

PUTTING DOWN THE CROSS: INDEPENDENCE AND NATIONAL HONOURS

RESOLVING THE SEARCH FOR UNITY



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Most former colonies have set up their own national awards to replace those of Britain and her empire. In 1969, seven years after Trinidad and Tobago became independent, a system of national honours was established by Letters Patent to the constitution. The ‘Order’ to which all awardees would belong was the ‘Order of the Trinity’ and the highest award was the ‘Trinity Cross’ (followed by the Chaconia and Hummingbird Medals, and the Public Service Medal of Merit). The medal for the Trinity Cross was cruciform in shape.

The person responsible for the name and design of the Trinity Cross in 1969 stated in a 2006 interview that she did not intend to produce a specifically Christian medal, and that “religion or Christianity never entered [her] mind”. Nevertheless, doubts about the suitability of this award for a multi-religious nation were expressed from the outset. In 1977 a prominent Muslim, Wahid Ali, overcame his initial reluctance to accept the award only when he was assured by Prime Minister Eric Williams that the issue would be soon reviewed; Williams in fact did nothing. In 1995, a Hindu religious leader, Krishna Maharaj, refused to accept the Trinity Cross, and this (unlike Ali’s reservations) became public knowledge. A committee chaired by the Chief Justice in 1997 considered the issue and made a

majority recommendation to change the name of the highest award to ‘The Order of Trinidad and Tobago’. In 1997 the party in power was based mainly on Indo-Trinidadian support and was led by a Hindu Prime Minister (Basdeo Panday), who decided, perhaps understandably, not to implement that recommendation.

Eventually the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, representing orthodox Hindus, and a smaller Islamic body, brought an action challenging the constitutionality of the Trinity Cross. In a landmark judgement delivered in May 2006, a judge of the High Court ruled that in his view “the creation and continued existence of the Trinity Cross, given the historical, religious and sociological context of Trinidad and Tobago, combined with the experiences, as well as the religious beliefs of Hindus and Muslims, amount to indirect adverse ... discrimination against Hindus and Muslims.” Since, however, the Trinity Cross was entrenched in the constitution, the judge ruled that he could not order the government to replace it with a non-discriminatory award.

Soon after the ruling, Prime Minister Patrick Manning (an Afro-Trinidadian Christian) made a statement to Parliament: His government accepted that it was morally obliged to “comply with this ruling and remove this anomaly from our national life. We shall



Opposite and above: Obverse and reverse views of the Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (Of the Society of Distinguished Citizens and Other Distinguished Persons)

do it.” He grounded this determination in the explicit statement that “Trinidad and Tobago is a secular democracy”. To this end, he announced the creation of a committee (chaired by the author) whose first remit was to review all aspects of the nation’s highest award and make recommendations.

The committee recommended that the Trinity Cross should be replaced by ‘The Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (ORTT)’, that its design should be circular in shape and feature various secular symbols of the nation, and that the Order of the Trinity should be replaced by ‘The Distinguished Society of Trinidad and Tobago’. In 2008, amendments to the Letters Patent were made to allow for the recommended change of the name and design of the highest award, and of the Order of the Trinity. The first awards of the ORTT were made on August 31, 2008. (Interestingly, in 2010 the ORTT was awarded posthumously to Krishna Maharaj, who had refused the Trinity Cross in 1995.)

In carrying out its mandate, the committee received written submissions from the public, and also followed carefully the lively debate on the issue in the press in 2006-08. Some persuaded themselves that the Cross and the Trinity were not really Christian symbols but were rather universal in nature, so that

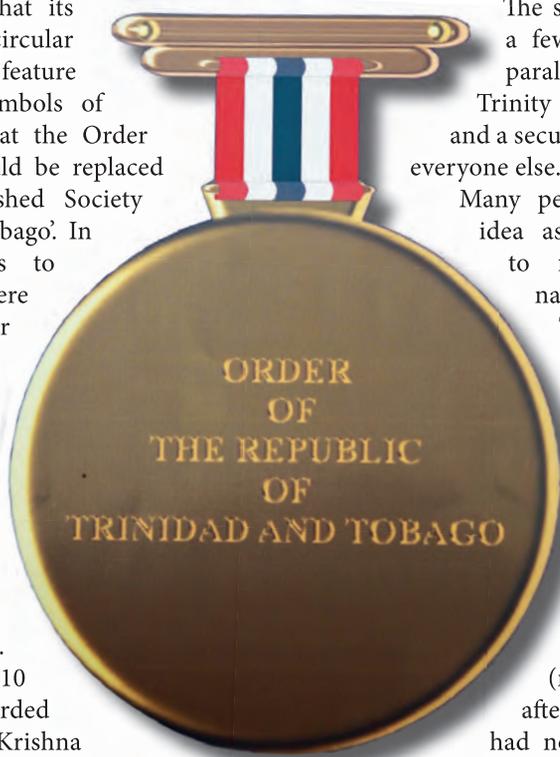
the Trinity Cross could not be considered discriminatory against non-Christians. Others accepted that both Cross and Trinity were preeminent symbols of the Christian faith worldwide, but felt that the Trinity Cross should be retained precisely because it reflected the nation’s history as a colony of Spain and Britain and as a Christian community. To abolish it was somehow to attack the faith and the nation’s historical heritage.

The suggestion was made by a few that we should have parallel highest awards – the Trinity Cross for Christians, and a secular or ‘neutral’ award for everyone else.

Many people rejected this last idea as divisive and tending to fragmentation of the national community.

They recognised (as did the committee) that only a single award with a secular name and design could serve the purpose of national unity. A few also pointed out that while the name ‘Trinity’ had some resonance for Trinidad (named by Columbus after the Holy Trinity), it had none for Tobago, clearly an issue for the highest award in a twin-island state.

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