The Role of the Churches in the Ethnic Conflict

by

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There are three things which often look alike
yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow;
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
from self and from things and from persons; and growing between them -
indifference, which resembles the others as death resembles life....This is the use
of memory: for liberation ....from the future as well as from the past. Thus love of
country begins as attachment to our own field of action and comes to find that
action of little importance, though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
history may be freedom. See, now they vanish, the faces and places ...., to
become renewed, transfigured, into another pattern.

T. S. Eliot (The Four Quartets - Little Gidding)

Preface

It was with some reluctance that I agreed to participate in this project to
"recollect" our collective experience of the ethnic conflict because it had
a ring of a tiresome déjà vu. Quite literally, reams have been written on
this subject and if anyone doubts it, he has only to glance through the
monumental two volume bibliography compiled by Kumar Rupesinghe
and Berth Vestarppen, referring to some 3,486 publications, relating in the main to the ethnic conflict. I wondered therefore what there could be in this project that had not been already covered in those earlier papers.

It was when I read an introductory piece entitled "Recollection, Reinterpretation and Reconciliation" written by Godfrey Gunatilleke, one of the three editors of this project, that I realised that it was driven by a wholly new vision and was not just an exercise in déjà vu. What Gunatilleke was proposing was not merely a change in perspective but a whole new epistemology and a new paradigm.

**A New Epistemology**

Whenever one makes judgements that certain things are true or false, right or wrong, about any matter, one rarely questions the validity of reasoning whereby one comes to make these judgements. That one is making certain assumptions about the very foundations of the rational process, far from being brought into question, is rarely even acknowledged. For instance, how does one test the truth or falsity of propositions claiming to present facts? What role does prejudice and bias play in the selection of facts and what are the limitations upon their availability? How does personal involvement, either as victim or as protagonist, effect one's perceptions? What are the historical contexts in which events occur and get interpreted and how durable are these contexts over time? In holding on to particular perceptions and emotions when the contexts within which they first occurred have passed on, is one allowing oneself, as Eliot puts it, to be under servitude to history? These are not only fundamental questions of epistemology, but important issues of morality as well.
Gunatilleke is suggesting that one should start looking afresh at events and experiences which have framed one's understanding of the ethnic conflict so far. He is asking whether one should continue to treat certain events and experiences as if they were set in concrete, and allow one's thinking and emotions to be held captive to them or does one rise to another plateau from where events and experiences may appear in a new light? To be fair by him, I do not think that Gunatilleke is proposing a recipe for cheap revisionism. He is actually proposing a new epistemology and a new paradigm for our understanding of the ethnic conflict.

**Limits of Deconstruction**

This is a fascinating approach, one that has some famous progenitors. It combines concepts derived from Jacques Derrida's theories of literary criticism, famously referred to as "deconstruction", as well as insights from T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets". It also brings to mind the Advaita concept of reality as One, within which no single ascription is wholly true or wholly untrue as well as the twin Advaita concepts of "Neti - Neti" (reality is neither this nor that) and "Tat tvam asi"(I AM that, and I AM that as well). One also recalls the quantum physicist Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle", according to which the reality out there can never be known, as it really is, because in the very process of knowing it, one alters it. A hundred years before Heisenberg, Immanuel Kant said the same thing; that the "thing in itself" can never be known because the mind frames it in certain "categories of understanding" which do not belong to the thing itself. All of which brings us back to T.S. Eliot's anguish, namely, if uncertainty is all one has as history why does one
allow oneself to live under its servitude?

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The best ostensive illustration of Gunatilleke's concept is an article he himself wrote to the publication, "Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited Vol. 2", edited by Michael Roberts and titled 'The Ideologies and Realities of the Ethnic Conflict - a postface'. Regardless of the validity of Gunatilleke's epistemology, I consider this article the most balanced and sensitive piece I have read on the ethnic conflict written by anyone in Sri Lanka or abroad. It is a remarkable work not only for the lucidity with which the writer uncovers, layer by layer, skein by skein, the tangled mass that is the ethnic conflict, but also for the writer's seeming absence of bias. If this article is a model of what he envisions for this project then the project needs no other validation. I feel strongly that Gunatilleke's article referred to here should be essential reading for whoever wants to probe below the surface manifestations of the conflict and lay hold of its deeper issues.

Having said that, I consider the epistemology proposed by Gunatilleke to be also a very dangerous one, in that, if its limits are not recognised, it can lead to a wholly subjectivist or solipsist interpretation of reality which, barring one's interpretation of it, dissolves itself into nothingness, rather like Schrodinger's famous cat.

In Gunatilleke's keenness to reinterpret what is out there by deconstructing it, concepts such as "true" and "false" can lose all meaning. The most recent example of such an endeavour is the ill-fated effort of David Irving, a British historian, to show that the Holocaust never happened under the Third Reich, and that what has been passed
down for fifty years through eye witness accounts, photographs, documents and the proceedings of the **Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal**, have been mostly inventions by **Jewish propagandists**. The nearest parallel to that academic charade we have in Sri Lanka is the claim that what confronts us today is merely a terrorist problem and not an ethnic conflict. These are some of the aberrations that can flow from attempting to transfer "deconstruction" from the domain of literary criticism to historical analysis. I must hasten to add that most British and American campuses have abandoned "deconstruction" as a valid tool of historical or sociological analysis. At least, it is no longer fashionable as it used to be in the sixties.

**History as Freedom**

While the risks entailed in "deconstruction" may be incipient in Gunatilleke's conceptual frame, quite clearly that is not what he intends. I believe he would agree that no amount of deconstruction and reinterpretation can dissolve the pain, the blood and the carnage, the broken homes, the fractured communities and the lost generations that comprise the facts of the ethnic conflict. No amount of "**recolleciton in tranquillity**", prescribed by Gunatilleke, can make these facts go away, especially when the recollection is undertaken by those who were never touched by the events. The pain may be eased by the passage of time, but the true healing and reconciliation will not come by that process alone. To suggest otherwise would be grossly to trivialise the spiritual and the moral realities that lie at the heart of the conflict.

Against the background of Gunatilleke's own overview I would like, at the very outset of this article, to articulate my own views about the
possibility of reconciliation. Though I frame my understanding within traditional Christian concepts like "contrition", "confession" and "repentance" I must emphasise that my understanding could as easily be framed within the Buddhist concepts of "maitriya", "karuna", "mudhita" and "upekha", a cluster of concepts which describe the same quality of consciousness I have in mind.

I believe that reconciliation will not come unless there is firstly an acknowledgement of the facts followed by a collective and public expression of contrition and repentance. Deconstruction and reinterpretation should never result in altering the facts, nor should they be an escape from having to confront them. That would be a moral subterfuge more monstrous than the facts themselves. Reconciliation cannot come merely through a cognitive or intellectual activity, much less through political manipulations or constitutional devices or through treaties or agreements. It will come only when we (I speak as a Sri Lankan) as a nation can discover the spiritual resources to confront our past and confess our collective guilt to each other. That will be the crucifixion, the moral catharsis, which alone will lead to a new birth and enable us to see things "renewed and transfigured into another pattern" as Eliot puts it. Reconciliation will come not by reinterpreting sin but by confronting it, not by deconstructing facts but by acknowledging them, in lowliness and with humility, with contrition and repentance. Then and then alone will history cease to be servitude and become unto us the gateway to our freedom. Until that happens, we, the Sri Lankan nation, will be condemned, like Sisyphus, to recycle our sin through time, for ever irredeemable.

Adopting the foregoing value frame I shall look at the churches'
contribution towards resolving the ethnic conflict under the categories of "recollection", "reinterpretation" and "reconciliation", as recommended by the editors.

Recollection

The churches' involvement in the ethnic issue has been a complex and ramified one. To understand it properly one has to look at it at the international level as well as at the national.

The International Level (Impressionistic)

I propose to analyse the international churches' involvement first in the impressionistic mode, subjectively, and thereafter through documentary evidence.

At the impressionistic level, I can draw on the vast first-hand experience I had when I was working as the Director of Research at the World Association for Christian Communication, an ecumenical organisation based in London and affiliated to the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. From this vantage position, for over 15 years, I had virtually a ringside side view of how churches in Europe and the western world responded to the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka. However, even though such experiences have a self-evident validity for me personally, I realise that validation in the public domain would require evidence of a different kind. On the other hand, I find that the documents do not always bear out what I experienced at first hand. The wisest way out is therefore to present both sets of evidence and leave judgement to the reader.
My first-hand experience of the churches’ involvement at the international level started in **July 1983** when the long-smouldering ethnic problem literally exploded in the faces of 3,000 delegates from churches all over the world who were meeting in Vancouver at the same time, at the **Sixth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC)**. I was in Vancouver at that time and I well recall the horrifying images that the main line television channels of North America projected of events in Sri Lanka. On at least four consecutive days the main news line at peak time was of Sri Lanka. Dramatic pictures of burning buildings and charred and maimed bodies of Tamils were splattered on the screen and the consistent storyline was of the majority Sinhala Buddhists, with the acquiescence of a Sinhala Buddhist government, practising systematic genocide on the Tamil minority community. Some commentators even drew parallels to the infamous "**Krystal Nacht**" of the Third Reich and 3,000 church delegates soaked it all up.

These images of Sri Lanka were fortified by several Tamil groups who flew into Vancouver to place their grievances before the delegates, but the Government's version, such as it was, went totally unrepresented. **Bishop Lakshman Wickramasinghe** who led the Sri Lankan delegation, while confessing his own horror at what was happening and the churches' outright condemnation of events, rejected steadfastly any suggestion of genocide. His statement made no impact on the general mood of the assembly.

The images imprinted in the minds of those delegates at Vancouver, multiplied and disseminated worldwide, and transmitted down to their
successors in office, provided the substance and the momentum for the international churches’ perception of the ethnic conflict over the past 17 years. Whether at international seminars and assemblies or at local parish levels the impression of a Sinhala majority brutalising a Tamil minority has persisted. When confronted with evidence of indiscriminate violence inflicted by the Tamil militants on the Sinhala civilian population, the international church community, while condemning it outright, has tended doggedly to hold on to the stereotype of the brutalising Sinhala majority.

This bias was further strengthened by a strong Tamil presence in the churches’ vast bureaucracy at Geneva. As I recall it, during those critical years in the aftermath of July 1983, there were at least four senior bureaucrats in the World Council’s secretariat in Geneva who were proactive on the Tamil side whereas the secretariat was totally devoid of a Sinhala presence. Furthermore a few powerful local staff in some of the church bureaucracies in Europe seemed not only to be filled with a crusading spirit on behalf of the persecuted Tamils but also seemed bigoted and unamenable to reason. I was personally aware of instances when this bias in favour of the Tamil cause led to the attempted funding of some projects in Sri Lanka which were clearly contrary to the funding criteria of the church institution concerned.

The International Level (Documentary)

Surprisingly, the documentary evidence does not fully bear my own personal experiences of the international churches’ biases.
I have looked at seven documents (vide A below) issued by international agencies, five of them by the WCC in Geneva, one by the National Christian Council of the United States and one by the Diocese of Madras. Except in the last instance, in none of the others did I find evidence of the bias I experienced at first hand during my seventeen years of working within the international church community. This should present an interesting epistemological conundrum to those who reject first-hand experience as anecdotal while opting for documentary evidence as objective and reliable.

One document is actually the relevant minutes of the **WCC's Vancouver General Assembly of July 1983**. While deploring the violence of July 1983 and taking the government of Sri Lanka to task for inaction, it calls on all parties concerned to resolve their differences through dialogue. Three of the documents are reports of WCC fact-finding missions to Sri Lanka, one led by **Alan Brash** that came in the immediate aftermath of the events of July 1983, one led by **R.J. Chance** also in 1983 and one led by **Ninan Koshy** in 1985. One of the reports was a WCC internal staff report compiled by **Tamara Kunanayagam**. In all of these reports I found the reporting of facts to be completely accurate and without bias, a total absence of a judgmental attitude and in fact a great deal of sympathy and understanding. All the documents spoke of the need for justice towards all communities, an end to all forms of discrimination and of the need to resolve differences harmoniously, through dialogue and without acrimony. All documents also called on the international Christian community to support all initiatives for peace and an end to violence. They also made strong pleas for financial and material resources from the world community to help in the rehabilitation of victims of violence.
The document issued by the National Christian Council of North America in the immediate aftermath of the events of July 1983, despite the virulent anti Sri Lankan media environment that prevailed in the West at the time, merely called for the cessation of violence and was also remarkably unbiased.

The only document that was clearly one sided and strongly biased was the one issued by the Diocese of Madras, in November 1983, under the hand of Bishop Sundar Clark. While condemning the violence it also made a strong case for the people of Tamil Nadu to "identify with their brethren in Sri Lanka where they were being subjected to genocide by the Sinhala people" (sic).

**The National Level**

In order to determine the national churches' involvement I first looked at thirteen documents (vide B below) put out by the two powerful ecclesiastical entities, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) and the National Christian Council (NCC) of Sri Lanka representing between them more than 95% of the Sri Lankan Christian population. In addition I have also looked at two addresses that the Bishop of Colombo, Bishop Kenneth Fernando, made to the annual meetings of the Diocesan Council in 1998 and 1999.

Not surprisingly I found within them a most remarkable consistency in the basic values and policies affecting the ethnic question. I give below these values and policies.

- Christians cannot remain indifferent or neutral on any issue
concerning justice, fundamental rights, discrimination, violence, terrorism, poverty, environmental decay, and any matter that violates the integrity of God's creation.

- All human beings, being made in the image and likeness of God, regardless of colour, race or creed, whether Sinhala, Tamil, Moor or Burgher have equal rights and are entitled to equal access to the means for their fulfilment. They are all God's people.

- Love of country is incumbent on Christians because this is the space in which God has placed us and it is the Christians' responsibility to hasten the coming of God's Kingdom within it.

- The churches affirm strongly the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, plural character of Sri Lanka and the cessation of conflict requires that all political parties commit themselves to these values unequivocally.

- The churches affirm their commitment to the concept of a single, united Sri Lanka. They do not see separation as inevitable, necessary or acceptable.

- The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has its roots in the discriminatory policies that the majority ethnic community has followed in its relations towards the principal minority community for several decades.

- There can be no cessation of conflict until there has been a fundamental reversal of suspicion and mistrust, hostility and aggression, on the part of both contending ethnic groups, not merely outwardly but deep
within their hearts as well.

- While recognising the right of the State to use force, within limits prescribed by law, to enforce its legitimate will as determined by Parliament, the churches reject totally the claim that peace can be ushered by violence.

- The practice of terror, in any form, whether as an instrument of policy or sporadically, by whoever, is condemned unequivocally.

- The only way towards peace is dialogue and negotiation.

- The mediation of a neutral friendly foreign country is strongly recommended.

- The pursuit of frivolous and petty side issues, mostly of a personal nature, by both mainstream political parties in the South, is one of the principal factors in the prolongation and deterioration of the conflict.

- The whole issue must be lifted above the level of party politics.

- There is a woeful lack of statesmanship and vision among our politicians.

- The questions who started the conflict and who perpetuated it are irrelevant. The past must never be an excuse for repeating its errors.

- It is inevitable that Christians being on the side of God cannot take sides as between contending parties but must uphold God's righteousness wherever it is endangered and condemn whatever is contrary to it, by whosoever perpetrated. The Christian walk is therefore a very lonely walk, always prone to rejection and condemnation by both sides.

- The churches' commitment to Peace and Reconciliation flows from the commission directly issued by Jesus Christ himself. It is
therefore non-negotiable.

- The churches recognise the urgent need for the sharing of power through a comprehensive programme of devolution as a necessary step towards the settlement of the conflict. They therefore support the Accord of 1987.
- All churches are united in their view that without prayer and the deep humility that accompanies it and without the impetus and direction of the Holy Spirit, human effort alone will not avail.

These then summarise the views of the churches on the central questions affecting the ethnic conflict.

I have also looked at another set of ten documents (vide C below) containing the views of some dominant prophetic Christian leaders who, by fearlessly articulating the churches' position on the ethnic issue, have attained visibility as well as notoriety, both nationally and internationally. Amongst them are Archbishop Nicholas Marcus Fernando, Bishop Deogupillai, Bishop T. Savundranayagam, Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando, Bishop Oswald Gomis, Bishop Malcolm Ranjith, Bishop Lakshman Wickramasinghe, Bishop Kenneth Fernando, Rev Celestine Fernando, Fr Tissa Balasuriya, and Rev Duleep de Chickera. Amongst them as well I found the same consistently unrelenting and fearless affirmation of the basic Christian position that I have summarised in the preceding paragraphs.

The documentary evidence is uniformly clear that the churches of the Roman Catholic as well as the Ecumenical fellowships, who comprise the vast majority of the Sri Lankan Christians, have a consensus on the ethnic issue and that they have articulated it regularly,
vigorously and courageously.

The churches and the church leaders have not been content merely to articulate their position on the ethnic conflict. They have also exposed themselves to the risks of praxis. They have lobbied with successive governments of Sri Lanka as well as with the principal political parties in the South and with Tamil militant groups in the North in the search for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation, based on the values incumbent on Christians. They have also travelled widely abroad, lobbying with foreign governments and agencies and with the foreign media, presenting the churches' perspective on the conflict with a view to ushering Peace and Reconciliation. Bishop Kenneth Fernando admits to having visited the North at least on seven occasions to talk to the Tamil militants in the search for understanding and reconciliation even though he has been most viciously ridiculed and even abused by certain sections of opinion in the South.

In the foregoing analysis I have not referred to the position taken by the Evangelical and charismatic churches who comprise about five percent of the total Sri Lankan Christian community. These churches have rarely, if ever, qua churches, articulated their position on the ethnic conflict. This has not been for the reason that they do not have a view but that they hold a very strong theological position on the futility of "works" as against "faith and prayer" as the principal modes of intervention appropriate to Christians. To translate this into lay language, what they say is that all conflict is the outworking of man's essential sinfulness and that unless that condition is first transcended through the Cross of Jesus in "faith" no amount of human or rational effort and secular initiatives, however well intended, will avail. On the
other hand, privately they affirm their total support for the values espoused by the Roman Catholic and Ecumenical churches except that in addition they also hold that those values can never be realised by unredeemed man and that only the Holy Spirit can bring them to fulfilment. They therefore prefer to pray and seek an outpouring of the Holy Spirit who alone will bring all to repentance and usher in the Kingdom.

**REINTERPRETATION**

It is evident from the foregoing that the position of the churches in relation to the ethnic conflict has been consistent and unequivocal. Not only that, it has also been articulated fearlessly and often in the teeth of virulent criticism and abuse. Neither the churches themselves nor any believing Christian would consider that surprising or untoward. In fact such opposition would merely further confirm to them their righteousness because Jesus Christ himself had warned them that the world will persecute them and despise them for standing up for the Truth. Christians must believe as a central article of their faith that they must not expect to be applauded by the world when they stand up for righteousness. So, the churches see the experience of being despised, persecuted and marginalised as invariable and necessary concomitants to their faith.

**Lack of Credibility (the Sri Lankan Context)**

However there is a view common among a large segment of Sinhala opinion that although the churches strike a lofty moral tone, their voice lacks credibility, both internationally and nationally, and not because they
stand for righteousness but, to the contrary, because their history is highly tainted by the lack of it. This segment of Sinhala opinion alleges that the churches are heavily biased in favour of the Tamil cause and that this bias flows from their colonial lineage and their consequent lack of “patriotism”. Critics also accuse the churches of hypocrisy and double standards and they adduce masses of evidence in support of their indictment.

In the Sri Lankan context they ask, "Where was the churches’ conscience during four hundred years of colonial domination when the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British persecuted and marginalised the vast majority of the people of Sri Lanka? How was it that the churches failed to stand up for the Buddhists and the Hindus, who by their own criteria must be children of God, made in His image and likeness, when the colonial masters systematically downgraded them while granting preferment to the Christians?" These accusations are not wild abuse but indisputable facts supported by hard historical evidence. The questions "When did the Christians discover their commitment to righteousness? Was it only after the colonial patrons left our shores and the churches suddenly found themselves stripped of their privileges?" are not mere rhetoric. They are entirely valid questions and the only answers that the churches can proffer is to plead guilty and themselves first practice the repentance and contrition they recommend to others.

Lack of Credibility (the International Context)

In the international context, critics of the churches' role in the ethnic
conflict adduce evidence which is even more compelling. They point to some of the Crusades which, supposedly undertaken in the name of the Prince of Peace, perpetrated arson, rape, destruction and death on a scale which even by the barbaric standards of those times were horrific. They point to the churches' acquiescence in the annihilation of whole civilisations in Central and South America by the Spanish Conquistadors and ask how the churches can now speak of the rights of minorities and claim to champion the oppressed. The churches' complicity in the colonial and imperialist enterprise all over the world are documented facts of history. To this day the Anglican Church in Britain is regarded by many as the last bastion of racial prejudice and colonial hubris. Even though the name of William Wilberforce stands out like a shaft of light, the churches' complicity in the infamous slave trade is totally at variance with the high moral tone which they strike now. Even as recently as the late 20th Century, some main line churches brazenly defended apartheid in South Africa and even provided it with a theological undergirding. Likewise, within the Southern States of North America some of the most powerful churches there acquiesced in the suppression of the black people and still do. The Roman Catholic Church famously blessed the marauding armies that Mussolini sent into Abyssinia. Evidence is still being unearthed how the churches of Germany, despite Bonhoeffer, either actively supported the barbarous Third Reich or failed totally to articulate the voice of righteousness in defence of the Jews. Right up to the Second World War it was not uncommon for Christian priests, on both sides of the conflict, to bless, in the name of the Prince of Peace, weapons of war, such as battleships at their launching, and warplanes on bombing missions.

By reason of these facts the churches' case is deeply flawed and
whenever they claim to stand for righteousness on the ethnic question, or for that matter on any issue touching on conflict and oppression, their voice lacks the resonance and moral authority that it should otherwise carry.

A New Beginning

However, within the past few decades, both within the Roman Catholic Church as well as within the Ecumenical churches who comprise the WCC and also within their Sri Lankan counterparts, there has been evidence of a new beginning. In a recent proclamation, Pope John Paul 2
nd confessed unreservedly, on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, its responsibility and repentance for all the errors it had committed through its two thousand year history. Similar expressions of contrition have also been made repeatedly by the World Council of Churches on behalf of all the churches who comprise their membership. These expressions of regret have also been followed up by strongly articulated support for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised, as proof of the churches’ new birth and as a witness to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the renewal of the church.

In Sri Lanka, it is heartening to note that out of the deep awareness of their tainted past a profound contrition and repentance seem to have overtaken the Roman Catholic Church as well as the churches who comprise the National Christian Council. However, if the churches are to acquire a genuine moral authority, as opposed to the authority it had borrowed from "Caesar" for over four hundred years and which it has now lost for good, and if their voice is to ring loud and
clear in the affairs of Sri Lanka, churches will have to demonstrate their contrition and repentance, with a deep humility, in praxis, in their life and witness, for decades to come.

**Current Impediments to Churches' Witness**

However, there are still two major impediments to the churches' witness.

One is that, in their keenness to overcome their historic alienation from all that is local and national, some churches may swing to the other extremity and forfeit the unique spiritual insights which they alone can bring to bear on the nation's problems. One sees more and more a tendency on the part of some clergy, to barter away the vocabulary of the Spirit for the concepts of the social sciences and the rhetoric of the NGOs. They drain concepts like "oppression", "salvation", "redemption", "deliverance", "liberation" and "resurrection" – which are at the heart of the Christian world view – of their essential spiritual content and reduce them solely to sociological or political categories, thereby confessing that they have in fact nothing to offer that is distinguishable from the world. Why should the country listen to the churches if all they have to offer are slogans and platitudes borrowed from the social sciences or from the seminar circuit? In fact much of the sociological jargon that many churchmen keep regurgitating have been abandoned even in the secular world and they therefore stand in danger of being by-passed even by their new friends.

These churchmen must therefore return to their authentic spiritual roots and restore the vertical dimension to their interpretation of the nation's problems. Otherwise they might as well join forces with the world rather
than let the world, and indeed their congregations, be confused about what they really stand for.

The point I have made in the foregoing paragraph is a fundamental one which I am aware is not likely to be shared by many theologians and clergymen. I am aware that some of them will hasten to stereotype my view as "evangelical" or "fundamentalist", and to these I would say that, to start with, I do not even share the central affirmation of those who fall into these two categories – namely that the Bible is to be taken literally. On the contrary, I hold that the deeper dimensions of the Bible can be grasped only by reading it as metaphor, allegory and parable, a view which must surely exclude me absolutely from the family of evangelicals and fundamentalists.

My critique of theologians and clergymen who have placed social engagement above the spiritual, stems from an important principle, namely that the inner is prior to the outer, that in order to change the without one has first to lay hold of the within; or, to put it in philosophical language, that Substance is prior to Form and that a change in the inner substance must precede a change in the outer form. This is diametrically opposed to the thinking of the "world" which is rooted in Form as against Substance and is constantly preoccupied with trying to change, to patch up, the outer to the neglect of the inner. My emphasis on the "inner" is not to be placated by a token gesture to prayer. Rather it is a whole world view, a weltanschauung. My view of Jesus Christ's mission is that it was undertaken to overthrow the worldview which tinkers at the circumference and supplant it with one that is centred within the inner plane and that the outworking of such a shift would produce the harmony and the peace that the world seeks to achieve through other means. *The Kingdom of God
is within you", He said. Also, "My kingdom is not of this world".

My critique of most mainline churches and their theologians and clergy is that they have bartered away this unique dimension which Jesus sought to bring and have instead joined the "world".

The other impediment to the churches' witness is that churchmen may degenerate into politicians in cassock. Just as at one time they were instruments of the ruling colonial power, so today churchmen stand the risk of becoming the instruments of political parties with whom they may share common secular goals. Churches need to guard against ambitious churchmen who see their ecclesiastical positions not as a God-given sacred vocation but as an opportunity for a career, and who might use their position in the church hierarchy to curry favour with the politicians of their preferment.

Populism and opportunism are temptations to which not only politicians, but churchmen as well, are prone. Churches can never with any moral authority, wholly and unconditionally, identify themselves with any particular political party or politician. The churches’ role in a sinful world must always be a prophetic one, never surrendering its right to criticise and call to account its Caesars and Herods, even when doing so is, as indeed it will always be, costly.

**RECONCILIATION**

As I understood it, the primary purpose of this project is "reconciliation", that is to say, to explore how, by truthfully confronting
the facts of the ethnic conflict and transcending them, we may work towards reconciliation. Unfortunately the concept of reconciliation has been so glibly bandied about that it has almost lost its specific content. We need therefore to reflect on it awhile, especially in the context of the churches' mission.

The need for reconciliation is a theme that runs consistently throughout the churches' witness. **Within the Christian context reconciliation is not merely a moral stance in the ordinary sense but an obligation mandated by Jesus himself and therefore incumbent upon all churches.** The scriptures speak of the purpose of Jesus Christ's mission as being the reconciliation of the world to God through the Cross. Therefore any Christian witness that is not grounded in this cosmic truth is no witness at all. The Master's commandment is unequivocal, "Before you bring your offerings to the altar, if you have anything against your brother, go first and be reconciled to him and only then bring your offerings" Mat.23&24.

It is not only the churches that talk of reconciliation. Men and women of goodwill and common sense everywhere have all talked of the need somehow to effect reconciliation. All religions commend it and exhort their followers to practice it. For decades now, they have all preached about it, have fasted and prayed for it and have performed all manner of sacrifices and ceremonies in pursuit of it, but reconciliation never seems to come. In fact after fifty years of talking about the need for it we are further away from reconciliation than ever.

**We need therefore first to understand, at least from the Christian standpoint why reconciliation continues to remain a distant dream.**
Let me first set out what the Christian vision of reconciliation is not, rather than what it precisely is. As the scriptures envision it, reconciliation will come neither through the triumph of arms nor through the cessation of war. It will not come through the signing of treaties, nor through political manipulation or through legal or constitutional reforms. Neither will it come merely through dialogue nor merely through the sharing of power. The Christian concept of reconciliation runs much deeper.

**The Christian View**

The Christian concept of reconciliation has a very specific connotation. Firstly, it presupposes a certain quality of consciousness that comes only through a spiritual dying. Paradoxically, in the Christian vision, **death must precede reconciliation**. The scope and manner of this dying are set out clearly in the scriptures *(vide D below)*. The heart of the scriptural message is this.

The only way to reconciliation between peoples is first through their mutual reconciliation to God, in and through the Cross of Jesus. "God has reconciled us to Himself through the cross of Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5: 18 & 19). Until human beings have opened themselves to that deeply unspeakable and profound truth and have experienced spiritual death they will for ever be condemned to live in conflict and at war with each other.

This does not mean that the answer lies in everyone becoming "Christian". To the contrary, history shows that there has been more
war and more bloodshed among "Christians" than among any other people. That is because for two thousand years the churches, while engaged in proselytising and adding to the numbers of "converts" had failed, and still continue to fail, to communicate the profound mystery of spiritual death in a way that believers could relate it to their everyday relationships. What the Christian concept of reconciliation requires quintessentially is that there should be first a renunciation and an abdication of self.

That is what a true identification with Jesus on the Cross means: crucifying our false identities and transcending our limited selves through Him, in order that we may inherit – in Him – a new identity and a higher self. We are all reconciled "in Him". That is the only reconciliation that is worth seeking, the only one that is possible.

Though I have set out the foregoing as a Christian view, readers who have even a nodding acquaintance with Theravada Buddhist doctrine cannot miss the similarities in the two views. The central teaching of Theravada Buddhism is that all conflict arises from a false sense of personal identity. It is this ignorance or avijja which is carried over as false collective identities and manifests as nationalism and patriotism which in turn consolidate and perpetuate conflict.

The Buddhist answer to conflict is by dying to the false sense of self through meditation and realisation. The Christian answer to conflict is by dying to the false sense of self, i.e. the First Adam, through the Cross of Jesus. According to scripture. "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile" and we may add "neither Sinhala nor Tamil".
Translating the Christian vision of reconciliation to the ethnic conflict, it requires that both sides, Sinhala and Tamil recognise their own culpability in the conflict. It is easy to make an inventory of the other person’s mistakes but doing the same with one's own is enormously difficult. Reconciliation begins only at the point where both Sinhala and Tamil begin to recognise their own errors and their respective contributions to the discord. When this task is undertaken in the Spirit rather than in the letter, it must lead to repentance and contrition. That is the spiritual dying, that is the renunciation that leads to reconciliation. Then the hurts and the wounds, the bitterness and the resentments begin to drain out and the intolerable facts of yesteryear take on a new aspect and a new reality. They cease to hold us in bondage and we find that we have in fact transcended them. That is the Christian vision of dying and being reborn, the experience of crucifixion leading to the resurrection and the new life, applicable not only to individual lives but to societies and whole nations as well. This is the only reconciliation that the churches can talk about. Every other model of reconciliation is of the "world" and is fraught with the world's corruption and infirmities.

This is not an idle Utopia. The instruments required for achieving this end can be devised in the public domain. In South Africa the Truth Commission was an experiment along this dimension. It helped in a large measure to drain long festering wounds. We need to create a similar forum comprising eminent and respected citizens before whom long-standing grievances and hurts may be shared and discussed, not in a spirit of acrimony or condemnation but with an openness and candour
and in a spirit of understanding and forgiveness.

A Fundamental Paradigm Shift

However, even if we get to the point where a Truth Commission on the pattern of the one that was set up in South Africa is constituted, antagonists long separated by prejudice and encrusted in accumulated hurts will not come together in a spirit of understanding and forgiveness spontaneously, or in response to rational persuasion. Another crucial element has to be inserted in the equation.

In the Christian vision coming together in a spirit of understanding and forgiveness requires a fundamental paradigm shift, a radical change in consciousness, which itself is unattainable merely through a rational discourse. Such a change in consciousness presupposes a death to self and it is in prayer and meditation that that spiritual death progressively overtakes the subject and opens the way for reconciliation.

Sadly, not all churches recognise prayer as the primary factor in reconciliation. Some churches seem to prefer working with the tools of the world, placing their trust in meetings, seminars, dialogue, negotiations, demonstrations and lobbying, unaided by any resource higher than their own wisdom. However, the Roman Catholic Church and the charismatic churches of Sri Lanka have consistently emphasised the primacy of prayer as the gateway to reconciliation. This is not to say that we can dispense with outward initiatives such as negotiation and dialogue but that they will remain unproductive and futile if undertaken only at the level of human wisdom.
and without a firm undergirding in faith and prayer. "Works" and "Faith" must go together, for works without faith is blind as faith without works is empty. Dialogue and negotiation are bound to reflect the inner reality. Where the inner reality is an unredeemed ego, rooted in arrogance and paranoia and festering with accumulated resentments, the dialogue and the negotiations will always produce thistles and thorns. On the other hand where the inner reality is a crucified and renewed self, made whole and at peace with God, dialogue and negotiation must bring forth fruit, abundantly.

The problem for the churches has always been how to keep the inner dimension of "faith" (prayer and meditation) in tension with the outer dimension of "works" (social action). The charismatic churches have tended to emphasise the former to the neglect of the latter whereas the ecumenical churches, represented by the NCC, have tended to emphasise the latter at the expense of the former. It is only the Roman Catholic Church that seems to have been able to hold the two in balance. If the other main line churches are also to play a meaningful role in bringing reconciliation to fruition, they too must accord to prayer its rightful priority.

The secular world tends to see prayer and meditation as appropriate only within the agenda of religion and as having no place within programmes for societal transformation. This outlook flows from an infantile and primitive understanding of the nature of prayer. This paper is not the place to launch an exposition of the power of prayer as an instrument of inner and outer transformation but it is the firm belief of this writer that, until at least a few Sri Lankans discover the secret of prayer and meditation as a catalyst
for change at all levels, spiritual as well as material, personal as well as societal, Sri Lanka will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis and keep floundering in one conflict after another, always victims of our outer circumstances but never exercising its God-given dominion over them.

CONCLUSION

This paper started with a quotation from "Four Quartets" where T.S. Eliot imputes three things. The irrelevance of "indifference", the uses of memory (recollection) as a mode of liberation from history and the possibility (thereby) of renewal and transfiguration into "another pattern". Godfrey Gunatilleke echoed these sentiments in his own introductory presentation and urged the writers of chapters to look at their respective tasks within this framework.

I have looked at the churches’ role within the context of this vision and found, firstly, that the churches cannot be indicted with "indifference" but that evidence of their involvement at all levels is abundant. This involvement has not come easily. Especially within the Sri Lankan national context it has been very costly because it has incurred for them the opprobrium of a large segment of their countrymen. In that sense the churches’ role has been a truly prophetic one.

Secondly, I found that the churches’ involvement, though abundant and prophetic, has lacked resonance and credibility. However, that has do with their tainted history, their misalliances and compromises of the past, both in Sri Lanka and worldwide. Acquiring credibility will be a long drawn out, painful and incremental process.
Thirdly, I believe that liberation from the servitude of history and transfigurement into "another pattern" that Eliot talks about will not come about merely by reinterpreting the past. In my understanding of the Christian vision no amount of rethinking the past, by and of itself, will yield "another pattern", for renewal and transfigurement are never secular processes, nor do they result from rational activity. Eventually, Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict may be wound down when one side or the other runs out of ammunition, or when one side decides that enough is enough and settles for less than their preferred ideal, but that will not bring reconciliation, much less, yield a new pattern.

The fundamental difference between the secular approach and the Christian vision is this, that whereas the secular approach works solely at the circumference, on the outside, in the Christian vision, no problem, whether it be the ethnic conflict or any other form of discord, personal or societal, can be absolutely and finally resolved at the level of the problem itself or merely at the circumference.

Wounded, weary and exhausted. Sri Lanka yearns for transfigurement, for a newer pattern, but it continues to search for these things in the wrong places. On the other hand, the Christian formula of repentance, contrition and spiritual death, supported by prayer, leading to a transfigured or "born again" new nation, will always appear paradoxical and incomprehensible and therefore unacceptable to the secular mind.

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Summary of The Role of the Churches in the Ethnic Conflict

The paper warns against the risks involved in trying to deconstruct history and
argues that no amount of deconstruction can make the facts of the conflict go away. Reconciliation is not an outcome of an intellectual activity but the product of a moral catharsis which in turn presumes a willingness of both protagonists, with contrition and humility, to confront their mutual guilt.

The paper analyses the churches involvement both at the international level as well as the national. At the international level it points to a divergence between the balanced approach evinced in textual statements issued by various Christian international bodies and the bias on the side of the Tamil cause revealed in their day to day activities. However at the national level the paper finds a remarkable consistency in the values and policies to which all churches seem committed. All churches seem unequivocally committed to the defence of fundamental rights and to a multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious Sri Lanka. They are also committed to a single undivided nation and do not accept that separation is inevitable. They reject the claim that peace can be ushered through military means or through terror tactics and urge dialogue, negotiation and compromise as the only way out. They bemoan the nation's lack of statesmanship and urge a greater reliance on spiritual resources such as humility and prayer. However the paper also draws attention to the churches' lack of credibility because of their historical association with foreign power systems.

The paper concludes by reiterating its fundamental claim that reconciliation will not come about merely through secular activities unless they are combined with an essentially spiritual initiative such as is represented by the Truth Commission in South Africa.