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# ON APOLOGIES: THE TESTAMENT OF BISHOP LAKSHMAN WICKREMASINGHE

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The apology extended by the Prime Minister to the Tamils evicted from their lodgings in Colombo on 7th June 2007 has evoked mixed reactions. Some of his Ministerial colleagues have questioned the need for an apology. Many others, Tamils and non-Tamils, have warmly welcomed it. A retired Sinhalese Major General has publicly thanked and congratulated the Prime Minister and strongly endorsed the apology. This particular eviction is related to our understanding of human rights and the concept of exclusive homelands. There is also the broader question of who, if any, should apologise when some wrong has been done. Apologies must emerge spontaneously from the heart and cannot be prescribed. However, few would deny the positive consequences of an apology or dispute the need for the wrongdoer to apologise for any wrong done. But is it ever necessary to extend an apology for the actions of others? For example, if some children do harm to others, would it not be appropriate for the parents, teachers etc, even if they had no hand in that wrong, to apologise? By extension, would it not be appropriate, on the principle of command responsibility, for leaders or persons in authority to apologise for the wrongdoing of officials and subordinates, even if that action was not authorised?

Further, what if there is no vertical line of command connecting the leaders to the offenders but only linkages arising from common identities, in cases where that wrong was committed in the name of one or more of those identities? For example, should someone who is blameless apologise for acts of religious bigotry committed by others of the same faith, or of ethnic cleansing committed by those of the same ethnicity, or of caste oppression by those of the same caste, or of unprofessional conduct by those of the same profession? Was the apology of the Sinhalese Major General for the eviction of the Tamils from the lodges warranted? Similarly, are apologies warranted from Tamils who were unconnected with the massacre of Muslim worshippers at Kattankudi and Eravur or of Sinhalese at Arantalawa or the attack on the Dalada Maligawa?

When Gandhi carried out his non-violent Satyagraha campaigns, he expected the Satyagrahis to submit to any violence inflicted on them without retaliating in kind. Whenever some of his followers resorted to violence, Gandhi not only called off the campaign but also apologised, even if such retaliatory violence was a response to greater violence inflicted on Satyagrahis. Did Gandhi need to apologise? Closer home we have the example of Bishop Lakshman Wickremasinghe. He was in the UK under treatment for a very serious heart condition when the 1983 pogrom occurred. Disregarding his doctor's orders he promptly returned to Sri Lanka in response to the national crisis. He came to Jaffna to meet the displaced. His visit lifted the spirits not only of those displaced but also those of others concerned, such as myself (I was then District Secretary / Government Agent, Jaffna). Twenty four years on, the memories of that visit have not faded, nor his message staled. He then went on to

other districts in the North and East to meet the displaced. What he saw and heard affected him deeply and, by the time he reached his ancestral home in Colombo and his office in Kurunegala his health condition was precarious. Then, as Bishop of Kurunegala, he wrote a profound and deeply moving pastoral letter in October 1983, and died soon afterwards. In that pastoral letter he confessed, "I was among those who tried hard and failed [to find a solution to the ethnic conflict]". A central feature of the Bishop's pastoral letter was an apology as a Sinhalese addressed to Tamil victims of the pogrom. The Bishop first analysed, one by one, from a Sinhalese perspective, the familiar reasons widely put forward to explain the violence directed against the Tamils. Did the many acts of violence by armed Tamil militants warrant violent retaliation against other Tamils? The Bishop's response is that we need to rise above "tribal vengeance" and "tribal morality". Further, did the Sinhalese have undue disadvantages and suffer discrimination at the hands of the British? Did the Tamils continue to enjoy undue advantages and privileges? Even if the pogrom was unjustified, did it help to bring about a more equitable balance in opportunities as between the Sinhalese and Tamil populations? Rejecting such arguments, the Bishop proclaims that, "We [must be] ashamed as Sinhalese for the moral crime other Sinhalese have committed."

The Bishop goes on to explore the need for an apology to the Tamil victims. Since he had no hand in the riots or in the build up to the riots, and was in no position to stop it, was an apology due from him? He cites the pride the Sinhalese today take in the Sinhala heritage, including Sinhala Bhuddism. Did they contribute to that heritage? Is not their pride based merely on their sense of ethnic and national identity with those responsible for developing that civilisation? If that sense of identity warranted pride in those achievements, then should it also not require apologising to the Tamil victims for the terrible actions in July 1983 of those claiming to act on behalf of the Sinhalese?. The Bishop proceeds to make an unqualified apology as a Sinhalese to the Tamil victims of the pogrom of July 1983. Bishop Lakshman Wickremasinghe's pastoral letter, written in the wake of the pogrom of July 1983, focuses on that crisis. But the message of the Bishop is equally relevant to all of us. Victims and perpetrators of communal violence are found among all sections of the population; confessions and apologies are due from each of us. An apology made under pressure is of limited value, but a spontaneous apology could be an irresistible first step towards reconciliation. His pastoral letter, formulated while yet "in the midst of our worst national crisis since the beginning of our independence", is not a detached scholarly theological offering but an anguished message from the heart of a thoughtful and deeply caring Bishop. That message from one of the great Sri Lankans of our time is a classic that needs to be read and re-read carefully and thoughtfully by all of us. ■