



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR  
**CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE**

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## **An American Tragedy: the Crisis of Conscience**

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*Satendra Nandan's book Gandhianjali was published earlier this year in Fiji and Canberra. His forthcoming volume, Twin Journeys: Love and Grief, is due for publication later in the year.*

In the global tragedy of COVID-19, when death seems to be hanging like a foggy shroud in every country, suddenly one life so mercilessly snuffed has touched our conscience: the death of George Floyd.

The city of Minneapolis erupted into an anger of violence as if the dormant lava of a racial volcano had found a most terrible expression through fires and rioting, shooting and looting.

A country that had lost more than 100,000 lives in less than three months of this pandemic of horrors is most damagingly affected by a single death.

That of course is the nature of human consciousness: we can accept the death of thousands as adding to the statistics but one death in circumstances as horrendous as that of George Floyd stuns and erupts into a volatility of violent reaction.

One picture can change the world. So does one life for good or evil. Or one coup closer home.

Often the latent virus of racism in the first modern democracy has contaminated so much of its exceptional achievements.

One shouldn't take anything for granted these days: the world can be upended very rapidly. And we can fall into a void so deep that nothing makes sense and the future, if any, stares from the void with a sinister smirk.

We know what happened in Fiji in 1987. And how the virus of racism and religious frenzy corrupted some of our finest beliefs and values.

The next instant is the most mysterious: in George Floyd's case it was nine minutes before his breath became air. He just died so unjustly.

And that tenth minute made the difference between life and death.

It was done legally by a police officer armed and guarded by other upholders of the law of the land. He and his companions had taken a vow to protect life and liberty and advance the rule of law.

Of course we, who have a smattering of history, know how America came into being through so many killings and conquests, but also with the most advanced ideas of freedom and democracy through a Civil War, two World Wars, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and a Cold War.

Today , the USA seems different and indifferent. Only yesterday a commentator described it as ‘a failed state’.

So is it a failure of leadership or the absence of character in a leader?

Canberra is not the best place to judge from: it’s a nation’s small comparatively recent capital. Its population is less than half a million built over more than a century when it was an obscure sheep station in the state of New South Wales.

The designer of Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin, is buried in Lucknow in a grave in Nishantgunj. I’ve a special interest not only because it’s a city in which I’ve spent almost half my half-life: it’s a home in-between Fiji and Delhi.

We now exist between things like life and death. COVID-19 gives it a new meaning and a new depth of nervous, anxious understanding.

From Washington, yesterday a friend of mine wrote a moving piece ‘ Public Confession as Civic Protest’ and sent it to me. He teaches under the very nose of Mr Donald Trump, the impeached elected president of a super power, if you believe in such things anymore.

Professor S. Clarke and I’ve known each other for barely two years but our mutual interest in the mahatma and the savior brought us together. We are doing a book on Mahatma Gandhi after attending a symposium last July on Gandhi’s 150th birth anniversary.

S. Clarke is a man of deepest integrity who has worked in India among the Dalits and other dispossessed peoples of the subcontinent.

His book *Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism In Christianity, Islam , and Hinduism*, (2017), is one the most penetrating books on the malevolent malaise of religious fundamentalism now prevalent on every continent and not a few islands.

I was writing my rather long contribution to his book on Gandhi when COVID-19 exploded with its extra-terrestrial fury and our world was thrown into an existential spin.

The world, as we knew it, was locked down. A new kind of suffocation was thrust upon the Earth on which we shared at least the air and the sunshine, the rain and some small sense freedom.

So, I was moved to receive this from him only last night:

Dear African American students, colleagues, and friends,

You are not alone in pain, anger, anguish, and dissent. I join your protest and your call for justice in the face of the murder of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery. I do so by an act of public confession: O God, as a member of the one human family, I have not done enough to protect a community that has for centuries been the target of capture, lynching, incarceration, and slaying. I have spent more time and energy taking care of my kinsfolk than investing in the kingdom of God...O God, as citizen of the United States, I am drenched in blood of the structural sin of this self-proclaimed great nation. The sin of slavery continues in our addiction to control, confine, humiliate, strip, brutalize, and punish Black bodies. These crucified ones scream against injustice and groan for justice. Yet I have been worried about my own security during this time of COVID-19 and my desire to keep the country economically strong to protect my portfolio.

Help me to courageously unveil the collective sins of this so-called Great nation as it concertedly defaces and decapitates the image God in my Black siblings.

Help me to extract the pastoral and prophetic gifts given me by the Spirit to shield 'sheep without a shepherd' and to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim the release the captives ... (and) to let the oppressed go free.

This is a cry from the heart of a conscience-stricken man-- a sort of Cry, the Beloved Country.

These thoughts come to haunt our mind and harrow our heart as winter of our discontent officially begins in my little city. Autumn has come and gone in solitary confinement of a kind.

The morning begins with a dense fog in my part of a new suburb, adjacent to the largest Town centre. The birds come: multi-coloured parrots, white cockatoos with golden plumes lit in the thin sunshine.

But the trees look bare and at night they have the ghostly appearance with black, bare boughs.

In my garden, though, I see a few green shoots of daffodils quietly emerging from under a carpet of fallen leaves.

I see my neighbours sweeping their front yards of fallen leaves stippling the edges of an empty street. You wonder where have the children gone?

On one side I've a Brazilian academic couple, on the other a Saudi diplomat with three cars with CD number plates.

Across the street are Chinese and Italians couples. One hardly sees them through the fog.

This, for the season, is my global universe.