Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque

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A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace

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PlutoPress
www.plutobooks.com

First published 2015 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3122 5 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3121 8 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7837 1214 4 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1216 8 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1215 1 EPUB eBook

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data applied for

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England
Text design by Melanie Patrick
Simultaneously printed digitally by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, UK and Edwards Bros in the United States of America

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1

Introduction

The photograph is a puzzling one. It appears to be taken from high up on a boat, with a calm sea stretching to the background horizon. Two incomplete figures frame the central image. On the left, a man's arm hangs down from a white short-sleeved shirt. On the right, lower down, we see the legs and torso of a man in shorts and a white shirt. In between there is what looks very much like a cage, hanging from cables. In the cage is a small group of obviously Christian clergymen, dressed in white robes. One wears a reddish-purple sash around his waist.

The picture was taken in 1993 at the port of Kankesanthurai (KKS) in Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula. The photographer was a Dutchman,

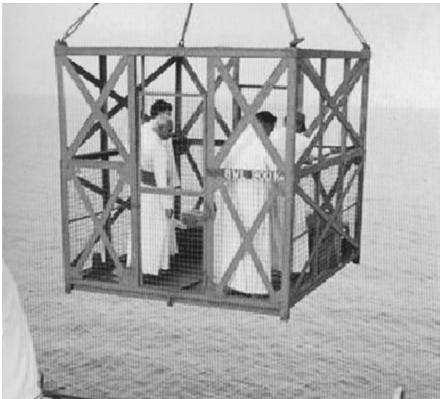

Figure 1.1 Priests boarding a transport ship, Kankesanthurai, 1992 (photo by Ben Bavinck).

Ben Bavinck, at the time employed by a consortium of Christian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Sri Lanka. This was the midpoint in the long civil war in Sri Lanka, which had started with sporadic skirmishes in and around Jaffna in the late 1970s, and would end with the definitive defeat of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. Bavinck first came to Sri Lanka in the 1950s, working as a missionary-teacher at Jaffna College. He retired to the Netherlands in 1972, but returned to Sri Lanka in the late 1980s. In his new role as an NGO coordinator, he travelled back and forth across the island, delivering supplies for Christian projects and recording what he saw and heard in a meticulous diary (Bavinck 2011), selections from which have now been edited and translated from the Dutch (a choice of language which Bavinck, quite rightly, thought as good an encryption tool as any). At the point when the picture was taken, Jaffna was almost unreachable by land routes, and those few civilians trying to get in – rather than out – had to negotiate passes and permissions from the defence headquarters in Colombo.

The picture provides a striking visual metaphor for one central argument of this book. It is a picture that combines capacities and constraint, movement and boundaries. Priests are able to travel across the boundaries thrown up by the war, very often with a freedom afforded to almost no other civilians, but their means of travel, at this point at least, is a cage. The cage confines them and allows them to move. This is a book about religion and conflict, and it is a book that explores the paradox that combines capacities and constraints, borders and transgressions. It is a book researched in the last days of a long and brutal war, and written in the first years of what is turning out to be a troubling and unsettled peace. It is written by a group of researchers with their own differing histories and engagements in Sri Lanka.

In 2006, the authors started work together on a project focused on the role of 'religious organisations' in 'the conflict' in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. This was an area that had suffered some of the worst of the civil war, but it had also been badly hit by the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and by the 'second tsunami' of humanitarian organisations that flooded the coastline, seeking partners and projects to absorb the huge amounts of money raised around the world in response to the disaster (Korf 2005; Stirrat 2006; Korf et al. 2010; McGilvray and Gamburd 2010). Our assumption was that faith-based NGOs, such as World Vision and Islamic Relief would occupy much of our attention in our research, and we assumed that the civil war between the government and the LTTE was the only conflict we would need to consider. Instead we found ourselves concentrating on rather more obvious religious organisations – the temples, mosques and churches of our title – and, in so doing, discovered there was no shortage of conflict within and between religious organisations, conflict which sometimes aligned with the deep currents of the war and ethnic polarisation, but at other times operated at a tangent to them.

Conflict

We start, though, with '*the* conflict', the war between the government and the Tamil secessionist LTTE. Sri Lanka is a relatively small island, about 450 km from north to south, and 200 km wide at its broadest. Its population of 20 million is divided by language, religion, and what until recently was routinely referred to as 'race'. The last is now more politely called 'ethnicity'. The population divides relatively neatly on linguistic lines, with Sinhala the first language of just over 70 per cent, and Tamil the first language of nearly all the rest. The oddities of history and politics have combined to pull the classification one way and then another – Tamils are Tamil-speakers, but so too are Muslims, who are not considered 'ethnically' Tamil. Muslims constitute an 'ethnic' category, as well as a 'religious' category; Hindus, though, are a 'religious' group but not an 'ethnic' group. Malays are religiously 'Muslim', but 'ethnically' not Muslim. Almost all Buddhists are Sinhala, but not all Sinhala are Buddhists. Academics have not helped clarify the taxonomic landscape, as they tack back and forth between constructivist arguments, in which everything was invented in the nineteenth century, and primordialist counter-arguments in which all has been as it is now for thousands of years (Spencer 1990a; Rogers 1994).

Much has been written about the war and its causes. Many accounts start with the moment in July 1983 when the LTTE pulled off its most spectacular operation to date, killing 13 government soldiers in an ambush on the edge of Jaffna town. This was immediately followed by retaliatory violence against Tamils and their property in the south of the island. No credible official death toll was ever announced, but it is certain that hundreds, probably thousands, died in the week that followed the Jaffna ambush. It is also now widely agreed that much of the violence was orchestrated by ruling party politicians and carried out by party workers, with the active assistance in some cases of the police and security forces (Manor 1984; Spencer 1990b; Hoole 2001). All was changed. Many Tamil families started to leave the island, joining family and friends in Britain, Australia, the USA and Canada. Young Tamil men, though, slipped away to join the different paramilitary groups fighting the Sri Lankan government. Paramilitary activity quickly spread beyond the immediate surroundings of Jaffna town, to Tamil-speaking areas along the east coast. By 1984, what had been a geographically contained situation was now something very like a war, with an embattled state confronting increasingly organised and disciplined resistance across a wide stretch of the north and east.

The 1983 narrative provides a conveniently clear chronology for the war, a moment of beginning to join the unusually clearly demarcated end in 2009. But it inevitably obscures the rising level of conflict in the decade before that, a back-and-forth of provocation and repression between the government and radical youth in Jaffna, parallel in some ways to the youth insurrection and repression in the south in 1971. The obvious similarities are demographic and political. In 1971, a group called the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) launched an audacious attempt to seize state power, attacking police stations and other targets in the south. The insurgents were young Sinhala men (and sometimes women), mostly rural, mostly educated, often un- or under-employed. The JVP itself was a leftist group, with roots in earlier small Maoist groups and, mostly unnoticed at the time, a braiding of Marxist and nationalist rhetorical strands in its propaganda (Moore 1993).[1] The early volunteers for the different Tamil groups that sprang up in the late 1970s, were from similar backgrounds, and were also motivated by varying combinations of Marxist and nationalist appeal.

If we view the war as something that stretched from 1983 to 2009, the story lends itself to a purely military interpretation, an account of insurgency and counter-insurgency, interrupted by a succession of more or less unsuccessful attempts to broker a political solution. If we move back to the 1970s, we have instead a story of the political aspirations of educated but under-employed youth. If we start the story of conflict even earlier, in the years after independence in 1948, our account shifts out of the demographic-economic register and back into something more recognisably political. In 1956, a patrician politician with a demagogic streak, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, won a landslide election victory on a populist platform dominated by the demand to make Sinhala the national language. His campaign was supported by members of the Buddhist *sangha* (order of monks), just as his later attempts to resolve Tamil complaints about the new language policies were successfully opposed by the *sangha* (Manor 1989; Spencer 2008). Here, in the 1950s, we find a tangled mixture of religion and politics at the very moment when the faultlines between

Tamil and Sinhala dramatically deepened. Not surprisingly then, the writing on religion and politics in Sri Lanka is dominated by analyses of the role of Buddhist monks, and the political fortunes of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. We review some of this writing elsewhere in this book, but our introductory experiment in reverse chronology helps make it clear that the conflict is not just about the claims of Buddhist nationalism – it has specifically political, economic, demographic and military dimensions, and a proper analysis must take all of these into account.

Whatever the political and other antecedents, the war that gathered force in the mid-1980s increasingly took on a dynamic of its own. At this point, the LTTE eliminated other Tamil militant groups, and attacked moderate Tamil politicians, declaring itself the 'sole voice' of the Tamil nation. Indian attempts to impose a solution in 1987 ended disastrously, with the troops of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) bogged down in an unsuccessful confrontation with the LTTE, while the Sri Lankan government faced a second insurrection from the JVP. The new government of Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected in 1994 on the promise of peace but, after a very brief window of optimism, found itself mired again in a draining military stalemate with the LTTE. In the late 1990s, Norway began to emerge as a potential third-party peace broker. With a new Prime Minister in place, and with promises of hefty external aid for post-war reconstruction on the table, a formal ceasefire was agreed between the government and the LTTE in 2002. Despite escalating infringements on both sides, and a return to open warfare in 2006, the ceasefire was only formally abandoned in January 2008, a little more than a year before the end of the war (Goodhand et al. 2011).

Our project was conceived in what was officially a period of peace, but soon enough war broke out again. The period of the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire was certainly less violent than the years that preceded it, if only in terms of body-count, but it was not free from all moments of violence, especially after a split between the northern and eastern leaderships destabilised the LTTE in 2004. The election of Mahinda Rajapaksa as President the following year was followed by a steep rise in ceasefire violations on both sides and, pretty soon, a return to open war. This time the war was different. The government had a decisive advantage in artillery and airpower, and at first the LTTE conceded territory rather than risk its own cadres and equipment in extended confrontations. Within a year, the Eastern Province was declared a liberated zone, while the final phase of the war was fought out in the northern badlands known as the Vanni. Here the LTTE leadership, the surviving cadres, and several hundred thousand civilians they had taken with them, were bombed into submission in May 2009. Although the war officially ended at a very precise point in time, this does not mean our story ends quite so abruptly, and in Chapter 7 we sketch in some of the more obvious religious and political developments that followed the LTTE's final defeat in 2009.

Religion

This book is about religion and conflict. Public discussion of this topic is often heated and rarely edifying. For the so-called New Atheists – figures such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens – religion is always and everywhere not merely a source of intellectual error and confusion, it is also a cause of most of the world's more intractable conflicts. In these imaginations, religion ignites fundamentalism, violence, divisions between different social groups and political collectives. As well as the obvious case of Islamist violence associated with groups like Al-Qaeda, such visions also find confirmation in violent religious conflict in South Asia. Hindu–Muslim violence in India is the best-known example, but Sri Lanka, where ethnicity is closely tied to religious identifications, would seem to offer further support. A starkly different vision continues to insist that religions, and religious leaders in particular, *should* be active advocates of peace and harmony: any departure from this expectation – and there are many, as there have always been – becomes an occasion for lamentation and surprise.

These competing perspectives gloss over the ambivalences and nuances of religious public action in spaces of violent confrontation, and the hybrid role that religious agents perform. In Edward Said's terms, sometimes they may act as 'potentates' working to reinforce political boundaries, and sometimes as 'travellers' able to transgress the same boundaries (Said 1994). Looking at the complicated ordinary work and acts of some 'extraordinary' figures, such as the Catholic priests who continued to travel back and forth over dangerously contested terrain, but also at less publicly visible religious figures and their work, allows us to paint a more complex picture of the relations between religion, politics and conflict. This presents a rather different image of religion in the postcolonial world, one in which religion is not only a problem but also a force with the potential to act at the margins of the political field to make life a little more bearable in otherwise terrible circumstances. This potential draws upon the work that religious leaders can perform as brokers crossing political boundaries, whether simply because they are religious leaders or because of some inner source of ethical conviction based in their religious life.

And yet, religion can also be a source of trouble, tension and conflict. In Sri Lanka, the most obvious issue is Buddhist nationalism, in which religious attachment and ethnic nationalism combine in a claim to the island as a Sinhala Buddhist space. Such claims are not mere abstractions; they have material force in the demarcation of sacred Buddhist spaces, and the movement of populations in conscious emulation of Buddhist kingdoms of the pre-colonial past. In one of the most famous passages in the island's Buddhist chronicles, the warrior king Dutugämunu is filled with remorse at the deaths he has been party to on the battlefield. He is visited by a group of Buddhist monks who tell him there are only one and a half for whom he should feel sorrow – one who had taken the Three Refuges (in Buddha, *dharma,* and *sangha*) and one who had taken the Five Precepts (Mahavamsa XV. 109–11; cf. Obeyesekere 1988). The deaths of non-Buddhists are of no karmic consequence. However, the entanglement of religion and violence is again complex. Religious zeal can be directed to outsiders, but also to insiders who fall short of the ideal. Peter Sloterdijk excavates this double-edged sword of religious zeal in the biblical story of the Jewish people in the Sinai. After Moses found the Israelites dancing around the golden calf, he not only ordered the destruction of the artefact but also the killing of all those who did not express their faith in God: brothers and friends, dearest and nearest, there was no mercy, no pardon, just killing (Exodus 32: 27; Sloterdijk 2013: 31f.). We find a similar story of internally directed violence – on a much smaller scale, of course – in Chapter 4, where those seen to have departed from the pillars of Islam find their buildings attacked and the body of their dead leader exhumed and stolen by fellow Muslims.

We need a further qualification: in this book, 'religion' is always in the plural. First, the east of Sri Lanka is a complex religious field, with Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists living in a tapestry of communities and settlements. Second, each 'religion' is plural in itself: we find Sinhala Buddhist monks who are strong advocates of a militant Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, but we also find those who distance themselves from this and engage in projects of inter-ethnic coexistence. We find different competing movements within the Muslim community, struggling for influence, believers and public space. Furthermore, there is a wide range of Christian denominations, from so-called 'mainline' ones like the Catholics and Methodists, to more controversial recent arrivals such as the many Pentecostal churches. Within the Catholic clergy, there are those driven by the social message of Vatican II and the influence of Liberation Theology, and there are those who are less enthusiastic about these new roles for the priesthood. Talking about 'religion' as a single set of practices is as futile as talking about 'Muslims' or 'Buddhists' in general, rather than the actions and statements of particular Buddhists or particular Muslims in particular circumstances. As Veena Das has recently put it: 'religious pluralism is the normal condition in which religious subjectivities are formed' (2013: 82).

This raises an issue of definition. Our project was part of a wider research programme on Non-Governmental Public Action, and the specific focus came in response to a call for work on conflict and on religion. However, 'religion' is not a self-evidently neutral term, so before we go any further, a little conceptual clarification is called for. Religion would seem to pose a problem in a number of slightly different contexts: it has become a problem for social scientists in general (somewhat less so for anthropologists than others), for liberal commentators, and possibly also for politicians. After many decades of neglect and indifference, mainstream social science rediscovered religion at some point in the late 1980s or early 1990s. The unexpected role of religious leaders in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the rise of the religious right in the US were two obvious reasons for liberal social scientists to wake up to a possible issue. Alongside these troubling departures from liberal expectation, were more obviously progressive religious initiatives like the rise of Liberation Theology in Latin America and the role of the Church in opposition to Soviet hegemony in the Polish Solidarity movement. Theoretically, for social scientists there had been few advances on the path-breaking work of Weber and Durkheim in the early twentieth century, while empirically any manifestation of religion in public argument carried a sense of anachronism.

Academic sociology developed Weber's legacy into what has now become known as the 'secularisation thesis', the presumption that religion would inevitably decline as a feature of modern, and modernising, societies. In his illuminating comparative study, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, Jose Casanova (1994) subjected the secularisation thesis to a forensic critique, while providing a strong argument for the continuing value of a more or less Weberian approach to understanding the role of what he calls 'public religion'. Empirically, outside Western Europe, it is simply not the case that religious engagement has declined steadily since the nineteenth century. Although alive in terms of individual participation, religion has not retreated into the realm of private conscience: the cases of Iran and Poland show quite clearly that this is not the case. What Casanova does rescue from the empirical wreckage of the secularisation thesis is a very specific part of Weber's vision of the modern: the necessary 'differentiation' of religion from 'secular spheres', something that can happen without any presumption of religion's decline or retreat from the public arena. Differentiation implies the construction of bounded areas of life – the economy, politics, religion – which in turn requires the construction and maintenance of boundaries. What is the boundary-work that seeks to mark off religion from other areas of life? Are boundaries purely a matter of constraint, or do they have productive consequences in certain circumstances? The issue this raises is the status of 'differentiation' itself – is this institutional or rhetorical, normative or empirical? To some extent, this book is an exercise in thinking through these questions and their implications.

Anthropology, as we have already noted, deserves a degree of exemption from the charge of indifference levelled at the other social sciences. British social anthropology and American cultural anthropology have both taken religion very seriously indeed for many years. One powerful and highly influential argument in recent anthropology would seem to close down this question of the setting of boundaries around religion before we have even started to address it. In a sustained critique of an early essay by Clifford Geertz, Talal Asad (1993) argues that the very idea of 'religion' as a separate, definable object of study is founded on a set of assumptions grounded in the history of European Christianity and inexorably tied to a set of liberal assumptions separating the private inner world of religious conviction from the public world of power and political argument. In an analysis heavily influenced by Asad, and by his protégé, David Scott, Ananda Abeysekera (2002) traces the recent history of arguments about Buddhism and politics in Sri Lanka, from the 1930s to the 1980s. Abeysekera is concerned to avoid obvious definitional issues: the concern is not what 'religion' is or ought to be, the question is how or why certain kinds of questions – like the relationship between 'religion' and 'politics' – come to get asked in certain academic contexts at certain times. The results of his enquiry are somewhat inconclusive, although much can be learnt from the concrete examples he deploys on the way, but he seems curiously uninterested in the most obvious theme that emerges: that Sri Lankan Buddhists have been arguing, often fiercely, about these terms and their relationship for decades. Sri Lankans seem – unlike Asad and his followers – quite relaxed about detaching the category 'religion' from the bigger package of post-Enlightenment liberalism in which it is supposedly embedded. In Brubaker's terms, both 'religion' *and* 'politics' are categories of practice, employed within our social field, rather more than they are categories of analysis (Brubaker 1994; cf. Curtis and Spencer 2012).

We will return to the question of secularism in our closing chapter, but our point of departure is a little different. As our evidence is ethnographic rather than theoretical or normative, we are left with the observation that people in Sri Lanka make frequent use of the categories 'religion' and 'politics' as two key terms in their practical journeys through the world of war. They also infuse these categories with their own normative implications, trying to separate a religious sphere from the dirty sphere of politics and its divisive arenas of struggle. This attempt at separation and at purification – the attempt to step outside of the political into a different place called 'religion' – also tells us a lot about the political, including the subtle ways in which some actors engage in politics while pretending not to. So, rather than settle on unnecessarily tight definitions from the outset, our approach to the language of analysis is pragmatic: what work does the idea of 'religion' do in different contexts? And what possibilities do people see – or not see – in what they take to be 'politics.'

Non-Governmental Public Action

This book is a product of two stimuli. One was a specific moment in the history of the war in Sri Lanka, and especially in the history of the space of the non-governmental in Sri Lanka. The other was the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research programme on Non-Governmental Public Action led by Jude Howell from the LSE (London School of Economics). The 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) brokered by Norway, was accompanied by a great deal of external aid, much of it directed to conflict-related projects and much of it routed through NGOs, both international and Sri Lankan (Orjuela 2004; Walton 2008). Norway itself contributed around $360 million between 1997 and the end of the war in 2007 (Goodhand et al. 2011). A network of local projects and initiatives sprang up in the shadow of the ceasefire, a small-scale peace industry, with local and international NGOs in a complex skein of partnerships, all driven by external funding. Then the tsunami hit. On 26 December 2004, a huge wave, triggered by an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, hit shoreline communities across the Indian Ocean. The east coast of Sri Lanka, flat but densely populated, was particularly badly affected: 10,436 were killed in Ampara District, and a further 2,975 in Batticaloa. The global response to the disaster was extraordinary, with record levels of