

Christian suffering and martyrdom: An opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation

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Abstract

Dealing with the recent killings of Christians in Orissa, the Indian author maintains that forgiveness and reconciliation are proper Christian responses to suffering and martyrdom. The Early Church lived this by God's superhuman power and was marked by holiness. Unfortunately, from the time of the medieval church a merger between violence and holiness has led to crusades, post-Reformation religious wars, the Conquista in Latin America and the shedding of blood of Christians by Christians eg. in Rwanda. However, there were Christians strongly objecting this. A brief survey of other religions also shows a merger between violence and holiness. Christians must not let evil succeed by responding with violence and retribution but must try to overcome evil with good by letting the cross of Christ shape their relationships with others. How should the Church remember and respond to the suffering experienced? The memories must be interpreted within the Christian world view, the wrongdoing must be publicly and truthfully remembered, condemned and forgiven. In the battle against evil, even against evil in one's own culture, the Church needs inter-church community.

Keywords Forgiveness, reconciliation, suffering, martyrdom, violence, remembrance, Orissa, India.

The Church is called by God to witness to the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation even in the face of suffering and martyrdom. It is imperative that the Church's response to violence is formulated in the light of Jesus' response to his cruel and barbaric crucifixion, designed by the Roman authorities as a deterrent for all to see and be warned. In the midst of this awful experience and extreme situation Jesus demonstrates love for his enemies. He offers forgiveness to those responsible for his execution (Luke 23:34). The Church is redeemed

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by God who in Christ dies for the redemption of the ungodly. The message of the cross then is that when we serve and even suffer for others, we are in the company of Jesus Christ. The cross opens us to grace giving us the kind of love Christ showed when he washed the disciples' feet and cared for the unlovable and died for the ungodly.

How was this model of Christ pursued or neglected in church history?

Obedience to Christ

The emphasis in the early Church was that every Christian should live in obedience to Christ. Clement (A.D. 30-100) gives the examples of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul "who spent their lives in the practice of holiness" and urges Christians "to give up vain and fruitless cares, and approach to the glorious and venerable rule of our holy calling" (Donalds & Robertson 1985:15).

The "Letter to Diognetus," was written by an anonymous apologist (about 129) to present a case for Christianity. The argument is set in the context of the transcendent God who made himself known in history in the person of Jesus Christ, 'destroying the divinities of human imagination'. The character of Christian life is a primary piece of evidence for the supernatural basis of Christian religion. 'Christians are different and mysterious, because they live by a superhuman power.' Christian faith brings vitality and grace and love to a world full of hatred. This illustrates the early church's conviction that every believer is so to live in obedience to Christ that others, seeing their exemplary lives, will want to follow Christ also (Letter to Diognetus:205-224).

In the Christian tradition, Cecilia was the daughter of a noble Roman family, and was the only Christian of her family, who lived during the reign of the emperor Septimus Severus (A.D. 193-211). She suffered martyrdom for her absolute devotion to Christ. Now in the catacomb of Rome lies her statue, on one hand she had three fingers outstretched and on the other hand just one finger, denoting her belief in the triune God.

In 284 when Diocletian became Roman Emperor the persecution of Christians intensified. Though Christians never presented a political problem to the state, for they remained aloof from politics to a

remarkable degree, the church was rapidly growing in numbers and strength. Two options were available to the ruler, either to force submission and break its power, or to enter into alliance with it and thus secure political control of the growing church. The latter as we will see later was adopted by Constantine; the former was adopted by Diocletian. The growth of Christianity was perceived as a threat and thus united worshippers of local deities against it, while Diocletian was disposed to emperor-worship and the service of old gods. Diocletian moved cautiously. He first got rid of Christians in the army and then the imperial service of Christians, beginning in February 303, by three great edicts of persecution in rapid succession. Churches were ordered destroyed, sacred books taken away; church leaders imprisoned and forced to sacrifice by torture. In 304 a fourth edict required all Christians to offer sacrifices. It was a time of intense persecution. There were many martyrs and many who gave up their faith (Walker 1970: 100).

How then did the Gospel spread to every corner of the Roman Empire within two centuries? The Christians were ablaze with the power of the risen Christ, the threats of persecution did not dampen down their passion to spread the gospel. The first great church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340) wrote that many unnamed charismatic evangelists travelled widely, “scattering the saving seeds of the kingdom of heaven far and wide throughout the whole world... a great many marvellous miracles of divine spirit were still being worked by them” (Thomas 1995:4-7).

Mission for most Christians in the early Church was defined primarily in terms of being rather than doing. This became a recurring theme of Orthodox mission theology.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity* American sociologist Rodney Stark writes: “The total number of Christians martyred by the Romans probably was fewer than a thousand. But their steadfastness greatly strengthened the faith of other Christians and impressed many pagans” (Stark 1997:164). He documents how the church lived during the first three centuries of the Christian era in the Roman Empire. Abortion, infanticide, adultery, demeaning treatment of women and plague were all common in the Roman Empire, with negative consequences on the Empire. The Roman population barely reproduced itself because of frequent abortions. Female infanticide

produced a serious shortage of women for marriage. Adultery, abortion, and forced pre-adolescent marriage destroyed the fertility of many women. Plagues killed a high percentage of the population. Stark demonstrates that Roman Christians behaved differently. They did not practise abortion. They treated women with dignity and respect and cared for others instead of fleeing when plagues hit. The impact was tremendous. The Emperor Constantine legalised Christianity in AD 313. Stark writes: “Rather than cause of triumph of Christianity, the emperor Constantine’s “Edict of Milan” was an astute response to rapid Christian growth that had actually made them a major political force” (:2). Unfortunately making Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire weakened the faithfulness of the Christian community by bringing in people who did not really believe or had a weaker belief.

Merger between violence and holiness

The crusades are the most obvious example of the merger between violence and holiness which took place in the medieval Church. Catholic Popes combined religious authority and political power for centuries. The crusades beginning from 1096 which dominated the life of both the Church and state in Western Europe for over two centuries, had their roots in the teaching of Gregory the Great that it was the duty of Christian rulers to defend and extend the Christian faith. Since salvation came by obedience and participation in the life of the Church, conversion by force seemed logical. In 1095 Pope Urban II (Riley-Smith 1981:37-40) urged his listeners to undertake a holy war to free the Holy Land from pagan control. The appeal succeeded, and the first crusade was launched. The crusades were a tragic distortion of Christian mission, for which the Church is still criticised.

However the early 13th-century friar Francis of Assisi joined the Fifth Crusade not as a warrior but as a peacemaker. He was not amused by the Crusaders, whose sacrilegious brutality horrified him. In his view, judgment was the exclusive province of the all-merciful God; it was none of a Christian’s concern. True Christians were to befriend all yet condemn no one. Give to others, and it shall be given to you, forgive and you shall be forgiven, was Francis’ constant preaching. Francis sailed across the Mediterranean to the Egyptian court of al-Malik al-Kamil, nephew of the great Saladin who had

defeated the forces of the hapless Third Crusade. Francis was admitted to the august presence of the sultan himself and spoke to him of Christ. Francis went back to the Crusader camp on the Egyptian shore and desperately tried to convince Cardinal Pelagius Galvani, whom Pope Honorius III had put in charge of the Crusade, that he should make peace with the sultan, who, despite far greater force on his side, was all too ready to do so. But the cardinal had dreams of military glory and would not listen. His eventual failure, amid terrible loss of life, brought the age of the crusades to its inglorious end (Cahill 2006). Donald Spoto, Francis of Assisi's recent biographer, accurately calls Francis "the first person from the West to travel to another continent with the revolutionary idea of peacemaking."

Another dissenting voice against crusades was that of Ramon Lull who in the early 14th century visited North Africa on an investigation mission for a crusade being planned by the Pope. He returned in 1308, reporting that the conquest should be achieved through prayer, not through military force (Ramon Lull).

The comments of Scott Peck on the nature of crusades are wisely stated:

Crusades and inquisitions have nothing to do with Christ. War, torture, and persecution have nothing to do with Christ. Arrogance and revenge have nothing to do with Christ. When he gave his one recorded sermon, the first words out of Jesus' mouth were, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Not the arrogant. And as he was dying he asked that his murderers be forgiven (Peck 1983:11).

The religious wars that followed the Reformation were some of the most violent in all of European history. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) was initially fought largely as a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the Holy Roman Empire, although disputes over the internal politics and balance of power within the Empire played a significant part. Walker writes:

Little evidence of spiritual life was manifested in this frightful time of war; yet to it, in large part, and reflecting the trust of heartfelt piety in its stress, belongs the work of perhaps the greatest of Lutheran hymn-writers, Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676). In its earlier years, also, lie the chief activities of that strange and deep Protestant mystic, Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), of Görlitz (Walker 1970:396).

The Roman Catholic mission in the sixteenth century continued many of the characteristics of the crusades especially in Latin America. The Society of Jesus saw itself as an army whose members were soldiers of God. They vowed to fight under the direction of the pope for the good of souls, and the propagation of faith in whatever countries he might wish to send them. The order produced some of the most attractive and effective missionaries, among them, Xavier, who wished to “bring natives into the fold of Jesus Christ” (Thomas 1995:29). The tragic side of Roman Catholic mission in this period was seen in the colonisation of Latin America, with mass baptisms, exploitation, and often extermination of the native populations.

But why is religious language exploited by people betrothed to inhuman violent struggles? Mark Juergensmeyer observes, “By identifying an earthly worldly struggle with the cosmic struggle of order and disorder, good and evil, light and darkness, justice and injustice, political actors and religious leaders utilize the readily available way of thinking that justifies the use of violent means” (Juergensmeyer 1991:386). The social scientists research to discover primarily the social and political aspects of the problem, but as Juergensmeyer states some ‘have tried to trace the patterns in religion’s own logic’. David Rapoport (1984:658-77), for instance ‘has identified several features of Messianic movements that he believes lead to violence, most of which are characterise by a desire for an antinomian liberation from oppression.’

For religious language to lead to violence it is essential for the pious to believe that the cosmic struggle is realizable in human terms. Juergensmeyer writes:

If the war between good and evil, order and chaos, is conceived as taking place in historical time, in a real geographical location, and among actual contestants, it is more likely that those who are prone to violent acts will associate religion with their struggles (Juergensmeyer 1991:386).

With millions of Christians killing Christians in Europe and not so long ago in Rwanda and Kenya in Africa and also in India in Asia, history shows much blood of Christians has been shed by Christians. However both sides of confessing Christians consider their dead as martyrs and the others as perpetrators of crime. Can such killings be considered martyrdom?

Merger between violence and holiness in other religions

Democratising societies in Asia and Africa display a disturbing common tendency towards ethnic and religious violence. The reason is simple. As societies open up and politicians scramble for power, they appeal to the public for votes using what ends up being the most direct, effective religious language, which cements group solidarity in opposition to some other group. Religious language is most effective in adding fuel to the fires of ethnic or religious conflict. Sometimes the conflict turns into a full-scale war. The warfare religious language is often used as a motivational tool for political ends, for nothing better unites and mobilises people and resources for action than war.

Religious intolerance is not alien to *Hinduism*, as Romila Thapar writes, “despite the nineteenth century myth that the Hindus are by instinct and religion a non-violent people. The genesis of this myth was partly in the romantic image of the Indian past projected, for example, by scholars such as Max Müller” (Thapar 1994:19ff; see Müller 1983:101ff). History bears witness to ample religious conflicts in the Indian society. “In Hindu tradition, for instance, the mythical battles in Mahabharata and Ramayana epics are frequently used as metaphors for present day struggles, just as are the actual battles in Sikh and Islamic history and in biblical Judaism and Christianity” (Juergensmeyer 1991:386). Romila Thapar questions, “One is often struck by how different the message of the Gita would have been and how very much closer to non-violence if Gautama Buddha had been the charioteer of Arjuna instead of Krishna” (Thapar 1997:71).

Writing about “The Mahabharata Legacy, and the Gita’s Intent” Rajmohan Gandhi says:

Proud as we are of the epic’s codes of chivalry, we cannot be proud, I suggest in all humility, of the story, or history, it reveals. In particular, we cannot be proud of the epic’s acquiescence in triumph of revenge over reconciliation. I suggest, further, that we cannot be glad that the epic is reproduced in varied forms in our history (Gandhi 1999: 34).

The concept of soldier-saint is inherent in *Sikh religion*. Before his death, Guru Arjan, (1581-1606) seeing the war-clouds gathering, advised his son Hargobind (1606-1645) to sit fully armed on his throne, and he asked Bhai Buddha to make a soldier-saint out of him (Loehlin 1964:7). Sikhs are independent and democratic; they are

equal members of a Brotherhood, the Khalsa. It was this spirit of independence that drove them to revolt against the Brahman-dominated caste system in the first place; and it was this same spirit that led them to organize the Khalsa as a militant brotherhood to oppose domination by Islam. "The warrior strain appeared in their ancestors of old. Their Aryan forbearers conquered all Northern India, singing the hymns of the Vedas as they went. A devout appreciation of Nature went along with the ruthless dispossession of the *Dasyus* (Dalits). These Vedic Aryans were the original warrior saints, and the ideal of the soldier-saint dominates the Sikhs to this day" (:7).

Certainly the *qur'anic model* of leadership is authoritarian. Starting with the eleventh century AD over a span of eight centuries, conquerors flying the flag of Islam raced down the passes of Hindu Kush, and down the plains and deserts of India, killing those in their way, smashing numberless idols in temples, including images of the Buddha, plundering gold and other precious booty. Sometimes they returned from where they came with their treasures. Occasionally they remained and ruled. Islam teaches it is the duty of Muslims to exert themselves strenuously "in the cause of God" against both personal ungodliness and the enemies of Islam. *Jihad* can mean 'holy war,' but the struggle for uprightness of life and propagation of the faith prefers peaceful means such as persuasion and example. Muslims consider themselves as comprising the *Dar al-Islam*, 'the Household of submission,' and the rest of the world's peoples as the *Dar al-Harb*, 'the Household of warfare.' It is the duty of Muslims to extend the *Dar al-Islam* by means of missionary activities and in some cases even by military jihad, if necessary, toward the ultimate goal of a worldwide Islamic community embracing all. However Quran explicitly admonishes that there shall be "no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2:256). *Jihad* is the only form of armed conflict sanctioned by the religion, and those who fall "in the cause of Allah" are martyrs who will immediately taste the joys of salvation (Sura 2:154; 3:169, 195). Muslims distinguish between the 'greater *jihad*,' which is the constant struggle of the individual believers against his own evil tendencies, and the 'lesser *jihad*,' which is actual armed conflict in defence of the faith or its propagation (Denny 1981:382).

The established leadership usually does not resort to violence; rather the second level of leadership, a younger and more marginalised group for whom the acts of violence are enormously empowering. The

psychological dimension of power may be even more effective. Even a small display of violence can have immense symbolic power: the power to awaken the masses into realization of their potency. This was best illustrated, when on December 6, 1992, the Ayodha's Babri Masjid mosque, built in 1528 by Mir Baqi under the authority of Babar, the first Mughal emperor of India, was demolished in revenge by a mob of more than 300,000 Hindus, most of whom wore the saffron colour of Hindu nationalism. Ashis Nandy aptly puts it, "there is now a peculiar double-bind in Indian politics: the ills of religion have found political expression but the strengths of it have not been available for checking corruption and violence in public life" (Nandy 1985:14-24).

Our brief survey of religious violence sufficiently attests the fact that a community of human beings can be thoroughly blind, corrupt, and incapable of recognizing what is good, just, liberating, and corresponding with God. Very few people would deny that violence with utterly false orientations in which the very powers providing orientation are employed, is a conspiracy against life itself. Religious language always becomes a handy tool to mobilise violence by merging violence and holiness.

Ruthless power politics that rules the world, at times reflects itself in various religions, and eliminates people who are perceived as threat to personal or institutional power. For evil to totally succeed requires that when an evil action is committed it is responded to with violence and retribution. This continues the spiral of evil. Instead of returning evil for evil, we must heed the scripture and try to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21).

The Christian community in India does not have a history of involvement in religious violence, even though we are victims of violence. They have practiced with honour and respect from all communities, their rights and duties as citizens to work for social progress and promote the ideals, which seem true and right. They work to alleviate human misery and injustice because they believe God loves all people equally and desires justice for all.

The cross defines our relationship with others

How should we then relate to others? The cross defines this. Jesus Christ “died for the ungodly” is the central assertion of the New Testament. The message of the cross is that when we serve and even suffer for others, we are in the company of Jesus Christ.

An exemplary witness to the gospel of reconciliation is demonstrated in the testimony of Gladys Staines. When Graham Staines and his two innocent children Philip and Timothy were burnt alive, in Manoharpur in Orissa, India on 23rd January 1999, his widow Gladys Staines commented, “I have no hatred. I forgive.”

When, the victim, Gladys forgave the perpetrators of the crime she changed the nature of discourse. Forgiveness does not allow perpetrators to decide the terms of discourse, nor to determine under what terms the social conflict is carried out, or the values around which the dispute is rampant. Forgiveness empowers the victims and disempowers the oppressors. The world media was at her doorstep questioning her, “How could you forgive?” Gladys writes:

God did not leave us alone. The whole community rallied around us. We were being upheld through prayer, phone calls and surrounded by not only friends from the local community but of the whole of India. People, whom we had never met, came to comfort and console us. I am overwhelmed and so thankful for many people who prayed and are still praying for us daily. God enabled us to forgive immediately. Jesus Christ has forgiven me and commanded us to forgive. Paul taught us to forgive as Christ has forgiven us. Ephesians 4:32. Forgiveness has brought healing into our lives and become a part of my life. God continues to encourage me to share the message of forgiveness and grace that He has given me. This message from God’s Word the Bible is for each one of us (Gladys Staines 2009).

However Orissa continues to witness waves of persecution against Christians.

Remembering the pain of Orissa truthfully

The Church condemned the painful and barbaric act of killing the 84 year-old religio-political leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati and four of his followers on 23 August 2008 by 30 masked Maoist Liberation Guerrilla Army. His killing resulted in the killings of Christians by the sections of Sangh Parivar in Kandhmal and in other

parts of Orissa, although the local Maoists owned responsibility for the killing of the Swami. The analysis of the militant section of Sangh Parivar stands shockingly on a simplistic syllogism. Premise 1: The Christians killed the Swami. Premise 2: Those who kill should be killed or at least punished. Conclusion: We are justified in mistreating and killing of Christians.

When on 24 August they came for Narmada Digal in Kandhmal, she wasn't there. She had fled, five children and mother-in-law in tow, to the safety of the jungles a kilometre away. So, they set about what she left behind; a framed picture of Jesus, a Bible in Oriya, utensils in the kitchen, some clothes, and linen. By the time Narmada sneaked back, her home was gone. What was left was still hot from the ashes, and smoking. The neighbours came to sympathize. Narmada took a good look, stood erect, and pulled her sari over her head. She began to pray. "Lord, forgive us our sins. Jesus, you are the only one. Save us from our misfortune. Free us, Lord." Narmada's children join her. She is weeping as she pleads for deliverance. So is everybody else. It is a solid bond between her and the crucified and resurrected Lord which no human violence can split. "I will die. But I won't stop being a Christian," Narmada says (Simha 2008).

The militant section of the Sangh Parivar burned, killed, beat, raped and forced conversion to Hinduism on Christian believers in Orissa. They systematically destroyed homes, churches, orphanages, Bible schools, even burning entire villages throughout the state of Orissa. The Sangh has assumed the role of jury, judge and executioner. The atrocities against Christians in Orissa are the worst ever in the recorded history of Christianity in India. The state government has totally failed in its duty to protect innocent Christians who are unable to defend themselves. The police have stood by, and occasionally joined the Sangh mobs in the violence.

How should the Church remember and respond to the recent killings of Christians in Orissa? Should we harbour cold and enduring anger, thirst for revenge and react like a wounded animal? In order to respond as free human beings we must value feelings, even the desire for revenge, but it also implies following moral requirements implanted by God into the framework of our humanity. As the Church we must be determined not to lose sight of the command to love one's neighbour, even if the other acts as our enemy.

The victim might question, shouldn't the perpetrators who are truly guilty be dealt with as they deserve to be treated with the strict enforcement of retributive justice? The state is a gift of God's common grace and is granted authority to maintain law and order and restrain evil in society (Rom 13:1-7). However it needs to be stated that Christian love of the enemy does not exclude the concerns for justice but goes beyond it, to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Suffering as part of Christian identity

The Church must integrate the humiliation and pain as part of the Church's life story. Those traumatised and wounded by violence require healing of their memories. Healing is accomplished not so much by remembering traumatic events and their accompanying emotions, as by interpreting memories within the Christian world view and inscribing them into a larger pattern of meaning making them part of our identity. The means of healing and reconciliation is the interpretative work the Church does with the memory of suffering and martyrdom. Suffering can make us better persons; it can draw us closer to God or make us more empathetic with other sufferers. Pain can cause us to grow in righteousness and Christlike character.

Public remembering

If no one remembers the Orissa violence and names it publicly, it remains invisible. To the outside observer, the suffering of victims and the violence of the perpetrators go unseen. Public remembering of wrongs is an act that acknowledges them and is therefore also an act of justice. Acknowledgement is essential to personal and social healing. The remembrance must be truthful.

To remember the wrongdoing truthfully is a process of condemning it. The biblical message of condemning the perpetrator and loving the wrongdoer form part of the Christian story. The message of the Bible is that condemnation is part of reconciliation, not an isolated independent judgement even when reconciliation cannot be achieved (cf Volf 2006). We forgive even when the perpetrator has not asked for forgiveness and work for reconciliation, fully realising reconciliation can only be attained if both parties are willing to be reconciled.

Need for inter-church community

In the battle against evil, in particular against evil in one's own culture, we need inter-church community. The Church has taken roots universally in many cultures, changing them as well as being profoundly shaped by them. Nevertheless all the Churches in diverse cultures are one just as the triune God is one. No Church in a given culture must commit the sin of self-sufficiency thereby isolating itself. Every Church must be open to all other Churches. Every local church is indeed part of the universal Church but the inverse is equally true that the universal Church is also part of the local church. This makes every local church a truly universal community of the Spirit. This is evident in the life of Christians who overcome national and ethnic rivalries as a result of transformation in Christ. This positions the Church as the multicultural community of the Spirit bound together by the power of the cross of Christ. The moral and social transformation shapes the Church as a transcultural community ordered toward purity of life and adoration of God.

Our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ who is the Word of God must be supreme so that we hear, trust and obey him in life and death. Yet, lest we drown the voice of Christ we need to see ourselves and our own understanding of God's kingdom with the eyes of Christians from other cultures.

We should not underestimate our ability to twist the Word of God to serve our own communal ideologies and national strategies. The desire for our community survival and prosperity of our culture can easily overpower us all and obscure our vision of God's new creation. If we are unaware that our culture has sabotaged our faith we will lose a platform from which to judge our own culture. In order to keep our allegiance to Jesus Christ pure we are duty-bound to nurture commitment to a multicultural community of Christian churches. Our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and our commitment to the inter-church community of Christ must go together. You cannot have Christ and reject his universal multicultural body.

The Church is the actual historical bearer of the reconciling message of Jesus Christ. The disciples of Christ are creative catalysts, they are the preserving and illuminating¹ elements in the world

¹ "You are the salt of the earth"; "You are the light of the world" (Matt 5:13-14).

without which the earth cannot survive and remains in darkness. Their light thus becomes the hope of the world. The disciples are indispensable for the accomplishment of God's purpose in the world. Their mission is accomplished not only in word but in the deeds of their daily existence.

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