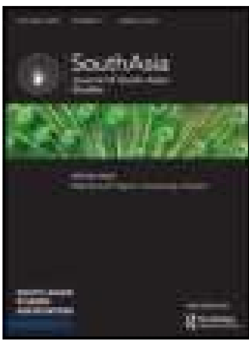

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Bernardo E. Brown

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Jesuit Missionaries in Post-Colonial Conflict Zones: The Disappearance of 'Father Basketball' in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka

BERNARDO E. BROWN, *Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore*

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In August 1990, Father Eugene John Hebert SJ disappeared while trying to reach his home in the Sri Lankan city of Batticaloa. Caught in the midst of the turmoil that confronted Tamil and Muslim minorities after the peace-keeping operations led by the Indian armed forces collapsed, Father Hebert was one of thousands of victims who perished in the violence that engulfed the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka between June and September 1990. Since the early stages of the ethnic conflict (1983–2009), American Jesuits stationed in Tamil-speaking areas of the island had become de facto human rights activists, being virtually the only remaining trusted mediators between the different factions involved in the armed confrontation. Their efforts to foster peace and dialogue in the region were far from their original assignment as educators—which Father Hebert had been conducting since his arrival in 1948. This article not only traces Father Hebert's life trajectory from Louisiana to Sri Lanka, it also reflects on the cultural impact that the presence of American Jesuits had in the entire region, as well as on the changing responsibilities they assumed in the volatile political context of the island that took them from coaching basketball to becoming catalysts for peace.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; Jesuits; missionaries; post-colonialism; basketball; Ceylon mission; Christianity; education; Batticaloa

The study of Christian missions across South Asia has been shaped by a distinct interest in processes of conversion that highlight the diverse expansionary and often controversial strategies that missionary enterprises implemented. Whether focused on contemporary evangelical denominations suspected of engaging in unethical practices, European Catholics promoting syncretistic *accommodatio* and inculturation policies, or austere American Protestants focused on making scriptural and theological printed materials available across linguistic boundaries, academic interest in missionary work shares an orientation towards

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growth and transformation.[1] Much of the scholarly attention on missionaries has therefore taken as its starting point the entanglement of Christianity with colonialism and modernity, and even when Christianity is not approached as a Western import to South Asia, its disruptive impact on other social and religious formations is taken for granted.

As missions have been invariably perceived as a source of rupture fundamentally motivated by the constant pursuit for new adherents inherent in every evangelising project, other dynamics that do not fit the expansionist narrative are difficult to conceptualise in the field. As a consequence, missionary efforts that strive for a measure of stability and continuity are recurrently sidelined from research agendas because the struggle for subsistence is rarely associated with the work of missionaries. Periods when missions fall into decline, when the very survival of evangelising and educational projects is in jeopardy, and when tactics to 'keep afloat' take precedence over expansionary projects, are usually periods that do not fit the proselytising model and are thus ignored by researchers. Academic attention is then directed towards emerging local and global socio-political dynamics that can provide new ways to interpret change, but rarely is much attention directed towards understanding what older formations do to reinvent themselves and what creative tactics they implement to adapt to new realities.[2]

This article focuses on the work of Jesuit priests stationed in South Asia during a period largely neglected by scholars studying Christian missions. I examine the work conducted by the Catholic Ceylon mission in post-colonial Sri Lanka at the time when the American Jesuit priests in charge of the diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa refashioned their educational and pastoral responsibilities to address the challenges posed by the growing political tensions that dominated the region. In this process of transformation, missionaries had to engage with brewing ethnic anxieties that would radically change the lives of the populations they worked with. Focusing on the disappearance of an American Jesuit priest who worked in Sri Lanka in the second half of the twentieth century, I suggest that missionaries in post-colonial contexts had to confront new political challenges that their predecessors—who were able to focus their efforts more squarely on evangelisation and modernisation—could not have imagined. The way in which these priests adapted to serve the changing needs of the communities they worked with also describes the process of redefining what missionary work consists of in the contemporary world.

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[1] An exception should be made here for Syrian Christians in Kerala who do not fit models of conversion and missionary work. See Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Susan Viswanathan, *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual among the Yakoba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For an excellent example of Protestant text-based missionary projects, see the work on the Church Missionary Society (CMS) by Christopher Harding, *Religious Transformation in South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); for Catholic inculturation in South India, see David Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society (1700–1900)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); for contemporary controversial evangelical proselytising projects, see Nathaniel Roberts, 'Is Conversion a "Colonization of Consciousness"?', in *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 12, no. 3 (Sept. 2012), pp. 271–94; and Neena Mahadev, 'Conversion and Anti-Conversion in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Pentecostal Christian Evangelism and Theravada Buddhist Views on the Ethics of Religious Attraction', in Juliana Finucane and Michael Feener (eds), *Proselytizing and the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Asia* (Singapore: Ari Springer Series, 2014), pp. 211–36.

[2] The emergence of an anthropology of Christianity has been particularly shaped by an interest in radical change, rupture and notions of difference. Only a few authors have criticised this heavy focus on expansion and transformation and are interested in less revolutionary forms of Christianity. See, for instance, Chris Hann, 'The Heart of the Matter: Christianity, Materiality and Modernity', in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 55, no. S10 (2014), pp. S182–S192; and Liana Chua, 'Conversion, Continuity, and Moral Dilemmas among Christian Bidayuhs in Malaysian Borneo', in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 39, no. 3 (2012), pp. 511–26.

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One of the consequences of the rise of Sri Lankan nationalism in the early twentieth century was the emergence of political dynamics marked by unprecedented tensions that deeply transformed the relationship between civilian rule and foreign religious workers.[3] The process of marginalisation from the public sphere to which Catholic institutions had been subjected since the mid 1930s is often interpreted as the gradual exclusion of traditional missionary projects from arenas of political and social relevance. But as missionaries were disenfranchised from their formal responsibilities as administrators and school principals, they were also liberated from the bureaucratic pressures that their former jobs entailed, with the unexpected consequence of allowing them to turn their attention towards new undertakings.

Sri Lankan government efforts to exclude Christian missionaries from public administration as a way to assert national sovereignty were largely successful; foreign missionaries as a 'defeated' colonial force no longer posed a threat to the nationalist project and ceased to be a credible enemy of an independent Sri Lanka. A consequence of this nationalist victory was that Catholic priests and nuns, who started to denounce the plight of Tamil minorities in the late 1960s, could not be convincingly represented as agents of colonial domination and foreign interference. Civilian authorities who had focused on ousting foreign missionaries from positions of authority did not find the new activities of priests relevant, so they were allowed to engage politically in unexpectedly influential ways.[4] It would not be until three decades after independence, in the 1980s, that the more radicalised proponents of Sinhalese nationalism would build a new discursive platform capable of once again targeting Catholic social activism directly.

The Breakdown of Peace

With the onslaught of violence that spread across eastern Sri Lanka from June 1990, the escalation of communal skirmishes into outright inter-ethnic clashes became a daily preoccupation for Catholic missionaries settled in the region. Rumours of imminent riots in the town of Valaichchenai had reached the bishop of the diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa during the second week of August, so he asked an American priest to go there in order to ensure the safety of a group of nuns and students living at the Sisters of the Good Shepherd Convent. Father Eugene John Hebert SJ, a Jesuit of Cajun origin from the town of Jennings in southern Louisiana, travelled alone on his motorcycle across this region interspersed by Tamil and Muslim villages to help prevent acts of violence in Valaichchenai from spilling over into the convent premises. On 15 August, two days after his arrival, tensions had apparently subsided and Father Hebert decided to return to his home at St. Michael's College in Batticaloa, some 40 kilometres to the south. Before his departure, he spoke by telephone with Bishop Kingsley Swampillai, who told him that a convoy had been sent to bring him back safely to Batticaloa. But Father Hebert considered such security precautions were unnecessary and decided to return on his own because he had already been absent for three days from the Eastern Technical Institute (ETI) that he directed. Without much information about the volatile situation that had taken over the region that separates Valaichchenai from Batticaloa,

[3] R.L. Stirrat, *Power and Religiosity in a Postcolonial Setting: Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[4] There are several examples of innovative centres for research and spirituality established by Catholic priests in the post-independence years, where work on human rights, the arts and political activism would become prominent and eventually notorious for its critical stance on nationalism and inter-ethnic violence. SEDEC, (presently renamed CARITAS Sri Lanka), the Centre for Society and Religion founded in 1971 by theologian Father Tissa Balasuriya OMI, and the Tulana Research Centre for Encounter and Dialogue founded by Father Aloysius Peiris SJ in 1974, are two of the most important examples of institutions that are still active today.

the 67-year-old priest hopped on his Vespa scooter—along with Bertram Francis, a Tamil student at ETI—and started his journey.

Bishop Swampillai had asked Father Harry Miller SJ, another American priest based at St. Michael's College, to lead the convoy to bring Father Hebert from Valaichchenai back to Batticaloa. Riots, looting and killings had been randomly erupting almost every day, alternating between the many villages that dot the area, making decisions over which roads were safe to travel a dicey speculation supported only by unreliable information. When Father Miller arrived in Valaichchenai on the morning of 15 August, he was informed that his friend of fifty years had already left. Father Miller and the security escort promptly returned to Batticaloa, but, upon arrival, learnt that Father Hebert and Bertram Francis had never made it home.

Only one hour earlier, they had witnessed the violent clashes that had erupted in Eravur—a mixed Tamil and Muslim town north of Batticaloa—where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had slaughtered over one hundred Muslim men three days earlier. Miller and others in the convoy promptly returned to Eravur in search of Father Hebert and Francis. The town had been devastated and most Tamil civilians had fled because retaliation by local Muslims was expected. Fearing the worst, Miller even checked inside the village wells—a common practice then was to dispose of bodies and evidence of foul play in wells—but they did not find any substantial leads as to what had happened to the missing priest and his student.[5]

Father Hebert's disappearance was far from exceptional in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province in 1990. After the withdrawal in 1989–90 of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), which had failed to become a catalyst for peace in the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka, a short-lived period of hope ensued during which the LTTE and the newly-elected administration of Ranasinghe Premadasa held peace talks. This brief moment of calm reached an abrupt end in June 1990, giving way to a bloodbath that lasted three months and would mark the region and the country forever.[6] Ethnic violence, pillaging, burning of houses and shops as well as outright mass executions soon became daily occurrences.[7] Several attacks on mosques took place during July, but the culminating event was the massacre of more than 140 Muslims at two mosques in Kattankudy on the outskirts of Batticaloa on 3 August, when armed men machine-gunned the crowds gathered for Friday prayers.[8]

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[5] See Øivind Fuglerud, 'Space and Movement in the Sri Lankan Conflict', in Philomena Essed, Georg Frerks and Joke Schrijvers (eds), *Refugees and the Transformation of Societies: Agency, Policies, Ethics and Politics* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), pp. 42–52.

[6] There are three recent ethnographies of the Batticaloa region that provide excellent insights into the socio-political and cultural dimensions of eastern Sri Lanka, the ethnic conflict and the dynamics of Tamil-speaking communities in contemporary Sri Lanka. See Margaret Trawick, *Enemy Lines: Warfare, Childhood and Play in Batticaloa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Mark Whitaker, *Learning Politics from Sivaram; The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist in Sri Lanka* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006); and Dennis McGilvray, *Crucible of Conflict: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

[7] After the departure of the Indian Army from Batticaloa, the LTTE was poised to take full control of the region before the government in Colombo made its move and before other rival Tamil organisations regained a solid presence in the area. The LTTE's bold actions to assert its supremacy were to raid police stations across the Eastern Province and demand the surrender of all government security forces on 11 June. After taking nearly 900 policemen prisoner, the LTTE released the Tamil members of the force, and later executed hundreds of Sinhalese and Muslim officers. See Fuglerud, 'Space and Movement in the Sri Lankan Conflict', pp. 43–4.

[8] Rajan Hoole, *Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power: Myths, Decadence and Murder* (Jaffna: UTHR (University Teachers for Human Rights), 2001); Dennis McGilvray, 'Tamils and Muslims in the Shadow of War: Schism or Continuity?', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 20 (Special Issue 1997), p. 239; and Emilia Fagerlund, 'The Tigers' Roar: Insurgent Violence against Civilians in Sri Lanka', in *Psychology and Society*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2011), p. 96.

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A week later, all through the night of 11 August, the carnage continued nearby, when another group of armed men raided the Muslim sections of the towns of Eravur and Chenkaladdy, leading to the massacre that preceded Father Hebert's disappearance. The morning after the killings, a division of the Sri Lankan army based only one kilometre away arrived to take control of the situation. However, instead of ensuring the safety of the Tamil civilian population, the army appears to have turned a blind eye to the attacks on Tamils carried out by Muslim men seeking revenge for the atrocities committed the night before against their families. It was in this context that Father Hebert and his student must have entered the town of Eravur for the last time on the morning of 15 August.

When I met with Father Miller in August 2013, he had two hypotheses about what might have led to the disappearance of Bertram Francis and Eugene Hebert. One is that on passing through Eravur and witnessing the violence and looting, Hebert decided to intervene to try to stop the mobs, which most likely reacted with more violence. His other hypothesis is that groups of Muslim men plundering the town of Eravur, and seeking to avenge the recent massacres committed by the LTTE, stopped them on the road and demanded that Father Hebert's Tamil travel companion stay with them while he carried on to Batticaloa, a request that he would not have complied with. At the age of 88, Father Miller needed to stop and take a deep breath when recounting what happened on the day his dear friend went missing. As the security caravan he led arrived back at St. Michael's and he heard that Father Hebert had not arrived, he felt immediately dismayed by the possibility that his friend was caught up in the turmoil they had just witnessed in Eravur. Knowing Father Hebert so well, Father Miller was sure that his colleague would not have been able to ignore what was happening. Father Miller believed that if he had been there with his colleague, perhaps, he could have convinced him to continue and avoid the violence, but without this restraint, Father Hebert would have felt compelled to do something. Father Miller movingly concluded: 'I missed Father Hebert only once in my life, that day was the day he died'.

The preceding sketch of the events that led to Father Hebert's disappearance is a rough overview of the terror and violence that beset Batticaloa in the months between June and September 1990. While at other stages of the 25-year conflict, the confrontation pitched LTTE separatist fighters against the Sri Lankan army, 1990 was a chaotic year in which multiple paramilitary organisations with different political objectives and fragile secret alliances confronted each other. The general sense of confusion and fear that these manifold conflicts generated was exacerbated by the fact that most acts of violence that struck towns and villages around Batticaloa were perpetrated by unidentified gunmen, who then vanished, leaving only dead bodies behind.[9] The University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR), probably the most reliable source of information at the time, eloquently noted in one of its reports that during those months, 'Of killing there was a good deal, but of fighting almost none'.[10]

With this context in mind, it comes as no surprise that the fate of Father Hebert and his student was difficult to track. The American embassy in Colombo half-heartedly fulfilled its obligation of demanding that the Sri Lankan government pursue an investigation into the disappearance of an American citizen, while Father Miller and other members of the

[9] Patricia Lawrence, 'The Changing *Amman*: Notes on the Injury of War in Eastern Sri Lanka', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 20 (Special Issue 1997), p. 215; and Dagmar Hellman-Rayanayagam, 'The Concept of a "Tamil Homeland" in Sri Lanka—Its Meaning and Development', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, no. 2 (Dec. 1990), p. 79.

[10] Fuglerud notes that between June and December 1990, the Batticaloa Peace Committee registered 1,500 disappearances, including those of Hebert and Francis. Fuglerud, 'Space and Movement in the Sri Lankan Conflict', p. 44.

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FIGURE 1. Map of eastern Sri Lanka.
Source: Bernardo Brown and Belen Torcelli, based on a map from Google Maps and a map from www.mapsof theworld.com.

Batticaloa Citizens Committee sought to find some clues on the fate of their dear friend. However, in the turmoil that characterised those months in which killings were counted by the dozen, the disappearance of one or two individuals had become a minor occurrence. When a measure of calm returned to Batticaloa towards the end of 1990, it had already become nearly impossible to conduct any investigation that could provide clues about the final hours of Father Hebert.[11]

Jesuit Missionaries in Sri Lanka

Although academics interested in Jesuit missionary activities in Asia have focused extensively on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century experiments in syncretism and cross-cultural dialogic methodologies, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer another period of

[11] According to the Uppsala Conflict Database (UCDP), the highest number of civilian deaths in the conflict up to that time was registered in August 1990, with more than five hundred registered killings. Fagerlund, 'Space and Movement in the Sri Lankan Conflict', p. 101.

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intense innovation for the Society of Jesus across the region. Jesuit involvement in South Asia during these years was not characterised by the Christian conversion project so much as by a modernising programme that was manifested in long-lasting transformations in the field of education.[12] The development of extensive school networks, however, was only one aspect of this ambitious plan—the training of religious vocations was another key component of the late nineteenth-century Catholic missionary project. Ceylon achieved regional prominence for the Catholic Church in 1890 when Pope Leo XIII posted Bishop Ladislao Zaleski to India tasked with the establishment of a new general seminary for South Asia. In his attempt to avoid caste conflicts and the long drawn-out hostilities between Goanese priests and Jesuits in Tamil Nadu, Bishop Zaleski decided not to build the seminary on the subcontinent. His alternative was to appoint Belgian Jesuits—already successfully settled in Bengal—to run the new seminary to be inaugurated in Ceylon in 1893.[13]

Besides their responsibility for organising the Ampitiya seminary in Kandy, the Belgians were also charged with staffing the newly-formed diocese of Galle in the south of the island. The French Jesuits of Champagne Province were also welcomed to Ceylon to organise the other new administrative region created after the division of the Jaffna diocese, Trincomalee-Batticaloa. Thus, the establishment of the seminary in Kandy in 1893 simultaneously marked two important events in the history of Sri Lankan Catholicism: it became the main centre of training for priestly vocations for the next half century in South Asia; and it opened a new era of Jesuit missionary and lay educational work in Ceylon.[14]

Over the next four decades, Jesuits inaugurated schools and renovated several modest educational institutes that had already been established by other congregations in the Tamil-speaking areas of Ceylon. St. Joseph's College in Trincomalee (1867) and St. Michael's College in Batticaloa (1873) were transformed and uplifted after 1893 when the Champagne Province took over the administration of the schools.[15] The diocese and its educational institutes soon became better staffed and equipped due to French investment in infrastructure and the appointment of approximately thirty priests (only two members of the French Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate or OMI had been working in the region before 1893). However, within the next two decades, this initial impulse given by the French was hindered by the difficulties imposed by World War I in Europe and the demands of the Madagascar and China missions, also under Champagne jurisdiction.[16] By the mid 1920s, the Ceylon mission was poorly financed and severely under-staffed—the missionaries rapidly aging after spending many years in the heat and isolation of eastern Sri Lanka.

In an effort to address the scarcity of human resources in the diocese, seven men from New Orleans (which, coincidentally, had been a A Lyon Province mission Province mission in the past) were sent to Trincomalee-Batticaloa in 1933 to work under French leadership. But when

[12] Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[13] See Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Caste, Class and Catholicism in India 1789–1914* (London: Curzon Press, 1998); Robrecht Boudens, 'The Establishment of the Papal Seminary in Kandy, Ceylon, in 1893', in *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenchaft Immensee*, Vol. 38 (1982), p. 298; and Vito Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The British Period* (Dehiwala, SL: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1992).

[14] P.G. Gomez SJ, *Sketches of Jesuit Work in Ceylon 1893–1990* (Dehiwala, SL: Tisara Prakasakayo, 2009).

[15] St. Michael's College in Batticaloa soon became a 'college second to none' under the leadership of two brothers, Father Ferdinand Bonnel SJ and the 'patriarchal' Father Charles Bonnel SJ, who spent 67 years in the Ceylon mission until his death in 1945. See John W. Lange and Guy F. Rajendram, *Palm-Fringed Coast: History of Trincomalee-Batticaloa Diocese (1895–1967)* (Colombo: Ceylon Historical Journal Monographs Series, 2007), pp. 334–5.

[16] Father John Lange SJ and Father Theodore Ray SJ, 'Trincomalee, Ceylon', in *Woodstock Letters: A Historical Journal of Jesuit Missionary and Educational Activities*, Vol. 75 (1946), pp. 285–303.

World War II broke out, another period of isolation and re-shuffling of priorities ensued in which the diocese continued to operate without much change. Five of the New Orleans missionaries endured more than a decade with little outside support until the end of the war.[17] The cessation of military hostilities and the re-opening of normal ocean routes after 1945 also marked the end of British colonialism in South Asia and the rise to power of Sinhalese nationalist sectors in independent Ceylon.

This was the context in which half a century of French administration of the Trincomalee-Batticaloa mission came to an end, opening the way for the New Orleans Province to take full control of the region. The official change of hands also coincided with the death in 1946 of Monsignor Gaston Robichez, the French bishop who had conducted the diocese for most of the 41 years he spent in Ceylon. While Robichez lay on his deathbed in Batticaloa on 13 February 1946, in Rome, the vicar general of the Society of Jesus was signing the order entrusting the mission to New Orleans under the leadership of John Linehann, the newly-appointed superior regular.[18] The end of the war, the death of Robichez, and of the legendary French Jesuit fathers Ferdinand and Charles Bonnel—who had overhauled St. Michael's and St. Joseph's—opened the doors to the deep transformations that took place in the diocese under the new American administration.[19] Moreover, the revitalising force of American Jesuits across the diocese became even stronger a year later when Father Ignatius Glennie SJ—former rector of the Papal Seminary in Kandy—was appointed bishop in Trincomalee.

Jesuit Education and Ethnic Conflict

One aspect of Jesuit work in South Asia that has attracted scholarly attention is the often odd space that missionaries occupied as cultural intermediaries in the multifarious relationship that existed between local forms of social organisation and the politico-economic structures of European colonialism.[20] In his ethnographic work with Catholics in Tamil Nadu, David Mosse noted: 'As the Catholic Church became institutionalized in Tamil society in the twentieth century, it had to respond to the contradictory post-Independence, post-Vatican II demands to modernize and democratize, Indianize and Catholicize; to "inculturate" and to abandon cultural accommodations'.[21] Furthermore, while during British colonialism, missionary priests had been crucial brokers connecting local populations with government

[17] Father Lange SJ notes that although the regular activities of the mission were disrupted, World War II was a very active period in the region. The Royal Navy used the Trincomalee port as a naval base for its Indian Ocean operations (the Japanese air force attacked the harbour in 1941). It was also an active period financially, as the presence of large detachments of British sailors generated a number of employment and business opportunities for local populations. See Lange and Rajendram, *Palm-Fringed Coast*, pp. 318–9.
[18] *Ibid*., p. 345.
[19] Between 1933 and 1958, forty American priests travelled from New Orleans to Batticaloa and Trincomalee. No priests were assigned to the Ceylon Mission during the war years (1938–45). I thank Joan Gaulene at the Jesuit Archives in Louisiana for this information.
[20] Interest in the work of Roberto de Nobili and Henrique Henriques has become an unavoidable topic for historians of colonialism as well as for cultural anthropologists like myself, attracted by their experiments in *accommodatio* and cross-cultural dialogues. Some of the recent interest in this period of Jesuit work in South Asia has been particularly highlighted by Ines Županov's remarkable research in *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); and in the field of cultural anthropology, the work of David Mosse with Jesuit communities in Tamil Nadu, explored in his *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*. Although not part of the recent interest in Jesuit work in South Asia, the book by Father S.G. Perera, *The Jesuits in Ceylon* (*In the XVI and XVII Centuries*) (Madura: De Nobili Press, 1941), is a fundamental review of the early Jesuit presence in Ceylon.
[21] Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree*, pp. 90–1.

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representatives, the internal divisions that nationalism brought to Sri Lanka after independence soon demanded that Catholic members of the clergy, too, find their place along the ethnic divide.

Indeed, the need to arbitrate between competing interests posed by agents who often failed to understand each other remained a constant responsibility that many missionaries undertook throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Although adopting notoriously different ideological positions in the various political junctures that Sri Lanka generated, individual members of the clergy advocated for the interests of the communities where they were embedded to the point of generating deep political tensions amongst the priests themselves.[22] The increasing distance that separated Tamil and Sinhalese communities in the country came to be reflected within the Catholic Church as well, where clergy working in the north and south of the country often appeared to have as little in common as the communities they worked with.

In the post-colonial context of Sri Lanka, American missionaries stationed along the east coast of the island transitioned from interacting with the often sympathetic requests of British civilian rule to the aggressive regulations imposed by mounting nationalist pressures. Nonetheless, Catholic missionaries continued to be deeply involved with local communities. For example, in 1950, Bishop Ignatius Glennie—the American Jesuit who ran the Trincomalee-Batticaloa diocese until 1974—requested that parish priests produce reports with 'items requiring the attention of the government'.[23] Over the next few years, similar actions across the region increasingly came to position the Catholic Church as a natural advocate for the Tamil cause, with education at Catholic institutions being an issue of mounting importance. The new scenario of an independent Sri Lanka was one in which state control over public education had become a fundamental bastion in the struggle for national sovereignty. But this struggle over an icon of autonomy and independent rule was also one of the main sites where the growing ethnic tension between the Sinhalese government and the Tamil minority would be manifested.[24]

Tamil communities that had historically inhabited regions of poor agricultural production in the north and east of the island had been uplifted under British rule by turning their focus of activity towards higher education and the pursuit of careers in the civil service.[25] English-language education at Catholic and Protestant schools provided the natural platform—especially outside Colombo and Kandy—to embark on successful careers with prospects of social mobility. In 1946, Father John Lange SJ and Father Theodore Ray SJ wrote on the state of the mission:

[22] Deborah Johnson, 'Sri Lanka—A Divided Church in a Divided Polity: The Brokerage of a Struggling Institution', in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (2012), p. 77; and Bernardo Brown, 'Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics, Different Paths to Reconciliation', in *IIAS Newsletter*, Vol. 69 (Autumn 2014), p. 17.

[23] Lange and Rajendram, *Palm-Fringed Coast*, p. 369.

[24] See David Hayes, 'Education is All About Opportunities, Isn't It?: A Biographical Perspective on Learning and Teaching English in Sri Lanka', in *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 80, no. 4 (2010), p. 517; Robert N. Kearney, 'Language and the Rise of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka', in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, no. 5 (1978), p. 521; K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); and Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka*.

[25] Tamil communities in the inhospitable north and east of the country are generally referred to as 'Ceylon Tamils'. They are different from the 'Indian Tamils', who were brought by the British from India to work on tea, rubber and coffee plantations in the hill country of Sri Lanka. Ceylon Tamils inhabit the Jaffna Peninsula and the Vanni in the north and the coastal areas between Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Given the harsh and infertile characteristics of these regions, the British administration encouraged the establishment there of missionary schools that could provide the local populations with a livelihood that was not dependent on agricultural work. See Sharika Thiranagama, '"A Railway to the Moon": The Post-Histories of a Sri Lankan Railway Line', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, no. 1 (Jan. 2012), p. 221.

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> Those who are able to get the equivalent of a high school degree have no greater ambition than to secure a position in one of the government offices or departments. Besides a certain amount of social prestige, these government jobs carry with them economic security. A few take to the teaching profession, which pays comparatively well in Ceylon.[26]

In the same letter, Lange and Ray wrote that with the transfer of the diocese to the New Orleans jurisdiction, there was widespread optimism in the region that the change would represent an injection of manpower and capital that would further improve the lot of Tamil students and their families. Although the next two decades were indeed characterised by the arrival of American missionaries to Trincomalee-Batticaloa and their efforts to update the educational and scientific facilities that their institutions offered, their arrival also coincided with an increasingly hostile attitude towards missionaries across the country. The development of educational infrastructure and the growth in the American Jesuit presence were conducted against the mounting opposition of a nationalist movement that regarded the Tamil minority as an unfairly privileged community in Sri Lanka. Moreover, it depicted Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, as a foreign faith that had excessively favoured Tamils through their near monopoly over education in colonial Ceylon, preventing Sinhalese Buddhists from achieving social mobility through education.[27] These opinions were radically different from the ones held in Tamil areas. In his memoir, Father John Lange remarked:

> The Jesuit Fathers of the Province of Champagne…had built up the Catholic community and all its institutions and had created a vital Church presence in the entire Eastern Province, a presence that was deeply rooted in the life of the people. Never in the Eastern Province has the Catholic Church been regarded as a 'foreign' institution.[28]

In their struggle to defend the autonomy of Catholic schools, foreign missionary priests inevitably became de facto advocates for the rights of Tamils.[29] The new situation hit American Jesuits in Batticaloa and Trincomalee especially hard. While their work on the island had been sometimes controversial and often criticised by local communities as well as colonial authorities, their presence was tolerated and, to a large extent, considered part of the local social landscape.[30] In the new political climate, this was no longer the case, and foreign missionaries soon came to realise that if they were to remain in Sri Lanka, they would have to confront the reality that their very presence had become a highly politicised matter.[31] But in spite of the initial resistance presented by Catholic sectors—and confronting fierce opposition from a Catholic laity that was dismayed to see their privileges dwindle without much

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[26] Lange and Ray, *Woodstock Letters*, p. 301.

[27] Stanley J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Colombo: Tauris, 1986).

[28] See Lange and Rajendram, *Palm-Fringed Coast*, p. 341.

[29] Father Harry Miller SJ became one of the most prominent advocates for peace in Batticaloa. He was a key figure in several peace initiatives, including the Norwegian brokered accord and ceasefire of 2002. Its failure in 2006 led to the government of Sri Lanka's military push to eliminate the LTTE, which was finally defeated in 2009.

[30] Catholics in colonial Ceylon, both Tamil and Sinhalese, had virtually monopolised the teaching profession and it was almost impossible for non-Catholics to access jobs in education. Likewise, the armed forces and other civil service industries were considered the realm of Catholics and the incorporation of others was almost unimaginable. See Hayes, 'Education is All About Opportunities, Isn't It?', p. 517.

[31] High visa fees were imposed on foreign missionaries and Christian nurses were banned from working in state hospitals. After a failed coup attempt in 1962, Christians were also purged from the armed forces, which formerly had had a large number of Catholic officers. See de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 528.

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sympathy from the clergy—by 1964, all the demands of the nationalists had been reluctantly accepted, avoiding major instances of conflict.[32]

The new government of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, backed by the Sinhala nationalists, came to office and implemented the Sinhala-only language policy in 1956. After Bandaranaike's assassination in 1959, his wife and successor, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, also approved the abolition of the denominational system of education that ended all state funding for Christian schools. For more than half a century, Tamil communities had relied on Christian schools as their path to social mobility, so an attack on the denominational system of education was an implicit blow to Tamil livelihoods. With this new policy, over six hundred parish schools were transferred from the Church into government hands without compensation. Some of the Jesuit schools opted to remain privately funded, although they were not allowed to levy fees. St. Michael's in Batticaloa and St. Joseph's in Trincomalee were two of the few institutions that chose this alternative, but within the next decade, the financial strain was such that they both eventually ceded their control to the state in 1970.[33]

The work of American Jesuits in independent Sri Lanka was thus marred by a number of problems that the French missionaries had not had to face in the past. The constraints imposed by lack of personnel and funding—as well the conditions of extreme poverty and poor infrastructure that had consumed the French since 1893—were no longer a big obstacle to Jesuit work. It was the arrival of ethnic chauvinism and an increasingly volatile political climate that deeply transformed the world inhabited by American missionaries in Sri Lanka.

'Father Basketball'

My own personal interest in the life of Father Eugene John Hebert SJ started with a rather accidental encounter in 2010. I was trying to learn about the human rights activism of American Jesuits affiliated with the Batticaloa Citizens Committee, which had documented more than eight thousand disappearances, murders and acts of torture. I became interested in the lives of four Jesuits from New Orleans who had arrived in Ceylon in the year of independence. At the time, I was not aware that Father Hebert—who went missing during one of the most active periods of the Citizens Committee—was the same priest who was popularly referred to across the Catholic schools of Tamil Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa as 'Father Basketball'.

With the official transfer of the diocese to the New Orleans Province, the flow of American Jesuits to Trincomalee-Batticaloa rapidly revived the life of the mission. By the time Eugene Hebert and his three colleagues arrived in Ceylon on 4 September 1948, there were fifteen Americans already working in the region.[34] The dedication to their pastoral and educational work was not only forged by their religious commitment, but by the very strong ties of friendship they built over the years as foreigners in a strange land. Father Harry Miller vividly described his shared history with his friend Father Hebert:

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[32] For a detailed account of Catholic resistance and the subsequent popular reaction to the leadership's position, see Stirrat, *Power and Religiosity in a Postcolonial Setting*, pp. 51–7; and de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, pp. 467–78.

[33] Stirrat, *Power and Religiosity in a Postcolonial Setting*, pp. 47–52; and de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 528.

[34] Eugene Hebert travelled with Father Ponder, Father Raywood and Harry Miller, who, like Hebert, would later be ordained in Pune, India, in 1954.

> We met at Union Station in New Orleans in 1941 when we were heading to the Louisiana seminary at Grand Coteau.... In 1947 we volunteered for the Ceylon mission, soon after we took a train to New York and boarded a ship that would sail to Colombo where we arrived only weeks after independence. From there we took a train to Batticaloa and after three years of our novitiate we did the trip back to Colombo, this time to go to Bombay and on to the Jesuit Seminary in Pune to complete our studies for the next three years. After our ordination in 1954, we sailed back to Colombo and then the train again, this time only up to Gal Oya Junction, where he went to do his work at St. Joseph's in Trincomalee and I came back to St. Michael's. It was the first time we were not in the same place since we had first met in Louisiana, more than ten years earlier.

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From a political and historical perspective, probably the most interesting aspect of the work of Father Eugene John Hebert SJ is that his forty years on the island took place entirely in the context of a newly-independent nation coping with the mixed legacy of 150 years of British colonialism. By 1950, missionaries who had historically played a fundamental role in determining educational policies under British rule had lost their place of authority and would continue to be increasingly marginalised in the coming years.[35] But since the new regulations restricted the administrative responsibilities they were allowed to undertake, missionaries found themselves with time on their hands to pursue other cultural activities.

It is important to note here that although the abolition of the denominational system of education was a defeat for the Catholic Church, the impact it had on the routines of schools was not as dramatic as many had expected. Priests and nuns continued to be very much involved in the life of Catholic schools and generally got along well with the new civilian administrators. Therefore, many aspects of the previous system continued unaltered, with the added benefit that religious workers no longer had to struggle with the responsibility of daily school operation. Priests like Father Hebert shifted their attention away from the complicated task of running large schools with small budgets and concentrated on new extra-curricular activities, such as sports, music and the development of the Eastern Technical Institute (ETI), a joint project initiated with the Methodist Church.

For all his reputation as the main force behind Sri Lanka's basketball, Father Hebert was not responsible for bringing the game to the country. American missionaries affiliated with the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) had originally introduced basketball to Colombo in 1917, and its popularity slowly spread across the island over the next three decades. It was the arrival of American Jesuits in the 1940s that provided a big impetus to basketball at the national level, which led to the establishment of the Ceylon Basketball Association in 1950 and the Sri Lanka Schools Basketball Association in 1958. This group of basketball enthusiasts was fundamental to the development of the tournaments and school leagues that thrived in the 1960s and 1970s, surpassing in popularity the practice of any other sport in cities like Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa.

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[35] The Education Ordinance of 1939 marked the beginning of the struggle between the Catholic community and the reformists led by Minister of Education C.W.W. Kannangara. With this Ordinance, the government effectively seized control of education policy from the Board of Education controlled by Christians. It created a network of central schools run by the state to teach in the English medium and also promoted the adoption of Sinhala as the official language of instruction, although this proposal was not implemented at the time. See Patrick Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006); de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, pp. 467–78; and Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2006), pp.146–8.

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Father Hebert in particular is credited with introducing a number of technical and technological improvements that transformed the way basketball was played in Sri Lanka. These included two electronic scoreboards (that were still in use in 2013) and a number of innovations that introduced Sri Lankan players to game styles and strategies from the United States. One of his students explained that Father Hebert was responsible for the development of a Tamil basketball vocabulary that allowed the younger players in the team—who struggled with English terminology—to understand the meaning of specific basketball manoeuvres such as rebound (*panthu pidi*) or give and go (*kodutu odu*).

After Father Hebert settled in Trincomalee in 1954 (Figure 2), he served as prefect of games and student counsellor. In his first years there, he collaborated with Father Ponder, the principal, and with Father Lange, trained in engineering, to build new premises for the school that could no longer operate where it had originally been built in 1867.[36] In this process of expansion, Father Hebert managed to raise funds in the United States to build a sports facility, and a lab and workshop for science, the Dallas Building. During the time in which he coached the school's basketball team, a fierce rivalry began between it and St. Michael's in Batticaloa, whose team was headed by another American Jesuit sports fan, Father Harold Weber SJ, who got hold of steel rails from the railway company to build the allegedly best basketball court in the region. Father Hebert's popularity as a coach grew year after year with the highly competitive tournaments that the two priests organised and the workshops for coaches from around the country that he co-ordinated (Figure 4).

The St. Joseph's basketball team rapidly improved under Father Hebert's guidance and won the 1964 Sri Lanka Schools Basketball Association championship. At the end of 1968, Father Hebert was appointed principal of St. Joseph's, but he only held the position for two years—the last two before the school's administration was transferred to the state. What then caught Father Hebert's full attention was education and training in engineering and technology. When he moved back to Batticaloa in 1974, his time was divided between coaching basketball at St. Michael's and the direction of the ETI. Some of his students are still affiliated with the institute and remember him riding a bicycle, the frame of which he had welded himself, and his interest in motors and electrical appliances of all kinds. They also remember his generosity and how he personally helped his students in small financial matters.

The College Band

With a wistful smile, Father Miller reminisced how Father Hebert had plans to start a marching band with St. Michael's students—blatantly ignoring Father Miller's opinion that this was a futile endeavour, considering Father Hebert's complete lack of musical talent. But to his amazement and incredulity, Father Miller soon realised that someone with no ability for melody whatsoever could nonetheless become a superb bandmaster. Father Hebert assembled and conducted a 'Western' band (there was also an 'Eastern' band that played South Asian music) composed of six trumpets, six clarinets, six saxophones, three trombones, three side drums and one bass drum, complete with cymbals and a band leader marching in front. The young college band only had time for rehearsals during lunch breaks, when Father Hebert

[36] Lange and Ray, in their report, explain that when the first Americans arrived in Ceylon in the mid 1930s, St. Joseph's was hardly a school as it did not even have separate classrooms. St. Michael's in Batticaloa was already a more established institution thanks to the efforts of Bishop Lavigne and the Bonnel brothers, who, in 1912, had taken the initiative of building a 'college second to none' in Batticaloa. Although American investment improved the facilities greatly, the school's operation had already been well provided for by the French. See Lange and Rajendram, *Palm-Fringed Coast*.

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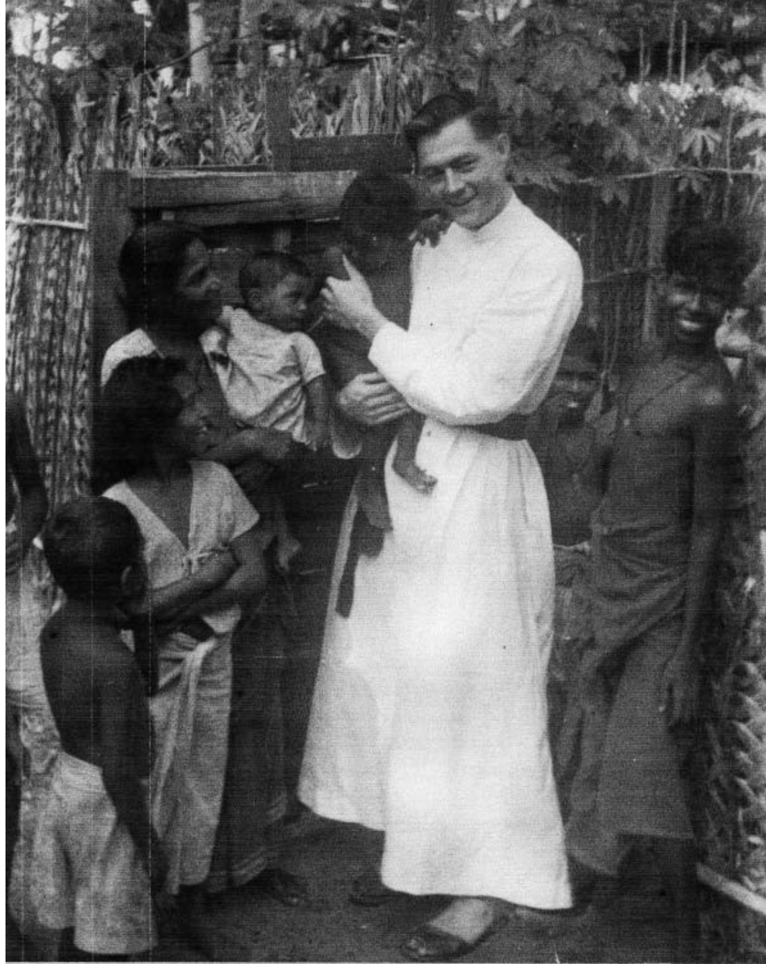

FIGURE 2. Father Eugene John Hebert SJ, ca. 1955 (photographer unknown). Original photograph from the Hebert family.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eugene_Hebert_SJ.jpg#filelinks (accessed 17 Sept. 2015).

returned to St. Michael's after his mornings at the ETI, and before he started coaching basketball in the evenings.

Nevertheless, within a very short time, Father Hebert had managed to teach music to his students and to bring uniforms and instruments from the United States. Only a year later, the band was playing regularly in Batticaloa. It rapidly improved until it rose to national prominence in August 1976 when Sri Lanka hosted the 5th Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). St. Michael's Marching Band was invited to Colombo to play for the heads of state and was honoured with a privileged spot, displacing the bands of the traditional elite schools of Colombo.

One of the former band members fondly remembers the excitement of playing before such an international audience and how proud they were to see their blue uniforms reflected in thousands of photographs circulating around the world. However, with a tinge

of hesitation, he suspected that they might have had an unexpected advantage in gaining so much attention, as the blue of their American uniforms coincided with the blue of the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Yet, giving all due credit to Father Hebert and the band, he noted that 'to be frank, we were the smartest band, as Father not only trained us to play the instruments, but taught us how to march and shine like stars amongst others'.[37]

Basketball in Batticaloa

Coming from a well-off Louisiana family, Father Hebert's relatives sent a new passenger van to Colombo almost every year. Equipped with the imported vehicle, Father Hebert drove his teams across the island to confront rival schools—from St John's in Jaffna to St. Aloysius in Galle (Figure 3). But along with his popularity as a successful coach, his fame grew as a defiantly loud presence at the side of the basketball courts, endlessly yelling instructions to his players, chasing referees across the court with the rule book, and allegedly not afraid to pull up his cassock and show his fists to disrespectful rivals. A former basketball player from a school in Colombo once described his memory of Father Hebert to me: 'We went to the Anglican school, we were not used to these kinds of things. These American Catholics would come with their teams and scream like madmen. As a child I was shocked to see these priests in their white cassocks even cursing sometimes in front of everyone. One time the referee got so angry that he just left the basketball court and told Hebert to go in and referee for himself'.[38]

Another alumnus had a vivid memory of certain unorthodox basketball tactics implemented by Hebert. During a game against the Sri Lankan Navy team in Batticaloa, in which St. Michael's was helplessly preparing for a humiliating defeat, Father Hebert disappeared to his quarters during the half-time intermission. He returned to the basketball court, accompanied by his nephew, who was visiting from Louisiana. The American relative came downstairs attired in the St. Michael's basketball jersey and went straight to warm up for the second half with the team, baffling the Sri Lankan sailors who did not expect a white basketball player on the court. Father Hebert's nephew was hardly any good at basketball—he allegedly did not score a single point in the few minutes he played—but the coach's tactic was a complete success and St. Michael's upset the Navy team in the final score.

A Changing Batticaloa

Towards the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Batticaloa that the American Jesuits had arrived in thirty years earlier had been transformed into a region brewing deep political antagonisms. Many of the local youths no longer dreamt of excelling at school to head on to university in Colombo or Peradeniya, or the most ambitious ones, to Cambridge or Oxford. Instead, their professional and academic dreams had been replaced with political commitments that would

[37] Personal communication with Tommy Ganeshamoorthy and B. Nimal Veerasingham, May 2014. See also B. Nimal Veerasingham, 'Father Hebert: From Land of Mississippi to Lagoon of the Singing Fish', in *DBS Jeyaraj* (10 July 2012) [http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/7871, accessed 7 May 2015].

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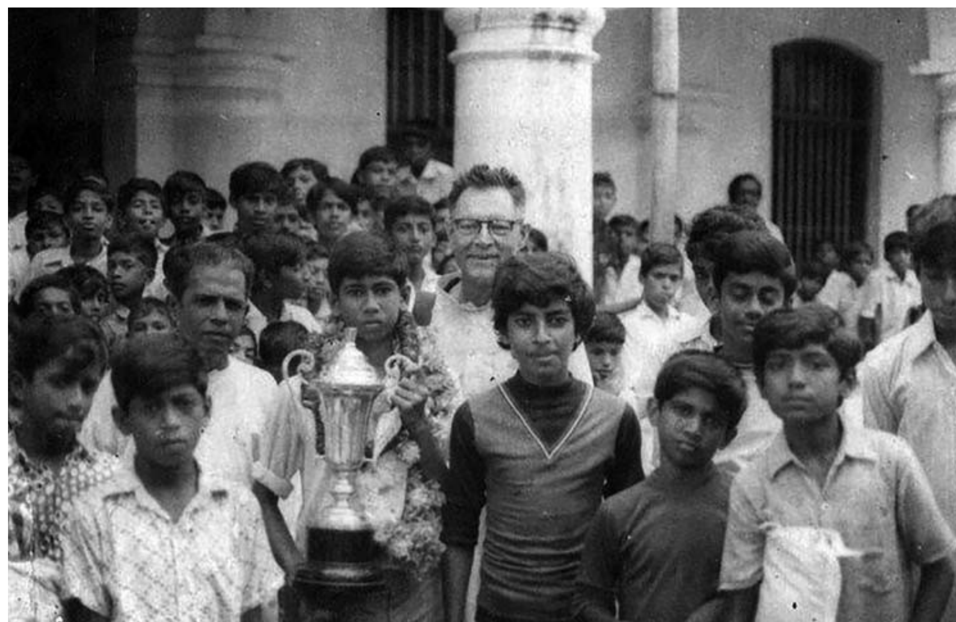

FIGURE 3. A warm reception at St. Michael's College, Batticaloa, for the U-15 team after winning the All-Island Championship in 1976.
Source: Photo courtesy of Tommy Ganeshamoorthy.

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lead them to active political participation and eventually to the violent clashes that preceded the arrival of the IPKF in 1987.[39]

Father Hebert, who was directing the ETI, and Father Miller, as principal at St. Michael's, struggled to protect their students and keep them out of trouble. Some students at the institute and the college were allowed to stay there for weeks, as many had gone missing while walking home from school. Just before his disappearance, Father Miller had argued with Father Hebert because he had allowed the basketball team to stay overnight on school premises in areas reserved for teachers and priests because there were no other appropriate lodgings for them to use. Father Miller wanted Father Hebert to cancel basketball practice for the time being, but Father Hebert insisted on giving a sense of routine and normality to students growing up in the midst of extreme violence.

However, allowing students to stay on school premises represented an added responsibility for the priests and demanded their constant vigilance to defend them from the dangers that Tamil youths were exposed to. Some young men had become victims of the Indian troops, and some of the Sinhalese troops, while others had been recruited by the LTTE. One afternoon, when a pick-up truck came to the ETI to recruit some of the students, Father Hebert stormed

[38] Interview with S. Perera, Colombo, Sept. 2013. See also Rex Clementine, 'Remembering the Brilliance of Fr. Hebert', *The Island* (25 May 2013) [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=79807, accessed 7 May 2015].

[39] Whitaker's ethno-biography of the Tamil journalist Sivaram is a unique example of how, in the span of half a century, a local aristocratic family transitioned from sending their children to study in the UK to struggling with daily subsistence and the political commitments that eventually led to armed confrontation. See Whitaker, *Learning Politics from Sivaram*.

FIGURE 4. Father Hebert at St. Joseph's College in Colombo during a tournament in the 1980s.
Source: Photo courtesy of Tommy Ganeshamoorthy.

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out of the institute and confronted the armed LTTE cadres who were rather aggressively searching for volunteers. That afternoon, the LTTE reluctantly left, having been chased out of the institute by the American priest, but most people in Batticaloa would not have dared to openly confront the LTTE without suffering grave consequences. To a large extent, the American priests occupied a unique space in Batticaloa during the war years because they could voice their opinions without fearing the reprisals that most other people would expect. Although Father Hebert was not an active member of the Batticaloa Citizens Committee, some of his political stances in defence of the Tamil students would eventually make him a figure of suspicion to the Sri Lankan army. Despite being conversant in both Tamil and Sinhala, Hebert allegedly refused to speak Sinhala to soldiers posted at checkpoints located in Tamil areas. This intransigence was brought to the attention of military authorities, who questioned him over his refusal to collaborate with army personnel. Father Hebert explained

FIGURE 5. Father Hebert's memorial at the Eastern Technical Institute (ETI) in Batticaloa, 2013.
Source: Photo by author.

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to the officers that Sinhalese soldiers should not be allowed to work in Tamil-speaking areas unless they were first trained in the regional language. The problem of linguistic nationalism that Father Hebert already understood well in the 1980s had become one of the main reasons for the alienation of Tamil youths from the national polity, which resulted in many of them adopting radical stances. The violence that Father Hebert (as well as other priests in Batticaloa like Father Chandra Fernando in 1988) succumbed to would visit the region intermittently until the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 (Figure 5).

Conclusion

In *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque*—a collaborative ethnography that assesses the role played by religious organisations in eastern Sri Lanka at times of civil strife and natural disaster—the authors note that beyond the work conducted by religious charities in channelling aid to populations in situations of extreme need, the actions of individual religious leaders have a vital impact on the lives of these communities.[40] Commenting on the peculiar space that these individuals occupy, Spencer *et al.* remark: 'Paradoxically, religious leaders' legitimacy comes from their apparent distance from the dirty world of politics, yet this in turn gives them a degree of moral authority to act in the political realm'.[41] Indeed, by virtue of

[40] Jonathan Spencer, Jonathan Goodhand, Shahul Hasbullah, Bart Klem, Benedikt Korf and Kalinga Tudor Silva, *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque. A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).
[41] *Ibid*., p. 124.

being at the margins of what is purely political, religious leaders possess a flexibility that allows them to mediate, negotiate and act as bridges, creating dialogue between the different factions involved and generating points of contact and solidarity between ordinary people caught in the midst of the struggle.

Eastern Sri Lanka has had more than its fair share of suffering, not only as a consequence of the war, but also as one of the regions in the country worst affected by the 2004 tsunami. During such critical instances, the work conducted on the ground by those responsible for mosques, Buddhist temples, Hindu *kovils* and Christian churches has been fundamental in saving lives and offering refuge to those exposed to uncertainty and violence. Throughout the ethnic conflict, the Catholic Church in eastern Sri Lanka had to travel a perilous road in trying to reaffirm its spiritual and educational commitments to the community while actively engaging with delicate political issues. As a consequence of the critical conditions imposed by the civil war, the activism and advocacy for the Tamil cause espoused by several prominent members of the Catholic clergy was often portrayed by Sinhalese nationalist sectors as pro-LTTE, and many foreign priests were accused of being staunch 'white Tigers'.[42]

Spencer *et al.* suggest that the institutional infrastructure that backed Catholic priests in Batticaloa underpinned the immunity with which they took notoriously high-profile stands against both sides. Father Harry Miller noted how during the 1990s, when he depended on the LTTE for transport out of Batticaloa, he once loudly complained about the hardships that the LTTE had imposed on Batticaloa's civilians. Father Miller spoke freely with his attentive interlocutor, who turned out to be none other than Colonel Karuna Amman, leader of the Eastern Province for the LTTE at the time. The anecdote is told by Father Miller himself as an example of the unusual freedom to speak and work that he had through the war years. To be sure, the transnational infrastructure of the Catholic Church provided a kind of immunity for religious leaders to voice their opinions and act as mediators at times when no other interlocutors remained. Nonetheless, considering the fate of many native and foreign members of the clergy in Sri Lanka, the courage they showed throughout the conflict should not be underestimated. To speak of their exceptional position in the confrontation should not detract from a balanced appraisal of the danger they exposed themselves to in order to save civilian lives. Whether actively engaged in the defence of human rights like Father Harry Miller, or only marginally involved in politics like Father Eugene Hebert—whose efforts were directed towards bringing a sense of normalcy to students growing up under extreme circumstances—Catholic priests were in a position where a refusal to act would have been the most reproachable attitude.

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[42] *Ibid.*, p. 118.