Prophetic Ecumenism of Public Witness: Victim-Centered Mission

Duleep de Chickera

A study group I attended in a Colombo suburb included some unsettling comments. We listened grimly as a woman related how she is compelled to hide her Christian identity in order to survive in her village. A man added how he too must minimize his Christian identity if he is to serve his neighborhood. This article surveys the social realities that prompt such disturbing remarks in Sri Lanka today and proposes a paradigm for mission from the perspective of victim theology in these daunting circumstances.

Changing Realities in Interfaith Relations

A worrying trend of religious intolerance has descended on Sri Lanka over the recent past.1 Those targeted are Christians and Muslims, who are subject to physical violence and hate speech in several parts of the country.2

For Christians, it is the newer communities that experience this persecution.3 Their methods of forthright evangelism and publicly announced healing services come under particular scrutiny and provoke unproven allegations of unethical conversions. The presence and work of Christian groups in predominantly Buddhist and Hindu areas are also contested, indicating signs of religious exclusivity.4 Occasionally older Christian denominations have faced violent reactions, though this has more to do with local tensions, no doubt now more easily provoked due to the wider climate of intolerance.5

The reaction against Muslims centers on cultural as well as economic factors such as halal food requirements, the female dress code, and the method of slaughtering cattle. At times there are allegations of a covert build-up of militant extremism seen as a threat to national security, fueled no doubt by media coverage of global militant Islam. As it is with Christians, the legality of Muslim places of worship is often a focal point of violence.

This violence is mostly generated and aggravated by Buddhist monks who lead mobs and engage in hate speech at highly provocative public meetings and press conferences. At times (Buddhist) government officials have also been known to add to the harassment of minority religions by questioning the use and dress code, and the method of slaughtering cattle. At times there are allegations of a covert build-up of militant extremism seen as a threat to national security, fueled no doubt by media coverage of global militant Islam. As it is with Christians, the legality of Muslim places of worship is often a focal point of violence.

This violence is mostly generated and aggravated by Buddhist monks who lead mobs and engage in hate speech at highly provocative public meetings and press conferences. At times (Buddhist) government officials have also been known to add to the harassment of minority religions by questioning the use and validity of house churches and prayer halls. In a few instances the perpetrators of violence against new Christian communities have been Hindu priests in Tamil Hindu areas and Roman Catholic priests in Roman Catholic areas. The issue here is often the conversion strategies of small Christian groups.6

The vast majority of Buddhists, however, do not associate with the current violence, and a few recognized Buddhist leaders have publicly condemned it. This stance is best explained as an ambiguity toward Islam and Christianity. While minority religions are accepted as part of the Sri Lankan polity, there is a suspicion that they have abused their religious freedom to encroach on the freedom of others and that consequently their agendas and attitudes are in need of correction.

The response of the guardians of the law in this culture of intimidation and violence vacillates. They have at times interpreted and applied the law to protect those under threat and hold the perpetrators responsible, but on most occasions they have simply withdrawn from their primary duty, demonstrating helplessness rather than bias.7 This sense of helplessness on the part of the law-enforcement authorities points to the heart of the current crisis: the breakdown of the rule of law because of the deliberate politicization of the police force for political gain by the current regime. In spite of numerous complaints, the violence continues unabated, adding to the vulnerability of minority religions and the impurity of those who take the law into their own hands.8

Victim Theology: Its Dynamic and Its Objective

Victim theology is crafted from Jesus’s option for marginalized victims. These are the little people, referred to as the helpless and harassed, with whom he deliberately shares life (Matt. 9:35–36; Mark 1:16–45, 2:13–17, 3:20, 5:24, 6:34). In doing so, Jesus highlights the plight of excluded humans on the margins of life and draws them into the center of the discourse. The objective of this dynamic is to call those responsible for the humiliation of victims into accountability and change.9 Since victims know the identity of their oppressors and sense the way to justice in their helplessness and harassment, the victim-centered perspective opens the way to just and inclusive reconciliation, which is what the Gospel is all about.10 It is only when victims are heard and oppressors repent and turn from their oppressive ways that the latter legitimately enter the discourse and the artificial “center-margins” divide begins to disintegrate. The corrupt tax collector Zacchaeus, for example, is compelled to repent and return his unjust spoils to the victims of his exploitation if he is to be free to return to his proper place in the community. Such change, Jesus declares, is the sign of salvation (Luke 19:1–10).

In circumstances of religious intolerance the church is to steer away from at least three sub-Gospel mission tendencies, regardless of the pressure and the provocation to submit. These are the tendency to withdraw altogether out of fear; to react out of bitterness, and to bypass the opportunity to engage in self-evaluation. It is only then that victim theology promises potential to bring fresh insights, energy, and expressions of witness and mission integral to both the Gospel and social trust.

The victim option of Christ compels the church to draw the victims of religious extremism into the center of the discourse. This is done best when the plight of these victims and the violence and intimidation generated by extremists are brought to bear on the national conscience and the state is held accountable for the erosion of religious freedom and the rule of law. The objective of this intervention is the consolidation of a culture of democratic governance in which freedom and rights for all eradicates both victimization and victims.11
Biblical Accountability

Accountability is an important aspect of this dynamic. It is the device that holds regimes responsible for good and just governance and pursues the common good on behalf of all. When abuse, corruption, violence, or incompetence contaminates responsible governance, accountability exposes these trends and calls for explanation. While the task of accountability is dangerous and difficult under authoritarian regimes, human passion for a just social order stimulates an ingenuity that discovers novel ways and means of sustaining pressure on these regimes.12

Accountability is a biblical concept. It does not originate from the United Nations or any other secular agency, even though these agencies affirm and promote it. Biblical accountability operates at two connected levels: (1) humans holding humans accountable, and (2) doing so because God holds humans responsible for a just, orderly, and integrated creation. So, for instance, the prophets held the ruling classes responsible for the deterioration of justice and the humiliation of the poor and excluded because such accountability is the desire of God (Amos 1:3–8). In line with this tradition, Jesus repeatedly held the Jewish authorities responsible for the additional burdens that distorted interpretations of the Sabbath law brought upon an already oppressed people (Mark 2:27; Matt. 12:8–12).13

Public Witness and Prophetic Ecumenism

This consistent and constant process of upholding the rights and sovereignty of the people, which runs parallel with holding the regime accountable for any prevailing injustice, violence, or discrimination, constitutes the public witness of the church. Public witness is far from being merely an activist extension of the church’s agenda. It is an integral part of mission since it flows from the heart of God, who hates injustice and desires that all creation should rise to a common life of just harmony (Isa. 61:8; Amos 5:14–15, 21–24). Furthermore, it reflects a knowledge of God (Jer. 9:23–24), the source of justice and righteousness, insofar as it does the right thing while ensuring right relations. And it is the motivation behind the church’s historic understanding of social justice, from which flows the duty of public witness.14

Public witness, if it is to make a substantial difference, must be encouraged and enhanced by a common mind among the disciplines of Christ, who believe that intervention in public issues is a continuation of the prophetic biblical tradition and an unchanging aspect of the church’s mission. In short, the church’s public witness cannot stand alone; it is dependent on the solidarity of the people of God. Such a public witness inspired by a prophetic ecumenical solidarity amounts to a demonstration of life and faith in the lordship of Christ over all life. Just as the branches stem from the one vine, so prophetic ecumenism flows from the heart and mind of Christ through the body that recognizes that it lives to discern and assist the spiritual arrangement that pleases God, which Jesus referred to as the reign of God.15 We catch a glimpse of this prophetic ecumenism in the fledgling Jesus community, which in turn inspired the public witness of Peter and John, who stood for the right to truth-telling as an act of obedience to God before the Jewish regime of the day (Acts 4:1–12, 29–37; 5:17–18, 27–32).

Challenges and Lessons

Several challenges, however, need to be addressed if the Sri Lankan church is to discover the gift of prophetic ecumenism for public witness generated by victim theology. These include (1) the fragmented nature of the one body of Christ because of historical and doctrinal reasons, which to date elevates institutional agendas over any significant cooperation among Christians; (2) an exclusive understanding of mission among some churches and groups that separates the religious from the secular, which consequently undervalues public witness; (3) an unacknowledged sense of suspicion between evangelicals and ecumenists regarding mission methods and objectives; (4) the inability of the greater part of the church, regardless of doctrinal or mission differences, to find the ever-present mission balance between faithfulness to Christ and loyalty to the nation; and (5) the inability of the whole Christian community to come to terms with the historical grievance that Buddhists primarily, but also Hindus, have regarding the violence done to these religious cultures during Western colonial rule, which correspondingly conferred power and privileges on Christians.

A collective approach to these challenges is best undertaken through the theology of the Christian communities that include the bulk of victims in the current crisis. Even though the painful victim experience has created an awakening to the need for public witness if the Gospel is to be freely proclaimed,16 an entrenched theological worldview still divides the religious from the secular and is in need of change. A different way of doing theology that begins with the harsh realities of life as victim theology does—and not with doctrinal stipulation regardless of context—is consequently the need of the hour. When these realities drive the church to seek answers in Christ and the Bible, a living theology that points to the inevitability of public witness is likely to emerge. This is always the case when the realities and challenges of the world interact with the living Word, written and incarnate. The inadequate approach of doctrinal affirmation must first be reconstructed into a living theology more conducive to obedience to the Lord of all life, including the public space.

Doing Theology

From this way of doing theology the younger churches will learn to perceive ecumenical dialogue as a gift in the common witness of the one body. Dialogue will be seen as essential conversations that bring and hold the whole polarized family together in order that God’s wider purposes will be done on earth through a better equipped body of Christ, which has ample room for diversity of tradition and practice. This dialogue will also challenge those Christian groups, mostly those of the older churches that have already engaged in public witness,17 to hear the groans of Christian victims more deliberately and with respect and sensitivity. The current tendency of these groups to stand with war victims and the poor and even Muslims in their aspirations for freedom and justice, but to bypass the victims of the younger churches, can best be explained as a sign of embarrassment caused by the aggressive methods of evangelism used by the latter. The
lesson here, however, for these publicly engaged groups is that public witness on behalf of victims can never be selective. It has everything to do with the dignity and equality of all humans, made in God’s image.

Other Contenders

Prophetic ecumenism for public witness will require the church to engage with other contenders who, like the church, are driven by belief or ideology and compete for space in the public arena. Here the stakes are high, and the church will meet with hostility, anger, critique, reaction, indifference, and cynicism, as well as appreciation, goodwill, respect, and solidarity. The call to be salt and light in God’s world cannot, however, be avoided. If the task of the church is to interpret the Gospel in and to the world, attempts to escape the scrutiny of other contenders in the public space will amount to unfaithfulness. The high price paid for public witness in the public space is integrity and the cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23).

Church as Violator

Victim theology inevitably judges the church. The Buddhist as victim also has a place in the center of the discourse. From here the church, perceived and entrenched in the psyche of the Buddhist victim as historical aggressor, needs to deal with the past through a public apology for the violence committed against Buddhism and Buddhist culture, especially during Western colonial rule, and for a postindependence greed for converts, much of which still prevails. Such an apology is likely to be well received by moderate Buddhists, who, if we can judge from informal conversations, clearly wait for such a sign. Above all, it will establish the credibility of the church as a national community that lives the Gospel of repentance and eventually will consolidate interreligious trust for the common good.

Appropriate Mission

Part of the post-apology manifestation of good intention will include a self-critique of the style of mission that has led to the grievance of the majority religion. This quest, which has been the constant pursuit of postindependence theologians in Sri Lanka, will require a delicate and sensitive balance between national integration and Christian identity, both of which require obedience to Jesus. The continuing discernment of the incarnational method of mission by groups of Christians as being the most appropriate for postindependence Sri Lanka is a helpful option for consideration. It is certainly more honorable than the method of evangelism that pursues speedy conversions. Just as the seed is to fall to the ground and die before it bears fruit, so Christian mission among other living religions in a conflict-ridden society involves engagement and immersion in the common struggles of the people. The way Christians behave and the values they live by in these struggles are to reveal the living Christ, who died and rose so that all may have abundant life. When the Gospel is lived in this manner, fresh opportunities of mission will emerge, and the Gospel will be preached with integrity.18

An added asset in the incarnational method of mission is that it prevents the public witness of the churches from becoming sectarian.19 Since social injustice involves a complex network, restricting the church’s public witness only to Christian or religious issues is unrealistic. The church’s prophetic witness is therefore not to be limited to issues of religious intolerance only when they affect the Christian community. It must stand shoulder to shoulder with current civil society initiatives, and it must widen its focus to address all violations of democratic rights and human dignity, regardless of ethnic, religious, political, or class identity. For this collaboration to be most effective, shared public witness will need to pursue a truly democratic culture in which the rule of law and good governance prevail and within which there will be freedom for all to live and practice their respective religion with dignity. In this collaboration the church and religions are to take note of and learn from the current methods of advocacy and campaigning adopted by civil society.20 As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, it is public witness and social advocacy from within that will change the current culture of authoritarian impunity and restore fullness of life for all.21 The biblical neighbor concept based on the biblical concept of social justice endorses this stance theologically and compels the participation of the whole church for the common good.22

Conclusion

Throughout its postcolonial life, the South Asian church has learned and relearned that human crises are an invitation to new lessons in witness and mission in the circumstances of poverty, violence, and pluralism. Christ undoubtedly comes to us in a new and daring way in the storm. The hardships of Jerusalem defined the early church’s emerging global mission. The wheat is to bear fruit among the weeds that threaten to choke it. In these metaphors and experiences, mission is reconstructed. Victim theology stands in this tradition. It facilitates the reconstruction of appropriate mission models in situations of conflict, which in turn equip the church to face and transform these social realities.

When viewed in this light, prophetic witness through prophetic ecumenism is the convergence of truth and life that pursues rights, freedom, and liberation for all from all types of violence, injustice, and oppression. It brings together those who are not against the churches. As a spirituality, it emulates the incarnation to eliminate the distinction between the religious and the secular, as well as between the center and the periphery.23 Above all, it promises to heal the divisions among Christians,

When the Gospel is lived in this manner, fresh opportunities of mission will emerge.

Epilogue

In 2012 the National Council of Churches (NCC) of Sri Lanka celebrated its centenary anniversary. There was much for which to be grateful to God. Among the several highlights of its ecumenical journey, the accompaniment of victims stood out prominently. These included war victims, the oppressed plantation community, the urban poor, victims of religious extremism, and victims of natural disasters.

The chief guest at the public event that commemorated this
important landmark was a person whom many Sri Lankans, including the large numbers represented by the NCC, consider to be the source of numerous violations of human dignity and rights, including religious freedom: the nation's president. This reversal in values—honoring the oppressor instead of lifting up the concerns of the victims of oppression and disaster—will require a substantial analysis elsewhere, but for now a comment is necessary.

Numerous church persons, including youth leaders, registered their protest by boycotting the event. When decisions to seek the approval of those in power place the violator at the center instead of the victim, the public witness of the church is ridiculed and suffers an immense setback. Most seriously, prophetic ecumenism is silenced. But all is not lost. Questions being asked already indicate that prophets will rise from among the people to embrace victims and hold violators accountable, notwithstanding a leadership that has violated the church’s trust. This tragic development has a bearing on the opening story in this article. The vindication of victims rarely comes from the top, and victims who long for liberation, such as the lone woman and lone man in the stories, are to look across and within themselves for life and liberation. However serious the betrayal of human trust may be, Christ—the victim-vindicator ever present among those who groan—is never without courageous and credible witnesses. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. Paradoxically, strong interfaith collaborations continue to run parallel with these incidents in multireligious Sri Lanka, where Buddhists compose approximately 70 percent of the population, Hindus 13 percent, Muslims and Christians 8 percent each, with a few smaller religions and agnostics making up the remaining 1 percent.

2. See January–March 2013 Report of the National Christian Evangelical Association of Sri Lanka, henceforth NCEASL; and Hate Incidents against Muslims, 2013 (Sri Lanka Secretariat for Muslims), henceforth SFM. While small Christian communities have suffered sporadic intimidation over a longer period, Muslims have been targeted over the past two years or so. Hindus also complain of discrimination and violence, particularly in the more militarized regions. The nature of this conflict is much more politically complex and will not come within the purview of this article.

3. Other than church members, few people make a distinction between the denominations. It is not uncommon for all Christians to be spoken of as (Roman) Catholics, the largest Christian denomination, with which most Sri Lankans are familiar.

4. See NCEASL.


6. For all these points, see NCEASL and SFM.

7. Again, see NCEASL and SFM.


9. Victim theology is the backbone of all liberation theologies.

10. This is the rationale of truth commissions and the thrust of restorative justice.

11. The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, chap. 2, art. 9; chap. 3, arts. 10 and 14 (10). While giving foremost place to Buddhism, these sections affirm the freedom of all Sri Lankans to manifest a religion or belief through worship, observance, practice, and teaching, alone or with others and in private or in public.

12. At present seven methods of advocacy and resistance are practiced by pro-democracy groups in Sri Lanka: (1) the maximizing of all opportunities to speak and teach, (2) the fullest possible use of all that is still left of democratic institutions (esp. the media and the judiciary), (3) the assertion of constitutional freedom and rights, (4) the assertion of the sovereignty of the people, (5) public boycotts, street campaigning, and protests, (6) the exposing of corruption, and (7) the call to accountability.

13. See also the subversive texts such as Matt. 6:24 (the absolute choice between God and mammon, or idols) and Matt. 22:15–22 (regarding paying taxes to Caesar, and calling for primary obedience to God, whose image is stamped on humans).

14. The fourth mark of mission of the Anglican communion—“to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation”—stems from this doctrine.

15. My preference is to speak of the governance of God, for such wording (1) reduces the connotations of triumphalism, (2) implies hard, continuing work, and (3) is more easily understood in the secular world.

16. Some pastors of these churches are now in court seeking redress and have begun to recognize the importance of public witness and advocacy.

17. Sections of the Sri Lankan church, particularly Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, have a long and rich tradition of engagement in public witness. A recent example is the submissions made by the Anglican Church to the presidential commission on reconciliation after the war. See Duleep de Chickera in an appendix to Powder Anew (Colombo: Diocese of Colombo, 2013).

18. The pastoral behavior of Christians in postwar refugee camps prompted some Hindus to attend worship in Anglican churches after resettlement around 2010. The churches decided that all would be welcome but not instructed and baptized unless they were strong and secure enough to say no. If they subsequently insisted on converting to Christ, the church would respond appropriately.

19. If it does, it could well turn into another protracted minority-majority conflict on the lines of the ethnonisicrisis. Given the world representation of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, such a conflict has potential to become a global issue.

20. See n. 13.

21. Several church leaders present in Busan in 2013 at the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches publicly identified international intervention as a way to resolve the current crisis in Sri Lankan governance. Dependence on external forces, however, reduces whatever energy can and must be generated internally.

22. This vision inspired persons like William Carey, William Wilberforce, Archbishops William Temple and Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Bishop Tutu, and others to work for social justice. The names of hundreds of lesser-known contemporary prophets from the Global South, including Sri Lanka, could be added to this list.

23. The incarnation, in which God becomes one with human flesh, has removed this distinction forever (see John 1:14).

24. Violators of human dignity and rights win converts through enticement. Religious leaders are not immune to this trap. When they—whether Buddhist or Christian—succumb to this temptation, the result is either visible collaboration with the violator or a demonstration of public affinity with the violator. In the people’s perception there is little difference between primary and secondary violators. They both disregard and humiliate victims.