



**University of
Zurich** ^{UZH}

Department of Geography

Conflict, Peace and Catholic Nuns
-
Mediating Social and Political Spaces in Northern
Sri Lanka

GEO 511 Master's Thesis

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Summary

This thesis addresses the roles and daily activities of Catholic nuns in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. It studies their dynamic role in conflict situations during the civil war and investigates their capacities in the transitional movement towards peace. The main objective is to investigate how Tamil Catholic nuns have been able to intervene as caregivers and brokers for the local people in (post-) conflict situations in the Northern Province. Further its objective is to understand which capabilities and individual characteristics enabled the sisters to cross not only physical borders but also cultural boundaries.

I will argue the potential of the nuns' particular role is due to their special position in the Catholic Church and the society in Sri Lanka and its potentials and limitations lie within the (post-) conflict dynamics of their spaces of agency. Being religious women, they have to fulfil the expectations of the Church, which are to live a simple life and to help the people in their community. They are described as motherly figures who take care of the poor and others in need. This leads to the assumption that the nuns are friendly, caring and harmless women, who are, due to their religious status, granted respect and the privilege to be heard and seen, which allowed them to gain access to dangerous spaces and to mediate on behalf of the Tamil civil society with the Sri Lankan army. But being religious women has not always granted the nuns a special treatment, as even they had to follow the laws of the state and subordinate themselves to the political dynamics around them.

This thesis is built on an increasing interdisciplinary interest in what role religion plays in conflict and post-conflict environments. Contemporary geographical research strives to understand the relationship between religious practices and politics in everyday life. This relation is demonstrated by studies of brokerage and other forms of social welfare provided by the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka (Stirrat, 1992, Johnson, 2012 and Goodhand et al., 2009). The role religion plays in conflict has become more prominent in recent studies of (post-) conflict Sri Lanka. Hereby, religious figures have been found to be able to cross discursive boundaries and physical

borders in order to do their social work for their communities (Johnson, 2012 and Spencer et al., 2015). As Goodhand et al. (2009, 393) write, “boundaries are not seamless, impermeable dividers. Depending on the time, the situation and the people involved, they can be crossed. People do this all the time.” These everyday interactions of different actors across various spaces create a network of relationships, which are not less complex than the conflict itself. A space of extensive relations is created through these interactions that happen across borders (Johnson, 2012, 79-81). In my thesis, I argue that this relational network is fundamental to the success of the nuns’ everyday services to their communities and enables them to reach a larger group of people and to close the distance between different communities.

The findings of this study are based on ethnographic and qualitative research approaches, whereby I carried out ten weeks of fieldwork in northern Sri Lanka. Through informal and semi-formal interviews and participant observation, I was able to gain individual and very personal insights on the nuns’ lives during and after the war. During these unstable times, people have needed a source of comfort and hope. This social gap was filled by the Church. The priests, as authoritative male figures were able to act politically and influence negotiations, whereas the sisters inhabited a motherly role as caregivers. This distribution in duties can be traced back to the traditional roles of women and men in the Sri Lankan society. However, this does not mean that neither did not act as the others, because indeed they have mediated in political situations and taken care of people in need. As the war came to an end, the role of the Church has changed again. Now, they take part in negotiations with the state on behalf of Tamil civilians and are the brains of communal rehabilitations projects. Where the state and the international community have failed to support the Tamils after the war, the local Church is stepping in and taking care of the people. The findings are presented by analysing impressive and informative life stories of the sisters of the Northern Province and show how their lives have been embedded in the local histories of the Tamils’ everyday lives during these turbulent times.

Consequently, the analysis of the nuns’ stories reveals how fundamental religious figures can be in conflict and peacebuilding environments. They can be the basis for a better cultural

understanding and the source to a successful and productive process towards peace. Therefore, this study demonstrates the potential of the nuns to mediate in difficult situations and care for the Tamil people. Their capacity to act on behalf of the people lays in their local embeddedness and the people's trust in them. This study highlights the capacities of the nuns, but also sheds lights on the limitations of their work. It shows how ordinary everyday interventions of marginalised women religious can play a significant role in highly political and dangerous situations and turn normal daily events into acts of heroism.

Sri Lanka – a spatial overview



¹ <http://www.nationsonline.org/maps/sri-lanka-map.jpg>. Access 5.05.2017

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1. First Introductions

Catholic Nuns. Religious women, who live in convents and pray all day long? Maybe, but that is just what one can see, catching a brief glimpse at a Catholic sister in her habit, kneeling in front of the Virgin Mary. Without a doubt, the nuns are highly religious women, following the vows, which they had promised upon entering the congregation. They live a life of chastity, poverty and obedience in the name of God. But also no, because the lives of the Catholic nuns do not only take place inside convents and churches, but most of all with and among the people of their parishes. There are sisters walking the streets, protesting for justice, sisters fighting for the fundamental human laws, sisters doing counselling for war victims, giving them hope and new skills to make a living. This and more is what nuns in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka are doing in their everyday lives.

The perception of nuns as purely religious figures focuses on their religious lives. But besides following a prayer schedule, doing housework and helping priests prepare for mass, the sisters have a much more important role; they keep the community together and care for them, independent of the circumstances, whether in times of conflict or peace. In northern Sri Lanka, the nuns form the backbone of their communities. This is not visible at a first glance, but when taking a close look at their daily work, one comes to notice, how deeply involved the sisters are in the people's lives, and how they support them every step of the way. The nuns are like the people's companions through life, protecting them from evil, helping them to solve problems, crying with them, celebrating with them, conclusively, living with them.

Among many roles, the nuns are significant in their communities as carers. They are mothers of the villages, looking out for everyone, educating the children, counselling the parents, caring for the sick and poor, looking out for the people in a highly individual way and not forgetting the community as a whole, they are watching out for their fundamental rights as citizens and public institutions. It is the nuns' power to be able to live this close to the people and therefore be the persons who understand their problems and successes in a profound way.

Hardly any academic work on Sri Lanka mentions Catholic nuns. They disappear behind political figures with big names and power, they are hidden by the Church's hierarchical and patriarchal system that allows the priests to inhabit a more prominent role in the eye of the public and be more visible than the women religious. Even if the nuns can be described as figures who operate in the shadow of men and persons who inhabit more powerful positions in society, they do a lot of social work for their community.

This thesis challenges the image of nuns as embodiments of holiness, innocence and purity who are hidden behind the walls of convents and are overshadowed by priests. In the following, the importance of the Catholic sisters shall be illuminated.

Furthermore, this Master's Thesis studies the work of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. In the field of conflict and post-conflict reconciliation studies the role of religion has gained an increased interest. So far, some studies on Catholic priests have been conducted to understand the role of religious figures in north and north-west Sri Lanka (Stirrat, 1992, Johnson, 2012, Goodhand et al., 2009, Spencer et al., 2015 and Brown, 2015).

None of these studies have a focus on the work of Catholic nuns. They appear to be less prominent and less authoritative figures compared to the male religious actors. However, nuns, too, have been able to perform important roles and to gain access to militarized and politicized spaces through their apparently innocuous roles as women religious. The nuns are not present in most of the literature about the work of religious figures in conflict and reconciliation processes that are performed in northern Sri Lanka. This Master's Thesis would like to close this gap with a survey on Catholic nuns in northern Sri Lanka and seeks to understand their significant role as caregivers and social workers for their conflict-affected communities.

Not just a birthday party

November 27th 2016 was a sunny and warm Sunday in Mannar. It was the day I understood how deeply involved the Catholic sisters are in what has been happening in northern Sri Lanka. It had been around one month since I had started my fieldwork in Sri Lanka's north and I had already

done around a dozen interviews with sisters, priests and NGO workers. But that day I discovered the connection between all the single stories I had been told and could make sense of all the parts of the puzzle that had begun to emerge. I came to appreciate the close relationship between the sisters and their experiences.

I was walking along the market stalls of Mannar town when I ran into Sister Jeyam, whom I had only met once before, on my very first day in Sri Lanka's north. Considering the last time that we had spoken, had been a month ago, and the conversation had only lasted half an hour, I was reluctant to approach her. But I did not need to worry whether she would remember me, she looked up from the fruits in front of her and our eyes met. Immediate recognition was visible and Sister Jeyam broke into a huge smile. I approached her and we hugged like old friends, asking one another how we had been these last few weeks. Sister Jeyam was on the way to one of her sisters' birthday party. "Usually we (the nuns) do not celebrate our birthdays much, but it is her eightieth birthday, so they have set up a small gathering."² I did not know what exactly she meant by a small gathering, but was to find out soon enough, as the nun invited me to come along to the event.

We left Mannar town by three-wheeler and shortly afterwards arrived at a convent of the Sisters of Charity, a reformation house where young girls were educated to become nuns. The convent was kept simple, a one-story building with several bedrooms, a kitchen and dining area and a fruit and vegetable garden that appeared well kept. Upon our arrival, we found several teenaged girls outside the convent, putting up decorations. As soon as they saw Sister Jeyam, they came to greet her, showing great respect and appreciation. This was a typical welcome that the sister would receive wherever she went, I had witnessed it while accompanying different sisters on daily excursions and church meetings. Inside the convent, the elderly birthday girl was happily waiting for us. She had quite bad hearing, but kept smiling as the greetings continued and the other sisters arrived. The sister who was in charge of the girls' formation also introduced herself. With only a brief greeting I could immediately tell, that she was one of those sisters, who had experienced a lot. Sister Rita's presence was incredible, her confidence very visible, and with a

² Interview Sister Jeyam, Mannar, November 2016

huge heart she cared for the girls, instructing them to set up the buffet. As it was still early, Sister Jeyam and I went to sit on plastic chairs under the trees and she told me about her experiences as a nun (see Chapter 5). While the sky turned from blue to pink to black, Sister Jeyam relived the joys and horrors of her life for me, telling me how she became a nun to serve the poor, how, during the war she looked after children in Kilinochchi and was arrested upon suspicion by the Sri Lankan Army, and how today, she is happy with her life choices and that even when bad things happened she was always side by side with the people, giving them hope and a caring hand. While we talked about war and its effects upon her and the people's lives, it became clear that not only the war had left its imprint on the people, but the sister had too. Still today, years after the war's end, people come to her thanking her for caring for them in difficult times, even if it had only been to hold their hands while waiting out on bombs in a bunker.³ Watching the sister over dinner, not a trace of sadness over the terrible thing she had seen and experienced were visible, instead pure joy and happiness was all the emotions that I could see on Sister Jeyam's face.

But Sister Jeyam was not the only nun, who had done her fair share and cared for the people in difficult times, so had the birthday girl. I came to know, mostly by talking to the other Sisters of Charity, that in the 1980s and 1990s the elderly sister had taken in Tamil girls and boys and hidden them, so that they did not have to join the Liberation Tamil Tiger Eelam. Sister Jeyam said that the old nun had been something like a hero to those girls and boys, saving them from a certain death in the killing fields, which is how the places of fighting were called. Hiding these teenagers was not without risk, had the Tigers discovered that the sister had been giving them shelter and therefore not followed the orders of the fighters, she could have been arrested, questioned, tortured or worse, killed. Looking across the dinner table the elderly women did not appear to be a threat to the Tigers, nor like someone who would challenge or disobey orders, but this image was, as I had just found out, misleading. There were other nuns present, who like Sister Jeyam and the elderly nun, had served the people during the war, making visits to refugee camps, hiding people in convents, cooking and caring for them while they were sick and could not move further.

³ Interview Sister Jeyam, Mannar, November 2016

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Other sisters had given shelter to human rights activists from the south, providing them with a place to stay and exchange ideas on how to help the civilians in the conflict. All the nuns had their individual stories to tell, some of which will be told in later parts of this thesis, but they all had three things in common. First of all, the nuns could only achieve what they had because of their close relationship to the people and their own network of sisters across the Northern Province. Secondly, they were only able to fulfil their duties and help the people because they were respected by all parties, the LTTE, the government and the people, as religious figures who received special treatment which allowed them to transgress borders and reach across discursive boundaries. And lastly, the nuns were highly dependent on the current situations, which limited them, but also opened up new possibilities.



Photograph – Chiara Borner, November 2016, Mannar

Research Objective and Questions

The aim of this Master's Thesis is to gain an in-depth understanding of the duties of the nuns in their local communities and their role during Sri Lanka's ethnic war and its post-conflict situation.

The three observations made in the event above, lead me to the following research question:

How are religious and political spaces of interaction in post-conflict Sri Lanka shaped through the everyday practices of Catholic nuns as caregivers?

Furthermore, five objectives can be derived from the overall research question:

1. What are the duties and the everyday practices of Catholic nuns in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka?
2. How are Catholic nuns perceived in the Northern Province by the communities they work with?
3. How were the nuns able to improve the lives of the people during the time of war in the North of Sri Lanka?
4. In what ways are Catholic nuns contributing to peacebuilding and reconciliation work in post-conflict Sri Lanka?
5. What can the social work of the Catholic nuns teach us about the role of marginalised figures in peacebuilding processes?

These questions have helped me to narrow down my research topic and ask productive questions to the nuns and to the people they work with. Further, these questions and the various answers which I have received, have led me to make three main observations which I have mentioned to understand at that birthday party and I can present the following main objective and argument, on which this Masters' Thesis is built, as below:

Key Objective

To investigate the role of the Catholic nuns as caregivers and brokers in (post-)conflict situations in the Northern Province.

Argument

The potential of nuns' role as caregivers and mediators is due to their special position within the Church and the society in Sri Lanka and its potentials and limitations lie within the (post-)conflict dynamics of their spaces of agency.

Academic background and contribution

This Master's Thesis is embedded in a wide range of literature, including conflict and post-conflict studies, religious studies and work on reconciliation. This thesis is supported by contemporary geographical research which strives to understand the relationship between religious practices and politics in everyday life. It is underpinned by geographical work that tries to demonstrate this connection through studies of brokerage and other forms of social welfare provided by the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka (Stirrat, 1992, Johnson, 2012 and Goodhand et al., 2009). The role religion plays in conflict has become a more prominent one in recent studies of post-conflict Sri Lanka. Hereby, religious figures have been found to be able to cross discursive boundaries and physical borders in order to do their (social) work for their communities (Johnson, 2012 and Spencer et al., 2015). As Goodhand et al. (2009, 393) write, "boundaries are not seamless, impermeable dividers. Depending on the time, the situation and the people involved, they can be crossed. People do this all the time." These everyday interactions of different actors across various spaces create a network of relationships, which are not less complex than the conflict itself. A space of extensive relations is created through these interactions that happen across borders (Johnson, 2012, 79-81).

Furthermore, Johnson calls this processes 'boundary making' whereby the work of the priests can be defined as boundary management (Johnson, 2016, 6). The crossing of boundaries, may they be physical or discursive and is described by the priests' ability to function as brokers. The priests are as privileged actors. Religion is often connoted with purity and is seen in contrast

“with the dirty world of politics” (Johnson, 2016, 8). This symbolism of purity serves the image of the Church as a non-violent, peaceful and most of all non-political institution. The intentions of the priests, when crossing borders and boundaries, are expected to be from the same pure intentions as their religious peacefulness. Mostly, the priests act upon the obligations of social welfare that they previewed themselves to have towards their community by crossing these boundaries. All these factors lead to their privileged relations with the state and allow them to act across boundaries in their own and their communities’ interests. The religious figures enjoy a high amount of social respect, which helps their status as peaceful and non-violent actors (Johnson, 2016, 7-10).

The possibility of religious leaders to cross boundaries raises a set of questions. First of all, one has to challenge the idea of religion as a pure thing without political interests. Johnson (2016, 10) questions this in her work and finds the work of the priests to appear in grey situations, where it is not clear whether the intentions are out of religious or political believes.

The Church is an important humanitarian institution that provides the people with shelter and covers their basic needs in difficult times. This is not unproblematic and has to be looked at more closely. Many scientists argue that the role of religion is special in times of conflict and reconciliation (Spencer, 2012, 725 and Heslop, 2014, 28). They create divers spaces of interaction and exchange, but as they do so, they become implicated in politics. The relationship between religion and politics is therefore fundamental when we look at everyday religious practices, such as the boundary management by priests (Spencer, 2012, 725). It has to be said that religion is represented as a privileged space for expressions of the community, but at the same time it is stimulated by the political. It becomes clear that the distinction between religion and politics is collapsing at the same time as boundaries are reinforced by religious acts (Heslop, 2014, 28). Politics set boundaries to religion and are simultaneously crossed by religious figures because they are deemed to be exceptional figures who exist in a different sphere of logic and action. The purity of the Church strengthens its ability of boundary management constantly and creates a grey zone of politicized actions (Johnson, 2016, 16).

All these activities and social practices created complex spaces of interaction, which can be summarised as geographies of religious practices. They create relations of power and social connections across boundaries which enabled them to conduct their humanitarian work. All in all, the religious figures appear to have an important potential to act as mediators in conflict and reconciliation (Spencer et al., 2015). This Master Thesis moves beyond the male bias that has preoccupied previous studies at the expense of overlooking the significant work of female clergy within the Church's humanitarian and social mission. More specifically, it intends to show that women are not only able to perform equally important roles within the Catholic Church, but that they do qualitatively different activities within the socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka's Northern Province.

Where stories are told

In order to be able to make a contribution to the current discussion on the involvement of religion in conflict and post-conflict studies, I carried out field research in Sri Lanka between October and December 2016. Over ten weeks, I conducted qualitative research in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, visiting different places and people. I stayed with the nuns and participated in their daily activities, accompanied them to Church, celebrations, human rights meetings, visited families and schools. This allowed me a very close observation and participation in the everyday lives of the nuns. This method is used in many ethnographic researches and seeks to achieve a fundamental, context based knowledge about local issues and practices, which cannot be obtained from afar. Having said that, ethnographic research primarily focuses "on taken for granted social routines, informal knowledge and embodied practices" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, 36). This did not only create a physical, but also an emotional closeness, which has helped me to understand the work of the nuns more deeply and to comprehend their entanglement with the dynamics of the people's lives and the predominant context of violence. Most of the time, I could observe the sisters' activities, take part in them and ask questions simultaneously, this allowed me to be part of their lives and communities.

A key outcome of this research method was that it opened up more doors. As the sisters took an interest in me, they wanted me to see and understand as much as possible of their world. They also connected me with priests and NGO workers, who they thought might be helpful to my work. I could stay at their convents, conduct my interviews after dinner or while we were on the way to different places meeting whomever they had to talk to that day. Mostly, I talked to the sisters, but as they were closely working with parishes, I was able to get some of their opinions, too. Interestingly, the priests' views were in many ways similar to the nuns', but speaking with them, I also found some fundamental differences between them. It was possible for me to gain a profound understanding of the current situation of the people through accompanying workers of the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society in Mannar district. Lastly, I met some human rights activists who have been working alongside the Catholic Church in the north for many years. This has helped me to get a perspective on the sisters' work from a different angle.

It is fundamental to mention here, that most of my informants were able to speak English, so that only in very few cases a translator was needed. Not needing translation enabled a direct dialogue with the interviewees and improved the communication flow. Further, misunderstandings or the loss of information due to translation was not an issue. Having a language in common made it less difficult to conduct the interviews and receive the information I was looking for.

Building a thesis

This Masters' Thesis is structured in seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter, I would like to go back to historic events and show where the nuns' engagement in social work for the suffering people in Sri Lanka's North came from. In Chapter three, I will illustrate the conceptual framework of my thesis. A theoretical background of the nuns' roles and a conceptual introduction is needed to understand the presented findings. Chapter four demonstrates the methodology of my thesis and my own position in the field. I will describe my field research, data collection and data analysis. My positionality in the field is important as it had a great influence on my possibilities in the field and my relationship with the interviewees. Chapter five and six represent the heart of my thesis; here, the stories of the nuns are presented and analysed. A few

stories have been singled out to be retold in Chapter five and will be embedded into the context of the (post-)conflict North of Sri Lanka in Chapter six to gain a context-based understanding of the nuns' personal experiences. In the final Chapter seven, the findings of this research are summarised and evaluated.

2. Past and Present – Historic Background

Religion in Sri Lanka and how Catholicism came to the country

The role that religion plays in the everyday lives of people in Sri Lanka is very important. It defines who they are, what they believe in and what they want to achieve on earth. But religion is not only a defining factor of people's identities, but an indicator of belonging. In Sri Lanka, there can be made a distinction between different religious beliefs; there is a majority of Buddhist people, then there are many Hindus and Muslims, each about a 30% of the population and there is a minority of around 5% Christians, who live mostly at the coast and in the north (Spencer et al., 2015, 20). In Sri Lanka, religion is closely interwoven with ethnic identities, but in this, Catholicism has been singled out, as there are Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics, whereby the Church spans the ethnic divides that have troubled Sri Lanka's history.

Buddhists and Hindus can look back on long traditions, as they have been present on the island long before the first Christian church was built. Catholicism first came to Sri Lanka in the 16th century, along with the Portuguese. The colonizers, who settled down on the west coast of the island, destroyed local temples and built their own churches (Stirrat, 1992, 15-20). The mission of the Church in these days was to increase the numbers in believers. During the time of British colonialization, the Church became more and more important. Through their good relationship with the British colonial powers, the Church managed to create an impressive network of schools and became an important social institution (DeSilva, 1981 and Stirrat, 1992, 15-20). As the missionary priests held an important role in the network of relations with administrative officers and with the local communities, their position was inimitable and increased their powers. The missionaries had the power to achieve whatever idea they had because of their unique position between the administration and the people. Here, for a first time, the priests are described as mediators between different groups and become politicised actors (Stirrat, 1992, 18). Both parties gained profit from this co-dependent relationship.

Being Catholic in this time, and later on, also meant a series of benefits for the believers, which could be traced back mostly on the educational system that had been established. The Catholics

had the privilege to obtain a good education, including the learning of the English language. The rapid growth of the school also meant an increased rate in children going to school and receive an education. Not only in their schooldays did the Catholics benefit from their religion, but afterwards, too. Job positions in the government and in the private sector could be obtained with less efforts and through connections of the Church (Stirrat, 1992, 18-19).

Conflicts based on religion and ethnicity

However, in the mid-19th century, religious conflicts started to appear more and more frequently between Protestants and Buddhists, as the first ones had the intention to convert the later. As they were not very successful and encountered resistance a set of conflicts and attacks followed (Stirrat, 1992, 19). With these conflicts, questions of territorial religious spaces emerged and furthermore, the issue of which spaces belong to which religious group gained importance. After the First World War, the questions of race and ethnicity became more prominent and the call for a true Sinhala identity became connoted with being Buddhist. Nevertheless, the religious leaders, namely the Catholic priests and Buddhist monks, deepened their role as mediators between different parties (Stirrat, 1992, 34-36). The Second World War came and went, and after that, independence was received in 1948 (Rogers, 1987, 394). But still, peacefulness did not come easily to Sri Lanka (Spencer et al., 2015, 3). The changes that followed in politics did have big effects on the Church, as did the implementations of Vatican II. This global reform had big effects on the Church in Sri Lanka, which turned their attention from merely religious praise towards a more open institution. The Vatican II councils were held from 1962 until 1965 in Rome, the centre of Catholicism and had a major impact on the priests and the laity. Their duties shifted towards doing more social work for the local communities, including local traditions and languages into their practices (Stirrat, 1992, 38-45). Furthermore, the roles of the religious leaders were newly defined and encouraged to involve themselves more into the social and economic lives of the parishioners. The Vatican II symbolises a shift from spiritual devotion towards social welfare as the most important task of the Church (Stirrat, 1992, 46). In the years that followed the engagement of the Church in social welfare, charity work and their involvement in community projects became a more central duty. However, this change in the Church's structure did not go

without resistance; many priests did not agree with the alienation of the religious devotion. For some, the religious praises should come first and social welfare afterwards. These different points of view resulted in tensions within the Church in the 70s its Tamil and Sinhalese dioceses. (Stirrat, 1992, 186 and Johnson, 2016, 14).

Nevertheless, the importance of the Church in daily activities stayed intact. This could be noticed during times of the conflict that started in 1983, when the Church provided an open ear and everyday assistance to local people and could reach out to sites and suffering people, who could not be reached by other humanitarian actors (Johnson, 2012 and Spencer et al., 2015, 3 and 31). Still today, the Catholic Church is of major importance in the Christian communities of Sri Lanka. The Church has over a million members (approximately 7% of the population), who live mostly in the north and at the coast (Stirrat, 1992).

First contact and engagement of the catholic women religious in Northern Sri Lanka

The history of the arrival of the Catholic Church and the first contact of the nuns with the people in Sri Lanka were not simultaneous and did not have the same effects on the population. In the paragraphs above, the history of the Church in Sri Lanka as a whole has been described, but the first sisters arrived well after the establishment of the Churches. Like the Catholic Church itself and the priests, the sisters first came to Sri Lanka as missionaries. However, their goal was to impart the values of Christianity to girls, to educate them and to nurse their upbringing. Their focus was, compared to the priests who held mass and taught Christian values to the whole community, just on those young girls (Gnanapragasam, 1998, vi).

The Holy Family Sisters of Bordeaux – The first sisters in Jaffna

The sisters of the Holy Family were invited to Sri Lanka by the Apostolic Vicar of Jaffna in the late 19th century and were the first nuns to settle in Sri Lanka. The idea of this invitation was to gain assistance of the sisters to spread Christian values and educate young girls in northern Sri Lanka. The first encounters of the French sisters with the people in Jaffna were well documented through letters of the sisters to their provincial in Europe. These letters have been collected and show in which context the work of the sisters began. The first of these letters is dated December

8th 1862 and informed the good Mother in France about the poor lives the sisters live in Jaffna and how they tried to educate the children in formation houses and teach them Christian values. The arrival of the first sisters in Jaffna meant small but steady changes for the people. The main tasks of the sisters were to focus on individual care of the children and give their concerns to each and every one. But further, during these first years of nuns in the country, the prime objective was still to convert the locals to Catholicism. The sisters “cared for the orphans, educated the girls, opened new convents and helped the priests in their pastoral activities” (Gnanapragasam, 1998, vi-vii).

But those tasks were not simple, as first of all the nuns had to adapt to a new context and learn a whole new culture. Over the years, Sri Lankan nuns took over the duties of their European sisters and started to take care of the people themselves.

Overview of religious institutes of women in Sri Lanka

The UCAN directory⁴, which is a database of catholic dioceses in Asia, shows that in Sri Lanka there are nine provinces with twelve different dioceses. This means nothing other than the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is organized in twelve dioceses, each of them has a Bishop appointed by the Pope and several priests in charge of the parishes. Most dioceses do not consist of more than a few dozen priests, but usually of more than hundred religious sisters. The sisters are organized in different congregations that all have a motto, a goal which they would like to achieve and which they dedicate their lives to. Not all congregations have convents in every diocese, but the most popular ones like the Sisters of the Holy Family, the Sisters of the Holy Cross, the Carmelite Sisters and the Sisters of Charity can be found in most places all over Sri Lanka. In the archdiocese of Colombo there can be found the biggest number of congregations. There are 24 religious institutes of women. However, as the percentage of the Catholic population is highest in Mannar, this is where the Church has a huge influence on the people⁵.

⁴ See: <http://directory.ucanews.com/statistics/sri-lanka-mannar/489> for statistics on the dioceses of Sri Lanka.

⁵ See: <http://directory.ucanews.com/statistics/sri-lanka-mannar/489> for statistics on the dioceses of Sri Lanka.

To give an impression on the different congregations, below can be found a list of the religious institutes of women of the diocese of Colombo⁶:

1. Apostolic Good Shepherd Sisters
2. Benedictine Sisters of Our Lady of Grace & Compassion
3. Claritian Missionary Sisters
4. Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod
5. Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart
6. Daughters of St. Camillus
7. Dominican Sisters of Malta
8. Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena - Philippines
9. Franciscan Missionaries of Christ King
10. Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Our Lady of Lanka
11. Little Sisters of the Poor
12. Missionaries of Charity (Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta)
13. Sister of the Holy Family of Bordeaux (Jaffna)
14. Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary
15. Sisters of Mary Immaculate
16. Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help
17. Sisters of Providence
18. Sisters of the Divine Saviour (Salvatorians)
19. Sisters of the Holy Angels
20. Sisters of the Holy Cross (Menzingen)
21. Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux
22. Somascan Missionary Sisters
23. The Apostolic Carmel
24. The Daughters of Providence for the Deaf & Dumb

⁶ See: <http://directory.ucanews.com/statistics/sri-lanka-mannar/489> for statistics on the dioceses of Sri Lanka.

The importance of religion in relation to politics

In this short introduction of the history of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, the importance of religious practices becomes visible. Further, the close relationship that religion seems to have with the everyday politics is remarkable (Spencer, 2012, 725). As religious practices are a fundamental part of the daily activities in Sri Lanka, this is where one can understand best the relationship between religion and politics (Johnson, 2016, 2-5). Therefore, religious practices must be studied to gain a deeper understanding of what religion can achieve in conflict and post-conflict Sri Lanka. The role of the Catholic Church is not a static one, but can be described as a dynamic practice of daily interactions. These interactions include the crossing of discursive boundaries and physical borders in order to do their (social) work for their communities (Johnson, 2012, 77-80).

From the beginning, the Catholic Church was involved in administrative work which means that they interacted with the public as much as with policies (Stirrat, 1992, 15-20). This shows that from the very start, the Church was involved in decision making and had a great reputation and received respect from all parties. Further, the changes of Vatican II enabled the Church to become more invested in social and political questions of the people (Stirrat, 1992, 46). This shift became most visible during the years of war, when the religious actors were able to cross boundaries and mediate in political situations on behalf of the Tamil civilian population (Spencer et al., 2015).

3. Conceptual Frameworks – Religious women in war and peacebuilding

Conflict and post-conflict studies

The field of conflict and post-conflict studies, religious studies and conflict resolution studies has become more and more complex in the recent years as have the conflicts itself. A war is no more a fight between two parties, rather it has become a complex field of multiple actors, including local and global interests and non-government organisations. Hayward (2015, 307) describes this new dynamic of war as "asymmetric in nature" and explains how local and global interests shape the course and outcome of a conflict.

Not only has the way a war is fought changed, but also the ways of how peace is built. The dynamics of conflict and its understanding were followed by a change, "contemporary peacebuilding sees formal negotiations as one small piece of a larger agenda of social, political, and economic transformations necessary for sustainable peace" (Hayward, 2015, 307). This means that peace does not just start where war ends and one party wins; no, it goes far beyond that. To achieve a stage of peace, a transitional process from conflict to peace is needed. This process is often formed through negotiations. In many cases the recognition for this work is on the civil society and social institutions, which, in the case of northern Sri Lanka, often appear in form of the Catholic Church (Goodhand et al., 2009, 679-698). Here, the local component comes into the picture; and the predominance of the local structure becomes included into the conflict resolution process. Various sectors that expand from social and political life to education and media, are being taken into account and integrated into creating a lasting peace, which should be sustainable to all (Hayward, 2015, 307-309). The intersection of the socio-political context with war is best understood through analysing the interactions that take place within and among different groups and individuals in and across spaces of conflict (Johnson, 2012, 2016). Not only war can be understood better through looking more closely at these networks of interactions but also the processes that will lead towards a more peaceful situation.

In conflict situation and in peacebuilding, the intersection with religion has not often been considered, however, in the recent years, a field of religious peacebuilding has emerged. This new field of scholars and practicals “argues that religious dynamics in conflict must be grappled with seriously, and that the religious sector – as a key element of civil society that has historically been marginalized form of peacebuilding – should be engaged effectively in comprehensive and strategic peace programming” (Hayward, 2015, 307). Looking at religion as a part of conflict management and peacebuilding enables new perspectives and highlights old problems from a new angle (Johnson, 2016).

Women of faith during conflict and peace transitional processes

Border-crossing and intersections of boundaries

In recent geographic literature, the relation between physical space and the possibility of religious figures to mediate in political situations across the border of these spaces has increased and gained more and more interest. This opportunity of religion to act across physical boundaries and mediate in highly political situations, has given conflict studies new perspectives on the work of religion in war and peacebuilding (Johnson, 2012, Spencer et al., 2015). Specifically, the potential of religious player to act as brokers in the interest of the civil society became more and more evident in the work of Johnson (2012, 2016), as she described the potential of the Catholic Bishop in Mannar to discuss war decisions with the Sri Lankan army and to establish a safe zone in Madhu.⁷

Invisibility and marginality of women religious

In an interesting collection of papers about “women, religion and peacebuilding” the editors Hayward and Marshall (2015) set the subtitle “illuminating the unseen” and explain the role of religious women in peacebuilding. They show, how important work the women are doing to

⁷ Janowski, Kris. 23.11.1999. Sri Lanka: UNHCR dismay at Madhu violations and
Janowski, Kris. 30.11.1999. Sri Lanka: Madhu cease-fire negotiations.

create peace after situations of conflict, however they note that this doing is not often visible (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 4). The book highlights the marginality of women in peacebuilding in general and shows that their marginalisation can be reflected in the male-dominated society. Most religious institutions are dominated by men and have distinct roles for women and men. Further, the hierarchy of the institutions, especially of the Catholic Church, are organised by gender and status. This means, that women are marginalised into gendered roles of caring and looking after the people, whereas men are more likely to inhabit authoritarian roles and make the rules. This ambivalence of invisibility and marginality can be seen in the exclusion of women in decision making processes and their “struggle to have an equal voice with male religious clergy” (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 14). This reinforces gender inequality and forces religious women to live a life at the margins and stand in the shadow of men.

However negative this may sound, this forced invisibility also creates opportunities for the women. As more and more often the domination of men in “religious institutional leadership” has been recognised, religious peacebuilding organisations have started to create more initiatives for women and have given them more significant roles in peacebuilding. Religions for Peace has for example created a “Women’s Mobilization Network” in 1998 to simplify the way of women into peacebuilding programs (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 15). This has given the women a voice and an active role, but has also lead to further separation between male and female programs of peacebuilding.

On one side, the invisibility of women religious has set them boundaries and complicates their work. For example, as less is heard of their actions, women groups receive less support and funding than male dominated ones. But there is also the other side to this story, many women find their invisibility and marginality to be useful. As women are not the leaders of religious organisations they can afford to be more flexible, work in a safer environment as they do not have to fear conflicts about inhabiting power, and are able to mobilise people outside of the power structures of the Church (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 15). Further, they do not need to occupy themselves with bureaucracy and can use their time to build close connections to the people at the grassroots. This allows them an intimate relationship to the people they work for and offers them a close perspective on what the people need (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 15).

Therefore, their invisibility can be seen as a kind of protection and leaves them with great room for their individual agency. Exemplary for nuns, it has been observed that in Northern Ireland in the late 20th century became more radical than the priests as the women were “not grounded in the conservative local institutions as much as the priests” (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 15). This lead the nuns to be more independent in their spaces of agency than the priest. This development could also be observed in northern Sri Lanka (see Chapter 5).

The extraordinary of ordinary everyday activities

When looking at the work of the Catholic Church in northern Sri Lanka, one can not fail to notice how special the involvement into the people’s daily lives is. However extraordinary the events and the actions of the Church may seem, they were the everyday reality of the Tamil society in the north during turbulent times. In the diaries of Ben Bavinck, who was working as a missionary as he first came to Sri Lanka in 1954 and later worked for relief and rehabilitation in the country, these daily events are documented. They show how these events and the activities of the Church were both ordinary and extraordinary. Listening to the sisters, telling their stories and reading Bavinck’s experiences, have both shown how “the everydayness or ordinariness of events” (Bavinck, 2011, 20-21). Everyday there was fighting at the same time as there was life going on. Simultaneously, the religious actors prayed, held mass and cared for the wounded and sick, while in other places, priests and nuns mediated and fought for the rights of the people.⁸ Similar to the question whether their work has been special or ordinary is the question on if everything that has been happening is just the everyday. Not only Bavinck had faced this dualism of the (extra-) ordinary, but so have scholars of social science. Rebecca Walker (2013, 86) writes that “the concept of the everyday is both complex, and, paradoxically, due to its ubiquity, often reduced to something that is straightforward and obvious.” Crook (1998,160) describes the ordinary as “the familiar and reliable”, which means that the extraordinary has to be found outside the normal state of things. This is seconded by Walker (2013, 86-87) who then follows that if “the ordinary connoting that which is timeless and commonplace, accordingly, the term *everyday* implies a life to be static, fixed, and, consequently, mundane.” For the conflict situation in Sri

⁸ Interview Tamil Catholic Priest, Jaffna, November 2016

Conflict, Peace and Catholic Nuns

Lanka and the brokerage and social work of the Catholic Church this means, as their actions were happening on a regular basis and became a normal thing, they can be described with the concept of the *everyday*, however extraordinary they may have been.

4. Methodology and positionality

The following section contains details on the process of research. It includes the description of the employed qualitative research methods and explanations how the research field was defined. In a next step, data collection and analysis are illustrated. At last, I will reflect on my own position in the field and discuss the limitations of the applied methodology used in this thesis.

How to do fieldwork

So far, only a theoretical framework of different concepts has been given, but to understand the research data and the discussion of the findings, a more practical approach is needed. A thorough understanding of data can only emerge through combining theory and practice. This section is to understand the choice of my field, my first contacts with the informants and the methodological approach on the research topic. Mostly this section shows how I developed my research from theoretical to practical.

Qualitative research methods

In order to study the influence of religious figures on everyday occurrences in Sri Lanka's north, I have chosen a qualitative approach. To understand individual stories, to find connections between them and to make interpretations, qualitative methods are used (Gibbs, 2010, 5 and Flick et al., 2010, 14-24). In my case, I have used a mostly ethnographic approach in data collection, where I did participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, mostly with one person sometimes more, group interviews and discussions. To use participant observation as a main methodological tool has helped to gain a deep understanding of the everyday lives of the nuns and their local communities in the Northern Province. There, the role and practices of the Catholic Church have been studied through participating in their activities and observing what the nuns did and with whom they interact. Participant observation meant, taking part in the sisters' daily activities, going to church with them, taking part in ceremonies, helping them in community project and accompanying them to meetings with non-governmental organisations to discuss current issues of the people in the north. The interviews were held with

nuns, priests, other members of the Catholic Church and parish people of the local communities. Other than this, I did some expert interviews with key informants and NGO (non-governmental organisation) representatives, who work with the Christian Church in Vavuniya, Mannar, Jaffna and Colombo.

Access to the field

Gaining access to my field of research turned out to be less difficult than I first thought. As the Department of Political Geography of the University of Zurich has a strong relationship and exchange with the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka, I was able to get in contact with people from that university. They were most helpful in assisting me to obtain my student visa and the first Sri Lankan people I got to know who could give me advice on the current situation. It also was through a meeting with Yves, a Swiss NGO worker, and his close friend Ruki, a Sri Lankan human rights activist, at the University of Zurich that I was able to get contact information of a nun in northern Sri Lanka. After getting in contact with that sister, who delightfully offered to host me at her convent for at least a month, I started planning out my research in more detail. I planned on meeting some people in Colombo first, including visiting the University of Colombo in order to meet one of the geography professors, and going to the north afterwards, staying with Sister Nichola and meeting her fellow sisters, maybe visiting Jaffna and Mannar, as I had been given some information on people to contact there. Most of these contacts I had received from Ruki, Yves or their friend Sunesh, who is originally from Mannar, but due to some complications of his engagement for human rights, had to leave the country.

Therefore, upon arriving in Sri Lanka, I had a list of possible persons to talk to, two new Sri Lankan friends, people from the University of Peradeniya, whom I could contact if there were any problems, and a nun who was eagerly waiting for me. To know, even before going to a foreign country, that I already had a network of trustworthy people, gave me reassurance and courage to start my field work. I was ready and excited to begin my work, but soon found out that I had to be patient and adjust myself to the Sri Lankan way of life, where hardly anything went the way I expected, but always turned out to be even better than anticipated.

Questions and answers – Collecting data – Where and who

When I arrived in the Sri Lanka, I soon realised that my initial concept of staying at one convent for a longer amount of time, was limiting my research to some extent and would not allow me to see the whole picture. This means that, had I stayed in Vavuniya at the same convent for a couple of weeks, I would have been able to get a detailed insight of the lives of a few sisters, but as I decided to broaden the geographic space of my topic, it was possible to receive a wider range of information while talking to nuns from different congregations, places and backgrounds. Looking back, I believe this to be the best decision I have made. It allowed me to understand not only how the nuns operated their daily lives today and which roles they play in reconciliation and community rehabilitation work, but it also became obvious how deeply interwoven the network of nuns are.

Defining the field



⁹ The Northern Province and its most important places

⁹ <http://www.nillanthan.net/?p=154>. Access on 5.5.2017

As I decided to meet people, mostly nuns and priests from all over the Northern Province, I broadened my initial topic of only looking at Vavuniya and enlarged my area of research to the whole Northern. This meant adjusting the field. I made the choice to look beyond just one place and changed my focus from a space-focuses to a more fluid people-focused approach. However, not wanting to lose focus and to broaden my field to much, I decided on interviewing mostly people from the Northern Province, as here the war has struck the most (Spencer et al., 2015). Further, I had learnt that most sisters are being relocated by their provincial supervisor within the Northern Province, which meant that the nuns are part of a dynamic network and in constant exchange between different convents but within spatial boundaries, the Northern Province, and discursive boundaries, within their congregation. By moving with them and from one convent to the next, I came to understand the importance of this network.

Another reason, why I had chosen the northern part of Sri Lanka for my research is, because in this area the influence of the Catholic Church in the people's lives is exceptional. In previous research, the role of the Catholic Church in the north has already been looked at (Johnson, 2012 and 2016, Spencer et al., 2015, Goodhand et al., 2009 and Brown, 2015). But none of them had a focus on nuns, which will be looked at in this thesis.

The special focus lies on the Northern Province, which is divided in five districts. There is Mannar District which shows the highest Catholic population in the country (Johnson, 2016). Here the influence of the Church is not only visible but can be felt, too. The Bishop of Mannar also played an important political role, as explained by Johnson (2016). Further there is Vavuniya District where many people were brought to hospitals during the war as it was most of the time beyond the Tigers' territory and where after the war the rehabilitation of the wounded was started. It has to be mentioned here that Vavuniya was also and still is important for people traveling further north to Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Jaffna. Vavuniya was the place where the checkpoint marathon to the north began and for a long point the last checkpoint of the Sri Lankan army.¹⁰ North of Vavuniya is Kilinochchi District, here people were displaced many times during the war and today the ones that can are resettling and going back to their place of origin. East of Kilinochchi and North of Vavuniya, Mullaitivu District is located. It is the place where the Tsunami

¹⁰ Interview, Tamil Catholic Sister, Kilinochchi, October 2016

in 2004 has destroyed the big parts of the coast, where the war has ended and the most destruction and death took place, still today this part of the country is marked by the war's effects.¹¹ This district has a low population density and the destruction of the war is highly visible. The fifth district is Jaffna District in the North, where many Tamil Hindus live and where for many years the stronghold of the LTTE was to be located during the conflict.

Even through only describing the five districts shortly, it becomes clear how different they are, but what they have in common is the nuns who take care of the people in need. This is the aspect I wanted to focus on.

Finding informants

As mentioned before, my first key person was Ruki, a Sinhalese human rights activist. He helped me to gain access to the field and introduced me to the first sisters and priests in Vavuniya and Mannar. My second key person was Sister Nichola, a senior sister who has been working in Vavuniya for many decades. Through her, I was able to meet other Sisters of Charity, which is the congregation the sister belongs to. She introduced me to her fellow sisters and even organised a few meetings for me. Further, she suggested more people I could talk to and called them ahead of time to let them know I was coming to talk to them.

Knowing Sister Nichola and Ruki opened many doors for my research. Upon getting in touch with new sisters, I only had to mention their names and I was welcomed into their convents and homes. From then on, I had no trouble finding new interview partners. I proceeded with the snowball or chain method (Patton, 1990) to produce more data and to find further insights on the sisters' work. Every sister and every priest I met, suggested me with other people to talk to and provided me with useful contacts. This network of the Catholic Church was fundamental for my research in two ways; first of all, it provided me with enough interviewees to fill four notebooks and secondly, it made me aware of how important this network is for the religious themselves.

I realised that my key informants had been of utter importance, without whom I would not have been able to gaining access to the field so quickly and meet so many people. Looking back, I think

¹¹ Interview Tamil Catholic Sister, Puthukudiyiruppu, November 2016

that it would have been more difficult to meet sisters and priests without knowing Ruki and Sister Nicholas. Through them, I was introduced in a very exclusive network of religious and had the privilege to take part in private gatherings of priest and nuns. This allowed me a very intimate and personal insight on their personalities and on their understanding of the situation in the north. Further, my close relations with the priests and nuns, also had an effect on how I was treated by the parish people. They treated me with respect and never questioned my presence or intentions. This made it possible for me to take part in Sunday mass, sitting in the midst of the Church, surrounded by the parishioners, talking to them freely and opened up a new perspective on the work of the nuns.

To sum up, I have to admit that only by entering the field with Ruki and Sister Nichola, I was able to gain access to interviewees in the whole Northern Province, meeting nuns, priests, the temporary Bishop of Mannar, several human rights activists, people from the Red Cross Society in Mannar and parishioners.

Talking to people in the south was a different story. Even though, I also worked with the snowball method. I had to find a person to start with by myself this time. Being in Colombo for a few days, I went to explore the city and passed several convents. Curious as I was, I just knocked at the door and was, after introducing myself and the purpose of my visit, welcomed to the convent. There I talked to several sisters, who then gave me further contacts to meet.

During my field work, it became clear, how dependent I was on my interviewees and key informants, they were the ones who allowed me full access to my research field and provided me with more information than I ever thought possible. However, I had to be careful not to become too close with the interviewees as I needed to keep a professional distance as a researcher. In order to understand this importance, I would like to present an anonymised table of participants below (Table of Participants).

Fieldwork data - Table of Participants

Interviewee	June 2016	October 2016	November 2016	December 2016	Total
Places	Zurich	Seeduwa, Colombo, Nuwara Eliya.	Vavuniya, Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Nochchikulam, Nanathan, Nusali, Madhu, Colombo.	Mannar, Kollimodai, Mullaitivu, Puthukkudiyirruppu, Jaffna, Mannar, Seeduwa.	
Academic		1	1		2
Group discussion				1	1
Mothers' group			1		1
Sinhalese Catholic nun		2	2		4
Sinhalese Catholic priest		1	1		2
Sinhalese human rights activist	1		1		2
Swiss human rights activist		1			1
Tamil Catholic nun			22	5	27
Tamil Catholic priest			6	1	7
Tamil displaced family			3		3
Tamil human rights activist			1		1
Tamil Indian nun			2	1	3
Tamil Jesuit priest			1		1
Tamil NGO volunteer group			1		1
Tamil NGO worker			2		2
Total	1	5	44	8	58

In the end, the results of field work as presented in the table above, include two group discussions with Red Cross volunteers, one sisters' meeting and 55 interviewees with nuns, priests, human rights activists, NGO workers, parishioners and academics. The interviews varied in length,

content and quality. Further, I conducted multiple interviews with a few people, meaning that I talked to around five of the interviewees at least twice, which is not included in the table above. Every informant is only counted once in the register. As visible, most of the interviews were conducted in the Northern Province, whereby a large number of them took place at different locations, each under unique circumstances, some in a rather private environment across a dining table, others were held outside or in the presence of others. This makes it difficult to judge the quality of data collection, but I believe it can also be as a strength of method, showing a variety of settings and information that can be gained in different environments. Some were rich in descriptions of the war, whereas others gave a better insight in what it means to be a nun in Sri Lanka. There were interviews on past experiences and others that focused more on the current situation. Yet, they all highlight how various people and places are and how they influence each other's possibilities.

Other than interviewing people, I did participant observation by taking part in the sisters' everyday lives. This included living with them, cooking together, going to schools with them, visiting their communities, getting to know their own projects and helping them by taking over small tasks, taking part in religious rituals and going to mass with them. All of these activities allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of who the nuns really are and what they do every day.

In addition to this, I collected documents, brochures, tables, newspapers and other texts on the Catholic Church in the north of Sri Lanka, including an extensive literature research in the Women's Education and Research Centre in Colombo and the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, which is located in Colombo, too.

Finding connections between individual stories – Analysing data

Coming back from my field work in Sri Lanka, I knew I had a lot to work with. I counted four notebooks filled with notes of interviews, thoughts on what I had experienced, basic Tamil vocabulary to survive a bus ride and say hello, a few maps and drawings of school children; books on religion,

war and peace, reconciliation and women, statistics from the Sri Lankan government, slips of newspapers and photographs. Those materials build the bases of my thesis. The quantity of data that had been gained during my stay in Sri Lanka was enormous and claimed for a qualitative approach of analysis.

Mayring (2010) describes a qualitative method called “content analysis” which aims to first make generalisations and in a second step to reduce the data. This process helps to filter and structure the gained data material. According to Mayring (2010, 64-66), there are three different types of approaching the content analysis; the summarising content analysis and the explicating content analysis. The first analysis aims to reduce the material through making generalisations, rewriting and merging the empirical outcomes. Secondly, the explicating content analysis intends to find explanations for polysemous and dense parts of the material. This happens by adding further explanatory passages. Lastly, categorising and restructuring the data help to gain new insights and findings (Mayring, 2010, 63-66 and Flick, 2007, 408-417). In this Masters’ Thesis, all of the above methods of analysis have been used, but as the research material and field data was rather extensive, summarising and structuring data was very important, and allowed the reduction of material and increased the outcome in quality.

In order to implement Mayring’s analysis method, a coding process is needed. This procedure summarised, structures and categorises data, whereby different attributes are labelled and parts of the interviews are highlighted, which then are formed to codes. In my case, some of the codes simply emerged from the data, whereas others I had thought of beforehand and applied deductively to the material (Flick, 2007, 386-393). Those codes had first emerged from theoretical background material and was later rediscovered in my data. The others, which I like to call my personal findings, were not mentioned anywhere and emerged inductively from the data. Combining both, deductive and inductive coding conceded me a wholesome analysis of my field material.

As all my data was written down in my journals, I first had some troubles coding the material, but by simply reducing the whole data first, it became possible. I therefore concentrated my analysis

only on the parts of data that would later help me answer my research question. First, through simply remembering what I could recall from memory, which interviews and stories were still alive in my head. This helped me to find a focus. Then, reading and re-reading the texts helped me to become more familiar with the passages and helped me to gain a deeper understanding of my material. This was necessary for new perspectives to emerge and for a new comprehension of the text.

Furthermore, the aim of my thesis was to get an insight on the sisters' lives and roles, therefore I decided to retell some of their experiences in later parts of this thesis, which allows a better understanding of the situations the nuns have faced, rather than only explaining my findings in an abstract manner through codes. This focus on my empirical data allows a detailed overview of my findings and it becomes possible to emphasise the most crucial stories.

Being a researcher – Positionality

The position of a researcher in the field and her relation to the informants is crucial to the outcome of the final work. Using a mostly ethnographic approach, I faced the most common problem of ethnographic research, the ideal distance between researcher and informants. Finding the balance between getting too close or staying too distant to the people who helped me and gave me their time and knowledge, was not always simple. To keep a scientific perspective, which means to stay as objective as possible and going native are the two extreme positions. Staying both objective and leading a close relationship with the interviewees was rather challenging.

My own identity in the field became fundamental to my research, it decided whether people accepted me into their homes, were open to my questions and willing to show me around or not.

One of the challenges I faced, was being from Switzerland, a foreign rich country. This global north-south difference was an imbalance I had to confront. The perception of the Sri Lankan people of Switzerland is that of a rich, developed, beautiful country with lots of opportunities and hardly any problems. This led them to believe that these attributes would all automatically be true for myself, too, as I am Swiss. On one hand, they were very curious to meet me, one of

the nuns even requested me to meet her, as she had heard about the Swiss girl going from convent to convent, talking to the sisters. Further, the people I met sometimes thought of me as a link and source to money, as of their perception of Swiss persons, I must certainly have enough friends who would be willing to help them financially. Not being able to fulfil this wish, was, contrary to my apprehension, not a limiting factor, as the people still enjoyed talking to me and getting to know more about my work and helping me out however they could. Being foreign also provided me with a special position within the Sri Lankan society, as most people treated me with respect and were very helpful in showing me directions, inviting me for dinner and giving me information.

On the other hand, there were certain negative aspects of being a foreigner. Most difficult was the language barrier that I had to face. Even though, I learnt a few words of both Tamil and Sinhala, I was not able to follow a conversation between the local people. However, interviewing mostly clergy, I had the advantage that nearly all of them spoke English, as mastering this language belonged to their training. This meant, that only when I did group discussions, I needed a translator. Both times that I used a translator, I felt more distant to the informants than when talking to people from the clergy, and was never completely certain, whether I had received an accurate translation besides knowing that my translator spoke all languages without difficulties.

Further, another factor that shaped my research was being a woman. In the Sri Lankan society, women and men are perceived and treated differently and have certain moral values to accomplish. As a foreigner, I did not strictly belong to the category of Sri Lankan women, but held a special position as a female foreigner. Being a woman meant for me, that I could easily access women in the community and I discovered that there were no barriers while discussing even highly delicate subjects, such as domestic violence or sexual abuse. The trust which I came across was remarkable and surprised me. It must be noted here, that these trusting relationships were mostly possible in more private settings and in situations where there were only women. As we talked about highly sensitive topics, it could not be expected of the women to be this trustworthy. But being among women meant, topics like children, marriage, men, social inequality, violence and harassment were discussed, whereas if there were men present, such

themes were not only not discussed, but the women also spoke less and left the spotlight to the men. To see this differences in behaviour was very interesting for me and fundamental in my analysis and the understanding of the context of this thesis.

Methodological critique

Doing field research, problematic situations are bound to happen and the chosen methods can be challenging at times. First of all, applying my methodology was not always possible the way I had wished and sometimes did not fit the predominant situations. This meant that I had to be flexible and adapt my methodology all the time, which was challenging but at the same time allowed a certain range of approaches and methods. It shows that no matter how much you prepare yourself before going to the field by reading theories and collect information on the place of research, in reality, once you are in the field, difficulties and possibilities that you did not think of before hand, do occur. Also, methodology looks different on paper than in the field and the same interview questions will not bring the same amount of results with different people.

As I did interviews under various circumstances and with people of different backgrounds, it can be said that a wide range of opinions and experiences can be found in this thesis, but one can not conclude by telling one singular story of Tamils in the Northern Province. It was not a problem to find interviewees, rather the challenge laid in choosing the most interesting and promising informants, this happened upon first impressions on my side and upon recommendations of others. Sometimes it was difficult to discover which person could provide information on which topic, but in the end, I came to the conclusion that it did not matter much whom I had chosen to talk to, as each person had their individual experiences and knowledge which led to a very diverse result. However, it was necessary to give good guidance during the interviews, as I did mostly unstructured and semi-structured interviews, including what I would like to call life histories where I simply asked the nuns to retell their lives and the most important events, the interviewees had the freedom to focus on topics and experiences they found most valuable to share. On one side, this provided me with a unique view on events and allowed an intimate insight in the sisters' lives, on the other side, they could withhold information. By asking follow-

up questions, I was able to fill the gaps and to gain the information I was looking for. Looking back, it might have been interesting to do a few more standardised surveys in order to see whether it made a difference to the open questions.

The biggest challenge for me was not the field work, but the analysis that had to be done upon returning to Switzerland. Having a huge quantity of materials, it became evident that a reduction of data was needed. Through using Mayring's (2010) data analysis method it became possible to divide the interviews into those with dense information and big value and others that only provided me with background information and helped me understand certain situations better, but were not fundamental to my research and were there for not used or only partly used. This decision was difficult to make because I felt a strong connection to the interviewees and knew most of them well, I had to try creating a certain distance between the interviews and myself.

In conclusion, I can emphasise that I found theory and practice of field work to be rather different from each other. Even though most difficult situations I faced in Sri Lanka could not have been foreseen and were not in the books, they were manageable and turned out to be of big value to my research. This does not mean that theory can be neglected, on the contrary, theory helps to navigate, prepare and after the field work to analyse data. But in the field, practical skills are as important as the academic knowledge. Further, I must admit that my research can not be seen as a conclusive survey on Catholic nuns in Sri Lanka, rather than giving a complete picture, my thesis can be understood as a view through a window, showing the lives of the sisters I have met and discussing their points of views. Nevertheless, this qualitative research is an enlargement on the research on the influence of religious figures in situations of war and the transition to peace. Further, it inaugurates a new field of possible studies on religious women and their impact on the Sri Lankan society.

5. The power of stories

In the following chapter, I would like to share a few life histories of some of the sisters I have had the opportunity to talk to. Meeting dozens of sisters, hearing about their lives and their achievements and struggles, has provided me with incredible stories to tell. For this chapter, I have chosen to write about the sisters whose narratives were most significant to my work. Furthermore, their recounts include historic events and the involvement of the nuns in their communities during these times. Additionally, these stories show not only unique perspectives and various possibilities and personal interests of the sisters, but, as they were in various places at different times, show the connections between spaces in the Northern Province and their unique traits. Therefore, I have intentionally chosen to present the story of sister from different districts to show a variety and to include different historic incidents where the nuns have been actively engaging in political scenes, mediated, educated and taken care of the people in need. However, in the following, after focusing on the nuns' activities during the war, an emphasis will be set on today's duties and possibilities of the sisters.

Sisters of Charity

As it has been described in Chapter 2, there are 24 different congregations of women religious in Sri Lanka. Hereby, the Sisters of Charity are the only congregation that has not been separated into a northern and a southern province. Not separating the congregation into different provinces, has stimulated a strong coherence and created a common identity of the sisters¹². This bond becomes prominent through the relationships between Sinhalese and Tamil sisters. They treat each other with respect, show affection and compassion for the others' activities and support one another in difficult situations with words and deeds. There is, contrary to other religious institutes of women, no ethnic barrier within the congregation.

The Sisters of Charity have, like all other congregations, guiding principles. Their name already refers to a charitable life, which is their motto. The nuns have commissioned their lives into the

¹² Interview, Sister Rita, Mannar, November 2016

service of the people. Their activities are guided by compassion, mercy and as their principle of charity is defined, they help the poor and others in need. All in all, it can be said, that the Sisters of Charity are like a religious welfare organisation that is sponsored by the Church and its parishioners to support the weaker people.

Sister Jeyam

When I met Sister Jeyam for the first time, I was deeply impressed by her openness to talk about the war and her experiences during those times. She is a passionate woman, who fights for what she thinks is right and does not hesitate to undertake hard work for it. I have met Sister Jeyam first in Vavuniya where she was visiting one of her fellow Sisters of Charity and for the second time in Mannar. Both times, the elderly sister, who now retired from active duty as a nun and simply lives the life of a woman religious, the nun recounted historic events through her own eyes and highlighted personal experiences. In the following, her life as a nun will be looked at more closely, shading light on her activities as a sister and show the possibilities and limitations of her work as a religious.

Beginnings – Caring for the tea plantation workers

Sister Jeyam decided to become a nun in order to serve for the poorest of the poorest, saying that “in the foundation, we are all god’s children” and that everyone should be treated equally. In December 1981, she joined the congregation of the Sisters of Charity. In her early years as a sister, she questioned why some people were discriminated and others could profit from treating those badly. As a young nun, Sister Jeyam started working in the tea plantations in the hill country, where she saw misery and unbearable, small rooms to live, where she went to visit the workers in their homes and talked to them. At the same time an Italian priest was working with the sisters in the hills. He had learnt both Tamil and Sinhala and wanted to write about the injustice the plantation workers were experiencing. His goal was to raise awareness of the poor circumstances the people were living in and to improve the people’s living standards. The workers received only a small payment and were not looked after well. The priest wanted to

published a book with a title like “The tears of the tea bush” to give an impression on how poor the tea pluckers lives were and was sent out of the country over night. His work was not for nothing, a Jesuit priest started to introduce a volunteer teacher system and the children started to attend school up until Grad 11, which is until around the age of seventeen. The priests recognised the workers as human beings and not as working animals. Sister Jeyam actively participated in this teaching program and educated and cared for the Hill people, which is the name the Tamil plantation workers had been given. It was during this time in the eighties, that the fighting started in Jaffna, but the tensions were also visible in the tea estates. “The Sri Lankan army killed Tamils in the north, but the government kept all the news about Tamils a secret and misinformed the people”, described the nun, “even the people did not know why the Tamils were fighting and why the Sinhalese hated them.”¹³ But, this hatred, led the Sinhalese were afraid of an increase of Tamils and this led to an extreme course of action; women got paid if they had an abortion. Each abortion was worth 500 rupees, which meant a lot of money for the poor pregnant ladies, but also meant the loss of the women’s dignity. The nuns visited these women and talked to them and grieved with them. When, after thirteen years, Sister Jeyam left Ratnapura, the people cried and wept for the loss of their friend and caregiver. Sister Jeyam calls her time in the estates her spring time as a young sister.

The war and its effects on the sister’s work – limitations and new possibilities

After working in the hills for thirteen years, the nun was sent to Kilinochchi, which is a district of the Northern Province and at that time was under the control of the LTTE. Her provincial supervisor relocated her there because the people were suffering from the rising conflict between the LTTE and the army. It has to be noted here, that the Sisters of Charity is the only congregation that is not divided into one southern and one northern community, there is just one congregation within the whole of Sri Lanka. This shows that the sisters were and still are one big family and that their ethnicity does not matter to them. It has helped them to understand one another and to care for the others and to see that they are no different, no matter where they were born. Secondly, it also shows the closeness of the sisters, whenever they would go and

¹³ Interview Sister Jeyam, Mannar, November 2016

visit a convent of their congregation they would be welcomed to their family and have a safe place to stay. While Sister Jeyam was in Kilinochchi, she was often using a bicycle, often travelling distances up to 50 kilometres a day. She would use the bicycle to visit people in their homes and look after them, doing counselling. One day, while she was at school teaching, a helicopter brought bombs, and the nun went to see where the bombs had fallen and brought two girls who had pieces of shells in their bodies to the hospital, where they were denied entry as their wounds apparently were not serious enough. So, Sister Arul Mary, who was also working in Kilinochchi at this time, removed the shell pieces from the girls without any pain medicine. "Looking back on events like this, seems like a nightmare to me."¹⁴

The nuns' situation during the early two-thousands was very difficult, they had to get a travel pass when they wanted to go from Vavuniya to Kilinochchi, which the army did not like, but being a religious and wearing the habit, their religious clothing, the sisters were nearly always granted access to Tamil territory. But, the army opened their bags, checked their identity cards and questioned them upon letting them pass, which was humiliating for the sisters. When they were displaced from Kilinochchi to Madhu, which was a jungle area in the district of Mannar. There they had to live in small shelters and tents, before, after two and a half years they could return to Kilinochchi. The sister recalls the reunion with the people in Kilinochchi as a happy memory, as they were joyous to the presence of the sisters. The presence of the sisters gave the people strength and hope for a better future. During her seven years of work in Kilinochchi, Sister Jeyam mostly did house visits and worked at schools. These schools were not restricted to Catholics, but rather open to Hindus too. The nun describes the relationship between Hindus and Catholic as friendly and says that they (the Catholics) did not want to convert the Hindus, but preferred to keep their relationship strong and chummily. The Hindus loved the sisters, as they cared for them equally like they looked after the Catholics. The religious leaders of the Hindus did not visit the people's houses and care for their problems like the sisters did, they were in charge of matters only involving religious rituals. But the Church always looked after the people.

¹⁴ Interview Sister Jeyam, Mannar, November 2016

Traveling to different places, from Tamil to government territory was not always easy. So, when Sister Jeyam was on her way back from Kilinochchi to Vavuniya from a meeting with a few priests on 1.12.1996, it was not unusual for their van to be stopped at a checkpoint by the army and for all the passengers to be asked to provide their identity cards. As asked, all of them handed over the papers to the soldier who went on to check them. The army men found the sister's photo suspicious; it looked like it had been put on the identity card as a fake. Furthermore, the sister's leg was in a cast and she appeared like a wounded fighter, when in fact she had insured her leg days before, falling of her bicycle. Sister Jeyam was arrested and brought to the police station for further inquiries. She was questioned on whether she really was a nun, where she was coming from and where to the van was going. Further they wanted to know what she did and whether she had relations to the Tigers. She did not tell much, but laughed at the last question. After being questioned, Sister Jeyam was put into a cell, but telling this story years later, she says with a smiling face, that she was never scared or afraid that anything might happen to her. So, she took her rosary out of her pocket and began to pray. Once in a while the policemen passed her cell, and one of them asked her: "Sister what are you doing here?" to which the nun replied: "I don't know either, but I would like to know, too." Later on, at about 11 o'clock, two girls around the age of twenty were brought in and put into the sister's cell. Both girls clung to the sister's robes and asked for her help. They were Hindi, but this was not of any importance to the nun; they prayed all night until at 5.30 in the morning. In the meantime, all the sisters had come to the police station and asked for Sister Jeyam's release. So, in the morning the nun was taken to court and released shortly afterwards, as were the girls. Looking back on what had happened, Sister Jeyam highlighted that she was never afraid for herself, but was happy to be able to comfort the two girls and help them to be released. She added that it had been the purpose of her arrest to safe these girls from harm that they could have experienced without her as their protector.¹⁵

This experience shows many different aspects of who a nun is and what her capacities and limitations are in tenuous situation. First of all, her identity as a nun was questioned by the army and the police, but having no evidence that she was not who she said she was and the pressure of the other sisters, they had to let her go. Her identity as a religious also prevented her from

¹⁵ Interview Sister Jeyam, Vavuniya, October 2016

being tortured or harmed while having been investigated. This shows how much religious figures were respected by the people, even by the army and the police. Further on, her religious identity served as a protective shield not only for herself but also for the two young women, who sought her help and comfort. Sister Jeyam highlighted that the habit has helped her a lot during the war. Not only was it visible that she was a religious, while wearing the habit, and she received great respects from all parties involved, but her clothing also granted her excess to LTTE territory and army land equally. If she had been wearing a Sari, the traditional clothing, that most women in the north call their daily attire, she would not have been allowed to pass the checkpoints. Being a religious was not enough to cross the border between LTTE and army territory, as the provincial of the Sisters of Charity was not allowed to transgress in a Sari. Wearing a habit, therefore was not just a sign of a religious person, but could also be called an entry ticket to highly guarded places. Because Sister Jeyam was wearing a habit, she had only been allowed to go to Kilinochchi in the first place, without having to undergo long questioning or harassment at the border. Many other sisters experienced similar special treatment while wearing a habit, this will become clear in the following stories of other nuns and comments of priests.

Second, her role as a caregiver becomes explicit while comforting the girls and praying with them. Like the nun has mentioned in several aspects of her story, comforting people, visiting them at their homes and staying with them in difficult times, is one of their main goals and shows how deeply involved they are in the everyday lives of the people and how much they care for their problems and try to help them in every way possible. When the people are suffering, the presence of the nuns is needed, which means that the nuns go to them, or the other way around, the people come to them, and the sisters talk kind words to them when they are lonely or need help, they sing songs to make the people happy and give medicine to the sick. Mostly, just being with the people and giving them faith and strength is enough. This closeness between the people and the nuns can be explained as a motherly relationship. The sisters are the ones, comforting the persons in need, giving them advice and helping them. They seem like mothers, taking care of their children; in the case of the sisters, their parishes. Further, the close relationship is not only due to emotional closeness and a shared experience, having gone through the same events and terrible happenings, the people and the nuns share a deep understanding of one another's

situation and problems. The nuns, having stayed with the people through the worst of times, understand the Tamils' struggles, like no one else. On a very individual, small scale level, the nuns are the ones, who can grasp the needs of the people the best. This close relationship of the sisters with the people is one of the nuns' most important capacities. This capability of the sisters will be looked at more closely in Chapter 6.

Talking about a possible future

Talking about the past, seemed to upset the nun, but in a very different way than when she was upset about the present and near future. As she had described past events like her arrest, Sister Jeyam had a small smile on her face, recalling memories and telling them like bedtime stories. The experiences seemed somewhat distant and the nun had come to an understanding with what has happened, but talking about present politics and the situation of the Tamils in the north, the sister got more emotional. With a strong voice, she raised her concerns and unhappiness with the present state of things. She, like many of her following sisters and in general the people of the north, are unsatisfied with what has been happening since the official end of the war in 2009. Sister Jeyam is retired now, after having done so much for the people during the war and suffered with them. Even though, she had experienced a lot of trauma and had to face difficulties every day, the nun is content with her life and the decisions she has made.

“Throughout my life, my choice to be a nun has made me happy. I am happy and content to have gone through all these difficulties alongside the people. If I was reborn, I would become a nun again.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Interview Sister Jeyam, Mannar, November 2016

Sister Arul Mary

Like many of the nuns I have met, Sister Arul had been actively engaging in humanitarian work during the years of conflict. First, as a young sister, she had been working on an interreligious program for peace in the east. Later on, the sister was living and teaching in different locations all over the Northern Province, mainly staying in Kilinochchi and Jaffna. During the height of the war, the Sister Arul was displaced many times with the people from the community she was serving at the time. Due to the fighting, the people had to leave their homes and seek safe ground in other places. Flight and displacement became the people's daily life and it was on one of those days that the incident below happened and made the daily happenings turn into an extraordinary incident in which Sister Arul played an important role in saving civilians from the army.¹⁷

Brokerage in the middle of the fighting¹⁸

"One time we were walking in no man's land", the nun and a group of civilians heard big noises so they lay down in the paddy fields to hide. As the nun had bad knees she could not fully lay down, so she was clearly visible. After about ten minutes, people from the army asked for her to come to them. There was crossfire going on overhead and one lady was having a heart attack; she was sweating away. When the message was received of a nun being among the people, the fire stopped on the army's side and the sister was asked to come and leave the people behind. But Sister Arul Mary declined and brought the lady with the failing heart. The army men asked her why she was bringing that lady and she said: "she is having a heart attack, can't you see!" The sister was frightened and tired, being among only army people now, who were all frowning at her. They did not check her Identity card but offered her a seat instead. But the sister refused to take a seat; she had a battered woman with her and a message to deliver. There were civilians out there in the field. One of the soldiers listened to the pleading sister and was convinced by her that the people out there in the paddy fields were only civilians. The nun was able to negotiate with the army man and achieved their unharmed escape. Later on, the sister described that man

¹⁷ Interview Sister Arul Mary, Jaffna, November 2016

¹⁸ Interview Sister Arul Mary, Jaffna, November 2016

as a good man, as a good experience with the army. But she also highlighted that this incident was not unusual at all; negotiating with the army for the people's wellbeing was what she did all the time. As the army did not know any Tamil and the people could not speak Sinhala, they were not able to communicate with one another. As Sister Arul Mary speaks both languages, she was able to negotiate with the army and act upon the Tamil people's needs. The sister described her ability to speak both languages as a fundamental advantage which made her the perfect broker for the people. Like this she could cross the linguistic and cultural boundaries between the Tamil civilians and the Sinhalese military.

Sisters of the Holy Family

The congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family counts the most nuns in Sri Lanka and is well represented all over the island. They are known for their cross-country social networks and show how a Tamil-Singhalese collaboration could look like. During the war, sisters from the south came to the Northern Province provide them with goods and offered their help. After the war, the sisters are still continuing their work together and have founded several projects, including school exchanges from pupils in the south to come visit the north and exchange ideas with the pupils there. Further, the sisters have established a few rehabilitation projects in different locations in the north and cooperate in finding new ideas on how to simplify the lives of the people in Sri Lanka.

Holy Family sisters meeting in Jaffna – North-South collaboration



Photograph – Ruki, December 2016, Jaffna

Taking part in a meeting of nine Holy Family Sisters from Jaffna and Colombo, meant getting to know nine individuals who all come from different backgrounds and have had different

experiences in their lives. But it also includes an understanding of one another that goes beyond a usual business meeting. The sisters have all known each other for years, working together in various projects, getting together for special events and living at the same convents, sharing their love for god and their will to serve him and the poor. It is evident that, belonging to the same congregation, they have the same values and the same goals. One of the sisters said “loving god, serving the poor is our mission”¹⁹. Their shared values are the basis for the collaboration between the Tamil and Sinhalese Sisters. During the meeting the fact, that the nuns belong to different ethnicities is no issues, rather their peaceful understanding and their collaboration in harmony is emphasised. “Tamil and Sinhalese working together setting an example – it works”²⁰ This collaboration has its beginning long before the war has ended; even during the war, the Sinhalese Sisters went up north to help their sisters in need even during the heights of war. Belonging to the same congregation is like being part of the same family, sharing the ups and downs of everyday happenings and helping out in times of crisis. One of the Sinhalese Sisters remembers the first time she has visited the refugee camps in the Vavuniya area. As she is Sinhalese, she was able to talk to the guards in their language and therefore gained their trusts easily which enabled her access to visit the people in the camps more easily than for her Tamil sisters.

As has been mentioned before, language is a fundamental tool of the sisters to be able to communicate and mediate in conflict situations. Most of the Tamil sisters speak Sinhala or at least understand it, having to go to Colombo in order to obtain a pass to visit the refugee camps, travelling by bus to the southern Sinhalese areas and interacting with government officials, the Tamil sisters had no choice but to learn the Sinhalese language. The other way around, the Sinhalese sisters did not learn Tamil as even without speaking Tamil they could communicate in the north with the officials and the army. Only a few of the nuns made the effort to learn the language of the Tamils.

¹⁹ Meeting of Holy Family Sisters, Jaffna, December 2016

²⁰ Meeting of Holy Family Sisters, Jaffna, December 2016

Working together for many years and having experienced similar things, has given the sisters a common feeling of belonging together and a shared identity. When one of the sisters is talking about past experiences they often refer to a common we. “We, (the sisters of Holy Family), have to heal from these experiences and get to the process of spirituality to heal and find peace. We need to acknowledge what has happened and go beyond ourselves to reconcile.”²¹

The close bond between the sisters became most evident when one of the younger sisters introduced herself and explained that she had also experienced displacement during first hand. In 2009, the war at its height, she was not yet a nun, but being detained into the camps, a senior sister, also taking part in this meeting in Jaffna, visited her and her siblings, encouraging them to study and after being released from the camp, the older sister encouraged her to go on with her studies and so the young sister went to their school and decided to join the congregation. Losing her father and taking care of her two younger siblings, one of them having lost one arm, the young woman was more than just relieved to have the sister helping her and encouraging her. “She is like my amma.”²² (amma being the Tamil word for mother). Telling her story, the young sister always kept a smile to her face, looking affectionately at her mentor.

²¹ Meeting of Holy Family Sisters, Jaffna, December 2016

²² Meeting of Holy Family Sisters, Jaffna, December 2016

Fighting for justice and a future

Since the end of war, some sisters have started community rehabilitation programs like Holy Family Sisters in Mannar and Mullaitivu, where they do counselling for families and help to solve their daily problems, while others are engaging themselves in human rights activism. Two sisters are very prominent in this sector and have been for years, both fighting a lonely battle. In the following, the story of Sister Christine will be shared to provide the view of a Sinhalese nun and to show her involvement in human rights activism.

Sister Noel Christine

“A Sister of Charity is a person, who, without neglecting her own perfection, offers her aid, as much as lies in her power, to her fellow men.”²³

Becoming a nun

December 26 of 1969 marked an important day in the life of Noel Christine Fernando; it was the day she decided to become a nun. At that time, the young Sinhalese woman was midway through her first year of training as an airhostess. That day, she, having grown up in a traditional Catholic family in Galle, visited the religious Christmas exhibition in Colombo, where she saw an Irish nun working with disabled poor looking children. Christine was struck by the children following the sister wherever she went and holding on to her, but even more impressed was she by the kindness of the sister, who took care of the children with such love, it was overwhelming. The young woman followed the sister around all day, finally arriving at home in a highly disturbed state. Soon after she started making investigations on how to become a Catholic nun. She went to Galle to follow the nun and talked to the sisters there and showed her interest in the congregation. First, they said no, but the young woman could convince the provincial that her devotion was deep enough, so on January 6 the following year, she entered the congregation of

²³ <http://www.sistersofcharity.com/founderfoundress/> 13.02.2017

Sisters of Charity and started her training as a sister and never once regretted not flying around the globe.

Political changes and structural changes in the church

1969 was also the year of the implementation of Vatican II, which has had a big impact on the Church and on the lives of the sisters, as the new paradigms influenced the roles of the sisters and allowed them to engage in more humanitarian work. Then, in 1971, insurrection came to Sri Lanka and a new youth started its rebellion against the government, who, in return, started to hit them in order to keep them down and quiet. This was the time, when Christine's training period was still ongoing and the young Sinhalese was learning how to pray within the walls of the convent. But the sister was not happy with this situation; she could not pray in a calm and peaceful environment while people outside were crying and suffering. There was a big disturbance within her and she was happy to be given permission to go out of the convent. This allowed her to come to know what was happening in the village and the young nun could listen to the people. Sister Christine started asking herself how could she be living inside the safe boundaries of the convent and let the youth outside getting killed. Furthermore, she started to question the other sisters and god himself; "if god wanted me to go there, wanted me to go to the convent, am I to do that only? – No! I have to speak to the people and help them". In her convent in Galle, there were about 200 to 300 nuns and they all prayed and thanked god and were obedient, but none knew what to do with Sister Christine's free spirit. So, her supervisor sister allowed her and two other sisters to go to town to visit the poor families. After they had finished their housework in the morning, the three of them were allowed to go to town, but had to return to the convent at night and report back what they had experienced. And there was a lot to observe and hear every day; the demands of the youth for jobs to support their families and the anger about the lacking support of the government. Going to town was not like taking a nice walk along a steady path, rather, these visits to the people were shaped by changing curfew times and political instabilities. One day, it was the Friday that Sister Christine will never forget, the sister was walking back to the convent in the evening, when she heard a gunshot in the background. Immediately she returned to the village, only to find the dead body of a young girl

lying in the middle of the street a loaf of bread next to her. The scene was horrific enough, but knowing that this little girl was an orphan living with her grandfather who was the gate keeper of the local prison and that this same girl sometimes received meals cooked by sister Christine, broke her heart and became the event that changed the sister's life. She could not come to an understanding to why this young girl had to die. A big funeral was organised and the girl was celebrated like a martyr. This day had not only been a tragic event but it also revealed Sister Christine's true passion and talents. From now on, she knew what she could do and what she had to do. This was also when she first became a problem to her convent and the police as she started, more than ever before, to question the life inside the convent and started to understand her life choices better. Furthermore, she scrutinized what kind of life she wanted and what she wanted to achieve, did she prefer a life inside the convent, praying, nursing and teaching, or did she rather fight for the people outside the boundaries of the convent. Sister Christine took her chance to work for the people who are nobody and invested her time in helping the poor and marginalised. Until today, she has the same ideals and fights for the rights of the poor. This, after her opinion, can only be achieved through changing structures, namely those of the church, to allow sisters to go beyond their role as a religious and transgress the boundaries of a solely religious life and become immersed in a more complex world of politics and cultural embeddedness. But as Sister Christine was the first sister to launch out these ideas of a sister who engages herself outside of the traditional boundaries of religious life inside the convent and become immerse in the public everyday lives of people, listen, talking and fighting alongside them, this was something new. And like many revolutionary thinkers, Sister Christine had a strong opposition, consisting of the traditionalist church and conservative politicians and citizens. Her struggling became more and more while she engrossed herself further into social services for the people in need.

Struggles for justice

Her idea that the church needed a fundamental change of structures has not only to do with her own dissatisfaction of the convent life, but also with her father's saying "begin inside the house to start change". This is why she started to implement change at the convent. First off all, Sister

Christine fought for a licence to live her life as a sister who dedicates her life to the poor and powerless. As she was the first to do so, the opposition and critics were huge. However, her desire to get permission to go anywhere in the country to work for social justice with the main subject to educate people on their rights through animation projects and her wish to live outside the convent in her own place was granted.

When she had first started her life as a woman religious, she had not known what she wished from life and her struggles in the convent had been immense. The other sisters were often disturbed by her dissatisfaction and strong will to serve the poor. Her superior once even told her directly that Sister Christine's struggle unsettled her, but that her mission was to comfort the disturbed people. Sister Christine agreed on this, but had a different outlook as she transferred this thought of mind directly to her work with the poor, who were often disturbed and therefore needed her help. With this argument, the sister justified her work. People however would often be disturbed by the truth, as Sister Christine said, and needed help understanding it. There is the truth of the people, what they believe in and how they act, but there is also God's word and his truth, those, said Sister Christine, ought to be the same for a happy satisfactory life.

In order to help the people, the nun cooked them herbal porridge, talked to them and got to know their stories, their needs and fears. She listened to all sorts of people, the kids, the youth, the old, the homeless and the sick. This devotion to the suffering and struggling humans felt like justice to the sister, and not staying inside the comfortable walls of the convent. "Helping the poor is justice", emphasised Sister Christine. These people showed her what life should be like, challenged her capacities and taught her the purpose of life.

Her congregation, the Sisters of Charity, which has its origin in Belgium, was not always satisfied with her way of living life as a religious and her choice to fight for the right of the poor. This led so far that the motherhouse of the congregation in Belgium heard of her and wanted to know more about her. Therefore, she was invited to travel to Europe and introduce herself. This was in 1999. On her first day in Belgium, there was a big celebration and on the days that followed many talks and discussions were held on the purpose of the church. Religious from all over the world had come to talk about big issues, such as schools and medicine, but none talked about

the poor, even though, in Lukas Chapter 4 it says “our mission is to serve the poor”, this Sister Christine accentuated in her own speech and received not only a positive feedback, but her Belgian congregation was, in contrast to the Sri Lankan convents, very fond of her. Other than that, she emphasised that their congregation had been established after the French Revolution in order to serve the poor. This motto was what encouraged Sister Christine to struggle against the ideas of her convent and fight for justice outside the walls of the Church.

Activism

When Sister Christine returned back to Sri Lanka from her travels in Europe, she started what she called the movement. Today (2016), Sister Christine is still one of the most active sisters in Sri Lanka, she fights for the rights of the free trade zone workers, has started several groups for the empowerment of women and created new education and job opportunities for young men. The sister works closely together with Father Sarath, who himself is actively engaging in human rights activism and participating in public demonstrations. Together they stand up and raise their voices to create awareness of the poor situation of the workers and their bad living and working conditions, they write leaflets and organise protests, both very much engaging in a highly visible position as religious figures, always being recognised in their habit and robe. People with whom they work look up to them, admire them and treat the two with immense amounts of respect. Most importantly Sister Christine is focusing on helping the people in their everyday lives and is not just caring for the individual needs of the people but for the legal aspects of their workers' rights.

6. Stories and their broader meanings – an analysis

Internalising pain and terrible experiences – everyday experiences

“But we can’t write our experiences down; we can’t express feeling like that.”²⁴

First of all, I would like to talk about how the sisters were telling me about their experiences. As I have mentioned in the last chapter, some sisters told the most terrific events with a smile on their face. I have already mentioned in Chapter 4, that trust was an important factor in gaining my data and it has become clear that this was also fundamental when the nuns talked about their experiences. They opened up about pain, loss and death, but at the same time they talked about laughter, funny incidents and happiness. This seems contradicting at a first glance, but when thinking about it, it is very ordinary. Like mentioned by Walker (2013, 86) even terrible things can become ordinary and count as everyday experiences. This thought of war being an everyday situation must be odd for outsiders but, as Sister Rita said, for the people it was their life and therefore an ordinary state.²⁵

However normal war was for the sisters, while they were recalling past events it was also visible how much they were shaped by what has happened to them. One of the sisters in Jaffna said that even today, eight years after the end of the war, she still had nightmares of the bombs falling onto their convent and fully destroying it.²⁶ Further, during the meeting of the Holy Family Sisters in Jaffna (described in Chapter 5), the sisters said that they could talk about what happened but, they could not write it down as this would be too painful.²⁷ When the sisters are completely honest, they show how much the experiences have hurt them, but in their daily work, their individual feelings do not matter. Then, the people are their first priority.

²⁴ Interview Sister Rita, Mannar, November 2016

²⁵ Interview Sister Rita, Mannar, November 2016

²⁶ Interview Tamil Catholic Sister, Jaffna, November 2016

²⁷ Meeting of Holy Family Sisters, Jaffna, December 2016

Giving hope and help – sisters during the war

As described in Chapter 5, the sisters were able to play important roles during Sri Lanka's conflict. Like priests, the nuns could gain access to the refugee camps and bring goods to the people. This capacity has already been described by Johnson (2012, 2016) and Spencer et al. (2015).

Giving a voice for justice

Today, many problems have still not been solved, including land issues and the whole human rights situation. As a matter of fact, quite big parts of the land that had formerly been owned by the people and then during the war been occupied by the Sri Lankan army, is now still in the possession of the army and it does not seem like they will ever give this land back.²⁸ For the people, this means that, after the war had ended, they were not able to go back home, but instead were forced to resettle to different areas. The government mostly designated areas where the families were relocated to, but only gave them a little money, which according to the Sri Lankan Red Cross Society and the nuns, was not enough to get their lives restarted.²⁹ In situations like these, the nuns are the ones who go and visit the people's households to find out with what problems they are struggling in their daily lives. The sisters visit the household and talk to the people to get information on their need and gives this information to humanitarian organisations or used the details for their own rehabilitation projects.

Other sisters, like Sister Christine and Sister Nichola, organise group meetings where people can talk about their issues and discuss solution plans. In a few cases, the sisters were even able to tell these problems and stories to the United Nations and get international attention. This steps were all undertaken to improve the situation of the Tamils in the North. It has to be noted here, that most of these meetings did not have an agenda to talk about issues of non-Tamils, which has to be looked at critically. A Swiss and a Sinhalese human rights activist have both highlighted that this focus on only Tamils might become problematic in the future, as there are also Muslims in the North who would like their needs to be considered, too.³⁰

²⁸ Interview Sinhalese Human rights activist, Colombo, October 2016

²⁹ Interview Red Cross worker, Mannar, November 2016

³⁰ Interview Sinhalese Human rights activist, Jaffna, November 2016 and
Interview Swiss human rights activist, Colombo, October 2016

Being (in-) visible – nuns and priests

As it has already mentioned in Chapter 3, women are often described as invisible when it comes to conflict and peacebuilding (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 15). The public does not seem to notice the work of religious women, which can be confirmed by looking at the work of the nuns in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. Their activities are known to the public, but hardly do they receive recognition for their work. One of the sisters: "We (the nuns) are with the people, they (the priests) have their politics."³¹

But the invisibility has not only had the downside that women groups receive less support and money, there are also upsides of operating as marginal figures. First of all, the sisters, living and working closely with their communities, are the ones who know best about their needs and can therefore help them best. As the religious women have less organisational and administrative obligations towards the Church as an institution, they can use their time more freely in the interest of the people and do not have to fear the power structures of the Church (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 15). Further, the nuns can use their time to build close connections to the people at the grass root level and do not need to worry about bureaucracy. Therefore, their invisibility can be seen as a kind of protection and leaves them with great room for their individual activities (Hayward and Marshall, 2015, 15). This allows the nuns to be more independent in their spaces of agency than the priests.

Another factor of visibility is the clothing of the sisters, the habit which most of the sisters wear and highlights them in public as they can be seen as religious figures from afar. The habit has helped them to gain respect when talking to authoritative figures and allowed them access to refugee camps. As the sisters are visible as religious workers, they can be singled out from the rest of the population and their special position is reinforced. This has helped the sisters, like in Sister Arul's case, to be recognised as innocent and not dangerous people.³² The sisters can use their religious identity to achieve their goals in mediating on behalf of the people. However, it

³¹ Meeting of Holy Family Sisters, Jaffna, December 2016

³² Interview Sister Arul Mary, Jaffna, November 2016

has to be noted that the habit has not always solved the problems of the sisters, as seen in the arrest of Sister Jeyam.³³

³³ Interview Sister Jeyam, Vavuniya, October 2016

7. Final Conclusions

During my visit to Sri Lanka in late 2016 the war was still a delicate topic to navigate and was visible in every place I visited. The war had ended in 2009, but the effects it has had on the country could be felt with every new encounter. Especially in the North, the conflict has left deep scars and shaped the lives of so many people. If there is one thing that I have learnt from all those meetings, it is that the people in Sri Lanka are very good at adapting to their environment; they do what they have to do to survive, to heal from trauma and to rebuild. During all these difficult processes the Catholic nuns were always beside the people, supporting and caring for them. This thesis has shown how significant the nuns have been in conflict situations where they were able to mediate on behalf of the communities and how important they are in helping their parishes heal from the trauma they have gone through and reconstruct new visions for the future. Furthermore, this thesis has shown that the nuns are religious women who do more than praying; they are involved in the society's wellbeing.

In this last chapter, I would like to look back on my study and summon the most important conclusions of this thesis, as giving an outlook on future possibilities.

Looking back – Content

This research has disclosed the role of Catholic nuns in Sri Lanka's civil war and the reconciliation that has followed. It has attempted to explore how the nuns were involved in mediating during the conflict and in peacebuilding situations. Further, the purpose of this study was to show which duties the nuns fulfil in their everyday lives and how their acting affects the people. Additionally, this research has strived to reveal the nuns' position as women working in peacebuilding and would like to show what their activities can tell about marginalised figures in conflict and peacebuilding. In order to find answers to all these questions, I carried out a qualitative research in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. I have collected data during ten weeks by means of informal, semi-formal interviews and participant observation. I have taken part in the sisters'

lives, visited them, and accompanied their daily activities. Further, to gain a more holistic view, I have talked to the people they work with, meaning NGO workers, priests and parishioners.

Looking back – achievements

In the paragraphs that follow, I would like to recapitulate the most important findings of my research which helped me answer the research question of this thesis: *How are religious and political spaces in post-conflict Sri Lanka shaped through the everyday practices of Catholic nuns as caregivers?* This will help to highlight the key roles of the nuns during and after the conflict and show their involvement in local events. Additionally, I would like to outline some more general reflections on the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka and the relationship between religion and politics. I will conclude by adding a short reflection on my research.

Basically, I have found three factors that shape the work of the nuns and the spaces in which they operate. All of the stories and experiences that I have been told could be lead back to these things which they have in common. Firstly, the nuns were only able to achieve their goals because they could refer to their close relationship to the people and their own social networks of sisters across the Northern Province. Secondly, the nuns could fulfil their duties and mediate on behalf of the people due to being respected by all parties, the LTTE, the government and the people, as religious figures who received special treatment. This enabled the sisters to transgress borders and reach across discursive boundaries. Lastly, the local context and the current state of affairs set boundaries to the nuns' achievements and created possibilities.

Relationships and their importance

The first observation, of the sisters being well-connected with each other and their communities, could be made when accompanying the nuns on their daily excursion. They knew everyone in the community they worked in and had a close relationship with them. During more than one interaction with the local people have I heard them referring to the nuns as motherly figures and spoken highly and with huge respect of them. Not only were the sisters adored by the

parishioners, but through the intimate connection they have with the people, they have become their persons of trust and are the ones that are asked for help and advice.

Across the boundaries of the community, the sisters are all interconnected through the network of the Catholic Church itself (Johnson, 2016). This means that the Church in the North is well informed about all convent and what is happening in which place. The principle of each congregation has knowledge about the sisters' whereabouts and their current activities³⁴. Regular meetings of the sisters improve the dialogue among the nuns and promote the collaboration of the nuns across different districts. Furthermore, as the nuns are transferred to different convents across the Northern Province every few years, they work with various sisters over the years and are able to become acquainted with many of their following sisters. This exchange and regular meetings ensure a good flow of knowledge and strengthen the ties among the sisters, which build the basis for the sisters' work.

Special position of the Catholic Church

As for the second argument, I have shown that the Catholic Church is well respected by most people in Northern Sri Lanka and therefore the nuns and priests are treated better than non-religious actors. This enables the Catholic Church to reach across boundaries and mediate on behalf of the population during and after the war (Spencer et al., 2015). The Church was and is able to act as an organ for the people and make their opinions heard.

As seen in the exemplary story of Sister Arul, the respect she received by the army, while she tried to mediate the safe release of civilians, was fundamental to her success. While wearing the habit and being visible as a religious actor has helped her to be recognized and respected by the Sri Lankan army, she could bring the interests of the civil society forward and achieved their wishes to be heard. This phenomenon of the Catholic Church as an organ of the people has been described by Johnson (2016) and Spencer (2012).

³⁴ Interview, Tamil Catholic nun, Kilinochchi, October 2016

Limitations and possibilities

Mostly, this thesis has looked at what the nuns were able to achieve, but it has to be stated that their work was also limited. The context the sisters have been working in has always shaped their possible actions. First it was the colonial times, when all the sisters were allowed to do was to teach and share Christian beliefs (Gnanapragasam, 1998, vi-vii) and then Vatican II provided them with the framework to act as social care givers and include local practices into their religious beliefs. During the war the work of the nuns was limited a lot by current political laws and the rules of the LTTE and the military. If the army allowed the sisters to pass the checkpoint, they could do their work and take care of the civilian in the North. But if the army did not grant them access, the sisters had no possibility in going anywhere. However, due to their religious belonging they were more often allowed to move from one place to another and to visit refugee camps, while normal people were not (Johnson, 2012 and Spencer et al., 2015).

Looking forward

It will be most interesting to see the development of the Catholic Church in the upcoming years. Future questions will circle around the reconciliation and peacebuilding process and how the Church is involved in them. Further, it will be interesting to find out how the Church in the North and the South work together, if they will do so, and what this collaboration can achieve. I am excited to see how the sisters adapt to new challenges and how they face upcoming difficulties and succeed in future situations.

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Personal declaration

“I hereby declare that the submitted thesis is the result of my own, independent work. All external sources are explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.”

Place and Date: Zurich, 13. June 2017

Signature