An Asian Bishop - Lakshman Wickremesinghe after 25 years

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by Prof. Rajiva WijesinhaBishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe died 25 years ago, on October 23rd 1983, exactly three months after the July racist riots began. In death he exemplified the Christian faith he subscribed to, for he sacrificed his life for his fellow men, the Tamils he realized had been indelibly scarred by the riots.He was in England when the riots happened, on sabbatical after being advised to rest following a heart attack. Knowing time was short, he was trying to set down his religious convictions through work that, in my novel about 1983, Acts of Faith, I described as ‘a book that proves that Christianity is identical with Buddhism and Hinduism’. This did not prevent him from engaging in politics too, for he abhorred the authoritarianism of the Jayewardene government, and the hypocrisy of the West that supported that government despite its appalling attacks on pluralism and democracy. Thus he responded fiercely when the Times, in those days still a respectable paper, exulted over Jayewardene’s triumph at the 1982 Referendum through elections were postponed for 6 years.
The Times claimed that ‘Capitalist Tea Tasted Sweeter’, a concept abhorrent to the Bishop who saw his role as comforting the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable. His Christianity, though intensely spiritual, was also deeply practical, and his essay ‘Christianity moving Eastward’, in which he expounded his essentially Asiatic view of the religion he was born into, exemplified his commitment to the people amidst whom he lived, the peasantry of the plains around Kurunegala, the oppressed Tamil communities of the hills. In the early seventies, he had been a champion of the Civil Rights Movement, when it concentrated on the youngsters hunted down after the 1971 insurrection. This was despite his long commitment to the politics of the SLFP, which he described as ‘my party’, in adding a brief note to his mother’s exultant letter to a friend after the 1977 election in which Jayewardene had triumphed. His preference for the SLFP did not preclude clear-sightedness about its deficiencies. Though he disapproved of political violence and the insurrection itself, he came forward unhesitatingly to affirm the rights of those who suffered from the intensity of its suppression, and to argue for alleviation of their deprivation. Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe So too he understood more than anyone else from his elite background, the transformation taking place amongst Tamil youngsters in the seventies, as they lost patience with what they saw as oppressive majoritarianism. And he understood their bitter frustration after 1977 when Jayewardene, having capitalized on Tamil grievances for the election, reneged on his commitment to hold an all party conference on the issue, and instead gave Cyril Mathew sway. In the early years, he thought Jayewardene could solve the problem, and spent many hours telling his elder brother Esmond to convince the President of the need for firm and swift action. He believed that Esmond had the capacity as well as the inclination to help, and did not understand that Esmond saw him as an impractical idealist. Though Esmond was humane like his brother, he was no match for the bigotry of Cyril Mathew, the malignity of J R Jayewardene. The three had worked together to rebuild the UNP after its defeat in 1956, only to find the fruits of victory going to Dudley Senanayake, who signed a pact with the Federal Party leader Chelvanayakam, to introduce District Councils. Mathew agitated against this and, with the opposition including the old left also on the rampage, Senanayake withdrew the proposal. So, when Jayewardene triumphed in 1977, Mathew was not to be ignored. He wielded considerable power, for he led the JSS, the trade union wing that acted as storm troopers for the government, once even assaulting Lakshman’s successor as Chairman of the Civil Rights Movement, Prof Sarachchandra. And though not themselves racist, those like Esmond who saw Mathew as a possible successor, citing the example of Mahathir Mohammed, saw no reason to rein him in. Thus, standardization – one of the principal reasons for bright youngsters of Prabhakaran’s vintage turning violent – was abolished but, when Mathew claimed in Parliament that Tamil examiners cheated, it was restored under another name, to continue still. When the government agreed to District Development Councils, and the Federal Party contested, defying LTTE calls for a boycott, Mathew wreaked havoc in Jaffna, and delivered it straight into terrorist arms. Perhaps the anguish Lakshman felt then, seeing his dream of a political solution vanish, caused his heart to give way. While in the country he did what he could to assuage feelings, to urge positive action, but then he was compelled to go away, and did not see the descent of the country into total lawlessness in 1982, the hasty Presidential election, undated letters of resignation to keep Members of Parliament under control, the Referendum. In 1983, after the riots, he was advised to stay on in England, but he hastened back. He promised to take things easy, but what he saw appalled him. He was the first national leader to go to Jaffna, for he was the first to understand the trauma the events had wrought. He spoke movingly of the need for apologies and recompense, but no one in authority listened. His heart broke. I had got to England the day he left, and we spoke on the phone. I hear his voice still, reassuring but committed. My mother told me, when I returned, that he wanted to see me, but his mother said to wait, perhaps fearing I would excite him. I thought we had all the time in the world, and agreed. In a week, he was dead. In a difficult job now, I miss him more than ever. Those who find it easy to criticize government assume he would have been on their side. I am not so sure. When I resigned from government service in 1980, over the deprivation of Mrs Bandaranaike’s Civic Rights, which heralded authoritarianism, most people I moved amongst thought I was wrong. Lakshman was the outstanding exception. He was proud of the gesture, and that pride meant more than the criticism of others. I think that now too he would have understood. Whether he agreed or not, he would not have jumped to conclusions, but applied principles logically yet sympathetically to derive the best course to ensure comfort for the afflicted. (Courtesy : The Island)Rajiva Wijesinha, Senior Professor of Languages at Sabaragamuwa University, is the Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process (SCOPP). He obtained his first degree in classics from University College, Oxford, and went on to do a doctorate in English at Corpus Christi College, where he held the E K Chambers Studentship. He is the author of several books including: Declining Sri Lanka: Terrorism and Ethnic Violence as the legacy of J R Jayewardene, 1906-1996, Cambridge University Press Delhi, July 2007.