

BOOK REVIEWS

PAUL CASPERSZ' SELECTED WRITINGS

Charles Sarvan

Paul Caspersz, S. J. *A New Culture For A New Society: Selected Writings 1945-2005*, Kandy Satyodaya Centre, 2005.

Paul Caspersz went to school in Colombo, entered the Society of Jesus in 1942, and was ordained a priest ten years later. He read Politics and Economics at Oxford and, returning to the island, was a teacher till 1971. A year later, he co-founded the Satyodaya Centre for Social Research and Encounter, Kandy, where he is now based. *New Culture*, marking Paul Caspersz becoming an octogenarian, is a remarkable book, testifying to a remarkable man, and a remarkable life of quiet, sustained, service to the poor and the disadvantaged. The anthology is animated by the spirit of Decree 1V of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus: “the reconciliation of men and women among themselves, which their reconciliation with God demands, must be based on justice.”

Caspersz has a special sympathy for the upcountry (or plantation) Tamil people because they are among the most wretched of “the wretched of the earth” (Frantz Fanon), suffering along both the vertical and horizontal lines of ethnicity and class. Brought over from India in the 19th century by imperial Britain, they were virtual prisoners on the estates: “not only was the estate isolated from the village but, through a series of vicious and restrictive laws, regulations and customs, each estate was carefully sealed off from every other” (p.32). The surrounding Sinhalese villages deeply resented both the expropriation of their land and the importation of foreigners, but unfortunately their anger often found expression not against the real villains – British imperialism, the tea companies and their managers – but against the hapless victims. Callously exploited by estate management (motivated by profit and heedless of the human cost); resented by the Sinhalese; cynically betrayed by their own trade union leaders, theirs has been a most unfortunate fate. *New Culture* traces the sorry story, independence (1948) bringing the deprivation of citizenship, disenfranchisement and, in the case of thousands, expatriation (*not* repatriation) to India. Caspersz argues that, given the long passage of time,

these folk should no longer be seen as “Indian” Tamil. The “ethnic origins of the overwhelming majority of the people now living in the island are Indian, and it is highly probable that *the origins of the great majority are South Indian*” (p.1, emphasis added). Unafraid, wishing to provoke thought, Caspersz argues that if the plantation folk are “Indian Tamil,” then the Sinhalese are “Indian Sinhalese” (p.18). He acknowledges that he had welcomed the Land Reform Law of 1972, not anticipating that nationalization would lead to Tamil plantation workers being ordered out of the estates, often without notice, “hungry, homeless and helpless” (p. viii).

The Sinhalese are by nature one of the friendliest people in the world but [they] can be easily but diabolically misled by Sinhalese racialists, who stop at nothing and are stopped by nothing, not even by compassion, the kindness and the non-violence of Buddhism, in order to whip up hatred against the Tamils to a frenzy. ‘The estates are now ours,’ they shrieked. ‘Get out!’ And the Tamil workers on many estates close to the Sinhalese villagers left the estates where some of them had lived for generations defenceless, friendless, their hearts in the dust like a tea bush uprooted, to roam the streets of the cities and live off garbage bins. (p. 35)

Not surprisingly, there is collective amnesia: for example, a friend of mine, a Kandyan, retired planter, disclaims any knowledge of it. Caspersz is aware of the suffering of Sinhalese villagers, but cautions against a “dangerously divisive” competition of misery: “Both estate workers and poor peasants suffer oppression. To ask where the oppression is greater is much less important than to end it, both on the estate and in the village.” (p. 36).

Ethnicity is “the dominant problem in Sri Lanka” (p. 78), and Caspersz pleads for a united nation that permits and encourages diversity (p. 74). Unity does not mean uniformity; integration is not assimilation; pluralism should be welcomed

and celebrated. The ethnic conflict is totally unnecessary, and a tragic waste. After all, Sinhalese caste groups such as the *karavas*, the *salagamas* and the *duravas* were “originally South Indian immigrants who over a period of centuries assimilated so successfully with the local population as to make everyone, even themselves, oblivious of their origins” (p.80). The irony is that “the vast majority of the Tamils would not want separation if there was genuine redress of their grievances” (p.83). To support this argument, Caspersz quotes from the 1970 election manifesto of the Federal Party: “It is our firm conviction that division of the country in any form would be beneficial neither to the country nor to the Tamil-speaking people. Hence we appeal to the Tamil-speaking people not to lend their support to any political movement that advocates the bifurcation of our country” (p.83). The Sinhalese who exclude the option of secession are, for that very reason, all the more obliged to work for *genuine* pluralistic acceptance and equality (p.86). The nature and shape of politics is formed by people and parties: “Whenever one of the two main Sinhala parties tries to redress the legitimate grievances of the Tamils, the other accuses it of betrayal or surrender. The tragedy is that there is no question of principle but of sheer dishonest political gain” (p.28).

As I have written elsewhere, unfortunately religious teaching does not determine the nature of society; rather, it’s the people who determine the nature of religion. The same religion – whether Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism or Islam – at different times and places finds different expression: compassionate or cruel, gentle or harsh, tolerant or assertive. Christianity, born in the Middle East, was adopted by the West, and later exported to the non-Western world. It accompanied Western imperialism—and the exploitation and humiliation that imperialism visited upon the conquered. Secondly, it came dressed in the ‘clothes’ of Western culture and, rather than adapting Christianity to Sri Lankan culture, converts adapted Western ways. It is not surprising that many Sri Lankan Buddhists have looked upon Christianity with resentment. (Recently, the situation has been worsened by the methods and motives of certain USA-based evangelical groups.) Caspersz does not deny the complicit role the church played in the past. For instance, the church stressed law and order, but did not question the moral rightness of that externally imposed ‘order’. A good Christian was held to be one who went to church, was concerned with the sacrament and the holy spirit – not with “inter-human justice” (p.142). But since we are social beings, to be a good Christian is not only to do “social service” but also to be active in endeavouring to bring about social change. Rather than being kind within an unkind system, one must work towards

changing the unjust order of things. What is desired, and longed for, is not charity but justice. A good Christian life means a good social life – not only prayer, however pious and emotional. Rather than being spiritual preparation and prelude, prayer has become an easy substitute for action. Christ’s famous Sermon on the Mount must be given a literal (not a conveniently figurative) interpretation. The beatitudes are the beatitudes of the poor and the oppressed (p.100). As Marx pointed out, for profit, we are willing to disregard human laws, and if “turbulence and strife” will result in material gain, so be it (see, p.192). Marx did not claim that “the economic element is the only determining one” (p.194). Indeed, it is this mechanically reductionist attitude that made Marx exclaim towards the end of his life, “Thank God that I am not a Marxist!” (ibid). Caspersz clarifies his position: “The God I believe in is the God of Justice, the God of Justice-Love. The God I believe in is the God who in Jesus became human, a colonized and anti-imperialist human, a worker, immensely concerned about the loss of human freedom and the oppression of the poor” (p. 195). And so a Christian priest quotes Che Guevara: “Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love” (p.102); a Jesuit quotes Che Guevara citing Jesus in his last letter to his children: “Above all, always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world. That is the most beautiful quality of a revolutionary. Jesus of Nazareth was guided above all by just such ardent love” (p.103). As for the role of Christians in the ethnic conflict, those described as “nationalists” are not inclusive but “racist” nationalists. However, while almost all Buddhists are Sinhalese, and all Hindus are Tamil, the Christian congregation consists of Sinhalese and Tamil. Therefore, Christians have a better opportunity, and a greater duty, to work for inter-ethnic understanding and harmony.

‘Development’ is a frequently encountered word, and countries like Sri Lanka are sometimes described as ‘developing’ nations. But what does development mean in practice? “Often and deliberately, the World Bank-IMF complex hides its real intentions behind difficult phrases” (p.256). When international organizations think, plan and carry out ‘development’ projects, the poor are peripheral (p.241); the centre is occupied by “economic growth which means the making of more and more money” (pp.241-2). It is assumed that the more material possessions and comforts a person or a nation **has**, “the more fulfilment is there of the capacity of that person or nation **to be**” (p.279). A distinction must be made between needs and wants. As Gandhi pointed out, there is enough in the world for everyone’s needs but

not enough for everyone's greed (p.250). Those active in 'development' should remember the Mahatma's words: "Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him" (p.240). Marx wrote that religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless world" (p.299). Development, while having to do with the economy, the material, must also have the spiritual dimension of devotion to humanity, to truth, goodness, beauty, equity and justice (p. 247). In that sense, one can be spiritual without being religious. Caspersz concludes that the opposite of religion is not atheism but idolatry, the idolatry of material possession, status, snobbery, false values and power. Oscar Wilde observed that we know the price of everything, and the value of nothing. Marcus Aurelius asked himself (*Meditations*) how one could estimate the value of a person, and answered that a possible way was by the things to which that person gave value. It does not mean that one should not take (using

contemporary parallels) an interest in fashion or football—there is a difference between value, the things that are really important to a person, and his or her interests.

As Paul Caspersz observes, some books do not pulsate, do not bleed (p.19) but, moved by love, sympathy and indignation, he himself writes with power and passion about "this once happy, but now so tragic, land (p.19). Yeats ("The Second Coming") wrote that the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity, but Caspersz, being among the best, is full of a passionate and selfless intensity. He is one of those to whom the miseries of the world *are* misery, and will not let them rest (Keats, "Fall of Hyperion"). Sri Lankans in particular should read *New Culture* and ponder: it will help to create a new culture (a new way of life) and so, a new society, a 'paradise isle' (tourist slogan) in far more important terms than landscape and scenery. A man who has rendered long and dedicated service, performs yet another in making this collection available to the public. "For good is the life ending faithfully" (Wyatt, 1503-1542). ■

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