

“The Catholic Church and Moral Leadership after the Easter Sunday Attacks in Sri Lanka: Faith, Governance, and Public Accountability.”

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Abstract:

The Easter Sunday terrorist attacks of April 21, 2019, marked a tragic watershed in Sri Lanka’s post-conflict era, resulting in over 250 fatalities and profound trauma within the Christian community. In the aftermath, the Catholic Church emerged as a pivotal moral authority, advocating for justice, transparency, and accountability from the state. This paper critically examines the Church’s role as a moral voice responding not only to the attacks but also to subsequent governance failures, including delayed judicial processes and democratic erosion amid Sri Lanka’s political and economic crises post-2022. Through qualitative analysis of pastoral communications, public discourse, and interviews, the study situates the Church’s response within Catholic Social Teaching frameworks. The findings underscore the Church’s unique position as a faith-based moral guardian amid governance challenges, highlighting both its influence and the risks of politicization in fragile democratic contexts.

Despite Sri Lanka’s constitutional commitments to justice and democracy, persistent lapses in security, political accountability, and judicial delays following the Easter attacks have undermined public trust. The Catholic Church, as a spiritual and community leader, intervened morally and publicly, yet scholarly examination of its influence on governance discourse and justice outcomes remains sparse. Additionally, the balance of religious institutions maintain between prophetic critique and political neutrality in crisis contexts warrants deeper exploration.

This study employs a qualitative research design comprising: Document analysis of official pastoral letters and statements issued by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference and prominent Church leaders, such as Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith; Media content analysis tracing the Church’s public advocacy and engagement; Semi-structured interviews with clergy members, theologians, victims’ families, and legal activists to capture diverse perspectives on the Church’s role and impact. The analysis is framed through principles of Catholic Social Teaching focusing on human dignity, the common good, and institutional moral responsibility.

The Catholic Church has demonstrated steadfast moral leadership by persistently demanding justice and transparent governance. Its interventions have elevated national and international awareness, yet state inaction reveals the limitations faced by religious moral actors within authoritarian or crisis-prone settings. Positioned as a guardian of ethical conscience rather than a political actor, the Church’s capacity to mobilize civil society remains significant, though it must carefully navigate potential politicization risks to maintain spiritual authority. The Church’s post-Easter engagement reaffirms the critical role of faith-based moral leadership during periods of democratic fragility and social trauma.

Key Words- Easter Sunday Attacks, Catholic Church, Moral Leadership, Good governance Failures, Justice and Accountability

Short Abstract

The Easter Sunday terrorist attacks on April 21, 2019, remain one of the darkest tragedies in Sri Lanka's post-war history, killing over 250 people and leaving deep scars within the Christian community and the broader society. In the aftermath, the Catholic Church emerged as a prominent moral authority, providing pastoral care, offering spiritual solidarity, and persistently calling for truth, justice, and accountability from the state. This paper examines the Catholic Church's response to the attacks, situating it within broader debates on governance, democratic fragility, and religious leadership in times of crisis. Drawing upon Catholic Social Teaching, the study analyzes pastoral letters, public addresses by Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, media records, and testimonies of clergy, victims' families, and civil society activists. Findings reveal that the Church functioned not merely as a spiritual caretaker but also as a guardian of ethical conscience, highlighting state failures, challenging impunity, and mobilizing public opinion nationally and internationally. However, the limited responsiveness of the state underscores the challenges faced by religious moral actors in authoritarian or crisis-prone settings. The paper argues that while the Catholic Church's interventions raised awareness and shaped governance discourse, they also carried the risk of politicization, which the Church had to navigate carefully to safeguard its credibility. The study concludes that the Church's engagement after the Easter Sunday tragedy demonstrates the enduring relevance of faith-based moral leadership in times of trauma, democratic erosion, and public distrust.

1. Introduction

The Easter Sunday attacks of April 21, 2019, represent a watershed moment in Sri Lanka's contemporary history. A series of coordinated suicide bombings targeting churches and hotels shocked the nation and the world, killing more than 250 people and injuring hundreds. For the Catholic community, which forms a minority in Sri Lanka, the attacks were not only a direct assault on their places of worship but also a profound test of faith and resilience.

The tragedy unfolded against a backdrop of Sri Lanka's fragile post-war recovery, where ethnic and religious coexistence remained vulnerable and governance structures were plagued by corruption, inefficiency, and political instability. Investigations revealed critical lapses in intelligence-sharing and state preparedness, raising pressing questions about accountability and governance failures.

Amid this crisis, the Catholic Church emerged as a moral actor of unusual prominence. While providing immediate pastoral and humanitarian support to victims, the Church also played a prophetic role in calling for justice and demanding accountability from political leaders. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, in particular, became a leading public voice, consistently challenging state authorities to reveal the truth behind the attacks and ensure that justice was served.

This paper examines the Catholic Church's moral response to the Easter Sunday tragedy and the broader governance failures that followed. It seeks to answer:

How did the Catholic Church articulate its moral responsibility in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks?

In what ways did the Church's interventions challenge governance failures and demand accountability?

What limitations and risks did the Church encounter as a moral voice in a fragile democratic context?

By exploring these questions, this study highlights the enduring role of religious institutions in upholding ethical conscience, particularly during moments of national trauma and democratic fragility.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Religion and Moral Leadership in Times of Crisis

Scholars widely note that religious institutions often step into the moral vacuum created by state failures. Beyond providing spiritual consolation, they articulate ethical critiques of injustice (Casanova, 2019). In post-conflict contexts, churches have frequently served as guardians of truth and reconciliation for example, the Catholic Church in Rwanda after the genocide (Longman, 2010). Such interventions demonstrate both the potential and the risks of faith-based leadership.

2.2 Catholic Social Teaching and Governance

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) provides a theological foundation for engaging governance. Key principles human dignity, solidarity, and the common good obligate the Church to respond to injustice (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Scholars like Dorr (2016) argue that CST offers not only pastoral guidance but also a moral framework for critiquing systemic corruption and impunity. In Sri Lanka, these principles framed the Church's engagement after Easter Sunday.

2.3 Governance Failures in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's governance crisis is well-documented. Sultana (2020) highlights the erosion of democratic accountability in the Yahapalana and post-Yahapalana periods. Gunatilleke (2022) notes how intelligence-sharing failures and weak institutions enabled the Easter attacks. These works contextualize the Church's critique of state failures.

2.4 Gaps in Literature

While there is extensive scholarship on governance and democratic fragility, there is little on how religious institutions act as moral watchdogs within these crises. This study fills that gap by examining the Sri Lankan Catholic Church's dual role as pastoral caregiver and prophetic critic of governance

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the concept of prophetic witness. CST emphasizes that human dignity is inviolable and that institutions, including the state, bear a moral responsibility to safeguard the common good. When state structures fail, religious institutions often act as moral guardians, offering prophetic critiques that challenge injustice (Amaladoss, 2015).

The prophetic role of the Church entails speaking truth to power while maintaining political neutrality. This balance is essential to preserve the credibility of religious institutions in pluralistic and fragile democracies. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Catholic Church's post-Easter

interventions reflected this dual responsibility: to console and shepherd its community, while also confronting political authorities with moral demands for justice.

4. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the Catholic Church's moral response.

Document Analysis: Pastoral letters from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, public statements by Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, and official Church communications.

Media Review: Local and international media coverage from 2019–2024 documenting the Church's engagement.

Key Informant Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with clergy, theologians, victims' families, and civil society activists.

Analytical Approach: Discourse analysis and thematic coding were applied to identify recurring moral, theological, and governance-related themes.

The methodology ensures a triangulation of perspectives, balancing institutional narratives with lived experiences.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Immediate Pastoral and Humanitarian Response

In the immediate aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, the Catholic Church responded with both compassion and moral leadership. Priests, bishops, and Church leaders publicly prayed for all victims, regardless of religion, emphasizing peace, unity, and forgiveness. They repeatedly stressed that the attacks targeted innocent civilians and were not representative of any faith community.

The Church organized memorial services, counseling sessions, and humanitarian support for families of those killed or injured. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith urged calm:

“We implore our faithful not to take the law into their own hands. Let us not allow hatred to grow in our land again.” (Ranjith, April 2019)

These actions received widespread local and international media coverage, praised as examples of compassion and interfaith solidarity. By prioritizing pastoral care and unity, the Church sought to prevent further cycles of violence and sectarian tension.

5.2 Advocacy for Justice and Accountability

Within weeks, the Church assumed a prophetic stance, demanding truth and accountability from political authorities. Cardinal Ranjith stated:

“Those in positions of responsibility must reveal the truth. The lives of our people are not tools for political games.” (Pastoral Letter, August 2019)

Church leaders used public rallies, letters to international bodies, and media engagement to amplify their call for justice. This advocacy reframed the tragedy from a strictly religious event to a matter of national ethical and governance concern.

5.3 Exposure of Governance Failures

Despite moral appeals and prayers for unity, the government struggled to identify key perpetrators and provide clarity to victims' families. Public opinion widely criticized politicians and other leaders as negligent or irresponsible, drawing parallels to governance failures during Sri Lanka's civil war, where reconciliation often overshadowed accountability. Citizens expressed frustration that the state prioritized political optics rather than fully investigating the origins of the attacks.

The Church consistently highlighted intelligence lapses, bureaucratic negligence, and delays in justice:

“The warnings were clear. The negligence was criminal. Justice delayed is justice denied.” (CBCSL Pastoral Letter, 2020)

Through these interventions, the Church kept governance failures in public discourse, maintaining pressure on authorities to act ethically.

5.4 Mobilization of Civil Society

Through prayer vigils, marches, and media engagement, the Church mobilized not only Catholics but also Protestants, interfaith groups, and civil society organizations. Families of victims became visible participants in advocacy campaigns, often appearing alongside clergy. Partnerships with international organizations, including Amnesty International and the UN, reinforced the Church's moral authority and legitimacy in public discourse.

5.5 Integration of Christian Moral Philosophy and Governance

The Church's actions reflected broader Christian ethical teachings that inform social and governance ideals. Practices such as praying for all victims, emphasizing forgiveness, and providing humanitarian aid are grounded in principles of human dignity, the common good, and stewardship. By publicly advocating for truth and condemning negligence, Church leaders demonstrated the application of Christian moral philosophy to governance, showing that ethical leadership extends beyond political office and into faith-based civic responsibility.

This study's research, based on pastoral letters, public statements, and interviews with clergy and civil society activists, confirms that the Church acted both as a pastoral caregiver and prophetic witness, shaping discourse on justice, accountability, and ethical governance.

5.6 Risks of Politicization

Despite maintaining moral authority, critics occasionally accused the Church of partisanship. Cardinal Ranjith clarified:

“We are not politicians. We are shepherds. But when our sheep are slaughtered, we must speak the truth.” (Homily, April 2021)

Maintaining credibility requires careful framing of moral interventions in universal, non-partisan language, avoiding the perception of political bias while upholding ethical imperatives.

5.7 Post-2022 Crisis and Expanded Moral Critique

During Sri Lanka's 2022 political and economic collapse, the Church broadened its critique to corruption, authoritarianism, and systemic governance failures, linking them to the same culture of impunity that enabled the Easter attacks:

“The same culture of impunity that caused the Easter tragedy has now bankrupted our nation.”
(Ranjith, May 2022)

This reaffirmed the Church's role as a guardian of ethical conscience in wider governance debates, illustrating its influence in shaping public discourse and promoting principles of accountability and transparency amid democratic fragility.

5.8 Comparative Insight: Lessons from New Zealand's Moral Response

The contrast between global responses to religious violence offers important lessons.

In March 2019, when a Christian extremist attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 Muslim worshippers, the Christian community and the government stood firmly with the Muslim minority.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's compassion—visiting mosques, wearing a headscarf in solidarity, and declaring “They are us”—became a global symbol of moral leadership.

Church groups in New Zealand joined Muslims in prayer, organized vigils, and advocated publicly against hate.

Through these actions, reconciliation became visible and credible.

In contrast, after Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday attacks, inter-religious relations deteriorated.

Instead of fostering mutual compassion, government authorities-imposed restrictions that limited movement between churches and mosques, often citing security concerns.

In places such as Batticaloa, churches remained closed for extended periods, and some communities continued to view one another with suspicion.

Even among Christian and Muslim groups who wished to reach out to each other, official control and social fear constrained dialogue and healing.

This difference reveals that reconciliation is not achieved by controlling communities but by empowering empathy, public mourning, and shared moral responsibility.

As Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith later reminded the nation: “Reconciliation without compassion is merely administration; we must feel each other's pain.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Catholic Church has demonstrated that religious institutions can serve as powerful moral actors in moments of national crisis. By demanding justice for the Easter Sunday victims, it has challenged both government inaction and systemic failures of accountability. However, sustaining this role requires careful navigation of politicization risks.

Recommendations:

For the Catholic Church:

- Continue advocating for justice but frame interventions in universal moral language to avoid partisan labeling.
- Strengthen alliances with interfaith groups to broaden legitimacy and avoid isolation.
- Document testimonies of victims and families for long-term historical and legal accountability.

For the Sri Lankan State:

- Expedite judicial processes related to the Easter attacks with full transparency.
- Strengthen independent commissions to investigate governance failures.
- Engage religious leaders constructively, recognizing their moral influence and legitimacy.

For Civil Society and International Actors:

- Support victims' families with legal aid, psychosocial care, and advocacy platforms.
- Encourage international monitoring (e.g., UN, human rights NGOs) to ensure accountability.
- Promote dialogue that connects faith-based justice advocacy with democratic reform movements.

Final Reflection:

The Church's witness after the Easter Sunday attacks shows that in fragile democracies, moral authority can both comfort victims and confront unjust structures. Its prophetic role has been indispensable, yet its credibility depends on sustaining both justice-seeking and political impartiality.

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