of one deeply involved and in solidarity with the struggle of the Tamil People.

As I write these words, I see the headlines of the local papers reporting the death of four innocent civilians killed by army shells that hit Jaffna Town on the 15th of March 1991. The killing of innocent civilians, it is claimed, cannot be avoided in a military operation. To the Tamils in the North, this has become a common occurrence and just one more event in the ongoing Government programme of deprivation, devastation, destruction and death directed against them. The Government now seems to have turned its war machine with increasing ferocity and deadly efficacy against the innocent civilians.

The people however, seem to have learnt to brace their loins and steel their wills and face all this with a quiet confidence if not a defiant courage. What is amazing is not so much their confidence or the courage as much as their firm resolve, **"We can be destroyed but we will not be conquered."**

The Pharaohs and Herods of this world, when their power is threatened, will not hesitate to kill even innocent babies. But it is from the matrix of such slaughter of the innocents that deliverance comes — through a babe in a basket of bulrushes or a babe in the arms of young mother fleeing with her husband as refugees.



From helplessness and hopelessness help comes. Have not Christians believed that from a grave, the ultimate as a locus of helplessness and hopelessness help comes? The Bible events are not of the remote past but are a present reality to all of us. We see charming and lovable young Sinhala lads asked to don their uniforms and sent into a Tamil village to bulldoze hundreds of houses and eliminate the population. We then glimpse a little of the meaning of the words spoken, when paid soldiers were carrying out the order of their superiors, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Father Emmauel is trying to help the Christian Church in this country, and more particularly Tamil Christians, to discern the spiritual realities of the ethnic conflict as the Tamil people, with their historic memory, struggle to reaffirm their national identity and to rediscover the soul of their community,

He identifies three theological trends which have informed Christians in this country in trying to understand and interpret the political conflicts – Church - theology, State - theology and Prophetic - theology. He dismisses the first two as irrelevant and escapist and opts for the prophetic-theology approach. "The Church is built", he writes 'not exclusively on the Apostles and their successors. It is built on the Apostles and Prophets and their successors.'

The temptation for the Church in this situation, he sees, is to remain an institution for compassion and relief or be content with prayers and good-will visits. "Prayer", he says, "is an indispensable part of Christian life and an eloquent expression of man's inability and his dependence on God. But when it becomes a form of escapism from facing challenges or responding to duties, it degenerates one's religion." Father Emmanuel would rather see the Church as the avant-garde of the community spear-heading the people's struggle informed by a truly contextual theology – a theology while rooted in the Word of the Bible also listens to the new Word God speaks today through the bomb-blasts of the War, a theology which

(iii)

emerges from a solidarity and oneness with those suffering and struggling, a theology which through the eyes of faith reads the meaning of the events of our time.

Father Bernard Lonergan, a great Catholic theologian once said, "the Church always arrives on the scene a little breathless and a little late." Father Emmanuel in the exercise of his arduous theological task may be "a little breathless", but he can never be accused of being late. This is a most timely exercise for which Christians and the entire Tamil people will remain grateful. Contextual theology, It has been said, is confronting the headliness of the newspapers with the headlines of the Gospel. This is precisely what Father Emmanuel has attempted in this tract and I would warmly commend it to our people here and abroad. For Church leaders in this country it must be a required reading.

(Sgd.) ✠ **D. J. Ambalavanar**

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19-03-1994

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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction :*      **THEOLOGIZING THE ETHNIC WAR**

#### **1.0 The Unique Relation of the Church to the Ethnic War**

There is an unjust and senseless war going on in the North and East of Shri Lanka for more than three years between the Government Forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (L. T. T. E). Though some government leaders claim this war to be against Tamil terrorism, it is actually a late stage and a new phase in the long deterioration of ethnic relations between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils.

The Church in Shri Lanka, composed of both the Sinhalese and the Tamils, cannot distance herself from the war. On the contrary, by her unique composition of membership, she is called to play a key role in mediating for unity and peace. Whether she likes it or not, she has had a part in the long deterioration of ethnic relations, both by commission and much more by omission. In the midst of a war that is consuming enormous amount of lives and property, she is urgently called to play her unique and strategic role for peace in the country. Whether she will play that role well is an open question.

Though imported and shaped by foreign missionaries under a colonial government, she still enjoyed the strategy and potential to build up a new united nation of Shri Lanka. But unfortunately her minority-complex, passivity and apolitical stance vis-a-vis the post-independent ethnic injustices, discriminations and racial riots almost amounted to indifference that helped extremist political elements to have their way. At this hour of national crisis, when she is awakened, if not shocked, by the deaths and disasters of the war, she needs

to become courageously prophetic. Then only she can assume her true place in the country as well as play a meaningful role in bringing justice and peace to the country.

As to what role, and to what extent she can play that role at the present moment, will be determined by the understanding she has of her present position amidst the multiracial multireligious population of the country as well as by her prophetic potential for sociopolitical involvement in Shri Lanka.

A study of her reactions and responses, at various stages of the deterioration of the ethnic problem into the present war as well as of the devastating effects of the war, will show the theology operative within this Church. A further step and a closer look will also recognize the birth of new theological trends out of the disasters of the war.

**1. 1. Though claimed to be a war against Terrorism, in fact it has become a total throttling of life in the North.**

Long before we reached the present stage of a war between the State Armed Forces and the LTTE, there were several other stages of the one ethnic problem. Only as a consequence of the denial of the democratic rights of the Tamils by the Government and a cruel suppression of all democratic protests of Tamils by the State Armed Forces (since 1956), there was born a Tamil armed struggle against the State Forces (1983).

The Government mismanaging the ethnic war merely as a problem of terrorism has strayed out of bounds to hit innocent civilian population. Against all its pious protestations and even against its claim of sending some essential items by ships, the Government has imposed inhuman restrictions on the life of the whole Tamil population in the North. Though the Government tries to justify its actions as meant to liberate the Tamils from the LTTE terrorists, it is in fact killing and



destroying innocent civilians and their properties much more than any Tiger cadres or their camps. This attempt to kill mosquitoes with a hammer makes the war to be totally destructive against the whole civilian population living in the North.

On the other hand, the LTTE fighting the attacks of the State Forces both on the borders of the Tamil region as well as on the civilian population, has built itself up militarily and politically to become the guardian and spokesman of the Tamil population. The Government may win a war by wiping away some more Tamil lives and property, but that victory will bring only the peace of the graveyard. Having evolved slowly with convictions and after sacrificing as many as six thousand Tigers and many more thousands of civilians, the Tamil protest - both militant and otherwise - will not subside easily.

## 1. 2. Causal and Consequential Realities around the War

With the war as the present centre and focal point of our attention and reflection, there are those sociopolitical and economic realities and events which were both remote and immediate causes of the war. We can label them all with the title - **causal realities**. Similarly there are those horrifying realities and events which have come as a result of the war. We can call them **consequential realities**. These two sets of realities can be pictured as sets of concentric semicircles - one parachuting slowly and landing (convergently) into the war, and the other, blasting off like a bomb (diverging from the war) damaging many, if not all, sectors of life in the North and East.

The "causal semicircles" help us to understand gradually the sociopolitical decisions and events that lead the country by the garden path into this senseless war. At each stage towards the descent to war, the decisions and events were mostly maneuvered by self seeking politicians and narrow minded fanatics out of the unscrupulous masses. Whenever

these stages erupted into racial violence against the Tamils, the Church with an apolitical attitude and distance, expressed sorrow, condemned violence and busied herself with obtaining compassionate relief for the victims from foreign agencies.

The "consequential semicircles" help us to understand how the war has blasted a whole population, mostly the Tamils, into a broken and wounded one. The visible effects of this war - the number of deaths and the value of properties destroyed - are a small fraction compared to the invisible and longstanding effects of this war on the surviving population - especially on the Tamil side.

Though many are thirsting for Peace in various ways for their own interest, the Tamils of the Northeast, who are the most affected by the war, have begun to read the New Word of God heard out of the devastations of the War and see New Signs which make up a new liberation - design for them.

### 1.3. Theologizing Contextually

In attempting to theologize contextually the political and ecclesial realities of Sri Lanka towards the war, and the liberation realities for the Tamils from out of the war, we propose to do three things :-

- i) to give an over - view of decisive political and ecclesial events of the last five decades in the country. This will help situate the ethnic problem and the subsequent war in Sri Lanka.
- ii) to identify and critically evaluate the theological trends that have been and are still operative within the Church of Sri Lanka with regard to the ethnic problem and the ethnic war.
- and iii) to spell out the theological thinking that is slowly emerging, especially among the Tamil Christians, out of the unjust and inhuman sufferings of the war.



## CHAPTER II

### OVERVIEW OF RECENT DECISIVE POLITICAL AND ECCLESIAL EVENTS

#### 2. 1. The Two Races of One Country

Shri Lanka has been for over 20 centuries the home of Sinhalese and Tamils - two ethnic groups with clearly two different languages and cultures. These two groups must have descended from the North and South of India respectively. The 65000 Sq. Km island records a history of many wars between the Sinhala and the Tamil kingdoms and of many invasions from the South of India even into the central parts of the island. It was only under the colonial powers, especially the British, that the educated sections of the two ethnic groups were brought together under one government and made to work together, if not live together, as one people, with English as the link - language.

#### 2. 2. The Two Major Religions

Already three centuries before Christ, Buddhism was brought into Shri Lanka from India by Mahinda and Sangamitta, children of Emperor Asoka. Since then the country has proudly preserved a pure form of the religion against foreign invasions and also sent missionaries to propagate Buddhism in other parts of the world. Being the religion of the majority Sinhalese, it always enjoyed a privileged place in the time of the Sinhala Kings. The Buddhist Kings and monks did yeomen service for the growth and development of the Sinhala language.

Nearly a fifth of the population were Tamils who lived mostly in the North and East of the country for not less than 20 centuries. They were overwhelmingly Hindus. History records that some Hindu Tamil Kings of South India were engaged in battles against the Buddhist Sinhala Kings of South Shri Lanka

and have also invaded certain parts of the Sinhala territory. Although as religions, they both share shrines all over the island and celebrate festivals in which believers of both religions mingle peacefully with one another, still these earlier Tamil-Hindu invasions have left some sort of fear, especially among the Buddhist monks, that the privileged place due to Buddhism will be adversely affected by any concession of power to the Tamils.

Into this racially and religiously mixed population came Islam, through commercial travellers from South India, and Christianity much later, through Portuguese colonialism of the 16th century. The Muslims were largely Tamil speaking and settled mostly along the North and East coasts and also, for commercial motives, in larger towns like Colombo, Kalutara, Kandy, Ratnapura and Puttalam. Christians on the other hand were mostly in the coastal areas and in larger towns.

### **2. 3. The Church in Shri Lanka**

After an initial growth under the protection and help of the colonial power, for about 150 Years, the Catholic Church went through a period of persecution under the Dutch for about a century. During this period, came the Dutch Reformed and other Protestant churches into the country. But it was only under the British, who followed the Dutch, there was sufficient freedom for all the missionaries to build and equip their own churches, as well as their institutions for educational, charitable and health services. These institutions enjoyed foreign support and privileges from the colonial powers to the envy of the majority Buddhists and Hindus.

### **2. 4. Post-independence Christianity**

In 1948 when the island became independent from the British, Christians, mostly Catholics, counted a good 8% (Buddhists 65% Hindus 18%, Moslems 7%) out of a population of 6 million. But their overall influence in the country was far above

this percentage. The reason for this excessive influence was largely due to the witness of service given in educational and charitable institutions run by them. The Buddhists and the Hindus, who went through Christian institutions, came out as the leaders of the young and independent nation. They were all grateful to the social and charitable apostolate done by the Christians, but they still considered Christianity as a foreign religion of the West.

## 2.5. British Colonialism and the Administrative Unity of Shri Lanka

The British left behind them, not only some good things like the English language, parliamentary democracy, education and roads but also the seeds for some national problems. The insecurity for the minorities they brought together under one colonial administration, as well as the poor foundation for any economic development and employment for the youth of the country, were some major ones.

Unlike their Portuguese and Dutch predecessors, the British were successful in bringing even the last of the Kingdoms - the Kandyan Kingdom - within one colonial administration of Ceylon (as Shri Lanka was then called). With Colombo as capital, and the country divided into provinces, they administered the country under one Governor in Colombo.

Thus the colonial government was an administrative unity, which brought together the English educated Sinhala and Tamil government servants from the deep South as well as from the furthest North, to work together for one centralized colonial government in Colombo. Besides these families of government servants, there were also people with commercial interests settled in and around Colombo. The capital city and its suburbs with its multiracial and multireligious population, linked by English and other professional interests, was the model of an artificial administrative unity in Shri Lanka, imposed by common loyalties profession and commerce. The rest of the country, less affected



by a colonial administration, was continuing a life as was in the kingdoms, separated according to regions, language, culture and religion.

Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake, who later became the Prime Minister and architect of the "Sinhala Only Act", realised well as a young politician that the two communities will never merge and said,

"If they consider past history, they would see that these communities, the Tamils, the low-country Sinhalese and the Kandyan Sinhalese, have lived for over thousand years and have not shown any tendencies to merge. They preserved their customs, their language and their religion. He would be a rash man who would pin his faith on the gradual disappearance of these differences." (Morning Leader, July 17, 1926 and Sunday Times, Oct-3-1993).

Hence the administrative and professional unity, a lifestyle, lived only in the Colombo region and among the English educated, should not be thought of as a deep-rooted and long established unity of two races with potentials for merging into one nation-state!

Already fearing an attempt on the part of the majority Sinhalese to subsume the minority Tamils as a subordinate partner to their nation state, few years before independence and more clearly on the eve of the departure of the British, the Tamil leaders wanted from the British a constitutional assurance for their rights as minorities. But unfortunately this was not provided for in the Donoughmore or Soulbury Constitution left behind by the British.

A century of centralized colonial administration (1815-1947) and a limited unity experienced among the Christians and the English educated Colombo citizens have deceived the post-independent government and its politicians to presume the administrative unity as a unity of the nation state. Even today some Colombo based leaders are arguing about a (myth) nostalgic

unity, while a section of Buddhist monks and political fanatics ignorant of the long history of Tamil Kings and Kingdoms beat their drums even about an integrity and sovereignty of Shri Lanka.

## 2. 6. Birth of a New Political Era

Soon after independence, there was an understandable surge of nationalism, very much among the majority Buddhists. The then ruling party - United National Party (UNP) - was seen as a pro-western party of the elite and the rich, pleasing to the departing colonial master, but not expressing sufficiently the aspirations of the Sinhala Buddhist masses. Hence a break-away group from this party, under the leadership of Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake gave birth to the Shri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

These two parties found hardly any support among the Tamils who live in the North and East of Shri Lanka. There were a few pro-western Tamil leaders, who for their own power wanted a colonial type of administrative unity, and accepted ministerial posts from these parties.

But by and large, the Tamils had their own political parties the Tamil Congress and the Federal Party - which were exclusively for the liberation of the Tamils from the oppressions inflicted by the majority-Sinhalese. They were the watchdogs of the Tamils against the discrimination inflicted on them by the government in the matter of development, education, employment etc. All along they were fighting these discriminations from the opposition benches and hardly any development worth mentioning was done in the North and East of the country.

## 2. 7. Birth of New National Problems

With the subsiding of the post-independence euphoria, the new political parties and their leaders were drawn into problems related to a new democratic government. They set out plans

and manifestos for consolidating their independence from the colonial powers and to steer towards development and economic independence. With a false sense of nationalism combined with a political immaturity, they presumed national unity and underrated the problems of the minorities.

The immature political leadership of the first parliament gave no importance and thought to the long and drawn out historical feuds between the different races, religions and their kingdoms in this country. Without weighing the pros and cons of a multiracial and multireligious existence in this country, they presumed that the administrative unity that was operative under the British for a few decades to be strong enough to be the backbone of this young and developing country.

## **2. 71. Sinhala Only Act – Sinhala Separatism**

The SLFP swept to power in 1956 with a popular but communalistic slogan promising Sinhala to be made the ONLY official language of the country in 24 hours. In spite of the unanimous protest of all Tamil members of parliament and the consequent riots against the Tamils, the government bulldozed its way to make Sinhala as the Only official language of Sri Lanka. This was the beginning of Sinhala Separatism in Sri Lanka. It led to much discrimination against the Tamils and the consequent racial riots for the next four decades and over. One leftist member quipped then in Parliament “with two languages we have had one nation, but with one language, we are bound to have two separate nations.” The wisdom of this saying is not yet clear to our leaders even after four decades of death and destruction! Long before the Tamils in desperation and after decades of living together, called for a separate state, the Sinhala Only Act sowed the seeds of separation among the majority community.

## **2. 72 Discrimination of Tamils in Education and Employment**

Another national problem that was hatched already during the British period, and became much detrimental to the Tamils, was the economy of the country. The structure of government,



the education in support of such a government, the economic structure and the mode of tapping the resources of the land viz tea, rubber and coconuts – all these were determined and handled by the colonial master for his own benefit. The British had no intention of building an economic base for the whole country and much less for the arid and flat North.

The Tamils had left their homeland undeveloped, and flocked to Colombo for the white collar jobs offered to the English educated. But with the departure of the British and the dawn of independence, the doors to higher education and employment were closed to them by the implementation of standardization of the marks of Tamil students and the imposing of Sinhala language on Tamil government servants.

## **2. 8. Southern Insurgency, Northern Militancy, and Government's Mishandling of Both**

The underrating of the importance of racial harmony and stable economy, not only weakened the foundations for true development and growth of the nation but also snow-balled into major militant dangers to the nation. The economic dissatisfaction erupted as youth insurgence in the South of the country (1971, 1988) and the long standing Tamil grievances, after many decades of democratic protests took the form of LTTE militancy (1983 - ?)

The government suppressed the Southern Insurgency partly by turning the State forces into death squads and partly by creating another ruthless private army of the ruling politicians (Black Cats). Over 60,000 were reported missing or dead "in the wiping away" of this insurgence and still they are digging out hundreds of skeletons from mass-graves in Suriyakanda.

Encouraged by its victory over the Southern Insurgency and forgetting that the Northern Militancy was only a late phase in the long drawn out Tamil struggle for freedom and restitution of human rights, the government has labeled Northern

Militancy as pure Tiger Terrorism and refuses to see it only as a militant face of a much larger Tamil struggle. As a consequence it is fighting not so much a war against the Tigers as against the Tamil civilian population!

## 2. 9. Church's Failure in Adjusting to New Realities

From the early years of independence, following its colonial stance of supporting the government in power, the church of the island has been openly supportive of the pro-western UNP (United National Party) government. Only once she made a strong public protest against a government of the non-UNP coalition, and that was in the interest of her denominational schools. Tooth and nail she resisted the move of the then government for the nationalization of schools, reluctantly gave up the vernacular schools (frequented by the poor) and retained a few private schools (for the elite!). With this defeat, she became too conscious of her minority status and drew herself into an inferiority complex. She adopted a back-door relationship through Christian Members of Parliament for favours and of late has settled for a living by the favour of the government in power!

At present the Church, especially of the majority South, finds herself suspected by the Buddhists as not loyal to their "Sinhala-Buddhist Shri Lanka". She is beset with a number of problems, even in relation to her apostolate to the poor and evangelisation among the Buddhists.

After a long period of silence, indifference and apolitical diplomacy with regard to the ethnic problem, she is afraid to intervene in some way to stop a senseless war and bring about peace in the country. She has weakened her mediating - strategy, prophetic power and credibility by her long silence. Even in the face of mass killings and gross violations of human rights both in the North and in the South, especially by the State - the professed guardians of law and order she kept silent!

unquestioned even by the Church,  
have lead us into a War.



and the Church to new thinking  
and new directions for Service to  
the people?

- INNOCENT CIVILIANS & YOUTH KILLED
- SIGNALA - TAMIL STUDENTS
- WIDOWS, ORPHANS, UNMARRIED GIRLS
- VALUABLE PROPERTIES DESTROYED & LOOTED BY ARMY
- NO TRANSPORT, DISPLACED PEOPLE, ARMY OCCUPATION
- LACK OF MEDICINE, FOOD & 49 ESSENTIAL ITEMS
- NO EDUCATION
- HEAVY FINANCIAL BURDEN ON GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE
- POSTAL SERVICES, TELEPHONE, PRESS
- RADIO, TV
- NO EXAMS, NO EMPLOYMENT



# SINHOLA - TAMIL

WARs BETWEEN PORTUGUESE, DUTCH & BRITISH KINGDOMS

DENIAL OF CITIZENSHIP TO INDIAN-TAMILS

SINHOLA ONLY Act & ANTI-TAMIL RIOTS

STATE AIDED Colonisation OF TAMIL RIOTS

'Sai' Campaign - ANTI-TAMIL AREAS

DISCRIMINATIONS IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, & PROMOTIONS

6th AMENDMENT OF TAMIL ACT (PTB)

PREVENTION OF TERRORISM ACT (PTB)

ARMY VIOLENCE IN NORTH & EAST MILITANT OPERATION OF LTTE

Political Events of Injustices and Discriminations against the Tamils, unquestioned even by the Church.



Will the deaths and destructions of the War awaken the Government and the Church to new thinking

## CHAPTER III

### IDENTIFYING THE THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN SHRI LANKA

#### 3.0 The Three Trends Among Christians

The theological trends or presuppositions operative within the Christian communities, with regard to Church-State relationships, can be identified roughly as three. Borrowing the terminology and idiom of the Kairos document (written by over a hundred ecumenical theologians, including the Roman Catholics, with respect to the South African Apartheid policy), we could describe these trends as State-theology, Church-theology and Prophetic-theology.

The majority of the faithful and the leadership of our churches follow a "Church-theology". The term Church-theology is not used here in the sense of being the official theology of the Universal Church. Nor is "state-theology" and "prophetic-theology" outside the official theology of the Universal Church. These three are all modes of expressions or interpretations of one authentic and official theology of the Universal Church, lending itself to different degrees of orthodoxy.

#### 3.10. The Church-theology of the Majority of Christians

The distinctive characteristics of this trend can be seen in some of the attitudes it fosters and favours among the Christians in interpreting and emphasizing certain aspects of Christian life.

#### 3.11. It favours isolation and apoliticism of the Church in relation to the world.

Church-theology favours isolation from the larger world and promotes a concern almost exclusively to ecclesiastical and ecclesial priorities. The practice of Christianity as a religion is loaded with liturgical observances plus a few minimum moral observances of the precepts of the churches. There is concern only about the salvation of the individual soul, not of the total man nor of total community and its needs.

Redemption of secular realities does not arise in this theology and is not spoken of. And active participation of Christians in social and political events is discouraged. Christianity is thus reduced to a private religion without much concern for the others and for their common good in society. There is no room in this theology for any prophetic action or sociopolitical leadership.

### **3. 12. Against death and destruction, it counsels prayer and distribution of alms from abroad**

In the present crisis of death, destruction, injustices etc., Christians are exhorted to prayer and giving of some "charity from a distance" to those who are affected. They do not want to be involved or drawn closer into these "worldly political issues". In spite of exhortations from the Universal Magisterium to become the moral conscience of the people, to be a vigilant and constructive critic of society, to work for the cause of justice and peace, human rights etc., in spite of stirring examples from other Third World churches for prophetic leadership in socio-political issues, the majority of Christians following Church-theology, opt to be passive and non-involved in the affairs of the society.

Besides prayer they prefer to dole out some money and stay out of critical situations. The leaders may be skilled and active in appealing for foreign aid for victims and in distributing that aid. In fact, since the war started, all the socioeconomic centre of the Church, especially of the Tamil churches, have become very active in doing this compassionate work.

But unfortunately very little is done to conscientise and motivate the fortunate, who are living happily outside the war-zones as well as those still surviving within them, to show their sympathy and to express their charity towards the suffering victims.

Hence in the event of disturbance and destruction of life, church-theology helps calm their conscience by an escape into prayer, charity and distribution of foreign funds.



### 3. 13. **It considers the State to be always right and questioning it to be disloyal**

Those who rise against injustices and try to change the discriminatory system are made to appear that they are lawless, anti-national and even subversives, if not terrorists. On the other hand, the State with its Armed Forces, according to this Church-theology, is always the just law-giver and has unlimited powers, even vis-a-vis the merely suspected and the innocent civilians.

The State-forces are empowered to burn people alive, murder and bury without inquiry and bomb out civilians and their properties! They are not taken to task for their crimes. In many instances, they are blessed in churches as fighters against evil and their sins against society are glossed over in silence. Church-theology will not question it.

This theology carries within it moral concepts outmoded by post-Vat. II developments. It presumes that the Church has a role only as a moral judge of isolated and individual acts and refuses to take a clear stance on the wider issues of social morality. Often it condemns violence of all forms and from any quarter. But for the Church to say this and then sit back unconcerned as ever, without lifting a finger to find the root causes of such a violence and without doing anything to root them out, not even a non-violent protest like Satyagraha or fast, is pure hypocrisy.

### 3. 14. **Official Leadership leans more towards Church-theology**

It is the sacred duty of any local Church-leadership, helped by the local resources they have, to study the burning questions of the people, to interpret relevantly and meaningfully the Universal Magisterium, and to speak out clearly and forcibly the directions the local Church has to take in the midst of crises. There are eloquent examples of such leadership especially in the Third World churches.

Although the ethnic problem has been a form of racial oppression and consuming a large amount of human lives and property and has now become even a senseless and inhuman war, the leadership of the Shri Lankan Church, influenced largely by a Church-theology, has done very little in channelling its resources of personnel or time or finance towards a just and peaceful solution.

The official statements of the Church as well as the timidity and tepidity of their actions, in the face of injustices and discriminations committed by the State, show that the majority of the leadership fosters Church-theology. In a very limited, guarded, cautious and often belated statement, the Church has tried to do a "soft evaluation" of the discriminatory policies of the State and limited its services mostly to "Red Cross" services of caring for the wounded and burying the dead.

Even the Tamil Christian leadership, though forced by the horrifying context of war, did not go much further. It was trying to direct some relief and rehabilitation work through Church-organisations aided by foreign funds. Some occasional "efforts to stop the violations of human rights by those in power." were made by the heads of churches. (cf. Bishop B Deogupillai, *For the sake of the grace given to me.* p. 2) Perhaps the leadership, which was apparently handicapped both by its Church-theology as well as by its concern to preserve a pseudo-unity with the southern leadership, could have done better.

### **3. 15. Church-theology lacks prophetic courage**

Even the cautious statements of the leadership were not given due publicity or preached eloquently to people. It appears that these statements were written not so much by force of conviction but more to calm the conscience of the leadership and avoid a criticism of conniving silence. While not having the courage to hit the nail on the head, or to call a spade, a spade, a series of less harmful evils have been named to couch and nestle the more vital issues like racial riots, State Terrorism etc. Without any

serious analysis of the real issues, they are just listed and balanced with so many other issues, so as not to hurt the politician in power and the State.

There is evidently a fear of examining an issue in all its dimensions, analysing it in depth and showing how it is anti-Christian and even inhuman. More courage is needed to handle a bull by the horn.

Is not the Church expected to go further than mere condemnations? Is she not to promote an active non-violence and point out alternatives, as done by Jesus and his close disciples, and even followed by Mahatma Gandhi? A Church that is afraid and hesitant to protest against injustices and killings in broad day light cannot be the prophetic Church founded by Christ.

### **3. 20. State-theology**

There are two minority groups, one on the right and the other on the left of this majority-Church-theology. The minority group on the extreme right are Christians, including some of the Church leaders, for whom allegiance to the party in power appears to be more important and fruitful than their allegiance to the Church. They espouse unconsciously a trend of thinking called State-theology. The main lines of this trend could be characterized as follows.

### **3. 21. It strongly supports politicians and political parties**

This theology also conceives, for its own benefit, religion as a "private matter", reduces it to some liturgical observances and denies any social or political action to Christians. But it goes further than Church-theology and expects the Church to be in support of some politicians and their political parties. They prefer to be on the side of the Government in power and be recipients of privileges and benefits. The Government in power is happy with the apolitical stance of the Church (but not at election times, for visible reasons) and encourages the concept



of "private Christianity" and their non-interference with the policies of the Government. It welcomes only an unconditional and uncritical support of the Church.

### **3. 22. It encourages Blind Obedience to an All-powerful State**

State-theology is useful to justify the present status quo both of the State as well as of the pre-Vatican II stance of a closed-up Church. Although successive governments have legislated unjust and discriminatory laws against the minority Tamils, the Church as a whole has kept herself at a distance. For her belated statements and conspicuous silence, she has been accused of blind obedience, if not connivance with injustice.

This theology canonizes the will of the powerful and continues to preach blind obedience to the State and passivity to the poor and the afflicted. It makes use of the concept of law and order to maintain the status quo, though the law be unjust and discriminatory.

The Sinhala Only Act of 1956; Standardization of marks for admission to University; Overlooking of merits and service with regard to employment and promotions, Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1977 are some of the unjust acts unopposed by the majority within the Church. These Acts of the Government gave ample chances for the Church to make a study of these questions and react courageously in the Spirit of Jesus and His Church. But being committed to an apolitical stance, not wanting to lose the colonial privileges still left or not being ready to court displeasure of the ruling party, those with a state-theology remained silent and passive. They buried the dead and looked after the wounded, but their state-theology could not provide the conviction and the courage to stand up in the name of truth and justice. By their silence they approved as lawful everything that was done by the Government.

### **3. 23. It Favours a Mutually Beneficial Alliance between Church and State**

The state-theology favours an illegal alliance between the Church and the State and allows Church to be used by the State in gratitude for favours. The suggestion by some Christian Members of the Government to create a Ministry for Christian Affairs is one example of this temptation in the Church to make an illegal connection with the State. The State is interested in bringing the Church under its patronage for its own benefit - not only at elections but also as a supportive and justifying body at other times.

Those who espouse a state-theology will understandably be in favour of such alliance. They do not see that the Church cannot afford to sell away its valuable and specific gifts, namely, freedom and autonomy, prophetic courage and critical ability. They see the strength of the Church, not in witnessing to the truth of the Gospel, but in the power and glory of the Church-institution (triumphalism) supported by the Government in power.

### **3. 30. Some of the Common Fallacies behind Church-theology and State-theology**

It is useful and relevant, at least to point out a few of the common fallacies behind Church-theology and State-theology, so as to facilitate their followers to move towards a more prophetic stance, if not a prophetic action, on behalf of truth and justice.

### **3. 31. A Minority Church, must survive by the Favours of the Majority**

The majority Christians who espouse Church-theology, and some among them, even leaders, who espouse a state-theology, often argue that in Sri Lanka, the Christians are a minority and that they should at all costs, go along with the majority Sinhala-Buddhists and live by passive silence and favours.

It is true that, as in most Asian countries, we are a minority religion. (Out of a population of 16 million, about 12 million

Buddhists, two million Hindus, one million Moslems and only about a million Christians). But this minority-situation is neither a handicap nor a hindrance to our mission as a Church, especially as a prophetic Church.

The Church of Sri Lanka must become more conscious of its enviable strategy of linking the two ethnic groups and thereby of possessing the potentials for mediation. The fears of being a minority religion, the fears of losing certain privileges and conveniences granted by the Government, the painful price of a prophetic stance for truth, and above all, the fear of being misunderstood, and even shouted down, by the Sinhala Buddhist Nationalists as anti-nationals—all these, must not dissuade or hinder the Christian leaders from playing their due prophetic role and giving a sincere witness to truth at this critical hour for the country.

“ The Church does not lodge her hope in privileges conferred by civil authority. Indeed she stands ready to renounce the exercise of certain legitimately acquired rights, if it becomes clear that their use raises doubt about the sincerity of her witness... ”  
(Doc. Church in the Modern World, G. S.—76e)

### **3. 32. The Dichotomy between the Church and the World demands an apolitical-neutrality from the Church**

Because of the past history of errors and dangers arising from undue alliance between Church and State, both have professed a “ safe separation ”, based on the scholastic dichotomy of the Church as spiritual and the world as material. This has encouraged a division of human life as religion and politics. But this compartmental dichotomy has often been exaggerated to mutual exclusivism and indifferentism. It has encouraged an apolitical stance of the Church bordering on indifferentism, even with regard to some vital and human issues.

This apolitical stance, based on an unchristian dichotomy, was proved to be false and dangerous in many documents of the Universal Magisterium of the Church. (Vat. II—Church in



the Modern World; Encyclicals – *Pacem in Terris*, *Mater et Magistra*, *Populorum Progressio* etc.)

“In their proper spheres, the political community and the Church are mutually independent and self-governing, yet by a different title, each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human beings.” (Ch. in *Mod. World*. 76c)

“In the political field, the Church in Asia is called upon to pursue sincerely a response of critical solidarity in the relationship between Christian faith and politics, of mutual autonomy and cooperation in the question of the relationship between religion and state” (FABC Papers n. 63 p. 48—A document of the Theol. Advisory Commission of the FABC)

### 3. 33. Prayer is a Substitute for Solidarity with the Afflicted

While the Northeast had suffered for the last four years death and destruction, and survived only in bunkers and refugee camps, without enough medicine and food, life in the South of the country has gone on in full swing without any genuine concern and serious effort for peace. The Church of the South understandably influenced by such an environment, could opt only for some prayer for peace as their substitute for expressions of solidarity. Beyond occasional prayers and wishes, beyond a handful of goodwill visits from some leaders, no eloquent expression of Christian solidarity has emerged from the Church of the South.

Prayer is an indispensable part of Christian life and an eloquent expression of man's inability and his dependence on God. But when it becomes a form of escapism from facing challenges or responding to duties, it degenerates one's religion. There are many Christians motivated by Church-theology and state-theology who espouse a false theology of prayer as an escape from their sociopolitical and even ecclesial duties.

### 3. 40. Prophetic-theology

The other minority group, on the left of the Church-theology trend is Prophetic-theology. Though it is strongly

against a state-theology, still by distancing itself in different degrees from the majority-Church-theology, its followers can be classified further into two groups - prophetic visionaries and prophets.

### 3. 41. Prophetic Visionaries

From among the Sinhala and Tamil Christians, there are a few who have been for the last few decades, favouring a revision of their older dogmatic vision of Jesus Christ, His Church and her sociopolitical mission, especially in the context of the Third world realities. This group of people emphasize Jesus and His Gospel as more prophetic and less priestly or cultic, and take a clear stance in favour of truth, justice and peace. They understand Him not merely as defined in the traditional dogmatic Christology of one Person and two natures, but more as a genuine Liberator of the whole person and whole humanity. They situate the various struggles of the poor and the oppressed within the larger Christian framework of the total liberation of man and his universe, namely the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

In Shri Lanka, such people have naturally a better understanding of the Sinhala Struggle (JVP) for a better economic upliftment of the poor as against a capitalist form of development. They have also a more sympathetic understanding of the Tamil struggle for freedom and its eruption to militancy. They are convinced that mere blanket condemnations of violence and war are woefully inadequate as Christian responses. They feel the need to go beyond condemnations.

In the absence of a clear and dynamic leadership, they have openly sided the poor farmers, fishermen, the city-workers and even the racial minorities by their speeches and their writings. They have even come out on the streets in protest against the actions of the Government. (for example, in giving the land of the poor to the Voice of America or for a hotel complex in Iranawila.) They have tried to enlighten the majority of

the Church, but unfortunately turned away as non-orthodox, anti-establishment and even subversives and have suffered disapproval from the hierarchy.

A genuinely prophetic stance involves solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering, becoming unpopular with the majority Christians, and their leaders, and with their own racial groups and worst of all, getting suspected as politically disturbing elements by those who foster state-theology and by the Government in power.

Though these few have a clear prophetic vision with regard to many intra-ecclesial realities of the local and Universal Church, and even of the ethnic issue, they still lack the courage to be martyrs for truth, justice and peace. And unfortunately, when it comes to larger national issues touching on their allegiance to their race, they seem to get cold feet. One expects more courageous actions to match their courageous visions. Hence it is more appropriate to call them prophetic visionaries and not prophets.

### 3. 42. Prophets

Among those who indirectly fostered a prophetic-theology, or animated a prophetic-theology, there were some who laid down their lives in clear and eloquent martyrdom, either by their refusal to accept violence or by defying unjust orders to help the dying (Father Michael Rodrigo O.M.I., Father Chandra Fernando and Father Selvaraj). There were also others who dared to side the oppressed and the weak and got killed for their stance (Father Mary Bastian, Rev. G. N. Jeyarajasingam and others).

If the Church of Shri Lanka is to play its unique role in conscientisation, mediation and proclamation of justice and peace in the country, such prophets must increase in number and be recognized as very necessary by the Christian leadership. The Church is built, not exclusively on the apostles and their successors. It is built on apostles and prophets, and their successors.



Hence in the Christian leadership both bishops and theologians—cleric, religious or lay—have their rightful and collaborative role to play. A Church which devalues prophets, prophetic vision and prophetic actions cannot be that of Jesus the Prophet.

### **3. 43. Knowing the Truth about the Afflicted is indispensable to Prophetism**

If the Church is to be faithful to its redemptive and prophetic mission in today's Shri Lanka, especially in the socio-political field, then she cannot afford to distance herself from the afflicted. Not knowing the truth about the suffering condition of their brothers and sisters and knowing only the truths of the Gospel or of the church is pseudo-Christianity. The Church must be in solidarity with the afflicted and have a passion for the truth about their real situation – the truth of tragic events taking place day by day and their victims.

The unconcern or lack of solidarity experienced so far within the Church is tied to an ignorance of the true situation about the afflicted. There is no genuine effort made, even by Christians who appear to be prophetic, to overcome that ignorance and to know the real truth about the affliction of their own brothers and sisters of the Northeast. Christians of the South cannot be guided towards the truth by newspapers and journals controlled by the Government and which pay very little attention or give provocative twists to events in the war zone.

The English media, which is the only channel of truth between the leaders of the majority community, and of the minority community, is largely controlled and manipulated by the Government for its own political power in the country and for boosting its international image. A strong and independent English media would make a big difference with regard to giving the truth at least to the leaders of both sides and kept a minimum dialogue going on. Unfortunately that amount of courage is still lacking, even for the Church journals.

### 3. 44. **Christians can become a Living Media of Communication**

In this context of no-communication of truth or of false communication between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Christians, who live on both sides of the divide, have the unique advantage of becoming a living media of communication and doing a prophetic mission by their good-will visits across the divide. With the media of communication between the two communities, all controlled and manipulated and the truth distorted by selfish and mischievous politicians, the network of institutions and correspondence within the Churches, can become effective and credible agents at the service of truth.

“God calls the Asian churches from the sociopolitical situations of Asia to a profound conversion.....not only in promoting liturgy and Christian communion, but also, and especially, in prophetic and liberating action. This action takes the trouble to read the signs of the times in sociopolitical realities. . . .” (FABC Papers n. 63, p. 48)

### 3. 50. **A Shift in Theological Trends Is needed.**

The last three decades have seen many turmoils in the political life of Shri Lanka. There have been not only deaths destruction and massacres but also many forms of threats to, the democratic form of Government and democratic way of life. Corruption is detected in almost every corner of public life, including the judiciary and the legislative assembly. The confidence of the people on political and governmental leadership is fast waning. More than ever before, religions are called to be guardians of moral values and religious leaders are called to be prophetic leaders of our people.

Will the alarm sirens around the country be heard by the worshippers and their leaders in our churches? Will they read the signs of the times along with the Word of the Gospel and step out of their sanctuaries to give that prophetic leadership needed at this hour?

## CHAPTER IV

### THE THEOLOGICAL THINKING EMERGING OUT OF THE WAR

#### 4.0 Hard Realities of Life Force New Theological Thinking

Out of the explosions and blasts of two World Wars, especially the second, emerged new thinking and new impetus for many movements that built a new Europe. And for Christians in a special way, the experiences of death, destruction, collapse of their kingdoms and powers, the horror of Hitler's Auschwitz, the gas-chambers and the like – spurred them to rethink their faith and Christian life. In fact the four great movements (biblical, liturgical, ecumenical and lay apostolate) that converged in realizing that great Pentecostal event of our century, namely, the Second Vatican Council, were all post-World War II movements, born out of the bomb blasts of the Second World War.

The Ethnic War in Shri Lanka still shows no sign towards an end. The weapons of war used in this war are an aggravation of those used half a century earlier in World War II. The Government is so keen on the acquisition of more weapons from all over the world that in recent times, Shri Lanka has become the dumping ground for much of the cheap weapons from China, Italy, Britain and many East European countries. And all these weapons are to be used against its own people! The efforts made to update the weapons of war are far superior to any effort made for peace!

This aggravating and threatening situation of hopelessness has provoked many Tamils to more anger and determination to stand together and die with honour rather than get killed by the Shri Lankan army. It has spurred them to think more courageously about their life and liberation. The Tamil Christians, mostly displaced and dispersed all over or wandering as refugees in their own land, recall to mind the Exodus-story of



the people of God and the events that happened in Europe during the Second World War under Hitler and his holocaust. All these urge them to think anew their future as a people.

Thus facing the hard realities of the war and its consequences, the people in general, and the Tamil Christians in particular, are gradually led to reading new signs, a new word and a new message out of the consequential realities of war. Some of the old ideas and ways of Christian life are being replaced with new. Many Christians in the South, who are not in the context of war, will most probably misunderstand them to be revolutionaries, subversives and even, terrorists. But if that be the title people give for following Jesus Christ, who gives Life and Freedom, then it is worth accepting those titles.

#### **4. 1. The Breadth and Depth of the Consequential Realities Facing the Church**

The effects of the war are not confined to the mere deaths of the thousands of young boys and girls dying in the war on both sides of the divide. Nor is it confined merely to the destruction of rebuildable properties. It extends to much wider realities, to the many invisible and irremediable aspects of life.

Within the Tamil population itself, the effects of war include innocent families destroyed by misdirected aerial bombs or undirected shells falling anywhere at any time of night; lakhs of people made refugees in their own homeland by the forceful occupation of the army and lakhs of refugees in neighboring India and in almost every continent of the world, without any hope of return to their homeland.

Those eight lakhs of people still surviving, but virtually imprisoned in the Jaffna Peninsula, and the thousands dispersed all over the North and East of Shri Lanka, face a host of other threats to life: constant fear of aerial attacks and artillery shellings by the army; literal starvation, sickness without medicinal care, infectious diseases, isolation without any social communication with their dear ones; growth without

education, increasing mental ill-health, etc. etc. In short, the war has wounded or killed every bit of the Tamil realities of life. Survival in the North is a continuous miracle.

The horrifying realities of the war have also called the attention of the Pope when he recently met the new Ambassador of Shri Lanka "On various occasions in recent years, I have expressed concern regarding the internal conflict in your country, a conflict which has consumed thousands of lives, inflicted immense suffering and had a devastating effect on family and community life." (Osservatore Romano 13-1-1994)

If the Church is that of Jesus Christ, she cannot be deaf and blind to the horrifying and challenging events in the North and East. She is called to face up to these events as her founder would have done in his times in Israel. She is called to read the signs God is still giving and move forward with Him in His thinking and action.

#### **4. 2. Different Degrees in Experiencing the Blast of the War**

While the causal realities and the anti-Tamil riots of the five decades have gradually and with greater momentum built an ethnic-bomb that has burst into the present war, the splinters of the bomb-blasts are creating shocks and quakes throughout the Tamil population of North and East, in general, and of the Jaffna Peninsula, in particular.

This war may cause only distant ripples of anxiety and concern for the people in the South, and definitely large loss of military-lives and draining of foreign resources for the Government. The poor families of the South, who have lost their dear sons in the war, are only a small percentage amidst a larger Sinhala-population. As a result, it may not pose any sizable threat to the Government nor a meaningful message to the right thinking people in the South.

It may evoke, among the few rightly informed Christians of the South, especially if they have visited the war zones, feelings of fraternal sympathy and compassion for those suf-

fering in the North and East. But unfortunately, the majority of the Southern Christians, are still carried away by the vicious anti-Tamil propaganda of the Government and think only within a church-theology or state theology. Hence they are perplexed, if not angry, about the situation of Tamils and can even become suspicious about the role of the Tamil Church.

But for the Tamils of the North and East, who have experienced for many decades a prolonged discrimination and now the horrors of the aerial bombs and are constantly on the run for their lives, things are quite different. In addition to the sufferings imposed by the war and a senseless economic blockade by an unjust and selfish Government, they have also to face the misunderstanding and consequent anger of their brethren in the South.

The number of Tamil deaths—as many as over six thousand boys and girls of the LTTE as well as innocent civilians killed, over thirty thousand form a very large percentage of the still surviving Tamil population of the country. Almost every other family in the North and East has experienced death and destruction, and all, without exception, have experienced the horrors of this war directly — day in and day out.

Besides these visible deaths and destructions, the inhuman strangulation towards the slow death of the Jaffna population by the Government's reduction to minimum of all necessities of life, is agonizing. It is in this agonizing together, they have strengthened their will and determination to stand together and survive against all odds.

#### **4.3. Out of the Blasts Emerge New Signs, New Message and a New Word**

Out of the bomb-blasts, the deaths and the cries, there emerges slowly a silent smoke and a heavy mist in the hearts and minds of those who are deeply affected by the horror-events. For the Tamils in general, and for the Tamil Christians in



particular, they are the New Signs of a New Message. The Hindus who are the majority among the Tamils, exclaim that all these events are happening according to the will of the gods and some form of liberation is to emerge from it. For the Christians, who also think on those directions, and are further enlightened by the Word of the Bible, and have accepted that Word in flesh (Jesus Christ), those Signs and Message take the form of a New Word. It is a New Word of God, though a harsh word of challenge, for the Tamil Christians in the war-zone. Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear will definitely identify this New Word.

#### **4. 4. Characteristics of this New Word**

Unlike the word of the Old Testament which was a religious history of a chosen people of God and unlike that of the New Testament, which was the written expression of the belief of the community on the Fullness of the Word, this new Word is a contextual Word with special characteristics.

##### **4. 41. The New Word in continuation of the old Revelation**

The New Word of God, is in addition to what was given in and through the history of Israel, in and through Jesus Christ, the Fullness of the Word. This Word or message given through the present events of the war is a continuation and not a contradiction of the old Word. Just as then, the Word was concretized in the history of a chosen people, Israel, so is it now that Word continues to be written in a particular way in the present history of the Tamils of Shri Lanka.

Doing theology in the context of war is not only to read the causal and consequential realities of the war, in the light of Christian faith, but also to reflect on those realities as the New Word, as part of God's revelation to us.

The Eternal Word or Wisdom of God, we believe, is never exhausted in the history of one particular nation, nor is it completely expressed in the Books of the Old and New

Testaments. It was revealed in Creation, in the history of Israel and in the New Testament. It was fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. But the living and liberating God continues to speak, even today, in and through the events that are pressing, if not crushing, human life in the war zones, especially in the North.

The present Church of the Tamils have an obligation not only to read the texts of the Bible and commemorate the definitive events of Jesus Christ, through the mediation of the Church, but also to read the New and Specific Word given to them through the events of the day by the living Lord of history. In the light of this New Word, the Word of the Old Testament and the Word of the New Testament will give birth to a New Message and a new faith. The message is part and parcel of the total message God wants to give to the Shri Lankans, especially Tamil Christians. And the faith of the Tamil Christians is renewed out of the dialogue between the Word of God, as given in and through Jesus Christ, and the New Word out of the bomb-blasts among the Tamils.

#### **4. 42 It is heard only by those who live the Events of the War**

When the Word is interwoven and written into the day to day history of a people, it can be seen and heard, not by the eyes and ears of the flesh, of an inquisitive journalist or visitor, but only by those who live those events or experience them with the very people - the subjects of that experience.

What is truth, what is justice, what is sincerity is made known to people, not in the words of Sunday-gossips and speculations published by armchair journalists, but in the cries and yearnings of those who dare to live through the events happening in the government declared war zone. When bombs fall, people run, scream, cry, for life, when people - babies, youth and old - are cruelly killed, the whole crowd breaks down in tears. These are the smoke and mist amidst which, people of faith see and hear the word.

#### **4. 43. It is experienced by the Spirit of those suffering in the War**

Many people may read, talk about, and react rather superficially if not irresponsibly. But only some read events with their spirit with their eyes of faith, with a solidarity and oneness with those suffering them. They see, when the tears get dried, more than ever before, the unjust and inhuman act of an oppressor. For days together, they keep asking themselves, what is the meaning of all these?

People see and experience in concrete, the falsehood of the media, the injustice of the Government, the hardheartedness of the ruler, the innocence of those who fall victims, the sincerity of those who resort even to war to defend a people etc. These events are never experienced in their nakedness and horror by those who live outside the war-zone in the South. They cannot hear this Word nor understand the response the Tamil Christians are giving to this New Word.

These signs and words from the war zone are provocative, at times more provocative than the words of the Scriptures, because they do happen to people day by day and even today.

#### **4. 5. Theologising from the Word of the Bible is inadequate**

The old practice of theologising universally, that is, reflecting on the Word of God as expressed in the Bible with the help of philosophical and cultural tools of Europe of a particular time, and then applying those theological concepts and conclusions to the distant realities of conflicts and wars all over the world, is thoroughly inadequate and can be dangerously misleading. This defect has been noticed even in the church's Social Teachings of recent times. Although they are intended for universal application, only the events and environment of Europe are taken to be the locus theologicus of Universal Magisterium.

Even the few statements made by the official Church of Shri Lanka suffered these inadequacies. A Church that was



shamefully silent when unjust executions and inhuman laws (the denial of citizenship rights to the Indian Tamils in 1949; the racial discriminatory Sinhala Only Act of 1956; the State-aided colonization of traditional Tamil-regions; the Prevention of Terrorism Act giving Draconian powers to the State Forces; the killings executed by the State Forces and the Black Cats of the ruling party etc.) were enacted by the State, woke up with a traditional text-book theology, only to condemn violence, suicide and terrorism. Neither the denial of fundamental rights to a people nor the terrorism of the State forces and the anti-Tamil riots of rabid racists were seen as inhuman, violent and terroristic. There was no serious effort on the part of the Church, except a mouthful of general condemnations, to understand the root causes of Sinhala or Tamil militancy.

Thus a first world-weltanschaung and definitions of war, terrorism, violence and even of human rights, are wrongly used in evaluating the realities of a long drawn-out human struggle of a third world people for justice, freedom and dignity.

Hence the theologising on the Scriptures using only a first world-view needs to be complemented by a contextual reflection using our own world-view, which is less architectoric and more organic less particularistic and more integral.

#### **4. 60. Theologising from the New Word and from Within the Tamil People is needed**

A contextual theologising of the realities of the war will demand an integral reflection, both on the Word of the Bible and on the Word of the war, done with the people as they experience the horrors of war. But to do such reflection one has to live closely with the people and share all their anxieties and fears. No contextual theologising is possible from outside the field of events, from outside the world-view of people.

The majority of Christians outside the war-zones (with Church-theology or State-theology), living mostly in the South, and fed by an anti-Tamil media, apply their traditional theological definitions on the distant realities of the war and speak

a blanket-condemnation of all that is going on in the war-zones as mere terrorism. They see the defensive counter-violence of the LTTE as terrorism, the Tamil civilian population as supporters of terrorism and worst of all, they see their State Forces as disciplined men empowered to do anything and everything in the name of law and order.

The Tamil Christians, having an experiential knowledge of all that is happening on ground, read their events as parts of a long and just struggle against an unjust ruler. They see the shadow of the Cross falling on their land. They put their ears to the ground, soiled by the blood of their youth, to listen to the birth pangs of their freedom. They trek their way of the cross, through forests and fields, by land and by sea risking their lives to bombing and firing. They are pulled by their chains (as happened to a Tamil bishop in the hands of a military police!) and humiliated and scolded by the Army merely for carrying some essentials to life.

With this experiential knowledge, gained for the last four years, they hope against hope that the Lord of history will lead them to true freedom.

#### **4. 61. Incarnation and Pascha Re-understood by the Tamil Christians**

Without sufficient sustenance for life, without electricity and transport, without proper Churches and homes, the Christians have flocked, even from refugee-camps, in large numbers to liturgical celebrations in churches and make-shift prayer-rooms. The absence of the distractive media of communications (no radio, newspapers, T.V.) and other recreational facilities (no liquor, cinema, club-life) have been in some way a blessing in disguise, to enable more people to congregate for liturgical and biblical services. People communicate more with one another and members of the family retire early into their homes. The influx of refugees create chances and offer challenges for greater sharing of houses and facilities with one another. On the whole, people have been challenged for a better solidarity and sharing of life.

Christians, in particular, have been forced by circumstances of the last four years to observe Advent and commemorate the mystery of Incarnation under conditions very similar to, if not worse than, the conditions in Bethlehem.

The refugee situation of the Holy Family, the massacre of innocent infants in Bethlehem and the flight in fear again of the Holy Family are all incidents happening today before our eyes. And the whole of the Tamil milieu turns out to be the modern Bethlehem, the cradle of a new liberation.

Similarly Christians observe lent and commemorate the Paschal mysteries of Christ under economic and sociopolitical conditions similar to the time of Jesus. While the Highpriests of Colombo are planning and plotting with modern Judases to capture and kill, the Tamil people are groaning in pain in their garden of Gethsamane. The sick and the dying carried to hospitals on bicycles, the thousands of cyclists risking their lives for a bundle of firewood, the humiliating experiences of women and girls under the soldiers at Check - points - these are the continuing Passion of the Tamil Pascha.

These experiences have helped the Christians to initiate in a little way, a rereading of the Bible in the Tamil context, especially the Exodus story of liberation from Egypt, the suffering in the hands of the Pharaoh, the humiliation and mockery in the hands of an army of occupation, the hunger and thirsts of the deserts, etc. A re-understanding of the vision and mission of Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by Jesus Himself through the words of Prophet Isiah and recorded in the fourth chapter of Luke, is gaining importance and relevance among the people.

“The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for He has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set downtrodden free...” (Lk.4.18)

Bible readings, preaching and silent reflections in the government-imposed darkness of the North, have begun to inspire many to a re-understanding of revelation and to accept the present events as part of their liberation history.



#### 4. 62. Liberation of Tamils Within the Total Liberation announced by Christ.

Christian revelation is concerned with the liberation of all humanity. It has been revealed through the struggle of Israel from Egyptian slavery. In Jesus Christ and His Kingdom, God initiated the total liberation of the World towards a Kingdom of justice and peace. Within this framework of the total liberation of man as revealed in Jesus Christ, each people and race, whether they be Sinhalese or Tamils, must learn to situate their struggle for justice and peace.

The Tamil Christians move towards situating the historical liberation struggle of the Tamils within the revealed plan of God in Jesus Christ. They have begun to see that within the Tamil people itself, there is a need to initiate many liberative movements with Christian inspiration – against casteism, against oppression of women, against unjust social practices etc. These liberative struggles, must go on, not to the advantage of oppressive forces from without the community, but parallel to the larger liberation struggle of a people for their right of self-determination, for their right to be a distinct people in their traditional homelands.

It is in the above perspective that the messianic responsibility of Tamil Christians to stimulate movements towards the total liberation of man should be understood. For the Tamils, Christianity is re-emerging as a prophetic religion of the Word with a liberative thrust for the whole people.

Thus the Tamil Church is called at this hour, even at the expense of being misunderstood by the Sinhala Church, not to assume a passive or a purely condemnatory role on the actions of others, but to assume a stimulating role within the Tamil community. At the same time she has a prophetic role in courageously purifying the means to the goal. In the past she has maintained a silence, that was often conspicuous, or murmured condemnations and suffered grudgingly. She is now called to situate her role in the larger context of the struggle and to reform her practice of religion in loyalty to the prophetic vision and mission of Jesus Christ, who came to liberate the whole human person and the whole of humanity.

## CHAPTER V

### REDISCOVERING THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN TODAY'S SHRI LANKA

#### 5.0. A New and Courageous Vision needed for the New Mission

The Church in Shri Lanka stands at the cross-roads of history. She is called to play a unique and important role for unity and peace among the peoples of the country. Though this task appears too demanding for her numerical and institutional strength, she has still some undiscovered potentials and the support of a world-wide Church. But there is one thing that the Church herself must undertake to do in order to play her role more fruitfully than in the past. She must rediscover her place and role in the present national setup of things and revitalize her hidden resources.

The country has undergone many changes within the short period after Independence (1948). These changes affect in a big way the thinking of politicians, social leaders and religious leaders. The Church must ask herself whether she had given sufficient attention to the changes in thinking and behavioral patterns outside her walls.

Her understanding of self as a minority-religion that should live on the favours of the majority, her understanding of national unity as the one that was experienced many decades ago in and around Colombo and among the elitist Christians, her understanding of mediation as merely shuttling between leaders of warring factions - all these need serious thinking and revision in the context of recent changes.

And she herself has to undergo a deeper repentance, conversion and renewal in order to rediscover her true place and function in Shri Lanka. Keeping her old image as a

foreign religion with an elitist leadership, without much influence and roots among the Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus, she will not be able to function as a worthy instrument of national unity.

At present some belated efforts for peace are made by the Christian leadership, especially of the South. Though welcomed by the Tamils thirsting for peace, these efforts are subject to strong suspicions and even accusations from the Buddhist Sangha. Unlike the Tamil Christian leadership, who have in some way identified themselves with the common Tamil ideal of liberation, the Sinhala Christian leadership has yet to do more in that direction. Thus parallel to her top-level efforts at mediation, she needs to muster support from the people at grass-root level for a genuine and justifiable Sinhala Nationalism. The latter will counteract the false and dangerous Mahavamsa-based Sinhala Buddhist fanaticism that seeks to establish itself, only by causing injustice to others or at the expense of others.

### **5.1. Revision of Response of the Compassionate Church**

The Church of the North and East, has had her share of destruction and devastations. She has lost lives, lost Churches, abandoned schools and parishes and parishioners have been dispersed as refugees in their own land. She has been forced into make-shift arrangements for the last four years. Although at times she has managed to cushion off some of the impacts of war by the privileged position she enjoys among people, she cannot go on in her traditional ways for a long time.

Vis-a-vis the above deaths, destructions and devastations, the Church has so far reacted, mostly in ways keeping with her traditional understanding of herself as a world institution for compassion and relief. This understanding falls within the theological trends we have described above in Chapter III as Church-theology and state-theology and could be further specified as the theology of the compassionate Church.



She has responded promptly and generously to the crying need for food, medicine, shelter, clothing etc. But at whose expense? The finances for doing these humanitarian services have been received, not from local benefactors, but just as the governmental organisations do, mostly from abroad. Very little was done to awaken the local Christians, of the North as well as of the South, to respond charitably and generously to the needs of those afflicted in war. Displaced people have suffered rejection and have had difficulties in finding refuge even in Christian homes; the hungry and the naked are still in their refugee camps, if not on the roads, as a challenge to the charity of local Christians.

Thus the nature and width of the response given by the Church to the horrifying needs of the war reflects her present position as a charitable institution with some foreign resources to nurse the wounded and bury the dead. Though she has acted through her social and economic aid structures to help the refugees, the homeless, the hungry, the wounded and the dead, yet the New Word of God out of this war has not been clearly heard, nor the signs of the horrifying times meaningfully read and interpreted. The theology of the compassionate Church with foreign aid still dominates.

## **5. 2. Harnessing Local Resources for Compassionate Work**

The Church must also take serious note of accusations made by some Buddhist and Hindu religious leaders with regard to the use of Christian funds. In the South as well as in the North, Christians have been accused of unethical conversions and proselytism using foreign funds. Though these accusations may be valid only in the case of some Christian sects trying to swell their membership, all Christians must beware of such temptations.

The recent initiative of some Hindu leaders in the North in starting relief and rehabilitation work, not with foreign aid, but with local donations, must inspire Tamil Christians and

their Churches to intensify their compassionate work also with local resources. Similarly, the Sinhala Christians, including leaders, who help swell the National Defence Fund of the Government with personal and school-contributions, must rethink and reorientate their resources for nobler causes like helping war victims in the South and even in the North. They must become aware that under the pretext of wiping out Tamil terrorism, or of defending the unity, integrity and sovereignty of the country, Christian contributions are probably misused by the Government to buy weapons of war that kill innocent civilians and even damage sacred places of worship in the North!

The churches of the North and South are now linked more for top-administration and reception of foreign funds and less for mutual enrichment or compassion. The efforts made for compassion and charity to flow locally between the churches of the North and South must outdo the efforts made for international linkage and foreign aid.

### **5.3. Revision of the Christian Aspiration for Unity and Peace**

It was mostly the Christians, along with the English educated living in and around Colombo, who once experienced a semblance of unity and peace in Shri Lanka – both during the British colonial period and in the years following Independence (see 2.5). Ever since the country started dividing into Sinhala and Tamil streams, the absence of unity and peace was felt most acutely in Christian circles. A visible nostalgia for a peaceful and fraternal living as in the olden days persisted.

In spite of extreme hardships in travelling and at great risk to their lives, the Christian leaders of the North and East have maintained their links with their Southern counterparts in all their planning, meetings and activities. A few of the Christian leaders from the South have visited their brethren, in the North and East to express their solidarity in suffering and to make efforts for peace. But recent decisions like the one made by

the Bishops' Conference about celebrating the Papal visit to Shri Lanka exhibit a scant regard for the sufferings and feelings of their Tamil brethern.

But all these are symptoms of a serious lack of prophetic thinking and courageous action on the part of Christian leadership. Sins of omission have been committed, especially in the initial stages of the ethnic cleavage, in not carrying the message of a united Shri Lanka, and all that it entails, to the larger and important leadership of the majority Sinhalese. Christians who had lived and enjoyed a unity, based on their religion and promoted by a colonial English administration, failed to work for the creation of that unity among others around them.

The Christians did not think it important for them to become apostles of a new unity of mixed races and languages in the country. They continued with their splendid isolation from the Buddhist-Sinhalese and Hindu-Tamils, distanced themselves from sociopolitical issues and left many human-right issues to the whims and fancies of politicians. Thus they missed the grace to be messianic, to be architects of a national unity based on equality and freedom.

#### 5.4. Revision of Christian Mediation for Unity and Peace.

Now faced with a war that has threatening consequences also for the South, the Christian leadership can be misled to cry with a nostalgia for the old type of unity and peace that prevailed around the colonial capital. The unity they aspire can be one in which they unconsciously expect the Tamils to be a subservient partner to the Sinhalese. And the peace they wish and work for can be one in which their own way of life goes undisturbed.

Unfortunately this is the type of peace and unity that is in alignment with what is wanted by Sinhala Buddhist Nationalists, lead by no other person than the present President of the country - Mr. D. B. Wijetunge. He recently made some statements at his party (UNP) sessions on the 19th of Feb. 1994,



which betray the arrogance and foolishness of Sinhala Buddhist extremists and shock all right thinking citizens of the country. He said that Sinhalese are the one true nation of Shri Lanka and all the others – the ethnic minorities – must grow like creepers around the one tree! He went a step further and declared that if the Government does not condescend to send food to the arid North by ships, then the Tamils of the North will have to cow down to the earth!

**But for such a subservient, if not slavish, unity and an undisturbing peace, the Tamils, including the Tamil Christians, will not give in. They prefer death to being creepers and leeches around an arrogant people.**

The bitter experience of the war has taught both sides, especially the Tamils, that only a unity based on the recognition of the right of self determination of the Tamils as well as equality and fraternity can survive. It has become crystal clear to the Tamils that an undisturbing-peace is a selfish aspiration of the South. Only a peace based on justice and recognition of human rights can satisfy the Tamils.

Justice of God demands that we Tamils be accepted equally as children of one Father, that we have the dignity and freedom of the sons and daughters of God, and that we have a God-given heritage of land, culture and identity just as any other people. In short, through the long suffering and death has emerged a new and strong consciousness about unity with other peoples and peace with justice and dignity. These cannot be bartered for any politics.

Hence Christian Peace-makers and mediators have to beware that they do not encourage a fragile blanket-unity and peace of the colonial times, that they do not presume once again that a blanket-unity can survive, that they do not unconsciously support the subservient unity called for by the Buddhist extremists, but encourage a more realistic unity based on autonomous provinces and equality of persons.

The Christians have been unconscious partners, during the colonial times and after Independence, for a deception of unity and peace in Shri Lanka. And by their silence, they have allowed this ethnic problem to grow. Let them not make another mistake by their misunderstanding of realities. They should work for a unity where the Buddhist-Sinhalese, Hiadu-Tamils and even Muslims, mostly living in their villages, can stand on their own dignity without fear, enjoy autonomous powers for administering their own affairs and relate themselves with one another as good and equally dignified neighbors.

### 5. 5. Responsibility of the Church to propagate the Truth

During the last three years, efforts were made by several non-governmental organisations and the Christian leaders to mediate for peace. The Norwegian government, the Quakers Peace movement, a group of Buddhist monks and Christian leaders from the South all came to Jaffna on their good-will missions, But the response of the Government to all these efforts have been cold rejections. It needs international aid and weapons, but not any good-will assistance for Peace!

The Catholic and Anglican leaders who have taken prisoners of war released by the LTTE as expressions of their good will to talk peace, have an obligation to carry the genuine wish and true message of the Tamils and the LTTE, not only to the government and people of the South, but also, if necessary, to the world outside. It has become the seasonal game of the Government to tell the donor countries at their meetings that they are for peace, while at home they prefer to continue the war and to violate human rights. This truth is becoming increasingly clear also to our Christian leaders who have visited the North and East. One may claim innocence out of his ignorance of the true efforts for peace, but when he knows well the efforts, then he has an obligation to shout the truth from the top of the roof.

## 5. 6. Revitalizing the Locality and Universality of the Church

The Church in Shri Lanka cannot overcome her minority-complex nor enjoy credibility and influence among the majority Buddhists and Hindus unless she strengthens her place in the present context of Shri Lanka and rediscover her potentialities for new relationships with others. In other words, a genuine localization of the Church, striking roots into the religiocultural and sociopolitical realities of the people and an equally genuine universalization of openness to others for dialogue and mutual enrichment are needed.

The Church must reinterpret her universality, not as mere part of a big world church, but more as a character of openness to religions, cultures and ethnic realities and a readiness for mutual enrichment.

In recent decades, some efforts have been made in the inculturation of church-liturgy. But that was mostly an intra-ecclesial exercise of touching up the rituals. This effort may, at the most, serve to reduce the foreign character of our western liturgy. Efforts have also been made to improve inter-religious relationships by participation in social functions and in social work. But more profound and sustained efforts have to be made to liberate the Church from her foreign character and to regenerate her as a truly local Church in the Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil-Hindu milieu or context. This will demand a re-evangelisation of Christians for a new style of life and a rediscovery of the Christian mission in a multireligious context.

## 5. 7. CONCLUSION : Chances and Challenges Ahead

The Church of Shri Lanka, a post-colonial religion in the country, was uniquely placed with a strategy and potential to build up a united nation of Shri Lanka comprising of the two major communities as well as the Muslims and the Burghers. Because of her minority-complex, apolitical attitude and lack of prophetic courage, she missed her chance to be the architect of a united nation.



Now she comes, rather late, but with a compassionate heart, to the scene of the ethnic war. Though divided as churches and their organisations, she is actively involved in relief and rehabilitation work for the people mostly with foreign funds. She needs to revise her mission for unity and peace in the country.

Unlike the Priest and the Levi who passed by "on the other side" of the wounded stranger on the road to Jericho, (most probably rushing to their temple sacrifices or prayer services), the Good Samaritan did well by the compassionate help he rendered at the cost of his own time, wine and oil. It is relevant and meaningful here to pose the question: What would he have done had he arrived on the scene of the incident, a little earlier, when the stranger was robbed of his belongings and seriously wounded by the robbers?

The majority of Christians with a church-theology or a state-theology, may pass by "on the other side" of the ethnic problem or war, to the prayer services of a "privatised and clerical" Christianity. The social apostolate of the Church, mostly funded by foreign agencies, is mostly a compassionate service similar to the one done by the non-governmental organisations like the Red Cross, the ICRC, and the UNHCR.

★ She needs to do more compassionate work by her own local resources and also address herself courageously to the injustices and discriminations that caused the ethnic war.

★ In order to play a meaningful and relevant role towards unity and peace in Sri Lanka, she has to liberate herself from the minority-complex and identify herself more with the just aspirations of both the Sinhala-Buddhists as well as the Hindu-Tamils. She must also liberate herself from the nostalgia of an administrative unity fostered by the British and cherished just by the Christians.

★ A difficult challenge to the Sinhala-Christians will be to help liberate the Buddhist Monks from their extreme nationalism based on the Mahavamsa stories, and lead a movement

towards an honest and sincere understanding of the genuine cry of the Tamils of the North and East for liberation and autonomy.

★ The Word of God, as expressed in the Scriptures and the New Word out of the War, as given by the same God through the painful realities of the ethnic war, are already identified by the Tamil Christians as a clear message about their liberation. Hence their brethren in the South are called to evaluate this message in all Christian charity and situate the liberation struggle of the Tamils within the Christian perspective of total liberation in Christ.

★ Thus the mission of the Church in Shri Lanka still remains unique and urgent. She needs to widen it out towards reaching the Buddhist-Sinhalese and the Hindu-Tamils with a new vision for a courageous collaboration towards unity and peace. She needs to deepen it, by sowing the seeds of new vision at grass-root level. May this new vision grow and pave the way for a just and peaceful Unity among the people of this land.



*One must become conscious of the prison and work to make sure that there are no more prison and no more imprisoned people, that all are freed.*

P. 135 Leonardo Boff  
Church, Charism and Power.

*Civilization will be judged by its treatment of minorities.*

- Mahatma Gandhi





*Among the many places of worship and religious houses seriously damaged by the aerial bombs and shells, was the 132 year old Catholic Church of St. James, in the heart of Jaffna.*

*(bombed on 13-11-1993)*



**BUILD - UP & BURST OF THE ETHNIC BOMB  
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