



# The predicament of pastoral sovereignty

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand the conditions of possibility of “sanctuary” – the claiming of a “sacred” space of (humanitarian) exception – in the midst of civil war. Sanctuary codifies an exceptional space where sovereign and pastoral registers of power converge into a form of “pastoral sovereignty” that can temporarily “interrupt” the law of violence of sovereign power. In civil war this can enable civilians to be saved and protected from killings and suffering. However, this pastoral sovereignty is precarious as it depends on the belligerents’ good will and tacit authorization: this is what we call the predicament of pastoral sovereignty. Using the case study of Church sanctuary in Sri Lanka’s civil war, this paper explores how this predicament of pastoral sovereignty comes into effect in moments of acute crisis. Throughout Sri Lanka’s brutal civil war, Catholic priests provided “sanctuary” to Tamil civilians in the form of territorial sanctuary (Church compounds), bodily sanctuary (the priests’ bodies providing protection), and numerous other humanitarian activities. Our ethnographic material illustrates the force and fragility of the Church’s claims to pastoral sovereignty and its sanctuary practices and provides detailed accounts of numerous constellations. The paper thereby raises fundamental questions about the ontology of sovereignty and its operability in moments of humanitarian crisis.

“I am afraid of laboratories, because in the laboratory you take the problems and then you bring them home to tame them, to paint them artificially, out of their context. You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious” (Pope Francis)<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

It’s late 2007 in Sri Lanka’s northern district of Mannar. The Sri Lankan army has launched a massive military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who are retreating across the area. Desperate for cadres, the LTTE aggressively recruits Tamil teenage boys in the territory under their control. In the middle of the war zone lies a famous Catholic shrine, Madhu. Families gather here in fear, mothers have brought sons into the church building to guard them against forced recruitment. The priests who are the guardians of the shrine, stand in front of the doors of the large Church. Angry LTTE cadres try to force entry but the priests refuse to let them pass. Confrontation ensues and the LTTE commander threatens to kill the

priests, but they do not relent and eventually, the LTTE give up and withdraw.

This period was the final phase of Sri Lanka’s civil war. For more than two decades the LTTE had fought for an independent Tamil Eelam against the Sri Lankan state. In late 2007, the military battle had escalated in the north, where the LTTE had held a large territory under its control and had acted as “de facto sovereign” (Klem and Manuaguru 2017). The LTTE, known as “the Tigers” had a reputation for their ruthlessness towards opponents, especially when their sovereignty was challenged. Locally they had killed many so-called “traitors” (Thirananagama 2010) or community leaders who opposed them (Goodhand et al., 2000; Klem and Maunaguru 2017, 2018; Thirananagama 2011). Furthermore, the Tigers were already known for violence at religious sites; they had thrown bombs into mosques in Kattankudy in 1990, killing more than 110 worshipping Muslims (Hasbullah and Korf 2013). They had repeatedly targeted and killed Buddhist monks and jailed and beaten Hindu priests, who they considered to be traitors (Sidharthan 2020). The story at Madhu therefore raises the question: Why did the LTTE not simply shoot the priests and force entry to the Church?

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis. Antonio Sparado, S.J. 20th September 2013. A big heart open to God: the exclusive interview with Pope Francis. America Magazine. <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

It is the proposition of this paper that the Church embodied a form of “sovereignty” that the LTTE did not dare to challenge. The Church’s refutation to let the LTTE enter its Church territory puts forward a claim to an extra-territorial space within the sacred grounds of the Catholic Church, where it reserves the right to sole authority *contra* the LTTE’s sovereign claims. Exploring why, on this occasion, the LTTE did not shoot the priests, despite their resistance to the LTTE’s mission to recruit new fighters, therefore raises fundamental questions about the ontology of sovereign power (Agnew 2005; Barkan 2017; Jones 2009; Humphrey 2007; McConnell 2013; Sidaway 2003) and its operability in moments of humanitarian crisis (Asad 2015; Fassin 2007; Keen 2014). Sovereignty is here understood as a “tentative and emergent form of authority” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006) that is not simply given, but needs to be constantly claimed, performed and secured through technologies of power, in its extreme form, through brute violence, as was the case in Sri Lanka’s civil war: sovereignty was heavily contested and fragmented across time and space and violence an everyday occurrence (De Alwis and Hyndman, 2004; Klem and Maunaguru 2017; Korf et al., 2010).

The Church had repeatedly claimed that Madhu and other Catholic compounds were territories the army and rebels had no legitimacy to enter and declared the shrine and its vicinities as “sanctuary”, i.e. as a humanitarian space of guaranteed refuge outside of the realm of secular sovereign powers. The delineation of Church territory as “sanctuary” has a long history, both internationally and in Sri Lanka: for example, during the “feudal revolution” in Medieval Europe, when violent conflict between local princes and barons was endemic, Church sanctuary provided immunity to ordinary people in distress (Babo 2003, p. 101ff.; Kirby 1982), which was deemed “irrevocable by the monarch” (Bau 1985, p. 141). In modern times, several sanctuary movements have revamped this claim for humanitarian action, especially to provide protection for conscientious dissenters or Asylum seekers, who are given refuge on Church compounds (Marfleet 2011; Lippert 2004, 2006; Mitchell and MacFarlane, 2018). In Sri Lanka, Madhu shrine embodies a long tradition of sanctuary as a place of refuge, worship and relief assistance (Stirrat 1992, p. 32f.); and its sacredness is acknowledged not only by Christians, but Buddhists, Hindus, even Muslims alike (Hansen 2003, 3ff.).

This claim to sanctuary as an extra-territorial space is fundamentally a claim to sovereignty, albeit one that is not enforced by violence, but “honoured on moral, religious and other grounds” (Hansen, 2003, p. 3). Claiming sanctuary as a “sacred” space of exception, thereby underwrites the transgression of pastoral registers of power - “a power of care [of the shepherd who] looks after the flock” (Foucault 2007, p. 127) - into sovereign registers, and through this operation constitutes what we call “pastoral sovereignty”. Carl Schmitt famously declared that the sovereign is “he who decides on a state of exception” (Schmitt, 1922, 13). Pastoral sovereignty deploys a “language of a political theology” at odds with Schmitt’s, resonating instead with Johann-Baptist Metz’s definition of a *new* political theology (Metz 1977, p. 150; Metz, 1997): The state of exception that pastoral sovereignty declares in the extra-territorial space of the sanctuary *interrupts* the “law” of sovereign violence on humanitarian grounds.

And yet, pastoral sovereignty is irreducibly temporary and precarious: In moments of violent excess, the non-violent claim of sanctuary leaves pastoral sovereignty vulnerable to moments of indiscriminate killing. A shocking event at the Cathedral of Batticaloa town in eastern Sri Lanka illustrates this precariousness: In 2005, Joseph Pararajasingham, a veteran Tamil MP from Batticaloa, was killed inside the Cathedral during Christmas mass by two gunmen who shot him when he was returning to his pew after receiving the communion from Bishop Kingsley Swampillai (Spencer et al., 2015, 116). The killing took place when the LTTE had split up in eastern Sri Lanka. The theatrical act of killing was widely understood to be a message from an anti-LTTE Tamil militant group to warn LTTE supporters that no space would be safe for them, *not even the sacred space of the Cathedral*, not even in its most “sacred” moment of the holy communion.

The predicament of pastoral sovereignty therefore raises the following question: what makes sanctuary claims and practice credible and robust in certain circumstances and when do those claims fail or disintegrate? To interrogate this question, this paper scrutinizes different sites and practices through which the “Tamil” Church, its priests, nuns and a prominent bishop, provided sanctuary to civilians suffering in the war and performed pastoral sovereignty: 1) the inviolability of sanctuary territories of Church compounds; 2) the sovereign bodies of their priests and nuns who were given free passage across military frontlines; and finally, 3) the charismatic authority of the bishop of Mannar diocese.

The field work on which these insights build have been compiled from several studies conducted by the two authors in Sri Lanka’s former war zones. Johnson conducted 154 interviews, including many over repeated field work periods in Sri Lanka (April 2010, November–December 2010, October 2011, April 2013 (London), January–February 2014), including with priests, the Bishop of Mannar, local aid workers, civil society representatives and other key informants. Korf interviewed selected priests from Mannar at a later stage (in 2017) and other Catholic lay people and clergy on numerous occasions. In addition, Korf interviewed priests, aid workers and civil society representatives in Batticaloa and drew on interviews and material collected as part of a collaborative ethnography of war and peace in eastern Sri Lanka conducted from 2007 to 2008 (Goodhand et al., 2009, Spencer et al., 2015). A third source for our case comes from interviews with Catholic nuns in Mannar and Vavuniya, conducted by master’s student Chiara Borner in October to December 2016 (Borner 2017). Our material thereby combines a dense ethnography of Madhu shrine and the work of priests in the diocese of Mannar, as well as more scattered information about priestly practices in other places of the former warzones of Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Catholicism and Sri Lanka’s separatist conflict

The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka represents a religious minority within Sinhalese and Tamil populations, thus finds itself in the middle of multiple struggles over identification, purification and boundary work (Nissan 2018; Stirrat 1992). In the broader identity politics of the island, “ethnicity” and “religion” as identity markers sometimes overlap, sometimes diverge: Tamils can be Christian or Hindu, and Christians can be Sinhalese or Tamil. Moreover, ethno-nationalism holds an uneasy relationship with “religion”: Sinhalese nationalists explicitly conflate a “Sinhala-Buddhist” identity to articulate their claims (Obeyesekere 1979; Rambukwella 2018; Seneviratne 1999; Tambiah 1992; Venugopal 2018), while Tamil separatist and ethno-nationalist discourse tends to steer clear of “religion” altogether (Thangarajah, 2000). While some Tamil Tigers were Catholic, most were Hindus, and the movement defined itself as secular. In the 1990’s an LTTE cadre explained to Patricia Lawrence that “religion is not part of the ‘consciousness of the struggle’” (Lawrence, 1997, 40). And yet, importantly there were Catholics in the military line of command of both the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE.

With increasing ethnic polarization during and after the war, the

<sup>2</sup> As most priests were accustomed to speak out as public intellectuals, most of them were open and frank about their work, the LTTE, the Sri Lankan army and human rights violations. Some spoke of internal struggles within the Church. *As much of this material is politically sensitive, we apply caution in quoting directly from this material for ethical reasons.* We have anonymized all sources, where appropriate. All interviews were conducted in English. We have coded all interviews as follows: Interviewer\_category of interviewed person\_location (region) of interview\_date of interview. If more than one person of the same category were interviewed on the same day, these are given numbers, e.g. B\_Priest 2\_Batticaloa\_020717 = Interview conducted by B of a priest (the second on that day) in Batticaloa on 2 July 2017. Interviewers: B = Benedikt Korf; D = Deborah Johnson.

Church has become bitterly divided along ethnic lines, making observers speak of a “Sinhala” and a “Tamil” Church in Sri Lanka. In the 1990’s Stirrat reported that the “Sinhala” Church hierarchy had disengaged from politics (Stirrat 1992, p. 45). The same could not be said about the “Tamil” Church hierarchy (Brown 2015, p. 598). For example, during the war and in the years following the military defeat of the LTTE, Mannar’s Tamil Bishop Rayappu Joseph, became one of the few and most vocal advocates for Tamil rights. Although the Tamil clergy and Bishop Joseph were popular and respected among the (Catholic, Christian and Hindu) Tamil population, they were criticised by Sinhalese nationalists, who considered them as “white tigers”, alluding to the white garment of the priests to suggest that they were LTTE supporters (Johnson 2016, p. 315ff.). On the other hand, Sinhalese Church leaders had worked to maintain good relations with the “Sinhalese camp” and the government. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo was publicly loyal to then President Mahinda Rajapakse, a relationship facilitated by Rajapakse’s Catholic wife. Tamil priests therefore often expressed frustration about a lack of support from the Sinhalese Church hierarchy for their humanitarian and human rights work.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout Sri Lanka’s war zones, Tamil priests and nuns travelled to remote, insecure places, crossed military frontlines, provided safe grounds on Church compounds to refugees, brought relief items to civilians trapped in LTTE controlled areas or lost between the frontlines and recorded human rights abuses of both conflict parties (Brown 2015; Goodhand et al., 2009; Johnson 2012, 2016; Spencer et al. 2015). Priests who chose to engage in this kind of humanitarian work took great personal risks. Numerous Tamil priests publicly denounced human rights abuses by the Sri Lankan military forces against Tamil civilians, most notably Mannar’s Bishop Rayappu Joseph. A small group of Tamil priests also dared to speak out courageously against LTTE atrocities, for example child recruitment (Brown 2015). Many of those who stood up were Jesuits, and a significant number of them declared that their spiritual inspiration came from Vatican II and Liberation Theology (Spencer et al., 2015, 8, 35, 127f.).<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Questions of sovereignty, sanctuary and political theology

The protection afforded by Catholic “sanctuary” in Sri Lanka’s war zone raises fundamental questions about the ontology of sovereignty, and political theology. In this respect, Foucault famously distinguished the logics of two incompatible laws of power: sovereign and pastoral power. Sovereign power is a menacing power able to kill or to refrain from killing (Foucault, 1978, p. 135f). Foucault claims the sovereign’s ultimate reference point is the sword (Ojakangas 2005, p. 6); when challengers transgress the sovereign’s claim they are met with the absolute menace of death – or in war: with military force or spectacular violence, e.g. against internal enemies and traitors (Agamben 1998; Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Thiranagama 2010). Pastoral power is the opposite of violence (Ojakangas 2005, p. 20). Foucault describes it as “a power of care. It looks after the flock ... The shepherd is someone who keeps watch” (Foucault 2007, p. 127). The shepherd or pastor must be prepared to sacrifice himself in order to save his sheep (Foucault 2007,

p. 170; Golder 2007).

Pastoral sovereignty combines these two registers of power in its claim to sanctuary (Lippert 2004): Sanctuary codifies “an exceptional space and a set of practices” (Lippert 2006, p. 74) in which and through which the shepherd’s (potential) intervening sacrifice on behalf of the flock signals a “higher” (sacred) law “consistent with the exercise of a sovereign power that flows from Church and community” (Lippert 2006, p. 73f.). The potential sacrifice of the shepherd on behalf of the flock provides the grounds for a *different kind* of sovereign power that is exercised *to protect* from killing and suffering. The shepherd’s potential sacrifice thereby produces a “moral untouchability” (Fassin 2013), which transforms a seeming weakness (the lack of means of violence) into a formidable power (Eagleton 2018).

When the priests at Madhu shrine barricaded the doors to protect civilians from LTTE recruitment their sanctuary claims were underwritten by a (potential) intervening sacrifice (being shot by LTTE cadres). Through this potentially sacrificial act on behalf of the community, the priests effectively claimed a space of exception – an alternative sovereign space based on the moral force of their pastoral power. In this moment, religion is mobilized as an “interruption” (Metz 1977, p. 150) of *secular* sovereignty in the name of love, solidarity and sacrifice. If the sovereign is “he who decides on a state of exception” (Schmitt, 1922/1985, p. 5), the Church’s delineation of “sanctuary” as a space of exception, where it claims “sole” authority, has sovereign connotations with performative effects: The LTTE did not dare to transgress it.

This claim to *pastoral* sovereignty over a specific territory outside of (territorially) and beyond (institutionally) the sovereign claims of the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE operated in a “highly confused political landscape of competing sovereign claims” (Klem and Manuaguru 2017, 640), characterized by an excess of sovereign violence that “is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, p. 297). A multitude of (state and non-state) “petty sovereigns” operated in this shadowy, fragmented field of sovereignty. Petty sovereigns, writes Judith Butler, reign “by aims and tactics of power they do not inaugurate or fully control. And yet such figures are delegated with the power to render unilateral decisions, accountable to no law and without any legitimate authority” (Butler 2004, p. 56). These petty sovereigns invent their own rule, enforced through violence and coercion without a sanctioned state authority calling them to order.

In Sri Lanka’s war zone, sovereignty was heavily contested, fractured and fragmented across time and space (Hyndman and De Alwis, 2004; Bohle 2007; Klem and Manuaguru 2017, 2018; Korf et al., 2010; McGilvray, 2008; Sarvananthan, 2007; Stokke 2006; Walker 2013). The major belligerents, and many smaller militant groups, claimed totalizing sovereignty (even if in a small territory), instilling in them the urge to unleash violence to achieve their aspiration (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005, 22–32; Manuaguru 2020). The LTTE in particular “arrogated itself the right to govern all Tamil life and death ... [and] the lives and deaths of traitors and martyrs were sacrificeable without retribution” (Thiranagama 2011, pp. 215, 217). The Sri Lankan military and secret services operated in a state of emergency that gave them a significant space of discretionary powers to kill or punish with impunity. In the shadow of these major combatant parties, numerous “petty” sovereigns exercised “de facto” sovereign power, including Tamil militants operating with the tacit complicity of the military or “rogue” elements within the rank and files of army, LTTE or other Tamil militant groups, producing a check-board of terror, violence and fear (Gaasbeek 2010; Klem; Manuaguru, 2018; Korf 2013; Spencer et al., 2015; Walker 2013).

In this landscape of competing sovereignties, international humanitarian organisations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) emerged as “new circles of power”, which offered “new meanings to the concept of sovereignty” (Wickremasinghe 2001, p. 159). Through a politics of life (Fassin 2007), that offers people at risk the assistance that allows them to survive, humanitarian organisations

<sup>3</sup> Sinhalese clergy we interviewed have argued that Tamil clergy often fail to recognize the perilous position they inhabit, living amidst a Buddhist majority, and sitting alongside political power in Colombo. In such a position, they argue, they have worked hard to maintain political and social relations, not only to protect Sinhalese Catholics from attacks by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists but to keep open the diplomatic channels that have enabled the organization and transfer of vast aid resources to pass to Tamil clergy for distribution. Though they have not engaged in political support of the Tamil Church, or directly addressed the conflict they have in other ways ensured the survival of the Church in a perilous period (e.g. D.priest1\_Mannar\_071210, D.priest2\_Mannar\_071210, D.priest\_Colombo\_250114).

<sup>4</sup> B.priest2\_280717.

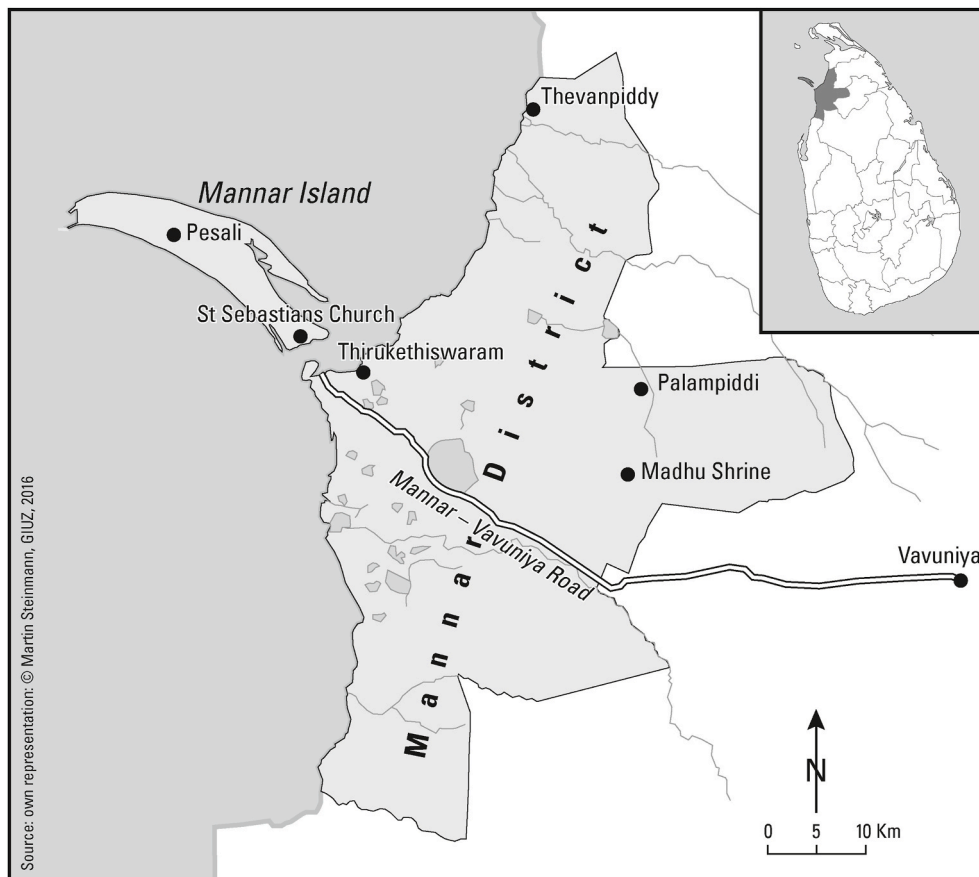


Figure 1. Map of Mannar District (Sri Lanka)

establish competing forms of sovereignty (Pandolfi 2003). These become effective in the spatial form of extra-territorial aid corridors and camps, set apart as nonbelligerent zones within the combat zone. The strength of their claims to extra-territorial sovereignty is grounded in the transnational moral appeal of “crisis” and “suffering” codified in humanitarian law that backs up their legitimacy and operational capacities as international agencies, operating inside and outside the *secular* logic of sovereignty.

The Church’s claim to *pastoral* sovereignty appeals to humanitarianism in its claim to *protect bodies* from violence, but it operates in the register of political *theology*: It confronts and disrupts petty sovereigns’ claim to de facto sovereign power *temporarily*, based on the “sacred” exception of its extra-territorial claim.<sup>5</sup> This claim to *pastoral sovereignty* is predicated on the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka being both a local and a transnational organization. During the colonial era, (missionary) priests enjoyed respect and power that the colonial administrators “frequently envied” (Stirrat 1992, p. 17). Although the Church lost most of its privilege and power it had held under colonial administration in the decades after independence, some have survived the colonial era and the indigenization of the priesthood, e.g. tax exemptions (although these are granted for other religions as well). Brown (2015, 598f.) further

indicates that the “Tamil” Church – and the remaining foreign missionaries in eastern Sri Lanka (e.g. American Jesuits in Batticaloa) – continued to enjoy respect among Tamils as advocates of Tamil minority rights. Pastoral *sovereignty* is predicated on this legacy of the Church’s extra-territorial power beyond the state.

“Territory is made ... through bodies” write Smith et al. (2016, 259; see also: Hyndman and De Alwis, 2004; Fluri 2011). The pastoral sovereign acts as shepherd to protect the flock from de facto sovereigns’ imposition of violence over their bodies. The bodies of priests and nuns subverted sovereign practices of territorial control by claiming sanctuary, by moving their own bodies across borders and military frontlines. By moving with vulnerable people, bodies provide sanctuary protection (Koopman 2011). In Sri Lanka’s war zone, the pastoral bodies of priests were highly visible and effective in their white garment, their habits, which could be seen from afar and placed priests apart even in large crowds of people: “Priests would go in front and be visible, civilians would follow behind feeling protected”.<sup>6</sup> This untouchability of a certain kind of body mirrors activist strategies of international companions in Colombia, whose “alter-geopolitics” of “putting bodies together” Sara Koopman (2011) has described as an activist tactic “to build alternative non-violent securities”.

These protective bodies become an important *site* of sovereign power that displays an “aura” and “charisma” that warrants respect. In medieval political theology, according to Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic study (Kantorowicz, 1957), the King was understood to have two bodies, a natural and a political one. Similarly, the priest (or bishop) has two bodies of a pastoral sovereign: his natural body as vulnerable human being and the (sacred) body of the pastoral sovereign that the priest is

<sup>5</sup> “Below the radar” of sovereign powers, numerous religious healing rituals and practices have been performed in Churches and Temples (Hatsumi 2017; Lawrence, 1996; Maunaguru 2020; Walker 2013), which complement the politically more exposed humanitarian work of the Church. The strength of pastoral power of the Church emerges from this combination of intimate religious rituals, the practice of liturgy and humanitarianism, which makes its performances of pastoral sovereignty credible and forceful: The priest fulfils his duty (as shepherd), and through action, the priest becomes what he is (Agamben 2013, p. 87), a pastoral sovereign.

<sup>6</sup> D\_LayHindu\_Mannar\_26012014.



willing to sacrifice on behalf of the flock. Aura compounds charisma in a king's crown or a priest's robe (Jaeger 2011, p. 24). For Walter Benjamin, "aura" produces unapproachability (*Unnahbarkeit*) as "a unique apparition of a distance" (Benjamin, 1968/2007, 243). Such aura is a ghostly quality of things, places or persons that is sensed, not seen (Jaeger 2011, p. 21f.; Hansen 2008), whereas "charisma" as "a certain quality of an individual" produces – according to Max Weber's famous definition – a particular form of authority. It is this aura of the "untouchable" priestly body that makes sanctuary authoritative as a performance of pastoral sovereignty.

Not all religions, sacred sites and bodes displayed this "untouchability". Indeed, their sacredness was often ignored by the belligerents in Sri Lanka's war, sometimes even explicitly targeted. For example, the famous Thirukeetheswaram Hindu temple close to Madhu Church in Mannar district was occupied by the army as a "high security zone", despite calls for it to also be respected as a "sacred space." In 1990, the LTTE attacked two mosques in Kattankudy, killing approx. 140 worshippers (Hasbullah and Korf 2013). In 1995, the Sri Lankan Air Force dropped a bomb on St Peter's Church in Navali, Jaffna, killing 65 people. In January 1998, LTTE suicide bombers attacked the Temple of Tooth at Kandy, killing thirteen persons. In August 2007, government bombs fell on St Philipp Neri's Church at Allaipiddy in Jaffna, killing 15 people who had sought shelter in the Church. Hindu priests are reported to have been imprisoned and beaten up by the LTTE (Sidharthan 2020). Even more so, the question arises, why Catholic sites and bodies were untouchable in certain constellations.

#### 4. Sanctuary as territory

Church compounds were often territories of sanctuary: Numerous informants, both from inside and outside the Church gave us examples of civilians fleeing to Church compounds for protection during times of crisis and military escalation.<sup>7</sup> Madhu shrine in Mannar district was not the only, but probably the most prominent of these Church sanctuaries in Sri Lanka's war. Madhu sanctuary houses a statue of the Virgin Mary and is a sacred Catholic site (Stirrat 1992, pp. 26, 32). Catholics claim it first provided their community sanctuary in 1544 when they fled from a massacring Hindu king (Hansen 2003; Hyndman 2003; Perrera 1998). The 400-acre site lies 12 miles off the main road between Mannar and Vavuniya, which was heavily militarized and often functioned as a military frontline. For most of the conflict Madhu was in LTTE territory ("uncleared" areas, or "the Vanni"), but when fighting escalated it became frontline territory.

On April 1, 2008, Bishop Joseph of Mannar issued a public statement to the Sri Lankan media, in which he defended Madhu Shrine as,

"a place of religious worship and a place of refuge for displaced people ... kept strictly out of bounds of any type of military or political activity ... a zone of peace *completely and solely under the administration of the Church*" (our emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

In this statement, the bishop makes a claim to pastoral sovereignty, because he precludes the *sovereign* right of other authorities to intervene by appealing to *pastoral* logics of worship and refuge. Premised on the sacredness of the place, the bishop declares Madhu shrine as a humanitarian sanctuary.

The Church had begun to administer Madhu shrine as a humanitarian shelter early in the conflict and had established consensus among warring factions that it was to be a safe space and demilitarized zone

(Hyndman 2003, p. 179). In November 1990, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) partnered with the Church to establish an Open Relief Center (ORC) at Madhu, then within LTTE territory, to offer displaced people essential relief such as food, water and sanitation. Together, the Church and major international humanitarian aid organisations installed a huge refugee camp in the vicinities of the shrine (Hyndman 2003). Until April 2008, when the Sri Lankan army finally conquered the area from the LTTE, the shrine hosted tens of thousands of IDPs for months at a time.

Open Relief Centres (ORC) were declared as politically neutral "zones of peace", banning weapons and uniforms. These ORCs were established with the agreement of the LTTE and the government (Wickremasinghe 2001, p. 156). Early on after its establishment at Madhu, the Church and UNHCR secured LTTE agreement not to recruit or raise tax on the site (Hansen 2003, p. 10; Hyndman 2003). The close collaboration of UNHCR and the clergy made Madhu sanctuary a relatively safe space from interference by combatants compared to other ORC camps. On numerous occasions, Madhu clergy, sometimes in collaboration with UNHCR officers, intervened with the LTTE to convince them not to enter the sanctuary armed or in uniform and to stop child recruitment on the premises. Hansen (2003, 11) reports that this intervention with the LTTE could be delicate. The LTTE resented the neutral status of the sanctuary and saw those taking shelter in the compound as escaping their duty to join the liberation struggle. And yet, the LTTE "almost always" complied with these requests, as they had "too much to lose" by alienating or openly opposing the clergy, and especially the Bishop of Mannar (Hansen 2003, p. 11) who were held in extremely high regard among Catholic (and non-Catholic) Tamils.

However, when military battles pressured combatants they could become more aggressive. In such crisis moments, the attempt to place this site outside of the space of military confrontation and to claim the sanctuary as territory under the pastoral sovereignty of the Church would falter or become fragile. Two such crisis moments happened in November 1999 and in March 2008, and these illustrate the predicament of pastoral sovereignty.

A fierce round of fighting in March 1999 saw a major government offensive against the LTTE target areas around Madhu. The military campaign coincided with national elections and the incumbent President Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike promised to "liberate" Madhu. Although fighting initially detoured around the shrine, the army eventually violated the "no guns, no uniforms" policy and soldiers entered sanctuary grounds. 30,000 refugees who were sheltering at the ORC were relocated to government camps and the shelters disassembled.

It was a few months until the LTTE was ready to counter-attack, but in November they succeeded in driving the Sri Lankan army back from most of the territory the latter had taken. Refugees sheltering at Palampaddy found themselves again at a military frontline, and on the 18th November the UNHCR secured agreement from the LTTE to move 3500 people back to Madhu, seen as a safer location. Just six days later six explosive rounds landed on and around Madhu Church and heavy fighting broke out in the area killing 38 civilians and wounding many more, including children (Hansen 2003).

The situation was chaotic and bodies lay around the shrine but local delegations struggled to gain access to the area. Interviewees described to us that Bishop Joseph was granted access by both the LTTE and Sri Lankan army to cross military frontlines to reclaim the bodies. He entered Madhu site at 2am on the 21st November and dead bodies were hastily wrapped in UNHCR sleeping mats and brought back to Mannar town, which was under curfew. The Bishop was reported to have spoken on the phone with President Chandrika. Furious at the violation of the declared "neutral zone" he threatened to personally drive the dead bodies to Colombo to protest publicly against the violation of Madhu's sacredness by the army. Shortly after the army did withdraw from the sanctuary, and it was re-established as a humanitarian space with the UNHCR able to cross front lines to deliver food and shelter to the IDPs

<sup>7</sup> e.g. D\_LayHindu\_Mannar\_07122010, D\_priest1\_Mannar\_09122010, D\_priest2\_Mannar\_09122010, D\_priest1\_Mannar\_31012014, D\_nun1\_Mannar\_31012014.

<sup>8</sup> J. Most Rev. Dr. Rayappu, Bishop of Mannar, *Appeal to Protect the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu from all Military Presence and Operations*. Press Release. 01.04.2008.

who took refuge at Madhu.<sup>9</sup>

In late 2007, amidst a large-scale offensive by the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE became more and more brutal in recruiting cadres among young, unmarried men and youth. Child recruitment had been a constant issue between Clergy and LTTE. The Bishop of Mannar remembered an earlier occasion where an LTTE commander blustered at him, but he felt secure that the LTTE hierarchy would not consent with the latter's behavior (Hansen 2003, p. 11). But during major battles, it became more difficult for priests to ensure compliance with the rules of the sanctuary. In late 2007, LTTE cadres increasingly entered the camps around Madhu to forcibly recruit young men to fight. There was frequent panic in the camp when LTTE cadres sought to round up teenagers to take them to fight with them. One of the senior priests remembered that at one such occasion, youth and parents assembled inside Madhu Church with priests standing at each door to prevent the LTTE from entering the Church, so that from any direction LTTE cadres would have to force their way past a priest to enter the group. The confrontations were heated. The LTTE commanders threatened to kill every priest unless they were let through, but the clergy did not relent, and eventually the LTTE retreated.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, the protection that the priests could afford was precarious: while the LTTE did not dare to confront the priests on the spot and left the scene, their cadres would return later to the compound and catch some youth to join them after they had returned home, or after they had fled into the jungle, as the fighting neared Madhu. The priests had been able to counter the LTTE in the direct confrontation, but lacked the capacity to provide protection beyond the Church building itself. Furthermore, while the LTTE cadres did not touch the priests in the direct face-to-face confrontation, they tried to kill some priests remotely and clandestinely: one of the priests working at Madhu shrine was killed by a Claymore anti-personnel mine soon afterwards.<sup>11</sup>

In the final phase of the war in the area in April 2008, the clergy were unable to uphold the sanctuary at Madhu shrine, because the two combatant parties tried to exploit the sacred shrine for their war propaganda. By April 2008, all refugees had fled Madhu and finally, all the remaining priests vacated the site as well because the LTTE were trying to provoke the Sri Lankan army to shell Madhu sanctuary. On April 3, the remaining 13 priests fled from Madhu in a brief combat lull and took with them all church records and the sacred statues to Thevanpiddy Church, then in territory under LTTE control. Sinhala language media channels subsequently accused the Church of complicity with the Tigers,<sup>12</sup> but a priest who was among those who had to flee from Madhu explained that there had been no possibility to bring it elsewhere: they brought the statue to Thevanpiddy to avoid having to cross the military front lines in this heavily contested period.<sup>13</sup> In August 2008, the priests returned the statue to Madhu when the Sri Lankan army had secured full control of the area.

On August 15, 2009, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith from Colombo, a close ally of President Rajapakse, celebrated the annual Madhu feast, attracting hundreds of thousands of worshippers, many of whom were Sinhalese who were celebrating Madhu's "liberation"<sup>14</sup> by the military, causing dissent within the Church<sup>15</sup>; Bishop Joseph did not attend these celebrations, presumably due to ill-health, and a number of priests stayed away from the celebrations in solidarity with the displaced

people, priests and nuns in the camps. Ruki Fernando, a Sinhalese Catholic activist, who had often travelled to Madhu for his human rights work, expressed these feelings:

How can we celebrate the Madhu feast? When so many of our people have been killed, injured, maimed, and forced to live in inhumane conditions, held captive against their will without any charges, and not allowed to go back to their families, villages, including those around Madhu shrine? When 6 Tamil Catholic priests continue to be detained, without any charges, perhaps for the crime of opting to stay back and serve their flock at the height of the war, in extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances?" (R. Fernando 2009)

These celebrations of the "liberation" of Madhu illustrate the predicament of pastoral sovereignty: neither had the clergy been able to prevent the incursion of violence into Madhu's premises, nor its political instrumentalization by Sinhala nationalists celebrating the military victory. The Church's claim to sanctuary had been effective as long as the belligerents were held in check by the dynamics of the war: In those periods, de facto sovereigns were reluctant to challenge the Church's claim to sanctuary, and if they did, the Church could mobilize its reputational resources to force a re-establishment of sanctuary. However, when the law of indiscriminate violence of military combat gained the upper hand, when neither LTTE nor the government cared to respect international opinion (as was the case in the final battle over the Vanni and in the aftermath of the government's victory), the Church's power to protect its sanctuary faltered.

## 5. Sanctuary as embodied practice

The Church was active in numerous sites across the war zone, as were numerous humanitarian aid organisations, which all operated in challenging circumstances (Bastian 1997; Korf 2006; Orjuela 2008; Walton 2008; Wickremasinghe 2001). However, we were told numerous times: None developed the visibility and powers that Catholic clergy were recognized for, not even international ones: "where the ICRC could not go, priests were able to go".<sup>16</sup> This statement cannot be overestimated: if there was any humanitarian organization that could go (almost) anywhere in the Sri Lankan war zone, it would be the "ICRC" – the International Committee of the Red Cross. This had to do with its mandate and its robust relations to both conflict parties, as well as its international reputation. What gave priests (and to some extent nuns) the powers "to go where even the ICRC could not go"?

Indeed, priests were crossing frontlines, entering camps, meeting high military and LTTE officials in particularly precarious moments of the conflict. During most of the war years, the landscape of northern and eastern Sri Lanka was scattered with checkpoints, formal borders and informal grey zones that made travelling across those lines difficult in everyday life (Gaasbeek 2010; Goodhand et al., 2009, 2000; Hyndman and de Alwis, 2004; Jeganathan 2004; Korf 2013; Korf et al., 2010; Walker 2013). During intense fighting, crossing the borders or frontlines became an impossibility for most civilians. Checkpoints and frontlines also inhibited the work of many aid agencies, then unable to deliver relief items to needy populations trapped between the lines. Priests, however, were often able to gain privileged access to military and LTTE commanders (Spencer et al., 2015, 123), which enabled them to negotiate access to disputed areas or to receive a pass to cross checkpoints.

The bodies of clergy embodied a kind of aura that provided sanctuary: being accompanied or being in the close company of a priest or a nun could provide some protection from being harassed by combatants. Lay civilians often sought this company as an explicit tactic to protect themselves. This form of sanctuary as embodied practice was described to us in an interview with a well-known (lay Sinhala) Catholic human

<sup>9</sup> D\_layHindu\_Mannar\_26012014, D\_NGO\_Mannar\_27012014, D\_priest3\_Mannar\_29012014.

<sup>10</sup> B\_Priest1\_Mannar\_270717, D\_Priest1\_Mannar\_270114.

<sup>11</sup> B\_priest1\_Mannar\_270717.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/news/story/2008/04/080421\\_madhu\\_bishop.shtml](https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/news/story/2008/04/080421_madhu_bishop.shtml).

<sup>13</sup> D\_priest2\_Mannar\_290114.

<sup>14</sup> D\_NGO\_Colombo\_24012014, D\_priest3\_Mannar\_29012014.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/news/story/2009/08/090817\\_madhu\\_idps.shtml](https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/news/story/2009/08/090817_madhu_idps.shtml).

<sup>16</sup> D\_priest2\_Mannar\_290114.

rights activist. When travelling to the northern regions, he would seek the company of Catholic sisters, officially as interpreters, but effectively as “body guards”,<sup>17</sup> helping him to cross checkpoints and travel safely through a landscape full of combatants and police surveillance from both combatant parties. Similarly, Ben Bavinck, a protestant missionary, writes in his diaries that when detained at a checkpoint, he recalls the “assumption” that they would be safe, because of the clerical robes of the Catholic priest amongst them.<sup>18</sup>

Priests and nuns worked with and through Sri Lanka’s CARITAS organization EHED or SEDEC. They often became the hands and voices of EHED or SEDEC as they worked to distribute aid and travelled to dangerous areas. In Batticaloa, during the 1990s, EHED was permitted to bring items into LTTE-held areas, which were banned for other aid agencies, such as concrete (Spencer et al., 2015, 124). During intense battles towards the end of the war on the eastern front in Batticaloa in late 2006 and early 2007, priests continued to travel across the frontlines to bring relief items and check the situation of civilians trapped in the combat zone, when the army forced the LTTE to retreat and thousands of Tamil civilians fled from the former LTTE-held area.<sup>19</sup> During the final battle in the Vanni, when all foreign aid agencies and local NGOs were expelled, the Catholic aid agency Caritas (SEDEC) was granted access to IDP camps to provide relief items, and some clergy stayed in those spaces with civilians<sup>20</sup> “Until the final days of the fighting, there were seven priests remaining with the people, living in IDP centres. Through CARITAS they were able to organize relief and also spiritual events inside the camps”.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of priests and nuns among civilians suffering in the war and the pastoral duties that they continued to carry out even in dangerous situations was often reported and lauded with respect: “They stayed with the suffering until the last moment, unless they were removed by force. If they were released from camps they worked to get others out”.<sup>22</sup> In the final days of the war in the Vanni, seven priests and several nuns were trapped with approximately 300,000 civilians on Nandikadal Lagoon’s beaches (Harrison 2012). Clergy could have secured a place on the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) evacuations, but most chose to stay. Equipped with satellite phones, some priests could communicate with the Church hierarchy about the humanitarian situation (Weiss 2011, p. 134). They were fulfilling pastoral duties, holding mass, praying with civilians and sharing in the suffering of the civilians (Harrison 2012).

On numerous occasions, priests negotiated access to or release from camps. For example, during the final months of battle in the Vanni, a priest was displaced alongside with a group of orphans under his care together with a nun. They were all detained in a camp, but he could negotiate his release from the camp. From outside the camp, he worked through Church networks to receive permission for the orphans and the nun to be released from the camp as well.<sup>23</sup> In another circumstance, a local priest intervened on behalf of his congregation whose fishing livelihoods were threatened, when the army took control of the beaches. After long negotiations with the local military commander and his Colombo based superiors, the fishermen were again allowed access to the beach to follow their fishing practice.<sup>24</sup> But there were also limits to

these negotiations. One priest confided to us<sup>25</sup> that when he was stationed in a remote parish, he noticed illicit trade and smuggling activities that negatively affected his parish flock. However, when he tried to intervene he received death threats and the bishop had to transfer him back into a post in Mannar town to protect his life.

Their role as shepherds of the Tamil flock brought priests into an uneasy relation with the LTTE and the latter’s claim to speak and fight for the Tamil community. Most Tamil clergy were sympathetic to the struggle of Tamils for more recognition.<sup>26</sup> The Church as institution never publicly challenged LTTE violence, albeit individual priests vehemently opposed the LTTE. The American missionary Father Harry Miller in Batticaloa, for example, repeatedly denounced the LTTE for recruiting children (Brown 2015, p. 598). Bishop Joseph publicly distanced himself from the LTTE: “I never accepted their killings and atrocities. I have condemned their killing and received death threats” (Joseph 2012). But some priests crossed the lines and joined the movement, most visible in the image of one priest close to LTTE leader Prabakaran who is reported to have been seen alongside him in the final hours of the war (Harrison, 2013, 150). The credibility of priests to be respected as pastoral sovereigns required, however, that they were not seen to liaise too closely with the LTTE (see also: Goodhand et al., 2009).

The “sacred” aura of clergy’s pastoral bodies was based on the close relation between priests and their flock. As one priest formulated it: “The resilience of the Church is related to the endurance of a family: Families stay together and care for one another. The Church in Madhu endures the difficulties it faces, because leaders are with the people and give themselves to the community”.<sup>27</sup> The priests’ firm embeddedness in the community gave credibility to the pastoral sovereignty that the priests carried with their bodies. As pastoral sovereigns, the priests have “two bodies” (Kantorowicz): the *political* bodies as pastoral sovereigns that protect them and their flock, and at the same time the natural body as individual human that made them vulnerable. Indeed, some priests have been killed: For example, Fr. Jim Brown disappeared on August 20, 2006, after going into the navy controlled Allaipiddy area in Jaffna, when trying to negotiate with the navy to take injured people out of the fighting zone. Fr. Francis Joseph, disappeared in Mullaitivu on May 18, 2009, when trying to broker a surrender of LTTE cadres to the army on the last day of war.<sup>28</sup>

## 6. Pastoral sovereign: the ambiguity of charisma

The charismatic Bishop Joseph of Mannar and his senior clergy embodied the aura of pastoral sovereignty very prominently, giving force and credibility to the claim to sole authority at Madhu sanctuary. Many interviewees referred to Bishop Joseph as the “voice of the people”, and Joseph consistently employed emotive language such as “my people.” This aura as shepherd made Bishop Joseph “untouchable”. As one informant put it: “Because he stood with the people and had their support, no one was able to touch him”.<sup>29</sup> Four elements combined to make him an authoritative figure.

First, his leadership was exercised through a hierarchical and disciplined organization, with visual markers such as a fortress like Bishop’s house in Mannar and impressive Cathedrals and Churches. Loyalty to the

<sup>17</sup> B\_Activist\_100516.

<sup>18</sup> Bavinck (2011), p. 173: Diary entry April 1991.

<sup>19</sup> B\_priest1\_020707; B\_Priest2\_020707.

<sup>20</sup> D\_priest2\_Mannar\_05122010, D\_Bishop\_Mannar\_09122010, D\_priest1\_Colombo\_25012014, D\_priest2\_Mannar\_27012014, D\_priest1\_Mannar\_28012014, D\_nun1\_28012014, D\_nun1\_Mannar\_30012014, D\_priest1\_Mannar\_31012014.

<sup>21</sup> D\_priest2\_Mannar\_27012014.

<sup>22</sup> D\_Nun\_Colombo\_121210.

<sup>23</sup> D\_teacher\_Mannar\_10122010, D\_priest4/5\_Mannar\_29012014.

<sup>24</sup> D\_Group Interview\_Mannar\_051210.

<sup>25</sup> B\_priest2\_280717.

<sup>26</sup> Some priests explained to us that they saw joining the priesthood as an alternative to joining the militants for politically conscious young men who wished to support the Tamil cause but did not agree with violent tactics. (cf. D\_priest\_London\_02042013, D\_priest1\_Mannar\_28012014, D\_priest1\_Mannar\_29012014, D\_priest2\_Mannar\_30012014, D\_nun2\_Mannar\_30012014).

<sup>27</sup> D\_priest1\_Mannar\_09122010.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.ucaews.com/news/sri-lankas-new-missing-persons-office-and-the-catholic-church/76381>.

<sup>29</sup> D\_NGO1\_Colombo\_24012014.



Bishop was fostered through a genuine love and respect for the man who took great personal risks to challenge the army and the LTTE about mistreatment of Tamil civilians. Although civilians widely voiced respect for Bishop Joseph's decision to stay close to "his people"<sup>30</sup> as a witness to and partner in their sufferings, Joseph's autocratic leadership was at times also seen to be oppressive; "Many priests are scared of him and all decisions go through him".<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, the bishop and senior priests worked in a general context in which war gradually eroded local leadership, often specifically targeted by military groups (Fuglerud 2009; Gaasbeek 2010; Goodhand; Lewer, 2000; Klem; Manuaguru, 2017; Korf 2004; Walker 2013). Community leaders left the area, or were silenced. Powerful politicians and government servants refused to challenge the status quo, and the security forces were seen as the perpetrators of Tamil suffering. Bishop Joseph and his senior priests stepped into the leadership vacuum. As one civil society representative put it: "The Bishop is authoritative because he goes in front and not behind".<sup>32</sup> A leading member of the Hindu temple in Mannar explained: "If the Bishop steps into a problem it will be solved. He is very strong, an autocratic leader."<sup>33</sup> Bishop Joseph was the only religious leader strongly involved in politics, with even the Chief Ministers and Provincial Government meeting him for advice.<sup>34</sup>

Thirdly, senior priests held powerful roles in local councils or committees, which gave them access to other senior actors within the government, military, international organisations and the LTTE. They worked with international aid workers and held relationships with military leaders (some of whom were Catholic). Bishop Joseph's reputation, authority and legitimacy positioned him as an important diplomatic figure. One international informant suggested Bishop Joseph had unparalleled access to LTTE leader Prabhakaran amongst religious leaders.<sup>35</sup> The bishop was a member of the Catholic group (together with Cardinal Ranjith) that conducted shuttle diplomacy between the government and the LTTE, eventually negotiating the Norwegian intervention during the late 1990s that would prepare the grounds for the ceasefire agreement (CFA) in 2002 (Goodhand et al., 2011). During the final months of battle in early 2009, together with other Tamil clergy, the bishop crossed the nearly impenetrable military frontlines to plead with LTTE leadership to concede defeat and avert humanitarian disaster. Though his message was not heeded, the bishop spoke without challenge.<sup>36</sup>

Fourthly, the bishop was a powerful advocate for Tamil civilians, and outspoken voice calling the government to account for war crimes during the war and after its end. The Tamil Church initiated documentation of those who went missing and drew on the experience and testimony of clergy who stayed with civilians during the fighting. Bishop Joseph gave evidence critical of the government forces before the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission,<sup>37</sup> after which the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) investigated him, and some Sinhalese nationalist activists and politicians repeatedly called for his arrest.<sup>38</sup> When the Rajapakse regime tightened its surveillance and suppression of dissent under the state of emergency, the Bishop became one of few figures who spoke out against the government. A civil rights activist in Colombo explained: "He is the only person able to say these

things".<sup>39</sup>

The charismatic leadership of Bishop Joseph illustrates the transgression of pastoral power into the realms of sovereign power: his gestures, habitus and practice of speaking about "my people" are constitutive of pastoral power: the shepherd who looks after the flock and takes great risk to rescue his sheep. Indeed, the bishop and senior clergy took great personal risks, endangered their physical safety and jeopardized their political reputation among Sinhalese politicians and military who questioned their loyalty to the state, and among LTTE cadres who envied their high regard among Tamils. The bishop fulfilled his tasks as shepherd with the authoritative aura of sovereign powers he held as the head of the diocese, and that he used to claim diplomatic exceptions, e.g. when travelling across the frontlines, appealing to the belligerents or defending human rights of Tamil civilians. While the two conflict parties and belligerents did not always listen to him, or called him a traitor, they never dared to "touch him". As the bishop himself acknowledged: "I am alive because I am the Bishop. If not, I would have been part of Sri Lankan history" (Joseph 2012).

## 7. Conclusion

Why did the LTTE not kill the priests when the latter denied them entry to Madhu Church? The "miracle" of pastoral sovereignty is encapsulated in this encounter, when the LTTE's all-encompassing, totalizing claim to be the sole ruler of the Tamil people (Thiranagama 2011), which it otherwise ruthlessly defended by killing "traitors", was face-to-face with the Church's claim to sole authority on its sanctuary grounds. Given that the LTTE was heavily armed, while the Priests only had their human bodies as shields, the LTTE could have easily killed or injured the priests to get inside the Church. In this face-to-face encounter, the LTTE cadres did not dare to challenge the Church's pastoral sovereignty, nor to touch the priests' bodies. On the other side of the frontlines, the Bishop of Mannar confronted the Sinhalese military and the authoritarian Rajapakse regime with their human rights abuses, when many opposition figures disappeared in "white vans"; but nobody dared to "touch" the Bishop.

This "untouchability" of priests, nuns and the bishop and the extra-territorial sanctuary that they defended reveal the "pastoral sovereignty" that the Church was claiming and performing in Sri Lanka's war and post-war period. The performative effects of this pastoral sovereignty was rooted in the charismatic "aura" of religious leadership, the legitimacy afforded to priests as shepherds who shared the experience of suffering with their flock, the Tamil community, and the *trans*-local networks of the Church with powerful actors within the government, military and LTTE (often, but not only, with Catholics in these institutions), which the clergy could mobilize politically. The "intimate involvement"<sup>40</sup> of priests and nuns with the plight of their parishes thereby provided the groundwork - the moral credibility - for the more political acts in the diplomatic channels or in the public arena that Bishop Joseph would fill with his charismatic personality.

Humanitarian aid organisations that operate in zones of war depend to some extent on "the belligerents' goodwill" (Fassin 2013, p. 42), who need to somewhat "respect" the formers' extra-territorial (quasi-sovereign) claims to aid corridors or refugee camps. This was also the case for the Catholic Church as humanitarian organization. However, when sovereignty is heavily contested in ongoing war, 'goodwill' is not simply a gesture of "benevolence" (as Fassin writes), but emerges as a tacitly negotiated compromise of two parties whose agency is limited by the claims of the others, although these claims are articulated through different registers. Byung-Chul Han (2011, 76) writes that indiscriminate violence does not produce territory in the sense of spatial authority: brutal violence alone will not provide credible authority, which is

<sup>30</sup> D\_International\_London\_11042013.

<sup>31</sup> D\_NGO\_Mannar\_29012014.

<sup>32</sup> D\_NGO\_Mannar\_27012014.

<sup>33</sup> D\_LayHindu\_Mannar\_26012014.

<sup>34</sup> D\_LayHindu\_Mannar\_26012014.

<sup>35</sup> D\_priest1\_Colombo\_24012014.

<sup>36</sup> D\_Bishop\_Mannar\_27012014.

<sup>37</sup> Submission by the Catholic Diocese of Mannar to the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission. 8th January 2011. [https://www.jrs.net/assets/Regions/IOR/media/files/LLRCsubmission\\_by\\_MannarDiocese.pdf](https://www.jrs.net/assets/Regions/IOR/media/files/LLRCsubmission_by_MannarDiocese.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> D\_priest3\_Mannar\_27012014.

<sup>39</sup> D\_NGO1\_Colombo\_24012014.

<sup>40</sup> D\_nun\_Mannar\_28012014.



necessary to exert territorial control. This is the vulnerability of the belligerents' performative power of sovereignty – a vulnerability that opens a space for humanitarian action. The Catholic clergy in Sri Lanka seem to have embodied this humanitarian space with a particular force. The Church stayed on where most humanitarian agencies left (international staff in particular): this predicated the *pastoral* sovereignty of the Church that placed it apart from secular humanitarian agencies: these priests at the frontline were ready to sacrifice their lives for their sheep.

Is pastoral sovereignty a *radical* political theology (Crockett, 2011)? Radical political theology understands its politics as a fundamental “disruption” (Rancière, 1995/1999) to the police order (here: the logic of sovereign power). Pastoral sovereignty's logic of “interruption” (Metz 1977, p. 150) makes space for humanitarian intervention, but does not confront the very logic of sovereign power itself. Kyle Gingerich Hiebert (2017, 50, 53) makes this point when he writes that Johann Baptist Metz's *new* political theology, although showing the need to move beyond Carl Schmitt's political theology, nevertheless acquiesces to the ongoing necessity of violence, and “lives out what it opposes” (Gingerich Herbert, 2017, 51). The work of interruption of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is implicated in the same predicament: its negotiated relations with the state that granted it exceptional privileges were one of the pillars that enabled the Church to act in quasi-sovereign manner in its humanitarian work, but a too radical disposition of the Church could have destroyed this pillar. The “interruption” that *pastoral* sovereignty performs is therefore by definition temporary and exceptional. Would it formulate a permanent claim over territory and its subjects or a radically different political project, it would transform into simply another competitor for *secular* sovereign power (and would need to replicate its law of violence). Then, it would not be *pastoral* sovereignty anymore.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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