Threads of Religion in the Weft and Warp of Conflict Resolution

Including reflections on conversations with people in Cambodia.

Catherine Morris, BA, LLB, LLM
June 27, 2011

Revised and updated from a paper presented at Come Back to the Core, *National Conference of the Conflict Resolution Network Canada, Waterloo, Canada, June 2, 2004.*

Some surprising threads are revealing themselves in the weft and warp of the field of conflict transformation. When I first became involved in the field of conflict resolution nearly three decades ago, the main "bible" of dispute resolution was Roger Fisher and William Ury's book, *Getting to Yes,* which proposed that if we uncovered the motivations or "interests" of people in disputes, we could resolve disputes with solutions that met the interests of both parties.

For the past decade or so, the "interest-based" approach has been challenged on several fronts. John Paul Lederach is one of the scholars who has emphasised "transformative" relational approaches. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa in the late 1990s, led by Bishop Desmond Tutu, has stimulated many sober moral reflections about reconciliation, apologies, repentance, reparations and forgiveness. At the same time, a number of scholars became aware that while the role of religion in conflict was fairly well-studied, there was little research on the role of religion in peacebuilding.[1]

The past decade has seen increased concern about the destructive role of religion. There is fear everywhere about the religions of others. And there are a lot of "others" out there, including Christian "fundamentalists," "Sikh" militants, "Hindu" nationalists, "Buddhist" extremists and "Islamist" militarists.

Religion as a factor in destructive and deadly conflict continues to be overemphasized at the expense of examining other identity and fairness issues.[2] But we do need to acknowledge that destructive violence is often promoted by religious teaching, symbolism and fervour.[3]

As Elise Boulding points out there are themes of violence and peace in the teachings and

[1] Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. "Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of Interreligious Peacebuilding." *Journal of Peace Research* 38(6) (2001): 685-704; Appleby, R. Scott. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; Coward, Harold, and Gordon S. Smith, eds. *Religion and Peacebuilding*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003; Gopin, Marc. *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Hadley, Michael L., ed. *Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*. New York: SUNY Press, 200; Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson, eds. *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

[2] David Smock. "How Important is Religion as a Source of International Conflict?" Lecture presented at the Distinguished Speakers' Series, Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Canada, January 17, 2004. Appleby, 2000.

[3] Scott Appleby. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation (*Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

practices of virtually all of the world's major religions. Within the major religious traditions there are diverse opinions about how to address conflicts. Within a given religion, we may be able to identify both militant (and militarist) extremists and "militant peacemakers."[4] We cannot accurately totalize any religion by calling it a "peaceful religion" or a "violent religion."

This is why religion has been referred to as Janus-faced. It seems appropriate to start with Janus, because he was the Roman god of beginnings. Janus looked to the past and to the future. But he also maintained the balance between peace and war.

The balance scale is another powerful Greco-Roman image – the goddess of justice holds her scales, impartially weighing the arguments of disputing parties and balancing the solution. In the West we carry the blindfolded goddess of justice and her balance scale into our thinking about conflict resolution – for example, in the ways we think about impartiality and objectivity.

Our thinking about how to address conflict fairly is deeply moral thinking. People in conflict generally make moral claims for justice and truth and mercy and peace as John Paul Lederach has pointed out.[5] I believe the moral claims we make when we are in conflict are rooted in what Ben Hoffman referred to recently as "sacred meaning."[6]

Drawing on needs theory, Ben Hoffman has suggested that humans seem to have a need for sacred meaning even if we are secularist in orientation, and even if we are atheist, since even then we find ultimate meaning in the absence of a god. The human need for meaning – including sacred meaning – is an identity need. Vern Redekop[7] points out that identity needs are fundamental and are connected and intertwined with our needs for security, food and shelter and social belonging. Also fundamental is the need for autonomy – a sense of having the choice and power to be able to do something that matters.

We get our ideas about morality – good and evil, right and wrong – from various religious sources.[8] In the West, we claim – certainly not without criticism – that our dispute resolution systems, including our justice system, are informed by "Judeo-Christian" thinking. Lederach's

---

[4] Scott Appleby. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred.* See also. Elise Boulding. "Two Cultures of Religion as Obstacles to Peace." *Zygon* 21 (December, 1986): 501-18. Some Christian leaders including well-informed scholars who read Islamic texts in Arabic, have noted the violent themes in Islamic scriptures and writings and history. They refer to passages in the Koran that urge fighting against non-Muslims and to the records of what Mohammed has said. The same argument must be made about Christianity, citing passages in the book of Judges in which whole peoples were exterminated in the name of God. Most Christians today, however, find these texts difficult to comprehend, and would not use these texts in support of wars or genocide. Most Christians do not model their understandings of Christian conduct and attitudes on these passages. Nevertheless, these texts (as well as others) have been used to lend support to the idea of a war fought in a righteous cause.

[5] J.P. Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

[6] Ben Hoffman, "Waging Peace with Jimmy Carter," UVic Institute for Dispute Resolution, October 3, 2003.

[7] Redekop, Vern Neufeld. *From Violence to Blessing: How an Understanding of Deep-rooted Conflict Can Open Paths of Reconciliation*. Ottawa: Novalis, 2002.

[8] For the purpose of this paper, I use Paul Tillich's definition of religion as "ultimate concern." Paul Tillich. *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

four themes of truth, justice, mercy and peace are found juxtaposed in the Hebrew scriptures to illustrate the concept of *shalom* (peace/wholeness).[9]

We in the West must not forget the pervasiveness of our Greco-Roman heritage by which balance scales are incorporated into our everyday moral and religious thinking. I've often heard that we need to "balance" truth and justice with mercy and peace. I believe we need to be more conscious of how this metaphor teaches us to think. The implication is that if we give more weight to peace and mercy, we may get less justice and truth and vice versa. The balance-scale metaphor also tells us that we need to exercise choice and exert power in favour of our visions of peace and mercy on the one side, or justice or truth on the other. We exchange one for the other. I don't need to tell this audience how the field of conflict resolution has tried to replace this "either-or" thinking with a more integrative "both-and" approach.

More recently, Western ideas about conflict resolution and peacebuilding have been influenced by religious ideas from Asia – particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Gandhi brought Hindu, Buddhist and Christian ideas together in his concept of *satyagraha* – "holding to truth." He drew on the Hindu and Buddhist concept of *ahimsa* – "non-harming" which he combined with teachings on justice and peace from the Sermon on the Mount, and the nonviolent resistance methods of Jesus. Gandhi also acknowledged the inspiration of a Russian pacifist Christian – Leo Tolstoy. Martin Luther King drew on the teaching and example of Jesus and used Gandhi's methods.

I can sum up the point I am trying to make with a quote by Scott Appleby from his wonderful book, The *Ambivalence of the Sacred*: "Religion is apt to 'hide' in culture, be appropriated by politicians, or blend into society in ways that make it hard to identify as an independent variable..."[10]

As a seventh-generation Canadian with Scottish and English ancestors who were various types of protestant clergy and missionaries – both men and women – I am deeply influenced by the history of the West mixed up with the history of Western Christianity, whether I know it or not, whether I forget it or not – and whether I like it or not. Our world views, and particularly our known and unacknowledged religious perspectives – wrapped up in cultural moral perspectives – are deeply connected to the ways we understand our concerns for truth, justice, mercy and peace, particularly when we are in conflict.

I would like to explore some ways these themes of justice, mercy, peace and truth weave themselves through conflicts in helpful and harmful ways. I want to consider the ways people exercise *choice* and *power* in the decisions they make to "do something" about it that matters.

Let me do this by telling you some of what I have been learning about conflict and peacebuilding

---

9. *Psalms* 85:10.

[10] Scott Appleby. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation (*Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

from people in Cambodia since 1995.[11]

Most Cambodians are Khmer-Buddhists with a strong national identity. Buddhism is the only institution that cuts across most of the political and social divisions. Monks used to be at the centre of education, moral teaching and community conflict resolution. They have a tradition of political neutrality, which has included mediation between people and rulers. Their very presence in public activities has a legitimizing effect. Monks still have exceptional power to sway people at the grassroots. One might expect that Buddhist clergy would have played strong historical roles in peacebuilding, but there is not really much evidence of this, although Cambodian monks have often been involved in trying to "do something" about social injustice.

Monks have at times been quite political in Cambodia. During the 19th and 20th centuries monks were sometimes been involved in the few sporadic protests against French colonialism. In 1942 the French colonial administration tried to Romanize the Khmer alphabet. Buddhist clergy saw this as an attack on Khmer-Buddhism.

A monk by the name of Hem Chieu led a monk protest. The French responded by publicly defrocking him and arresting him for plotting a coup. The religious insult of defrocking a monk provoked an "umbrella war" of a thousand people in Phnom Penh. Hundreds of monks in saffron-robes were there with their umbrellas. Hem Chieu died in prison, but to many Cambodians he is a national hero.[12] The Khmer language was never Romanized.

Some of the leaders of Cambodia's communist movement after World War II were former monks. But in 1962 the Pol Pot faction gained control of the party. The extreme version of community of the Pol Pot regime between 1975 and 1979 tried to purge all religion. And they nearly succeeded – fewer than 5,000 of Cambodia's 65,000 Buddhist monks remained after the end of the regime. About 25,000 were executed.[13]

The current Supreme Patriarch of the largest denomination of monks is Venerable Tep Vong. He was appointed as head of his denomination in the early 1980s. At that time, he was a member of the communist central committee. Today, he is widely believed to be partisan in his loyalty to the current ruling party.

[11] For a report of some of this research, see Catherine Morris, "Case Studies in Religion and Peacebuilding: Cambodia." In *Religion and Peacebuilding*, ed. Harold Coward, and Gordon S. Smith, 191-211 (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), available at https://www.peacemakers.ca/publications/Morris_Chapter.pdf.

[12] Bunchan Mul, "The Umbrella War of 1942," trans. Chantou Boua, *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-1981,* ed. Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua (London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1982).

[13] Peter Gyallay-Pap, _From Conflict to Reconciliation in Cambodia?_ (Battambang, Cambodia: unpublished paper, 1993).

During the 1980s, some non-partisan senior monks like the now famous Venerable Maha Ghosananda (died March 2007) and Venerable Yos Hut Khemacaro, were working hard, visiting all the factions' refugee camps along the Thai border. They also went as delegations to encourage the peace talks that resulted in the Paris Peace Accords of 1991.

Beginning in 1992 a coalition of Buddhist, Quaker, Mennonite, Catholic and other peace-workers from Cambodia and other parts of the world organized peace walks through armed conflict zones. This coalition played a significant role in the 1993 elections organized by the UN. Just prior to the election they organized a peace-walk led by Maha Ghosananda. It is believed this walk contributed to calming people and encouraging more than 90 percent of the electorate to go out and vote. There had been a lot of pre-election intimidation and killings by the Khmer Rouge and the ruling party. A lay Buddhist woman organizer of the 1993 peace walk told me:

> "People were afraid before the election – they expected bloodshed . . . Venerable Maha Ghosananda was influential in awakening people with his peace walks. The symbol of thousands of saffron robes and miles of walkers lessened their fears."

She told me that people had stored food rations for fear of election violence, but they came out and cooked for the walkers. The Dhammayietras have continued each year.

In the run up to the 1998 election, the inter-religious coalition – which was organized chiefly by women – organized another impressive campaign for a peaceful election. In addition to poster campaigns, they held training workshops in sixteen of twenty provinces and peace walks in at least ten provinces.

These are the accomplishments of a small multi-religious group of non-partisan peace workers including Buddhist, Christians and some Cambodian Muslims. In general, however, Buddhism in Cambodia is more or less a ceremonial veneer, and the Buddhist clergy are weak. There are now about 50,000 monks in Cambodia and about 20,000 nuns, but only a handful of senior monks and nuns have much education. The senior clergy are aligned with the government and seem easily manipulated by authorities. The young monks tend to prefer the opposition party. Non-partisan monks are few and far between – Maha Ghosananda became elderly and quite frail [died in 2007], and Yos Hut's office, stacked up with papers, shows how few qualified people there are to do so much work.

After the 1998 election, the preliminary election results showed the ruling party was ahead, but the opposition parties organized non-violent demonstrations in late August 1998 to protest irregularities in vote counting. Students became involved, and in early September there were violent clashes between authorities and demonstrators. At this point, hundreds of young monks spontaneously joined the demonstrations. One witness told me the monks' involvement was impulsive, motivated by desire to de-escalate the conflict. But some of the monk demonstrators appeared to have political motives, and they claimed Hem Chieu – the umbrella war monk hero – as their inspiration.[14] The young monks' intervention was unplanned, and they had not obeyed

[14] Michael Hayes, "The Legacy of Achar Hem Chieu," *Phnom Penh Post* 7(22) (October 2 - 15, 1998).

elder monks who did not want them to participate in the demonstrations.

The young monks' involvement in the demonstrations meant that monks became targets in the violent government crackdown.[15] Police publicly disrobed monks and beat them. Authorities searched pagodas and fired guns within temple precincts. Fifty-three (53) people disappeared, including four monks.[16] At least seventy-seven (77) other people were injured including eighteen (18) monks and a nun. The Supreme Patriarch left town. Another senior monk made a statement on government television that monks' involvement in the demonstrations was against rules of Buddhism. This monk also claimed that the young monks fell and were injured in the confusion.[17] A member of the foreign media reported that the monk may have been coerced into making this statement.[18]

Public opinion became polarized along political lines. There was public outrage at the beatings and disappearances of monks and nuns. Some people applauded the monks for taking a brave stand. However, others criticized them for getting involved in politics. Some said the monks were manipulated by the opposition. The monks were thoroughly intimidated, and there has been virtually no religiously-based activism since 1998.

In the third national election last year, there was another dispute involving monks. The 1993 constitution gives monks the right to vote, but monks' custom of political neutrality means monks traditionally do not vote. Monks have been divided about this, and the debate is politicized along partisan lines. The Supreme Patriarch did not want monks to vote, because the majority are young and would vote for the opposition. One monk spoke out about the right of monks to vote, and on 6 February 2003 he was assassinated inside the temple grounds of Wat Lanka in Phnom Penh. There was no official investigation. There are many theories about why he was murdered – a personal dispute, a dispute about funding of his meditation centre, or a political assassination. But not many monks registered to vote. Interestingly, in the next election in 2007, the CPP pointed out that monks have a right to vote if they like, and Tep Vong did not say anything to the contrary.[19]

These examples show three different views about the practical meaning of "neutrality." One is

---

[15] Yos Hut Khemacaro, "Steering the Middle Path: Buddhism, Non-Violence and Political Change in Cambodia," Safeguarding Peace: Cambodia's Constitutional Challenge. Accord: International Review of Peace Initiatives 5 (1998): p.73 (London: Conciliation Resources, November, 1998), available http://www.c-r.org/accord/cam/accord5/yoshut.shtml, Accessed January 2001, p.76. Also see Chea Sotheacheath, and James Eckardt, "Activist monks dare to defy authorities;" Pok Sokundara and Beth Moorthy, "Monks walk a tightrope between peace and politics;" Laura McGrew, "Buddhism and Beatings," *Phnom Penh Post*, 7(22) (October 2-15, 1998); discussions with researchers and civil society leaders (Phnom Penh, May-June, 2000).

[16] Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Human Rights in Cambodia, *Monitoring of Election-Related Intimidation and Violence, August 20-October 28, 1998* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (COHCHR), October 28, 1998); COHCHR, *Killings and other instances of violent deaths documented in and around Phnom Penh between 7 and 19 September 1998* (Phnom Penh: COHCHR, September 25, 1998).

[17] Chea Sotheacheath, and James Eckardt, "Activist Monks Dare to Defy authorities."

[18] Laura McGrew, "Buddhism and Beatings."

19 Cambodian monks get the vote [Tep Vong refrains from commenting on the issue]. KI Media, 10 November 2006, http://ki-media.blogspot.com/2006/11/cambodian-monks-get-vote-tep-vong.html

neutral disengagement from social issues and silence about controversial political or social issues. This is currently favoured by most senior monks.[20]

A second definition of "political neutrality" is closer to the style of Cambodia's monk political activists represented by Hem Chieu of umbrella war fame. This stream claims neutrality in standing for righteous governance regardless of political affiliation. Some young monks representing this thinking have leaped into the middle of clearly partisan opposition political demonstrations while asserting non-partisan motivation.

A third stream of thinking is non-partisan social engagement. Monks taking this approach may be involved in development work, education about nonviolence and promoting human rights and public morality by both laity and authorities. Engaged Buddhists are in a minority in the Cambodian *clergy* and laity, but their activism resulted in nomination of Venerable Maha Ghosananda for the Nobel Prize four times between 1994 and 1997.

My work in Cambodia has led me to a hypothesis that I'd like to test:

- Religion is not constructive in conflict resolution or peacebuilding when it is weak, or when it is disengaged from issues of social justice and peace.
- Religion is also unconstructive when religious actors become politically aligned or allow themselves to be politically used or manipulated. Religion is more likely to be manipulated when religious literacy is poor.
- Religion seems more constructive for peacebuilding when its leaders and practitioners are knowledgeable about their religious traditions concerning conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and when they are equipped and willing to play engaged but non-partisan roles in teaching, conflict resolution, and advocacy for public ethics and nonviolence at both grassroots and national levels.

I wonder if we might also explore these principles as they relate to the stances of conflict resolution organizations and peace workers in Canada.

I want to conclude by saying something about power.

I have discussed the role of Khmer-Buddhist religious ethnonationalism in Cambodia's anti-colonial struggles. In 2003, we saw Americans fervently send many young adults into battle. This fervency cannot be accounted for by Mr. Bush's claims that Saddam Hussein threatened US security. Some symbolic buttons were pushed – including the potent ideal of America as a righteous and Godly nation that cares enough to fight for justice and peace for others. Commentators say Americans are religious, but how well schooled are they in Christianity, particularly in the radical teachings about power and nonviolence in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that Gandhi found so compelling?

[20] Conversations with government officials and civil society leaders (May-June 2000) [Notes on file].

I have mentioned what needs theorists say about the basic human need to exercise autonomy and choice and to exert power in favour of those choices. When we are frightened and angry about some injustice, we tend to construct the ones who injured us as "enemies," particularly when our identity – our need for sacred meaning – is threatened. It is a small step toward using our power to coerce, and then to harm and then even to kill the enemy.

The Roman goddess Justitia and her balance scale may lead us astray. Our Western popular religion includes a rather fervent faith in Roman gods and goddesses, not to mention the other ancient gods of Mammon (greed) and Moloch (the State), about which I will not speak here. In addition to leading us to think we have to choose between justice and truth or mercy and peace, the balance scale leads us to think we need to exert our power in favour of one at the expense of others. This can also lead us into choosing our mode of power in distinctly partisan ways. We weight the balance scale to suit us – mercy is for us and our kind, and justice is for those others, and especially our enemies**.**

Elise Boulding points out another problem: She asserts that religions contain both "holy war" cultures and what she calls "peaceable garden" cultures. The holy war culture and the peaceable garden cultures, she says, tend to be reproduced by women. What remains relatively undeveloped – or has been compromised -- within many religions is the "middle ground" culture of conflict resolution and peacemaking. Also undeveloped is the role of women in public peacemaking roles despite the year 2000 call of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 urging states to ensure "increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict. 21

Given the polarization I have noted, I have wondered what would happen if we were to use a different metaphor? Might we think and act differently if we imagined identifying and carefully weaving together the threads or walking along pathways of peace, justice, mercy and truth? Would it create different patterns in our thoughts and new pathways for actions if we could understand each of these threads as integral to the pattern we want to create as we address conflicts? That way, we can examine all these threads together and hold them in creative tension with one another.

In the field of conflict resolution, we are fond of saying that our processes help people move away from adversarial uses of power over or against one another, and moving towards cooperative uses of power with others. As Ben Hoffman so wonderfully states it, "1 + 1 = 3" when we use power cooperatively.[22]

But how to do this "new math" continues to challenge us. When we are angry at others for some real or perceived breaches of peace, justice, truth, or mercy, it is easy to slide away from our lofty cooperative ideals, even when we are highly trained in negotiation, mediation and other peace work.

---

21 Security Council S/RES/1325 (2000) http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf

22. Ben Hoffman. *1+1=3: New Math For Human Relations* (Eganville, ON Concorde Inc., 2003).

The aspirational climb toward cooperative uses of power relies on our constant commitment to view others compassionately and fairly. And our commitment to view others compassionately and fairly depends on our ethics about the use of power and our persistent commitment to those ethics. We need to grapple with how to use power in our conflict resolution and peace work and particularly thinking about what kinds of coercive power are appropriate and when.

In the field of conflict studies, we have continued to neglect the topic of power. This has led to concern about political naivety of the field of conflict resolution. We may need to become less naive about power, including political power. In particular, we need to learn more about how to help people harness and transform their attitudes and ways of using power.