



2016

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Recommended Citation

Rajendra, Tisha and Johnston, Laurie. Ambivalent Solidarity. *Public Theology and The Global Common Good: The Contribution of David Hollenbach*, , : 120-130, 2016. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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Ambivalent Solidarity

Tisha Rajendra and Laurie Johnston

In David Hollenbach's many discussions of the global common good, he makes frequent reference to the importance of solidarity as a fundamental component of that common good. We cannot adequately understand or work toward the common good without two forms of solidarity: first, a sense of our mutual interdependence and an openness to dialogue with the other—what Hollenbach calls “intellectual solidarity”—and second, a willingness to act in accord with that interdependence—“social solidarity.” As the processes of globalization increase our interdependence, the risk is that exploitation, rather than genuine solidarity, comes to characterize this interdependence.¹ Globalization offers many opportunities to develop the virtue of solidarity, but it also poses the risk that the solidarity we develop may be only a flawed, incomplete form of solidarity, not true solidarity in justice. On the whole, Hollenbach is optimistic about the possibilities; he notes the many nongovernmental organizations and transnational movements that are “working to move public opinion, national governments, and international institutions to adopt norms of action that reflect greater solidarity with those who are vulnerable and marginalized in the present global order.”² Yet he also cautions that such movements may promote only partial, incomplete forms of solidarity:

Many of these transnational movements working for global justice are somewhat paradoxically focused on concerns for particular groups of people—women, the poor, specific ethnic and cultural minorities. This poses the most challenging question raised by the phenomenon of globalization—how to achieve effective and universal

¹David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 184ff.

²*Ibid.*, 238.

respect for the common humanity of all people even in the midst of their differences.³

He goes on to warn that the same type of interest-group politics that can distort democracy within the United States also poses a risk to justice and democracy on a global scale. For Hollenbach, solidarity that is *particular* is problematic; however, we argue in this chapter that authentic solidarity can be expressed only through particular relationships between particular groups of people. Yet if solidarity remains focused only on those particular relationships, it fails to be truly virtuous.

Genuine solidarity must include specific practices that manifest an enduring commitment to particular groups of suffering people. It is the particularity of specific others that draws our attention and elicits a particular response. However, limits on our time, resources, and attention prevent us from engaging in practices of solidarity with all suffering others at once. The paradox of solidarity is not that it is at once both universal and particular; it is that it is only through the practices of solidarity with specific suffering others can we attain the universal solidarity that Hollenbach speaks of. And yet, as Hollenbach warns, practices of solidarity can easily go amiss, resulting not in the development of universal solidarity, but in practices that actually blind us to the humanity and suffering of the other. How, then, can we ensure that particular practices of solidarity lead to the cultivation of universal solidarity rather than a deadening to the suffering of others? By drawing on a case study of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and the work of Martha Nussbaum, this article illuminates some aspects of the relationship between particular practices of solidarity and universal solidarity.

THE NATURE OF SOLIDARITY AND COMPASSION

Christian ethicists frequently prioritize the universal dimension of solidarity—the solidarity that extends across borderlines. The paradigmatic example of universal solidarity is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan overcomes the historic animosity between Samaritans and Jews to make an alliance with someone different. Citing this parable, Jon Sobrino uses the solidarity of US churches with Salvadoran churches as a case study for his examination of solidarity across divisions of nationality, ethnicity, and economic standing.⁴

³*Ibid.*

⁴Jon Sobrino, “Bearing with One Another in Faith: A Theological Analysis of Christian

Sobrino distinguishes solidarity from a mere “alliance of self-interest” precisely by drawing on this universal dimension of solidarity. He stipulates that solidarity must occur between “unequals”—people who are not only different from each other but who are also unequal in social and economic standing. Solidarity acts as a bridge between groups of unequals, enabling them to enter into relationships with one another despite their differences.

Yet in examining Sobrino’s case study, we can see that solidarity also has a second dimension: besides the sense of universal humanity, there is a dimension that arises from the historical particularities of specific relationships. Among all the suffering peoples of the world, the US churches did not just choose the Salvadoran churches by chance; these relationships emerged in the particular context of the Salvadoran civil war, which was funded and supported by the US government. In establishing relationships of solidarity with Salvadoran churches, the US churches were acting in defiance of the foreign policy of their own government. In cultivating this relationship of solidarity, the US churches were not only drawing on universal claims about the dignity of the peoples of El Salvador; they were also acting in the context of a particular—and problematic—relationship between the United States and El Salvador more generally. In cultivating bonds of solidarity with Salvadoran churches, the US churches were attempting to change the nature of that relationship through particular institutions and out of a particular bond of a shared religious tradition.

Perhaps nothing points to the role of particularity in solidarity like compassion. We describe compassion as “suffering with”—a feeling in one’s own person elicited by the suffering of another. Bryan Massingale writes that compassion is “both the ground and the fruit of . . . solidarity.”⁵ In other words, solidarity arises from this emotional response to the suffering of another; but the virtue of solidarity also enlarges our hearts, enabling us to more powerfully feel the suffering of others. In Sobrino’s case study, the American churches were motivated by their emotional response to the horrendous suffering experienced by the Salvadoran people and the role of their own government in that conflict. Compassion, in other words, points to the particular dimension of solidarity: it is not generalized suffering that evokes compassion; it is the specifics of the suffering of particular, embodied others.

Yet compassion does not always lead to authentic solidarity. Often,

compassion and solidarity become divorced from the universal dimension. In what follows, we turn to a case study of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and examine how and why compassion and solidarity with suffering others went wrong in this case.

THE SRI LANKAN TAMIL DIASPORA

From 1983 to 2009 Sri Lanka was ripped apart by a brutal civil war that resulted in up to 100,000 deaths. The roots of the conflict lie in the British colonial period, during which ethnic Tamils were given opportunities for education and government positions were denied to many of the majority Sinhalese. After Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, Sinhalese-majority governments enacted a series of discriminatory policies against Tamils. Following a series of unsuccessful peaceful protests, many in the Tamil community began to place their hopes in armed militia groups seeking an independent Tamil state in the historic Tamil homelands of the north and east of the island. In July 1983 Tamil militants killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers, setting off mob violence against Tamil civilians in the capital of Colombo. In the aftermath of this pogrom, one militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), consolidated its power in the north and east by assassinating members of other groups. Meanwhile, the government of Sri Lanka had shifted into war mode, ostensibly targeting the LTTE while bombing civilian areas indiscriminately, disappearing and detaining thousands of Tamils, and placing Tamil majority areas of Sri Lanka under military rule. The LTTE responded with civilian bombings and massacres, assassinations of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, and an attempted assassination of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The LTTE also inflicted terror on its own people, arresting and torturing dissidents, recruiting child soldiers, and executing suspected informers.

As a result of the conflict, more than 500,000 Tamils left Sri Lanka in the years following the 1983 riots. While many found themselves in refugee camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, others fled for Canada, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe. Due to its generous asylum policies, Canada is home to the largest Tamil diaspora today. Although the Tamil diaspora is by no means a homogenous group with one political agenda, many in the diaspora financially supported the LTTE (frequently known as the Tamil Tigers) through thirty years of civil war. An insurgent group with a shoestring budget, the LTTE had virtually no friends in the international community and could not have sustained such a long insurgency without the support of the diaspora. Some in the diaspora

Solidarity,” in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 144–72.

⁵Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 118.

were coerced into funding the LTTE, but much of the diaspora funded the LTTE voluntarily. Though reports of the LTTE's brutality against their own people were widespread and well known in the international community, the diaspora seemed to turn a blind eye to reports of child conscription, assassinations of Tamil moderates, and the use of civilians as human shields. In the aftermath of the war, the diaspora has called for an investigation into war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government against Tamil civilians; however, the diaspora has not called for a similar investigation into war crimes committed by the LTTE.⁶

Although the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora would have described itself as acting in solidarity with the civilian Tamils living on the island, this is a case of flawed solidarity; the interventions chosen by the Tamil diaspora did not lead to peace nor to the flourishing of either Sri Lanka community or the international community. Solidarity is dependent on what Martha Nussbaum calls accurate "judgments of compassion."⁷ In order to examine why the solidarity of the diaspora went wrong, we examine Nussbaum's account of compassion as applied to the Tamil diaspora. Martha Nussbaum writes that compassion involves three separate judgments. First, we must note that someone else is suffering and accurately assess the seriousness of the suffering. Is the suffering significant enough to truly affect a person's flourishing? The second judgment of compassion is whether the suffering is undeserved. The third judgment of compassion is whether the other's suffering affects the self in some way.

The first judgment of compassion, accurately assessing the fact and the scope of another's suffering, requires openness to reality and an accurate judgment of reality. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora had no trouble accurately assessing the scope of the suffering of their compatriots. The first generation had themselves suffered directly either at the hands of the Sri Lankan government or at the hands of Sinhalese mobs during bouts of ethnic violence. Surely, they would have had no trouble imagining the suffering of Tamil civilians, nor would they have failed to see the seriousness of their situations. However, there were also forms of suffering that most diaspora Tamils seem to have overlooked. Although it is not reasonable to expect anyone to be fully aware of all the world's sufferings, these forms of suffering were in fact quite proximate and relevant

to the Tamil population, particularly when they involved the recruitment of child soldiers.

During the war, many in the diaspora were getting their news from only a few sources with a pro-LTTE bias, such as TamilNet, a news source with a separatist agenda. Major news outlets in the West did not devote much space or time to the conflict, and the ones that did were considered by the diaspora to have received one-sided information from the Sri Lankan government. Essentially, many in the diaspora had applied a cognitive filter to any news emerging from Sri Lanka: atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan government were real; atrocities committed by the LTTE had been fabricated. Although it is common for humans to prefer information that confirms our own biases, there is a point at which such bias constitutes culpable ignorance.

Nussbaum's second judgment of compassion is whether the suffering is undeserved. One cannot make this second judgment without the first. In other words, we are less likely to feel compassion for someone if we feel they have done something to earn their suffering. Nussbaum presents the example of a teenager who is jailed for torturing animals; we are unlikely to feel much compassion for him. Yet if a criminal is given a punishment far more severe than would fit the crime, we may feel compassion for her, despite her guilt. But such complex judgments of desert frequently disappear in the polarized environment of a war, when "you're either with us or you're against us." For many Tamils, those who suffered at the hands of Sri Lankan government forces were generally perceived to be undeserving of such treatment. But this was not the same for those who suffered at the hands of the LTTE.

This tendency to evade compassion by dismissing suffering as "deserved" was applied not only to the Sinhalese civilians; Tamil moderates were also held to be deserving in some sense of their suffering. One example is Neelan Tiruchelvam, a Tamil Member of Parliament who worked within the Sri Lankan government to craft laws that would give the predominantly Tamil northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka a measure of political autonomy. For his work with the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government and toward a nonviolent resolution of the war, Tiruchelvam was assassinated in 1999, presumably by the LTTE. The LTTE, whom he had publicly criticized throughout his career, deemed him a traitor to his own people. Following the lead of the LTTE, the diaspora similarly dismissed Tiruchelvam as a traitor. In the polarized environment of a civil war, this man who actively expressed solidarity with Tamils was not regarded as deserving of solidarity in return.

The third judgment of compassion likewise follows from the first and second judgments. Nussbaum terms this the "eudaimonistic judgment"—

⁶International Crisis Group, "The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora after the LTTE," February 23, 2010, www.crisisgroup.org, 15. See also Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL), A/HRC/30/CRP.2 (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015) and International Crisis Group, "War Crimes in Sri Lanka," May 17, 2010, www.crisisgroup.org.

⁷Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion and Terror," *Daedalus* 132, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 14–17.

the judgment that the suffering of another person affects us in some way. In the parlance of many Christian ethicists, this third judgment of compassion is solidarity itself—the idea that because we are all interdependent, the suffering of one person affects another. This is what moves a person from merely suffering-with another person to acting to alleviate their suffering. Since the eudaimonistic judgment follows from the other two, flaws in the first two judgments prevented the Tamil diaspora from applying the eudaimonistic judgment to all who suffered from the war in Sri Lanka. Reporting based on interviews with members of the diaspora, the International Crisis Group states, “A palpable sense of guilt pervades the Tamil diaspora. Privately, some express shame for leaving Sri Lanka while other Tamils fought and died for the cause or fell victim to government violence.”⁸ The guilt is a manifestation of the eudaimonistic judgment.

Of course, this eudaimonistic judgment had its limits. While the Tamil diaspora felt that they in some sense shared the fates of the Tamils on the island who were persecuted by the government, their sense of solidarity did not extend to the Sinhalese majority, who were perceived as deserving any suffering meted out by the LTTE or the Sri Lankan government.⁹ The Tamil feelings of bitterness toward the Sinhalese are not completely unwarranted; Sinhalese majority governments had been depriving Tamils of civil and political liberties since shortly after independence in 1948. A strand of Buddhism that emerged during British colonialism in Sri Lanka insists that the island must be an ethnically pure, Sinhala Buddhist state.¹⁰ The Sri Lankan army terrorized the Tamil civilian population, targeting sanctuaries, the Jaffna public library, and disappearing thousands, and few of the Sinhalese majority protested these war crimes.

Authentic compassion, according to Nussbaum, requires accuracy in the three judgments. Thus the case of the Tamil diaspora illustrates failings in all three. Nussbaum’s first judgment of compassion requires an openness to what Jon Sobrino, drawing on the work of Ignacio Ellacuría, would call “reality.” But the filters applied to the news coming out of Sri Lanka simply erased the wrongdoing of the LTTE. When the news of the LTTE’s activities became irrefutable, such as in the assassinations of Tamil moderates and civilian-targeted bombings, it was instead the second judgment of compassion that failed: the victims of the LTTE were taken to be deserving of their suffering in some sense. The third judgment of compas-

sion, solidarity, was also flawed: despite their tremendous compassion for the Tamils left behind in Sri Lanka, suffering at the hands of the Sri Lankan government, the Tamil diaspora not only failed to improve their lot but may have worsened it by funding the LTTE and prolonging the war. Even now, when the future flourishing of Sri Lanka depends on a real reckoning with the past, the diaspora has not joined in the international calls for investigations of war crimes because such investigations would examine war crimes committed by the LTTE as well as those by the Sri Lankan government. This is a failure of the eudaimonistic judgment; for the diaspora, true solidarity would require a reassessment of their own role in the war.

Not only do the second and third judgments of compassion follow from the first; all three judgments of compassion function together. If the suffering of the other can affect us, then the possibility of breaking through the wall of misinformation that surrounds us is much higher. For example, if the moral imaginations of those in the diaspora could have extended compassion to the Sinhalese victims of civilian bombings, or to the refugees in the diaspora who left Sri Lanka fleeing the Tigers rather than the Sri Lankan government, the diaspora might have been able to question the veracity of the news reported by TamilNet. Thus the eudaimonistic judgment could precede the other two and lead to more accurate information about both the fact of suffering and whether those who suffered deserved it, breaking through cognitive biases. That was the case with one member of the diaspora who went to Sri Lanka after the war and listened to family members in the conflict zone tell stories of how in the last days of the war the LTTE kidnapped children after shooting their parents. In this case the feeling of suffering-with led to a reevaluation of the news sources he had relied on for years. Only then could this member of the diaspora accurately assess the scope of suffering by Sri Lankans, both Tamils and Sinhalese.

This anecdote also points to another fact about solidarity. It is only the particulars of the suffering other that can evoke the eudaimonistic judgment. When we allow another’s suffering to affect us, it is usually the particulars of their suffering that draw us in. Perhaps we can hear in our imaginations the screams of the children who have witnessed the deaths of their parents and then been kidnapped by their murderers. Or perhaps, in imagining the desperation of the parents to protect their children, we can imagine our own children ripped from our arms. It is the particularity of these horrors that make our ears ring or our arms ache in sympathy with the parents who lost their children. However, solidarity cannot end with these particularities.

When the third judgment of compassion is working properly, the

⁸International Crisis Group Report, “Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora after the LTTE,” 4.

⁹See *ibid.*, 4–5.

¹⁰Eva Neumaier, “Missed Opportunities: Buddhism and the Ethnic Strife in Sri Lanka and Tibet,” in *Religion and Peacebuilding*, ed. Harold G. Coward and Gordon S. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 69–92.

particularity of the suffering other leads to a realization of common humanity and interdependence. Approaching the other with eyes shaped by the eudaimonistic judgment can perhaps lead to a more accurate second judgment of compassion, assessing whether suffering is deserved or undeserved. If the Tamil diaspora were able to see Sinhala civilians as in some way suffering at the hands of the same autocratic regime that ran roughshod over Tamil civilians in its quest to vanquish the LTTE, they might have been able to see Sinhala civilians as similarly undeserving of suffering. True, Tamil civilians were victims of ethnic discrimination and exclusion, but it is also true that Sinhala civilians who spoke out against their government were often assassinated or disappeared.

These failures of compassion are certainly not unique to the Tamil diaspora. Many Sinhalese civilians could not make accurate judgments of compassion toward the Tamils in the north nor the refugees in the diaspora. Elsewhere, Martha Nussbaum details the ways in which the compassion of Americans for the victims of 9/11 led to a nationalism that excluded Arab and South Asian immigrants.¹¹ More recently, the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris rapidly erased many Americans' compassion for Syrian refugees and led many governors of US states to try to bar the entry of Syrian refugees.¹² The tendency for compassion to be deformed into something "narrow and self-serving" that divides us against the "other" is a symptom of human sinfulness that is universal.¹³ The Tamil case calls attention to the ways that a particular diaspora, because of their access to communications tools and financial resources in the West, can practice a flawed form of solidarity in a way that has significant consequences. Other diaspora populations play an important role in many conflicts around the world, both for good and ill—for example, the Irish American support for a peace accord in Northern Ireland and radical nationalist websites that stoked the conflict in Bosnia.¹⁴ Clearly, moving toward peace and genuine solidarity requires a deepening of compassion in order to break what Hollenbach calls the "downward spiral of self-defense and aggression."¹⁵

¹¹Nussbaum, "Compassion and Terror," 11–12.

¹²Patrick Healy and Julie Bosman, "GOP Governors Vow to Close Doors to Syrian Refugees," *New York Times*, November 16, 2015.

¹³Nussbaum, "Compassion and Terror," 11–12.

¹⁴See Daniel Bynam, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 253, and Paul Hockenos, *Homeland Calling: Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 28.

¹⁵David Hollenbach, "Social Ethics under the Sign of the Cross," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 16 (1996): 10.

TOWARD SOLIDARITY UNDER THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Perhaps one of the greatest mysteries of the human heart is why in some cases our experiences of suffering lead us to feel compassion and solidarity for other sufferers and in other cases the experience of suffering inspires only a defensive desire for control and self-preservation. The flawed, partial solidarity in the Tamil diaspora and other contexts might be seen as combining these two possible responses: it expands the eudaimonistic judgment beyond the individual self, but not beyond one's own group—thus failing to move from the particular experience of suffering to a universal view.

So many of the world's most important movements for human rights arise precisely from experiences of suffering, and yet so many of the world's most violent episodes also arise from experiences of suffering and victimhood. Exposure to others' suffering can produce similarly bifurcated responses, as Hollenbach explains:

The instantaneous transmission of television images of human suffering can . . . have both positive and negative influences on the public sense of solidarity and moral responsibility. . . . Repeated exposure to images of violence and starvation can give rise to public moral disgust, leading to a haughty sense of superiority, a deepened perception of the divisions between the civilized "us" and the savage "them." Such disgust leads either to disengagement or to a righteous quest for hegemony in the name of civilization.¹⁶

How can we move toward broadening our eudaimonistic judgment toward the universal, so that we can practice genuine solidarity while cultivating the kind of deep engagement with particular persons that inspires solidarity in the first place? As Christians, this is where we must turn to the cross, the "preeminent sign of . . . divine solidarity." It is in the cross, as Hollenbach writes, that we find the point of intersection between the particular and the universal, the compassion of God and the suffering of humanity:

The cross of Jesus Christ does not point to the preeminence of a kind of self-sacrifice that acquiesces in violence or injustice. Rather, it unveils the mystery at the heart of the world as One who has utter compassion for all who suffer. The cross is the revelation of divine

¹⁶Hollenbach, *Common Good*, 237.

solidarity with every human whose experience is that of forsaken-ness and abandonment.¹⁷

The cross reassures us that the God of the universe is with us and with all who suffer. It is also a sign that calls us to enter into the suffering world, as Christ has. And it is, of course, “the most particularistic of all Christian symbols,” as Hollenbach acknowledges. Yet he points out that it need not function as a sign for Christians alone; it also serves an important function as a general reminder of humanity’s bloody history, which must not be ignored. “Followers of all religions and none must engage the questions raised by this history,” Hollenbach writes.¹⁸

For Christians, the cross is a sign that the finite, time-bound, and often flawed ways that we attempt to express solidarity can ultimately be transformed by grace into something that strains toward the universal, the cosmic. Yet the universal mystery of the cross is one that is mediated through our own particular relationships. We experience Christ through one another; when we find refuge in a friend who can speak the words of compassion to us, it is then that our own suffering can become the grounds for compassion for others—rather than a source of anxiety and self-protection. When refugees find a genuine welcome, perhaps it is more likely that they may be able to develop a broader compassion as well.

At a time when the world faces massive crises of migration, the demands of solidarity can appear exhausting. The world’s religious communities must challenge themselves to draw on those elements of their traditions that nourish and deepen genuine solidarity with those who are suffering. For Christians, this means once again taking refuge under the cross, because, as Hollenbach writes, “It is here that we might discover a hope that is not based on the illusion that we control the world.” And once we understand this, “We find the deepest source of strength to think and act in solidarity with those who suffer.”¹⁹

¹⁷Hollenbach, “Social Ethics under the Sign of the Cross,” 12–13.

¹⁸Ibid., 16.

¹⁹Ibid., 17–18.

PART IV

PUBLIC THEOLOGY

The public theology movement has emerged as a significant force in contemporary religious and social thought. It seeks to bridge the gap between faith and public life, addressing issues of justice, equity, and the common good. This movement is rooted in the conviction that religious traditions offer valuable insights and resources for navigating the complexities of a pluralistic and often polarized world. Public theologians engage with a wide range of social and political issues, from environmental justice to human rights, drawing on their respective faith traditions to inform their analysis and advocacy.

At the heart of public theology is a commitment to the public square, where diverse voices are heard and dialogue is fostered. This is not a neutral space, but one where the values and principles of various faith traditions are brought to bear on the challenges of our time. Public theologians work to articulate the moral and ethical foundations of their faiths in a way that is accessible and relevant to a broader audience. They seek to challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives that are grounded in their respective religious convictions. This work is essential for building a more just and equitable society, where the needs and voices of all are taken into account.

The public theology movement is a testament to the enduring power of faith to inspire action and transform society. It is a call to us all to engage with the public issues of our time, drawing on the wisdom and resources of our faith traditions to make a positive impact on the world. In a time of great uncertainty and division, public theology offers a path forward, one that is rooted in hope and grounded in the pursuit of the common good. It is a path that leads us to a more just and equitable world, where the values of our faith are lived out in the public square.