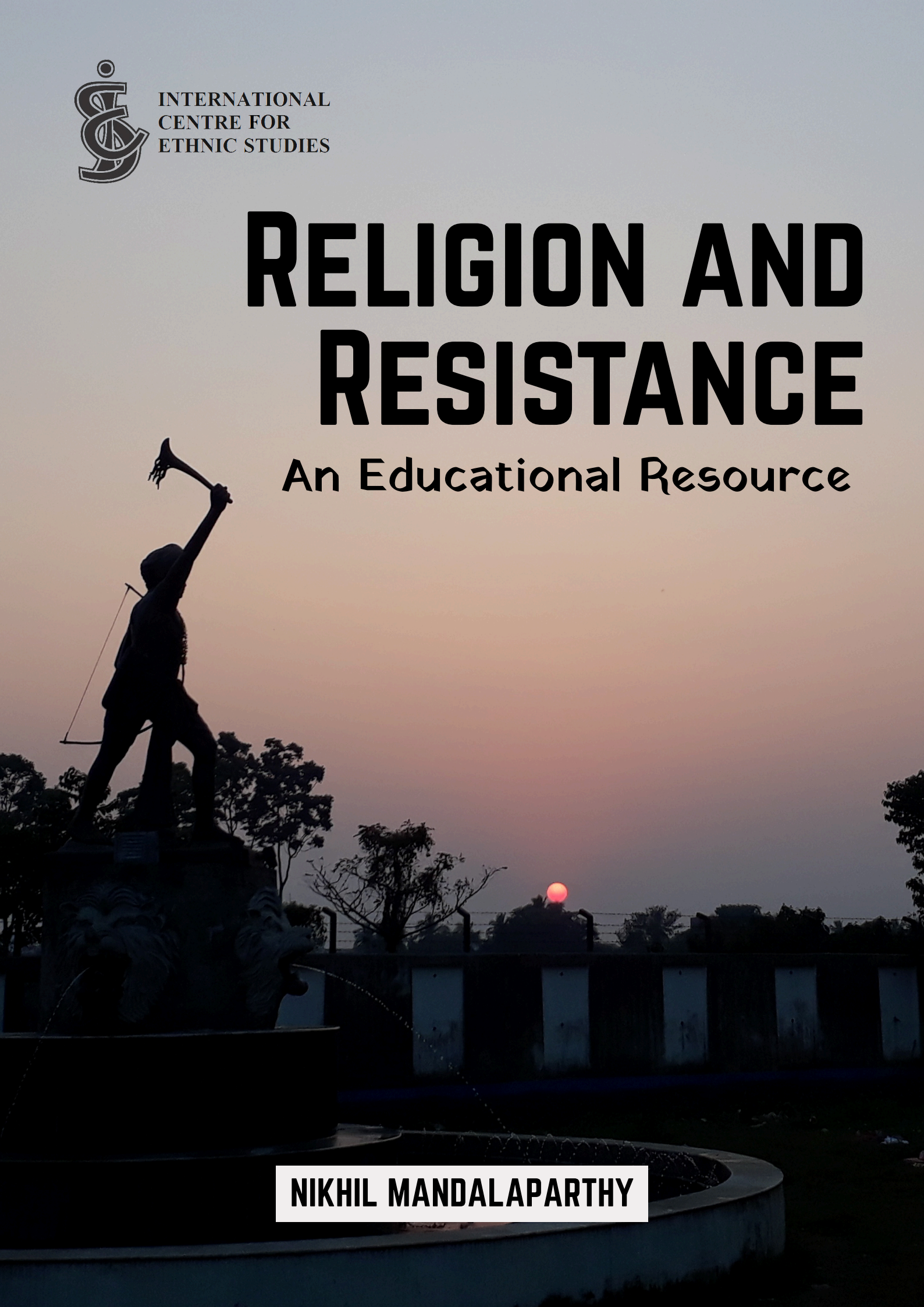
INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
ETHNIC STUDIES
RELIGION AND
RESISTANCE
An Educational Resource
NIKHIL MANDALAPARTHY

Religion and Resistance

An Educational Resource

Nikhil Mandalaparthy

International Centre for Ethnic Studies

2025

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INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR ETHNIC STUDIES

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Cover Page: Birsa Munda statue in West Bengal, India. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Religion and Resistance

An Educational Resource

Nikhil Mandalaparthy[1]

[1] Nikhil Mandalaparthy was a 2024-2025 Luce Scholar affiliated with ICES from September 2024 to June 2025, and is an incoming PhD student in the Department of Religion at Emory University, USA.

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About this Resource

What is this resource?

This resource is a collection of open-access articles, poems, videos, posters, and other resources related to religion, politics, and activism in Sri Lanka and other parts of South Asia and the diaspora. This resource provides ways to explore this question: "How has religion served as a site or mode of resistance to power, hegemony, and domination in modern Sri Lanka and South Asia?"

This resource is based on the syllabus of an in-person course that was held at ICES Colombo in January-April 2025.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is useful for anyone who is interested in learning more about religion, politics, social movements, and history in Sri Lanka and South Asia. This is by no means an exhaustive resource, but it can be a starting point for those interested in the topics. There are many more readings on these topics that cannot be included in this resource due to copyright restrictions.

How do I use this resource?

This resource is divided up into different topics. Under each topic, there is a list of readings and/or media sources, along with questions to prompt discussion or introspection. You can explore these readings at your own pace as an individual, or bring together a few friends to start your own reading group!

Religion and the South Asian Left

How have leftist movements in modern South Asia viewed religion? These two readings (one about Pakistan, the other about India) raise important questions about the views of South Asian secular leftists regarding the role of religion in social change. These readings will provide an entry point to explore your own attitudes towards religion and resistance.

Pakistani flyer which says "The one who tills shall be the one who eats", a popular slogan in the 1970s, which may have been derived from a quote from a 17th-century revolutionary Sufi saint.
Source: Shozab Raza, "The Sufi and the Sickle"

Raza, Shozab. "The Sufi and the Sickle: Theorizing Mystical Marxism in Rural Pakistan." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64, no. 2 (2022): 300–334.

You can also listen to the author give a talk about this article.

Reflection Questions:

- What kind of Islamic teachings inspired Sibghatullah's activism?
- Raza writes that in rural Pakistan, the Mazdoor Kisan Party (MKP) "*did see the radical possibilities of religion*" and so they were open to engaging with religious

ideas and institutions. In what specific ways did the MKP engage with Islam as part of their basebuilding tactics?

- How does this compare to activism you have seen in Sri Lanka?

Birsa Munda statue in West Bengal, India. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Shah, Alpa. Religion and the secular left: subaltern studies, Birsa Munda and Maoists. *Anthropology of this Century* (2014)

Reflection Questions:

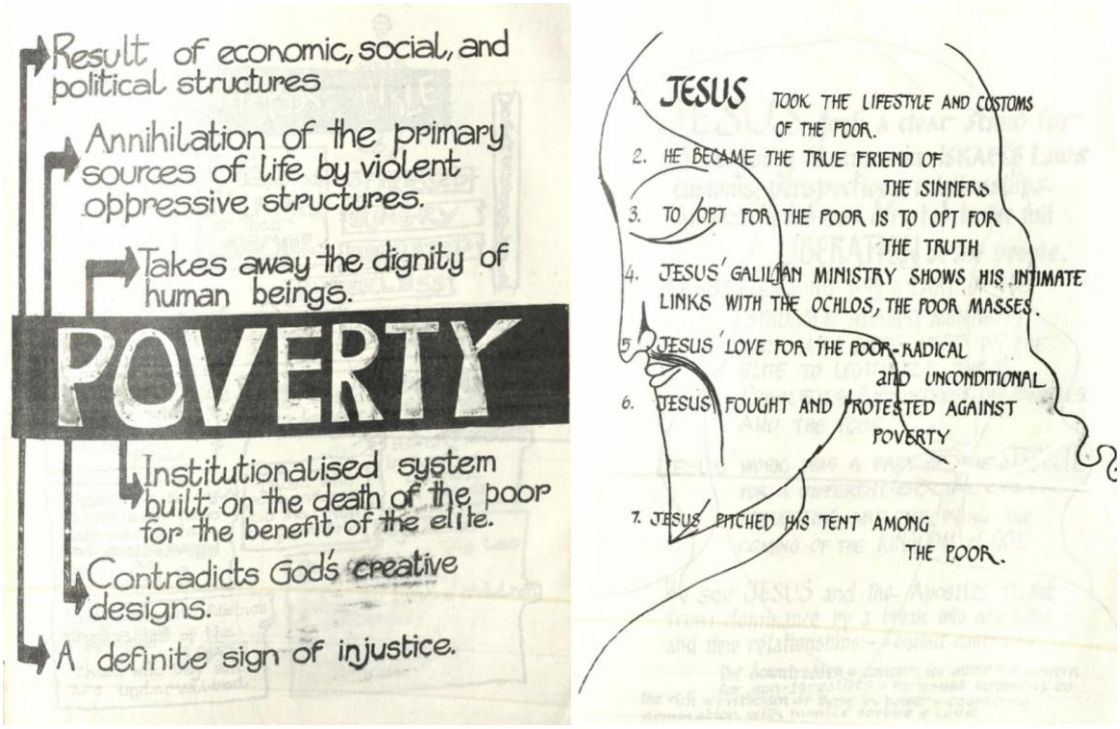
- In this article, Shah writes that most Indian leftist activists have mostly viewed "*religion as a separate dimension of life that needs to be eradicated in order for radical change to be possible*." How does this compare to attitudes expressed by activists in Sri Lanka?
- What are the similarities that Shah suggests between the anti-colonial rebellion of Birsa Munda and the contemporary Hindu sect called Shiv Charcha?
- "*What was it that people were doing in becoming a part of movements such as Birsa's*?" How would you answer this question?

- In addition, Shah writes that "*It is far too easy to dismiss these movements as fanatic or appropriated by fanaticism*". How would you describe the fervor and intense feelings generated by religious and political movements in Sri Lanka / South Asia?
- Shah talks about devotional movements like Birsa's emerging in Adivasi areas during times of great socio-political change. How does this compare to times of significant socio-political change in Sri Lanka?

Liberation Theology in Sri Lanka

Liberation theology is a movement that emerged in the Catholic church in Latin America in the 1960s. Proponents of liberation theology argued that spiritual liberation is synonymous with liberation from oppressive economic, political, and social structures. Over time, liberation theology grew to influence activists and thinkers around the world, both Christian and non-Christian. Liberation theology has a vibrant history in Sri Lanka. Beginning in the mid-20th century, a number of Christian priests, particularly Catholics, explored questions related to justice, war, ethnic tensions, and poverty in their teaching and writings.

These resources focus on four influential Sri Lankan liberation theologians: Fr. Michael Rodrigo (1930-1987), Fr. Tissa Balasuriya (1924-2013), Fr. Paul Caspersz (1925-2017), and Fr. Aloysius Pieris (b. 1934). However, there are many others beyond just this list.



A few posters designed by Fr. Michael Rodrigo and posthumously published in 1989.
Source: *Quest: Selected Posters of Fr. Michael Rodrigo O.M.I.* (Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, November 1989)

Selected posters by Fr. Michael Rodrigo

These posters come from a publication titled *Quest: Selected Posters of Fr. Michael Rodrigo O.M.I.*, published by the Centre for Society and Religion (Colombo) in November 1989. This poster collection was published after Fr. Michael's assassination in 1987. It is hosted online by Princeton University Library (temporarily unavailable).

Reflection Questions:

- How would you describe the visual aesthetic of these posters? Which posters stand out to you the most, and why?
- How does Fr. Michael engage with history in these posters? In these posters, what commentary does he provide about the historical context of Jesus's time, and the historical context of modern Sri Lanka?
- Fr. Michael's posters draw on the life of Jesus as an inspiration for social justice, but he also heavily criticizes religious institutions such as the Christian church. Can you identify examples of both types of messaging in these posters?

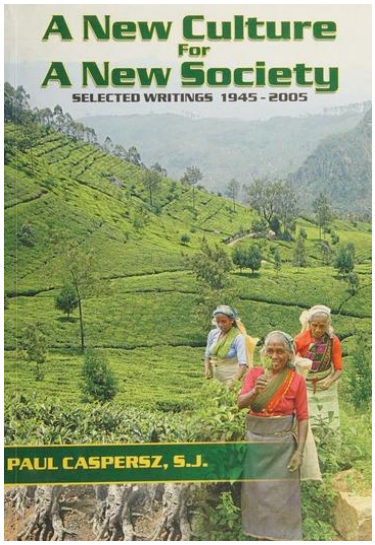
Fr. Tissa Balasuriya. Source: Fr. Tissa Balasuriya's blog.

Steele, Jonathan. Father Tissa Balasuriya obituary, *The Guardian*, March 6, 2013.

Reflection Questions:

- In his book *Mary and Human Liberation,* how did Fr. Tissa depict Mary? How did this differ from traditional views of Mary? What consequences did Fr. Tissa face due to this book?

- What were Fr. Tissa's views on other religious traditions? What kind of inter-faith and inter-ethnic peacebuilding activities did he engage in?
- How did Fr. Tissa connect Biblical narratives to social and political issues in modern Sri Lanka, such as the phenomenon of enforced disappearances?

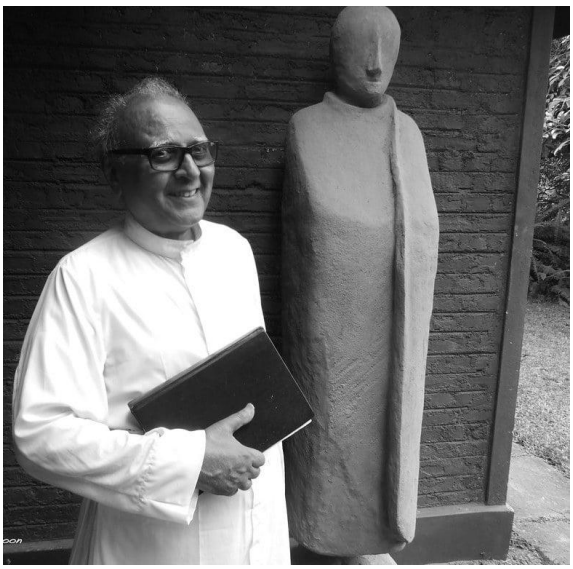


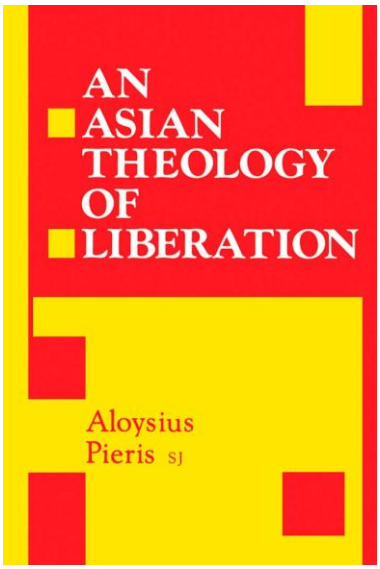
Left: Fr. Paul Caspersz's ordination as a priest in 1952 (Source: Facebook)
Right: One of Fr. Paul Caspersz's books (Source: Internet Archive)

Sarvan, Charles Ponnuthurai. "A Tribute To Fr. Paul Caspersz." *Colombo Telegraph*, April 30, 2017.

Reflection Questions:

- According to the author, why did Fr. Caspersz take a special interest in working with the Malaiyaga (Upcountry) Tamil community?
- How did Fr. Caspersz approach the issue of ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka?
- How did Fr. Caspersz engage with the historical legacy of Christianity's relationship with colonialism while also grounding his activism in his Christian faith?





Left: Fr. Aloysius Pieris (Source: Facebook)
Right: One of Fr. Aloysius Pieris' most influential books, published in 1988 (Source: Bloomsbury Publishing)

Gomes, Janina. "Viewpoint: Poverty, Religiousness Key to Sri Lankan's Theology." *National Catholic Reporter*, May 19, 2000.

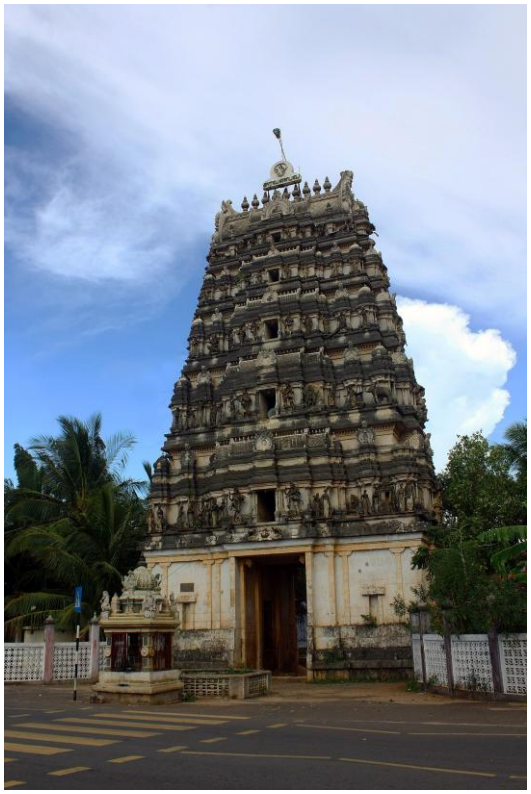
Reflection Questions:

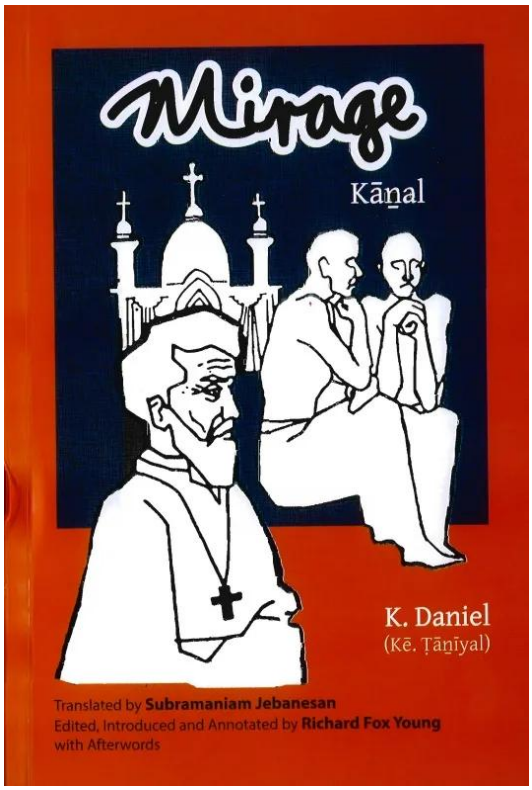
- According to the author, what are the two "dominant realities" of Asian life that influence the theology of Fr. Aloysius Pieris?
- What examples of "religous socialism" does Fr. Aloysius describe in Asia?
- What are Fr. Aloysius's views on poverty and the poor? How does he interpret the life of Jesus through an Asian approach to liberation theology?

Resisting Caste

Caste affects the lives of billions of South Asian people across the world: a birth-based social hierarchy, maintained through endogamy (marriage within the same community) and often influenced by notions of purity and pollution. Although caste is popularly associated with Hindus, caste is practiced across religious communities in South Asia, including Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and many others. Caste has a long history in Sri Lanka as well. In Sri Lanka, as well as other parts of South Asia, anti-caste movements have had to engage with questions related to religious identity, beliefs, practices, and institutions.

These readings focus on anti-caste activism around the Jaffna peninsula in the 20th century. However, there are many other studies of caste in other parts of Sri Lanka, in both Sinhala and Tamil communities. For more sources, check out this bibliography, compiled by scholar Michael Roberts.





Left: Maviddapuram Kandaswamy temple in Jaffna district, where activists demanded the right for all castes to enter in 1968 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)
Right: *Kanal,* a novel by Panchamar (Dalit) writer K. Daniel, translated into English as *Mirage* and published by Kumaran Book House in 2016 (Source: Colombo Telegraph)

Pfaffenberger, Bryan. "The Political Construction of Defensive Nationalism: The 1968 Temple-Entry Crisis in Northern Sri Lanka." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (February 1990): 78–96.

Reflection Questions:

- How does Pfaffenberger describe the Jaffna peninsula's caste structure? How does it differ from caste in southern India? How was caste in Jaffna affected by Dutch and British colonialism?
- What are the connections between caste and religion in Jaffna? How does Pfaffenberger tell the story of Arumuga Navalar's Hindu revivalist movement in Jaffna? How did Minority Tamils engage with this movement?
- How did Tamil political parties in the 1960s engage with the Maviddapuram temple entry conflict and other caste-related issues? What consequences did this approach have for Tamil politics in Sri Lanka?

Dream Yalini, and Sajeevan Jeyakanthan. "The Legacy of Dominic Jeeva." *Dalit History Month*, April 24, 2021.

Reflection Questions:

- Who was Dominic Jeeva? What was the impact of his writing and activism?
- What kind of caste-based restrictions were imposed on Panchamar Tamils in the 20th century in Jaffna?
- How does caste intersect with educational access?
- In narrating a history of anti-caste activism in Sri Lanka, what kind of organizations do the authors of this article mention?
- How do the authors of this article describe the impacts of caste in Sri Lanka's civil war?

Religion, War, and Reconciliation

These readings explore religion, war, and post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka. The poems explore themes related to religion and violence, particularly in Jaffna. The articles explore the role played by Christian priests during the war, and the consequences that some of them faced for their human rights activism. Finally, there is a link to a discourse by a Sinhala Buddhist monk and activist, about Buddhist teachings that promote post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Left: Nallur Kandaswamy temple (Source: Wikimedia Commons)
Right: Jaffna Public Library (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Arasanayagam, Jean. "Nallur." *BOMB Magazine*, Summer 1992.

Reflection Questions:

- What religious site is mentioned in this poem? Why is it significant?
- Which religious deity does this poem focus on? What is this deity's connection to war?
- What kind of contrasts does the poet create between the scenes inside and outside the temple?
- What do you think the poet is trying to communicate when she writes that "Turned away, from bloody skirmishes / of humankind, the gods are blinded / by the rain of bullets"?

Nuhman, MA, translated by S. Pathmanathan. "Murder." In "The burning of the Jaffna library: 31 years on," *Groundviews*, June 1, 2012.

Reflection Questions:

- Which historical event provides the context for this particular poem?
- Which religious figure and religious scriptures are portrayed in this poem?
- How does this poem address physical violence against living beings and other forms of violence (i.e. book burning)?

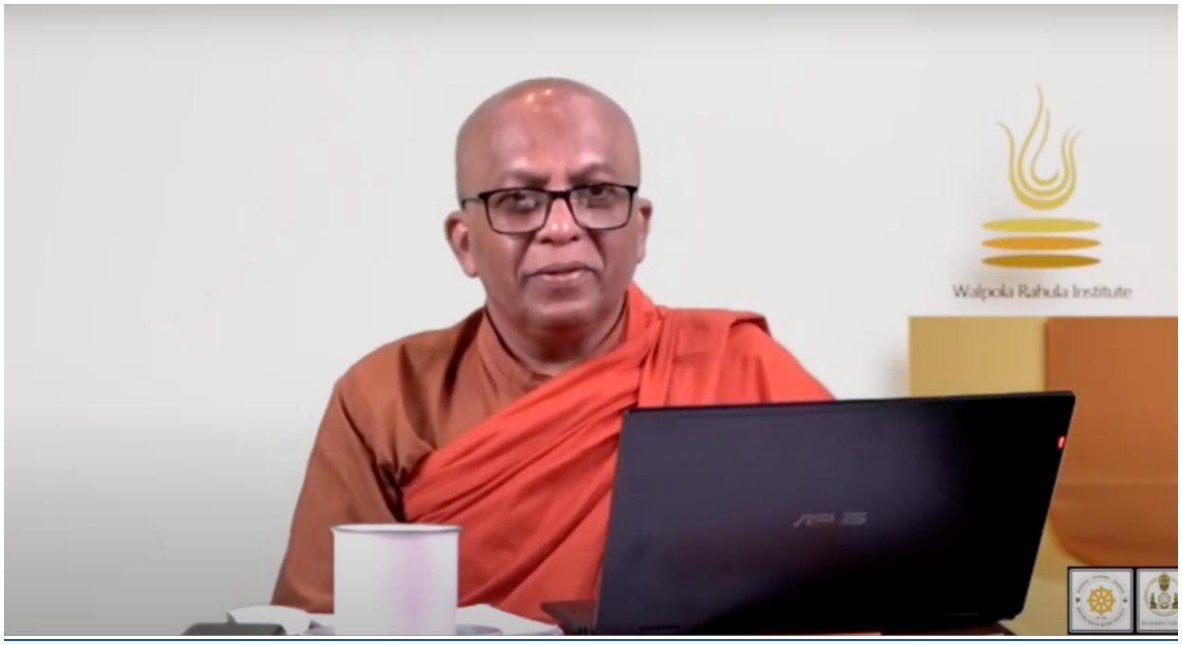
February 2024 memorial event for Fr. Mary Bastian, a Catholic priest who was killed in Mannar in 1985 (Source: Roman Catholic Diocese of Jaffna, Sri Lanka)

Fernando, Ruki. "The Murders of Troublesome Priests," *Groundviews*, January 6, 2025.

Reflection Questions:

- Which religious leaders are mentioned in this article? Why were they killed? Who is identified as reponsible for their deaths?
- What kind of activities were these religious leaders engaged in that made them targets for violence?

- What kind of investigations have been carried out into the murders of these religious leaders? In your opinion, has justice been delivered?
- When and how did the El Salvadoran government eventually acknowledge the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero? How does this approach differ from that of the Sri Lankan government?



Source: YouTube

Ven. Dhammananda, Galkande. Religion, Rights & Reconciliation: Finding Healing after Conflict (*British Mahabodhi Society*, Feb 26, 2023)

Reflection Questions:

- How did the war affect Ven. Dhammananda and his family?
- What kind of Buddhist teachings and narratives does Ven. Dhammananda highlight to support post-war reconciliation?
- How does Ven. Dhammananda describe the relationship between "victims" and "perpetrators" in the context of the civil war?

Ritual and Protest in Sri Lanka

In this session, we will look at religious ritual and protest in post-war Sri Lanka. Some of the readings discuss the phenomenon of enforced "disappearances" in Sri Lanka, and explore how relatives of "disappeared" people have incorporated religious rituals in public protests. The final readings explore the role of religious symbols, rituals, and leaders in the 2022 "Aragalaya" mass protests in Sri Lanka.

Source: YouTube

In Plain Sight – Searching for Truth Behind Sri Lanka's Mass Graves (dir. Ruvin de Silva, 2023, 30 min.)

Reflection Questions:

- This documentary provides a brief introduction to enforced disappearances and mass graves in Sri Lanka. How are these two issues connected?
- Death-related religious rituals are not discussed in this documentary, but they provide an important way for people to process life transitions. What does the psychologist who is interviewed in this documentary say about the psychological impact that enforced disappearances have on family members and communities?

Sandya Ekneligoda holding a flame and trident at Kali yādinna in front of the Presidential Secretariat, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 24 January 2019 (Source: Photo by Nilshan Fonseka, cited in Chulani Kodikara's article)

Kodikara, Chulani. "Disappearances, Dissident Memory and Magic: Sandya Ekneligoda's Struggle for Justice." *Memory Studies* 17, no. 3 (June 2024): 531–46.

Reflection Questions:

- Which female divine figures does Sandya Ekneligoda appeal to in her protests? What kind of rituals does she conduct?
- According to the author, what are the empowering effect(s) of this mode of ritual protest?
- This article uses different terms to describe Sandya Ekneligoda's activism, such as "sorcery", "religion", and "magic". How would you differentiate between these categories?
- Over the past decades, commentators such as Dr. Jayadeva Uyangoda have criticized mothers' use of religious rituals in their protests, arguing that it may be "temporarily empowering" but in the long run only reifies stereotypical notions of women as "the carriers and bearers of culture". After reading this article, how do you make sense of these complexities?

Source: Kumanan Kanapathipillai

Protests in Kilinochchi

For years in Kilinochchi, relatives of disappeared people have been protesting in the city of Kilinochchi, calling for justice and accountability from the Sri Lankan government and international community. Take a look at this article from the *Tamil Guardian*, these photos by photojournalist Kumanan Kanapathipillai, and this Instagram post by Tamil-Canadian dancer Yalini Rajakulasingam.

Reflection Questions:

- How would you describe the images of these protests? What emotions are conveyed through these pictures?
- What kind of religious imagery are you able to identify in these images?
- In her social media post, how does Rajakulasingam describe the religious iconography in these protests? What connections does she make to the narratives and rituals associated with goddesses like Mariamman and Kannaki Amman?

Source: Photo by Nazly Ahmed

Jehan Appuhami's Cross

Take a look at this news article and Instagram video of actor Jehan Appuhami carrying a cross from Katuwapitiya to Galle Face Green during the Aragalaya in 2022.

Reflection Questions:

- Why did Appuhami choose to carry the cross? What were his demands to the Sri Lankan government?
- What meanings do you associate with the Christian cross? What message do you think Appuhami was trying to convey by carrying a cross, rather than another religious symbol?
- How does Appuhami's act blur the lines between "protest" and "performance"? How do you think you would react to seeing this in person? Have you seen similar protests in Sri Lanka or elsewhere?

Fr. Jeewantha Peiris at the Aragalaya. Source: Photo by Bhanu Prakash Chandra

de Soysa, Minoli. "Father Jeewantha Peiris: A Warrior for Truth and Justice." *Groundviews*, August 4, 2022.

Reflection Questions:

- Who is Fr. Jeewantha? How does the author describe his role in the Aragalaya?
- What kind of consequences did Fr. Jeewantha and other religious leaders and activists (like the Buddhist monk Mahanama Thero) face for engaging in activism during the Aragalaya?

Religion and Resistance in Myanmar

In this section, we turn to Myanmar: another country in the region that has been struggling with Buddhist nationalism and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar resulted in the rise of a resistance movement that has displayed unprecedented levels of inter-religious and inter-ethnic solidarity across the country. These readings provide an opportunity to compare and contrast activism in Sri Lanka (i.e. the Aragalaya) and Myanmar.

Protests in Myanmar in February 2021 against the military coup. Source: Wikimedia Commons (left, right)

Fulton, Angela, and David Thang Moe. The Christians Living Under Buddhist Nationalism, *Christianity Today* (October 29, 2024)

Reflection Questions:

- How does Moe describe the history of Bamar Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar? Do you notice any similarities or differences to the history of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka?
- According to Moe, how did the inter-religious resistance to the 2021 coup transform relationships between members of Christian ethnic minorities and the Bamar majority in Myanmar?

Buddhism, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in the Myanmar Coup. *Georgetown University Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*. March 8-April 16, 2021.

Reflection Questions:

- According to the authors of these articles, how might ethnic relations in Myanmar be transformed by the solidarities created by the resistance to the military government?
- In Ronan Lee's article, he writes that "some among Myanmar's majority Bamar and Buddhist communities are rethinking their previous anti-Rohingya stance." According to Lee, how and why did this transformation take place?
- In his article, how does David Thang Moe describe the idea of "reciprocal liberation"?

Religion and Activism in the South Asian Diaspora

This final section explores how resistance movements have engaged with religion, moving from South Asia to the South Asian diaspora. This reading ties in many of the themes from the previous sections: feminist activism, creative reimagining of religious symbols, and solidarity across religious and ethnic divisions.

Source: Southall Black Sisters

Richman, Paula. "The Ramlila Migrates to Southall." In *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 309-328.

Reflection Questions:

- How did the Southall Black Sisters re-tell the story of the Ramayana from a feminist perspective?
- Compare the Southall Black Sisters' portrayal of female characters such as Sita to this music video from the Hindi film *Swades* (dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, 2004). How does the actress portray Sita? What kind of gender roles and stereotypes are being reinforced here?
- How did the Southall Black Sisters' Ramlila address issues such as gender roles and patriarchal family structures?

- How did the Southall Ramleela blur the lines between the categories of “religious ritual”, “performance”, and “protest”? How does this compare to Jehan Appuhamy’s performance-protest during the Aragalaya?
- What does the Southall Black Sisters’ depiction of Ravana tell us about their analysis of oppression and violence? How does this compare to the approach of Catholic liberation theologians?
- How did the Southall Black Sisters create a community and Ramleela performance inclusive of both Afro-Caribbean and South Asian members? How does this compare to multi-ethnic solidarity in social justice movements in Sri Lanka?

Religion and Resistance

An Educational Resource

Nikhil Mandalaparthy

This resource is a collection of open-access articles, poems, videos, posters, and other resources related to religion, politics, and activism in Sri Lanka and other parts of South Asia and the diaspora. This resource provides ways to explore this question: “How has religion served as a site or mode of resistance to power, hegemony, and domination in modern Sri Lanka and South Asia?”

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