Sri Lanka’s religious fault lines

The island is a microcosm of the world’s religions—and of their wars.

by Philip Jenkins in the October 23, 2019 issue

The shrine of St. Anthony in Kochchikade in the city of Colombo, Sri Lanka, prior to the terrorist attacks on Easter Sunday 2019. (Photo by leodaphne / iStock Editorial / Getty Images Plus)

I grew up loving the work of science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, who spent much of his life in Sri Lanka, the former British possession of Ceylon, which he regularly portrayed as something like an earthly paradise. Probably correctly, he believed it to be the site of the legendary realm of Taprobane, the subject of endless fantasies in the classical world and a vibrant center of early Buddhism.

But Clarke was under no illusions about the religiously inspired absolutism and violence that had so often marked the country's past. Its wealth and strategic location made it the home of multiple societies and faiths—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian—which repeatedly fell into conflict. The island is at once a microcosm of the world's religions and of their wars.

Last Easter, when Islamist terrorists targeted three Sri Lanka churches, killing hundreds, most Western observers immediately understood the attack as a typical manifestation of the Islamist extremism that has become so common in the age of al-Qaeda and ISIS. Lost in the media accounts was a sense of the very distinctive history of Christians in that ancient and paradoxical country, in which savage violence was anything but new.

Sri Lanka's Christians claim their church was founded precisely in the year AD 72. More probably, it was part of the larger expansion of the Syriac-speaking Church of the East in the fifth and sixth centuries. A cross in the Nestorian style was found at the ancient royal capital of Anuradhapura, a special holy place of Buddhism. Successive waves of merchants and adventurers brought in other waves of the Christian faith, which competed fiercely with each other. The country's great Catholic saint is Joseph Vaz (1651–1711), who struggled to keep the faith alive against vicious persecutions inflicted neither by Buddhists nor Hindus but by Dutch Calvinists. (Pope Francis eventually canonized him in 2015.)

That background is neatly symbolic of the country's larger religious history. Although it has so often witnessed stunning examples of interfaith exchange and dialogue, it has also been a battlefield, sometimes literally so, and seldom on the lines that outsiders might expect.

Today, Christians make up 7.5 percent of Sri Lanka's population, some 1.7 million people, with Catholics strongly in the majority. Ethnically, they are very much part of the local population, rather than remnants of imperial elites. So thoroughly integrated are they in local cultures as to cause frequent headaches to Vatican observers, who fear that Buddhist-Catholic dialogue might lead to excessive Christian concessions, if not syncretism. They recall Thomas Merton's 1968 visit to the great shrine of Polonnaruwa, to which the famous Trappist responded in ecstatic words that sounded almost like a Buddhist profession.

But if the country's Buddhist tradition is inexhaustibly rich, it also includes a powerful element of political activism. The country has a sizable Buddhist majority, some 70 percent of the whole, and mainly associated with the Sinhalese people. The Tamil linguistic minority is mixed but mainly Hindu. From the 1980s, the two peoples and faiths clashed in a series of wars that killed at least a hundred thousand. Suicide attacks were a specialty of the Tamil extremists, the "Liberation Tigers."

It would be wonderful to report that the Christian church played a mediating role in the conflict, but believers were themselves split between Tamils and Sinhalese and could rarely agree on peacemaking strategies. Some Catholics—including clergy—were prominent in the Tiger movement.

Since the civil war ended in 2009, Sri Lanka has developed a strand of intolerant Buddhist militancy that has not unreasonably led one sect to be labeled the Buddhist Taliban. Militants have denounced members of other faiths, including Muslims and Christians, and attacked persons and property. When the first news broke of the recent Easter atrocities, my own first reaction was to counsel caution in assuming Muslim responsibility. Although Islamists did indeed prove to be culpable, there was no shortage of plausible Buddhist candidates.

Violence, then, was not wholly a surprise to the country's Christians. What was uniquely horrible was that some of the country's holiest sites were targeted. Three churches were selected for massacre, including the beloved national shrine of St. Anthony in Kochchikade in the city of Colombo, where almost a hundred perished, and St. Sebastian's in Negombo. The Catholic presence in Negombo is both obvious and venerable, with many wayside shrines and Marian statues throughout the area. Finally, an evangelical congregation was hit, to ensure that all branches of the faith would suffer.

The churches will be rebuilt and restored, and St. Anthony's will resume its position as one of the greatest Catholic sites in the whole of Asia. But like so many Christians through the world, Sri Lanka's believers always live with the knowledge that they live on a complex religious frontier, or more accurately, on multiple converging fault lines.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Microcosm of religious violence."