



SRI LANKA LECTURE SERIES

**Pillayar and the Politicians:
Divine Solutions to Sri Lanka's
Ethnic Problem****Professor Jonathan Spencer FRSE**Regius Chair of South Asian Language, Culture and Society
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At a Pillayar temple (kovil) just outside Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, there is a boundary wall, strikingly decorated with portraits of Sri Lanka's post- Independence political leaders. The murals are the idea of the temple's chief priest and were painted after a series of dreams in which Lord Pillayar (Ganesh) set out for him a path to the solution of Sri Lanka's long-standing ethnic problem. The paper draws upon research in London and Sri Lanka, jointly carried out with Dr Sidharthan Maunaguru (National University Singapore). We came upon the murals in 2012, 3 years after the end of the 30-year civil war. The temple they adorn is situated in one of the most fiercely contested zones of the war years, and the appearance of such vivid and public political imagery is itself unusual in the nervous public culture of postwar Jaffna. The paper starts with the murals and the chief priest's account of their origins, and will use this as the platform for a set of reflections on the shifting and porous boundary between religious institutions and political practice in Sri Lanka, during and after the long civil war. In particular, I will explore the ways in which the space of the temples seems to provide both a place outside the claims of the ethnic conflict, and a place from which it is possible to evoke radically different understandings of both the causes, and possible solutions to, that conflict.

Date: Thursday, 05.06.2014**Venue:** South Asia Institute, Room 317**Time:** 2 pm / 14 Uhr s.t.

All interested persons are cordially invited!