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Douglas Irvin-Erickson • Peter C. Phan  
Editors

# Violence, Religion, Peacemaking

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## FOREWORD

The field of religious peacebuilding reached a turning point in about 2000. Prior to that there were notable cases of religious peacebuilding, including the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, the religiously motivated civil rights movement in the USA, and Gandhi's movement in India. But prior to 2000, the focus of the literature relating to religion and conflict focused on religion as a source of conflict. Scott Appleby's book *Ambivalence of the Sacred* published in 2000 helped mark and stimulate this shift in focus.

This shift was evident in the programming relating to religion at the US Institute of Peace (USIP). Prior to 2000, USIP organized study groups on religion as a source of conflict in places like Israel/Palestine, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Nigeria. USIP launched its Religion and Peacemaking Program in 2000. Since 2000, USIP has helped stimulate and provide financial support for religious peacebuilding efforts in Israel/Palestine that brought together top Jewish, Muslim, and Christians to advocate for peace. It provided encouragement and financial support for the peacemaking efforts of Rev. James Wuye and Imam Mohammed Ashafa of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Nigeria to undertake interfaith peacebuilding in places like Yelwa/Nshar, celebrated in the documentary the *Imam and Pastor*, which is mentioned in Chap. 10. This documentary has been widely shown and has had widespread impact in such far-flung places as Kenya, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Iraq. Training programs in Burma/Myanmar and Sri Lanka brought together Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian leaders to learn how to organize interfaith peacebuilding in those countries. In Indonesia, Philippines, and Pakistan, USIP has helped stimulate and finance the introduction of peace studies in the curricula of Islamic schools, to emphasize the peaceful teachings of Islam.

These efforts of USIP have their counterparts in the programs of many other organizations around the world, principally since 2000.

This book makes a contribution to the burgeoning literature on religious peacebuilding, which has blossomed since 2000. I want to lift up three chapters as making particular contributions. These are Chapter 2 by Peter Phan, Chapter

3 by Douglas Irvin-Erickson, and Chapter 10 by Ezekiel Abdullahi Babagario. In his chapter, Phan articulates the warrants for both violence and nonviolence in all the major world religions. Too often in contemporary discourse, Islam is held up as the religion of war and Christianity is praised for being a religion of peace. It is true that most of the contemporary violent extremism is committed in the name of Islam. But teachings about peace and nonviolence are very prominent in the Quran and the Hadith. This is an important lesson that should be promulgated.

In Chapter 10, Babagario makes the very important argument, exemplified in the case of the Middle Belt in Nigeria, that so-called religious conflict is usually not fundamentally religious in character. In the case of Nigeria, what is frequently characterized as conflict between Christians and Muslims is more fundamentally a conflict of identity that has more to do with ethnic, geographic, occupational, and class identities than it does with religion per se. Religious differentiation coincides with differentiation by these other identities and religion is too simply cited as the key difference. But conflicts in the Middle Belt are not about the validity of religious teachings and practices of Islam and Christianity. Conflict is over jobs, political power, scholarships, and land rather than religion. (The case of Boko Haram in the northeast of Nigeria underscores another set of variables that Babagario does not address.)

Because the conflicts in the Middle Belt are caused by these other variables, to resolve the conflicts these other issues need to be addressed. Peacemakers need to promote an equitable share of political power, access to land, a fair distribution of scholarships, and so on. Peace is not going to be achieved by Muslims convincing Christians to convert to Islam or vice versa. But it will be helpful for the peacemakers to lift up the warrants for peace and nonviolence in both of these faith traditions. Moreover, the fact that the conflicts are not fundamentally religious in character does not mean that religious leaders and institutions cannot make significant contributions to peace. Although Babagario does not cite them, religious leaders have engaged in productive peacebuilding efforts in the Middle Belt.

I lift up the case of Nigeria's Middle Belt not because of the intrinsic significance of this region of Nigeria, but because the dynamics underlying conflict and peacebuilding in the Middle Belt apply to conflicts in many parts of the world. Although the Islamic State has complicated the situation, the conflict between Sunnis and Shia in Iraq is not fundamentally a religious conflict, but a conflict over political power and competition for resources. It is not unlike the conflict between Iraqi Kurds and the Sunnis and Shia, even though the Kurdish identity is based on ethnicity rather than on religion. The Kurds are Sunnis, but they do not identify with the Arab Sunnis in Iraq. While there is a role for religious peacebuilding in Iraq, those promoting reconciliation need to base their efforts on a recognition that religion per se is not the fundamental source of conflict.

Similarly in places like Sri Lanka, Burma/Myanmar, Central Africa Republic, and Israel/Palestine, where the conflicts are often framed in terms of religion,

religion is not the fundamental issue. The conflicts in these countries are for resources and power, and the lines of division are more in terms of ethnicity than in terms of religion. Granting that, in all these places significant religious peacebuilding has been undertaken. Interfaith dialogue has focused on the more fundamental issues, but religious language has often been utilized to promote peace and reconciliation.

As illustrated in Chapter 3 by Douglas Irvin-Erickson, religious peacebuilding can be a powerful tool for peace in zones of conflict where religion is not a factor at all. Describing the peacebuilding efforts of Maha Ghosananda in Cambodia at the end of the civil war involving the Khmer Rouge, no mention is made of religion as a source of conflict or even as a secondary factor. Ghosananda engaged in transformative meditation to promote peace. He spoke in terms of religious idioms "allowing the political and social pursuit of peace in this world to be presented as if it were a cosmic pursuit, heroic, and worthy of tales of heaven and history." He "engaged in religiously symbolic actions in order to bring the world order into line with the cosmic order provided by Buddhist beliefs in a good and just society."

The religiously motivated struggle against apartheid in South Africa is another example of a case where religious peacebuilding was effective in a conflict that did not reflect religious divisions. That was also the case with the religious foundation of the civil rights movement in the USA

David Smock

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume developed out of the conference on “Nurturing Cultures of Peace in Context of Violence” held in May 2013 at the New York Theological Seminary. The conference brought together practitioners and scholars in the field of religious peacemaking, who were joined by leaders from faith communities around the world who were actively involved in conflict prevention, conflict management, and peacebuilding in their own communities.

The goal of the conference was to strengthen relationships between religious leaders, peace practitioners, and scholars, and to create a forum for a free exchange of ideas at the nexus of theory, practice, and faith. The result was a transformative three-day event, complete with training workshops for religious leaders facilitated by scholar-practitioners and workshops facilitated by religious leaders for scholars and practitioners to better understand the religious potential for peace. The chapters in this volume are reflective of these interdisciplinary, interfaith, and international conference goals. The contributing authors in this volume are leading and emerging scholars in the field—all of whom have lived, taught, or worked in the areas of conflict they write about.

We are grateful to the many participants and audience members whose comments and contributions helped improve our ideas and thoughts. We extend special thanks to the Henry Luce Foundation for providing the resources that made this conference possible, and to the many co-sponsoring institutions whose delegations, students, scholars, and resources contributed to the success of the conference. The academic and university co-sponsors included:

- Auburn Theological Seminary
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## CHAPTER 3

## Spirit Cults, Religion, and Performative Peace in Cambodia

*Douglas Irvin-Erickson*

Since 1979, religion and local spirit cults in Cambodia have been primary avenues for forging lasting peace and combating the structural violence that persists as a consequence of the genocidal rule of the notorious Khmer Rouge regime. The chapter examines the Buddhist traditions of peacemaking in Cambodian society and politics, and argues that religious peace work in Cambodia should be understood in terms of "performative peace" that, in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, was directed toward forging "negative peace," or peace that is defined as the absence of hostilities and direct violence. The chapter then transitions into a discussion of how the tradition of "performative peace" in Cambodian society has been used in recent years by the most vulnerable of people in the country as a tactic of nonviolent resistance against landgrabs, structural inequality, and structural violence. Rather than engaging in Buddhist performative peace, the local spiritual practice of spirit cults have provided the primary idioms for resisting structural violence through performative acts of peace.

The chapter concludes by arguing that these acts of performative peace, in both Buddhist traditions and the tradition of spirit cults, should be understood in cosmopolitan terms. In attempting to articulate a cosmopolitan theory of religious contributions to peacebuilding, the chapter uses the Cambodian case to demonstrate that positive and just peace is perused through a wide range of societies and spoken about through a wide range of idioms, while being mobilized, rationalized, and legitimized through an equally wide range of beliefs and ideologies. Before proceeding with the argument, however, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by performative peace and religious peacebuilding.

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Mark Juergensmeyer presents religious violence as a performative act, committed by individuals and governments for the purpose of intimidation.<sup>1</sup> Juergensmeyer does not take religion as a causal variable in human violence. Even though religion may provide the ideology, motivation, and organization structure for the perpetrators to act violently, he sees these same aspects of religion as carrying an equal potential to motivate human peace. Rather, Juergensmeyer argues, violent acts undertaken in the name of religion are committed within the context of global politics and global society, where the religious violence emerges from cultures of violence and carries symbolic power, and is used to empower certain groups and certain people. Oftentimes, the perceived benefits engendered by cultures of violence have economic, ideological, or even gendered dynamics that, in turn, have a sacred element to them, Juergensmeyer writes. In this sense, religious idioms allow political struggles in this world to be presented as if they were cosmic confrontations, spoken about in terms that are usually reserved for tales of heaven and history. Religion is not to be understood as the source of “cosmic war,” nor is religious violence necessarily religious in nature. Instead, for Juergensmeyer, religion provides an avenue for demonizing enemies and rationalizing cosmic struggles and cultures of violence.

One of Juergensmeyer’s central claims is that religion in and of itself does not motivate violence, even though violence is present in religious traditions. This means that violence in global politics emerges not from religion and religious experience itself, but from the processes through which states and non-state religious groups interact in reciprocal ways. Furthermore, Juergensmeyer contends, governments find it expedient to use the long-standing connection between religion and violence to pretend that religious groups are the cause of violence and terror when, in many instances, it is the states and governments themselves that commit terrorism or provoke terrorist acts in the first place.

If religion can motivate violence, can religion motivate peace in similar ways? This is not to suggest—as René Girard and Émile Durkheim have argued in different ways—that religious rituals and sacrificial acts channel violence into social metaphors, or channel violence upon sacrificial victims whose death provokes no reprisals, or that religious beliefs provide social cohesion and offer a vision of cosmic order for worldly good. In contrast, Juergensmeyer believes that worldly violence and worldly struggle is what gives religion, rituals, sacrifice, and violence their symbolic meaning (Girard and Durkheim saw this largely the other way around).<sup>2</sup> Like all religious images of sacrifice, Juergensmeyer writes, martyrdom and religiously motivated acts of violence provide a symbolic conquering of violence that puts violence into a cosmic order, using the larger framework of order that religious language provides.<sup>3</sup> Thus worldly violent actions do not mimic cosmic beliefs, religion, and religious rituals; rather, religiously symbolic acts of violence mimic the worldly order.

## PERFORMING PEACE: THE PEACE WALKS OF MAHA GHOSANANDA

The peace walks of Maha Ghosananda in Cambodia can be taken as an example. Ghosananda, the founder of the Buddhist Dhamayietra Centre for Peace and Non-violence who was nominated five times for the Nobel Peace Prize, earned doctoral degree in philosophy from Nalanda College in India in 1957 and studied Gandhian methods of nonviolent engagement from Nichidatsu Fuji, the founder of the Japanese Buddhist sect Nipponzan Myohoji. In 1965, he studied in Thailand under the Buddhist reformer Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, who incorporated meditation practice into a radical social philosophy. As Ghosananda explained later, meditation functions as a vehicle for social transformation because it leads to inner peace, and finally social change.<sup>4</sup> When the Khmer Rouge came to power, Ghosananda was on a nine-year meditation retreat under the master Achaan Dhammadasa in Thailand.

By 1992, the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC) had begun to work to secure a peace agreement between the still warring parties in Cambodia, and planned to repatriate nearly 350,000 refugees from camps along the Thai–Cambodia border. Ordinary Cambodians had no say in this element of the peace process: unaccountable leaders invited the UN in to administer multiparty elections which were agreed upon by Vietnam, China, the Soviet Union, and the West as a way of resolving their international conflict over interests in Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> Ghosananda worked with the UNTAC repatriation program and offered Cambodians a way to engage the project from a grassroots level. The repatriations began as peace walks, where the monk led refugees through Cambodian territory that was still controlled by the Khmer Rouge. Because the monk remained politically unaligned, he was welcomed into Khmer Rouge controlled camps, where he set up makeshift temples that enforced a strict non-weapons policy and taught transformative meditation techniques to refugees, victims, and combatants. The walks held a performative, symbolic power and became “a vehicle for overcoming fear, and an expression of the eagerness for peace.”<sup>6</sup> Villagers would join the walks, and individual Khmer Rouge soldiers would lay down their arms to receive blessings from the monks as a means of psychological purification, Matthew Weiner explains.

If cultures of violence can have economic, ideological, or even gendered dynamics that are given a sacred element to them, as Juergensmeyer writes, then so too can cultures of peace contain systems of ethics and values that provide peace with a sacred element. In such a way, the peace worker is able to speak of peace in religious idioms, allowing the political and social pursuit of peace in this world to be presented as if it were a cosmic pursuit, heroic, and worthy of tales of heaven and history. Ghosananda did not engage in religiously symbolic actions in order to bring the worldly order into line with the cosmic order provided by Buddhist beliefs of a good and just society. Instead, the peace walks were undertaken in the name of Buddhism to delegitimize the



insurgency and cultures of violence, while carrying symbolic power in order to empower people in Cambodian society who sought a peace settlement.

In Ghosananda's philosophy, an individual's consciousness actually becomes a category of social ethics, for the individual consciousness can lead to social peace or social disruption.<sup>7</sup> A symbolic link to a peaceful past in Cambodian history, Ghosananda was looked to by Cambodians as way of connecting with a lost "Buddhism and their Buddhist history" while they struggled to rebuild society, end entrenched cycles of violence, and establish a positive peace.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the end of the Khmer Rouge insurgency in 1997 had far more to do with the politics and brinkmanship of Prime Minister Hun Sen than with UNTAC and Ghosananda's peace walks.<sup>9</sup> But, as John Paul Leterach argues, after conflict has ended, it is necessary to rebuild relationships between members of a divided society before reconciliation and peace can be achieved.<sup>10</sup> Ghosananda contributed greatly to repairing individual relationships through his command over Cambodian Buddhist identity, and his ability to navigate local understandings of how peace is made while using locally salient idioms and beliefs in order to present peace in this world as a cosmic struggle.

Juergensmeyer's notion of performative religious violence relies upon Michel Foucault's idea of an "episteme," a certain paradigm of thinking that defines the conditions of all knowledge. Speaking about performative peace through the lens of post-structuralism will prove unsatisfactory to many, for it places the meaning of the social act outside of the human subject. As such, taken to its extreme, this perspective cannot explain why an individual would decide to act violently, except to reduce the individual's choice to a constellation of socially constructed determinants. In order to provide a way of understanding how and why religion shapes individuals' choices to act violently, Juergensmeyer's theory also rests on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the "habitus," the socially and historically constructed systems of individual cognition. The problem, however, is not that Bourdieu's habitus cannot explain actions from the perspective of the individual actor, for Bourdieu attempts to do this (i.e., the religious zealot who kills for god and the Khmer Rouge militant who lays down his or her weapons to join a Buddhist peace walk). Rather, the very question of individual human agency falls outside of the boundaries of what Bourdieu's theory of the habitus is trying to explain. Juergensmeyer is careful to avoid this type of social theorizing because, in placing the sources of human actions outside of the human subject, the social scientist or social critic diminishes her ability to determine why an individual acted violently or peacefully, while diminishing the role of individual choice and freewill in shaping system of collective violence.

#### A COSMOPOLITAN THEORY OF RELIGION AND PEACEBUILDING: THE CAMBODIAN CASE

The Cambodian case illustrates a second interpretive approach to religious peacebuilding, typified by a new body of scholarship through the work of scholars such as Erik Davis, Alice Beban, Courtney Work, and Matthew

O'Lemmon.<sup>11</sup> While these authors do not think of themselves as belonging to a school, their work expresses a cosmopolitan ethics, in a Kantian sense, that underscores their social theory. This ethics privileges as strong defense of a universal understating of peace as not just the absence of collective violence, but rather peace as positive peace. These authors recognize that peace, understood in these terms, is a social endeavor and that a peaceful society is marked by the absence of violence and the presence of just social and political conditions that make peace sustainable, ensuring security from physical harm and a common respect for shared notions of basic inviolable human rights. The theory is cosmopolitan in the sense that the definition of what constitutes just social and political conditions is not determined a priori, nor based on an abstract notion of the human good developed prior to the establishment of a given society. Instead, what constitutes a just society should be allowed to emerge directly from the social conditions and contexts of the people living in any given society who are making demands for justice at any given time. This cosmopolitan theory of religious contributions to peacebuilding thereby recognizes that positive and just peace will be perused through a wide range of societies and spoken about through a wide range of cultural idioms, while being mobilized, rationalized, and legitimized through an equally wide range of beliefs and ideologies. As such, the theory acknowledges that people around the world do not need to employ liberal concepts, or speak in terms germane to the Western liberal tradition, in order to seek and achieve positive and just peace that upholds the basic and equal rights of all individuals, on a local or global level.

If religion is defined broadly in this chapter as a human response to the perception of a sacred reality, then the concept of religion can be said to encompass codes of conduct, creeds, and cults, which consist of prayers, devotions, and the beliefs of spiritual disciplines. As Scott Appleby has written, the patterns of communal worship, the ritual expression of creeds, and the codes of conduct that define the explicit moral norms governing the behavior of those who belong to the religious community, allow religion to constitute an integral culture capable of forming personal and social identity and influencing experience and behavior.<sup>12</sup> However, the experience and actions of a religious actor cannot be reduced to the religion, nor is any one actor representative of a particular religion. The combinations of creed, code, cult, and type of religious community in the late twentieth century, Appleby writes, "are as numerous and diverse as the social identities, political parties, and legal claims they underwrite."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the religious extremist may employ violence as a sacred duty or as a privileged means of purifying the community and waging war against a threatening outsider, while the religious peacemaker may likewise view peace as a sacred duty and strive to sublimate violence or resist efforts to legitimize violence.

Both the peacemaker and the extremist, Appleby writes, are kinds of militants who claim to be "radical" in so far as they believe they are rooted in, or renewing, the fundamental truths of their traditions, distinguished from people who are not motivated by religious commitments most other religious believers.<sup>14</sup>

However, the religious peacemaker need not think of herself or himself as a militant or a radical. Instead, religious actors may choose to peruse social justice and reconciliation through nonviolent means because these behaviors are authentic responses to the sacred that are symbolically resonant within the context of a particular political culture. In the case of the Cambodian spirit cults, unlike the Buddhist peace walks, the religious actors did not think of themselves as religious actors, or radicals or militants. Rather, it was their claim to being ordinary that made their peace work salient.

Some historical context is necessary. In 1979, after the Vietnamese expelled the Khmer Rouge from the capital, Khmer Rouge leaders Pol Pot and Ieng Sary were tried in absentia and found guilty of genocide in a show trial that blamed the Cambodian genocide on the USA and China.<sup>15</sup> The propaganda of the trial was important for establishing the political legitimacy of the subsequent Vietnamese-backed governments. From 1979 until 1993, these Vietnamese regimes demonized the Khmer Rouge in order to bestow legitimacy upon their own regime. With the final collapse of the Khmer Rouge movement, the Cambodian government offered amnesty as part of a peace deal, and shifted toward a policy of collective amnesia until the United Nation backed Khmer Rouge Tribunal in the mid-2000s made it difficult to continue officially burying the past.<sup>16</sup>

Transitional justice mechanisms, when seen as part of a liberal peace-building strategy, are believed to bring democratization, the rule of law, market liberalization, and justice—"goods" that are taken as necessary conditions for peace.<sup>17</sup> Many observers argue that the Khmer Rouge Genocide Tribunal, known officially as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), has brought about a growing liberalization of Cambodian society. Scholars, for example, have argued that the inclusion of civil parties and victim participation in the ECCC, even if people maintain particular local customs and traditions, signals a shift in Cambodian society from viewing the genocide as evil or fated, to the genocide as a violation of individual human rights.<sup>18</sup>

The widely held sentiment that international tribunals contribute to peace-building and reconciliation by bringing global democratic norms to Cambodia is an interpretive position that began in the 1990s. An influential study sponsored by the Brookings Institute and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development claimed that there was an "absence of a cultural tradition in Cambodia for the acceptance of differing opinions, much less reconciliation, in the case of dispute."<sup>19</sup> The conclusion was that Cambodians need to be educated by the international community on how to reconcile peacefully. The claim begs the questions of how a human society could exist without nonviolent dispute mechanisms. And, the argument comes close to a tautology when the critic looks to the Khmer Rouge genocide and insurgency as an expression of the violence inherent in Cambodian culture, which emerges when Cambodians are internationally isolated and left to their own devices.

To say that peace and reconciliation after genocide emanates from outside "Cambodian" society implies that the Khmer Rouge genocide was the result of an internal social dysfunction. The claim obfuscates the history of the genocidal

program while absolving the geopolitical patrons of the Khmer Rouge (such as the USA and China) who financed and supported Khmer Rouge either during the genocide or during the bloody insurgency they waged for almost a decade after 1979 during the Cambodian Civil War.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the argument explicitly stated that reconciliation in Cambodia requires "creating new ways of behavior appropriate to a modern, developing state that avoid, in particular, 'the practices of the recent past'."<sup>21</sup> The narrative thereby creates an essentialized image of Cambodia as a place and a society filled with premodern and superstitious people who are incapable of civility—all the while casting the secular, democratic, and modern "international and global society" as peaceful and civilized by contrast. In the name of universal liberal values, the argument abandons universal liberal principles, as well as pretense of cosmopolitan principles.

So many scholars and activists believe that criminal trials and international justice bring liberal norms and progress to "developing" countries that it is now fashionable for contrarians to admonish global transitional justice mechanisms as legitimizing the expansion of neoliberal principles and undermining local cultures and local autonomy.<sup>22</sup> Both extremes are unfortunate. Two decades of international intervention in Cambodia—from peacekeeping missions and UN oversight of democratic elections to the current Khmer Rouge Tribunal that combines international judges and stall with Cambodian judges and lawyers—has led the concepts of justice, human rights, and genocide to become infused into the political and social landscape of Cambodia.<sup>23</sup> However, this is not a one-sided exchange, but an exogenous and endogenous process where Khmer traditions and cultural norms remain in place while being adapted within a changing social, political, and economic context.<sup>24</sup> The hybrid international-domestic tribunals such as the ECCC have become sites of an interplay between local and global ideas.<sup>25</sup> Thus the concepts of justice and human rights are being shaped in a local vernacular and framed within Buddhist moral precepts and conceptions—so much so that many Cambodians consider the ECCC to be a fully Buddhist institution.<sup>26</sup>

#### PERFORMING PEACE THROUGH SPIRIT CULTS: THE IDIOMS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CAMBODIA

One reason why many Western scholars believe that Cambodians did (or, do) not have nonviolent reconciliation mechanisms—or the cultural values necessary for democratic and liberal civility—is because the cultural frames of reconciliation in Cambodia are often expressed in the idioms of the spirit world. Spirit cults, prevalent throughout Southeast Asia, are historically constructed belief systems that cut across religious, ethnic, and political lines. They are supported by an ontology that structures truth claims over how the world really is.<sup>27</sup> It is important to remember that modern rationality also contains historically constructed truth claims: the belief that money and property ownership are "real" is just as much a fashioned social fiction as the "reality" of spirits.<sup>28</sup> The centrality of the *neak tã*, and other spirits, to the construction of

social reality is such that the presence of spirits is what transforms the earth into a social territory where a community and its ancestors may live.<sup>29</sup>

Most scholars consider Buddhism and spirit worship two separate belief systems. However, throughout Southeast Asia, Theravada Buddhism encompassed, subordinated, and accommodated the cults to form unique blends of religious culture.<sup>30</sup> Because the spirit cults across the region (such as the *nats* cult in Burma, the *phi* in Laos and Northeast Thailand, and *neak tā* in Cambodia) do not have a doctrinal link to Buddhism, the cults transcend religious divides and draw adherents from Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as self-proclaimed atheists and “modern” young people, creating a basic shared lexicon and repertoire of actions, practice, and beliefs across the region.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the spirit cults constitute a form of religious belief that serves as a source of cosmopolitan ethics across the region.

The spirit cults of Southeast Asia are spoken of by adherents as ancient and preexisting the arrival of Buddhism from India. Historically, this is true.<sup>32</sup> However, the spirit cults are not primordial or archaic social forms that persist into modernity. Rather, they are actively conditioned by unique historical experiences, and constantly reinterpreted through changing cultural assumptions.<sup>33</sup> Since the spirit world is always changing, new *neak tā* are created or shift forms depending on the changing conditions of social contexts.<sup>34</sup> Whereas the French colonial period brought an expansion of spirit cults that helped shape a collective sense of Cambodian and Laotian nationalism, spirit cults grew in influence and changed considerably in the aftermath of the devastation brought by the USA’s war in Vietnam, when the USA dropped more bombs on Laos and Cambodia than the combined tonnage dropped on Germany and Japan during World War II.<sup>35</sup> In Laos, spirit cults adapted to the ideology of a Marxist revolutionary state which tried to purge Buddhism of merit, karma, fatalism, and pacifism.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in Cambodia, spirit cults underwent tremendous changes during the Khmer Rouge genocide, and have experienced a period of rebirth and redefinition in the decades since.<sup>37</sup>

The Khmer Rouge attempted to destroy Buddhism and folk culture as early as 1973 in some regions and, after seizing power, succeeded in destroying Buddhism in its instructional form and extinguishing Buddhist practices.<sup>38</sup> However, as the peace work of Maha Ghosananda demonstrates, the apotropaic rituals, symbolism, and language of Buddhism could not be totally extinguished and reemerged after 1979, playing a significant role in the peace and reconciliation process.<sup>39</sup> After the genocide, Buddhist thought and local spirit cults became the primary mediums for interpreting the past and providing a lexicon for people to speak about how reconciliation should proceed.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, with repression and massive population transfers across the country during the genocide, the spirit cults broke down as the link between villages and a community of ancestors was broken, and the *neak tā* practices lost their regional significance. Yet survivors have frequently recalled maintaining spirit shrines clandestinely during the Khmer Rouge years, and continuing the practice *neak tā* worship.<sup>41</sup> In fact, *neak tā dombond dek* (*neak tā* iron-rod), the

arbitrator of justice, now bestows legitimacy upon the ECCC, as court officials, defendants and witnesses must swear an oath to the *neak tā*.

Like most people, Cambodians associate fears of death with fears of contagion. The fear is expressed locally—especially among the majority Khmer ethnic group—through anxiety of the spirits of the dead who inhabit the world of the living, especially in the forests and waters. Living a civilized life in traditional village life, Erik Davis writes, means growing rice and participating in Buddhist rituals, actions that require mediating and controlling the spirits who take offense at the incursion and insults of civilization over the natural world. Because of the power and wrath of the spirits, new fields and new buildings must be built with the permission of the spirits.<sup>42</sup> One often finds that spirit houses are positioned next to or in close proximity to *wats* and pagodas, or religious sites of other religious groups, in order to bestow protection and blessing upon the holy, religious, or spiritual site.<sup>43</sup> During Buddhist ceremonies of gift-giving at the *wat*, gifts are usually given before hand to the *neak tā*. And, when giving gifts to the *neak tā* of the *wat*, gifts are often offered to the *neak tā* of the person’s home as well.<sup>44</sup>

As gods of the realm of men (*devatāmanussāloka*) the *neak tā* cannot intervene in the calculations of the afterlife but they retain a powerful ability to shape the human and physical world. Some *neak tā* are associated with natural phenomena (*neak tā phnom*, of mountains; *neak tā tuk*, of trees), while others are associated with specific locations. Village life in Cambodia is protected by a network of these tutelary spirits, while more powerful *neak tā* protect larger geographical regions. This ensures that the explanations of events that shape the social life of a community are spoken about through the idiom and ontological framework of the spirit cults. Contentious political claims, and demands for justice, are also spoken about in terms of the spirit cults, which serve as a location for our analysis of the religious contributions to nurturing cultures of peace.

An illustrative example comes from a study done in Pursat province, where the Pheapimex Corporation appropriated land from farmers and the monks of a local temple.<sup>45</sup> As Beban and Work point out, existing systems of legitimation underpin Prime Minister Hun Sen’s patronage system where political and economic elites manipulate neoliberal economic reforms.<sup>46</sup> Hun Sen’s patronage network is responsible for the vast majority of “landgrabs” in Cambodia, where falsified legal documents given to corporations trump the oral contracts of peasants in the courts. While the prime minister appeals to villagers through the idioms of the spirit and spirit cults, he has duplicitously declared a “war on landgrabbing.”<sup>47</sup> However, the idioms of the spirit cults provided villagers in the Pheapimex case with an avenue to delegitimize the landgrab and organize popular resistance to corruption. In this way, the spirit cults provided a culturally and socially appropriate language and medium through which villagers could engage in a nonviolent form of political and economic contention, symbolically demonstrating the landgrab and the patronage network that supported the landgrab were unjust—without directly challenging the patronage system or the state.



Villagers described how a spirit appeared when the corporation began clearing the land. On a holy day, a woman walking to the temple became possessed with the spirit as she passed the land. In convulsions, she shouted at the workers operating the machinery to stop, taking on the voice of the spirit which claimed the land and the trees as home. The workers abandoned their machines and refused to clear the land. It was weeks before the company could find workers willing to bulldoze land because people in the surrounding area were afraid that the spirit would punish them for cooperating with the company.<sup>48</sup> What is significant about this account is that the spirit cult offered a way for the villagers, at the bottom of the patronage system, to socially delegitimize the act of stealing the land and act together in solidarity with each other. After all, the company did not have to find workers who were not religious nor superstitious; the company had to find workers who were from distant enough communities that they felt no solidarity with the villagers making the claims to resist clearing the land.

While this action was not immediately intended to stop interpersonal or direct violence, it can nevertheless be understood as a performative act of peace—or, a performative act of positive peace—intended to directly influence the economic conditions of society. In this case of the spirit cults and landgrabs, it is the worldly economic and social struggle that gives the spiritual acts of positive peace their symbolic meaning, providing a symbolic conquering of the structural conditions of society that puts conflict between peasant villagers and land owners supported by powerful political patrons into a cosmic order, using the larger framework of order that the language of the spirit cults provides.

The *neak tā* does not act as an interlocutor between the spirit world and individual human beings, but as an associative force that extends to every member of a social unit, whether it is a family or a village or a nation. The *neak tā* therefore stands in to both represent and create social stability and a community, as the spirit imbues the meaning of local and royal rituals, mediating the exchanges of social, political, and economic life.<sup>49</sup> Far beyond a subconscious act, officials and elites from local levels to the national level find it necessary to peruse the legitimacy of spirits as a perquisite of garnering social and political legitimacy.<sup>50</sup> The relationship is not very different from the reciprocity in the social contract in Western political theory, in that the spirit cult structures the patronage system so as to provide conditions of legitimate rule, but also allow peasants and disempowered villagers avenues to legitimize their resistance against political elites and powerful patrons.<sup>51</sup>

While many scholars have referenced Bourdieu's habitus to explain Southeast Asian spirit cults as the common cultural practices done without reflection or consciousness, Matthew O'Lemmon argues convincingly that even those Cambodians who acknowledge *neak tā* in passing "just in case" do so consciously out of the uncertainty of a situation that would not have been normally anticipated.<sup>52</sup> Thus the spirit medium must be seen not as a premodern relic surviving anachronistically into our current age. Instead, the belief system pro-

vides individuals and communities with a vehicle for articulating basic claims to social and economic justice, and then motivating people to act in solidarity in support of those claims. The material conflict is spoken about in idioms of the spirits, while the spirits step in to serve as metaphors for the peaceful yet forceful human conflict. This allowed the villagers to force the patronage system to take the well-being of the villagers into account.

### CONCLUSIONS BEYOND CAMBODIA: FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL, THE SOCIAL TO THE POLITICAL

Jean Paul Lederach points out that reconciliation in societies divided by violent conflict depends upon sociocultural resources, at least as much as economic and political resources. On the one hand, political actors must be willing to negotiate for peace. On the other hand, "the greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is always rooted in the local people and their culture."<sup>53</sup> When one is talking about a system of violence such as the Khmer Rouge insurgency between 1979 and 1991, most of the violence did not emerge from an obvious set of political actors. While Prime Minister Hun Sen secured formal peace by brokering a peace deal with the Khmer Rouge in 1996—offering amnesty to Khmer Rouge cadres in exchange for defecting toward the government—lasting peace and reconciliation had to be forged by rebuilding the social bridges between formerly divided people at the local level. This rebuilding of social bridges, Lederach wrote, required acts of "moral imagination" to integrate formerly divided people into new, shared social webs where protracted violence had no place.<sup>54</sup> This "moral imagination" that Lederach identifies was at work in the Buddhist idioms of peace employed by Maha Ghosananda, as well as the more spontaneous use of spirit cults to delegitimize aspects of the political patronage system in order to resist landgrabs.

A greater understanding of how religions and religious beliefs contribute to cultures of peace on local levels can prove beneficial on a variety of levels. In the overwhelming majority of conflicts around the world, religious identities do not form the fault lines of enmity. Rather, most conflicts split the adherents of religious communities. Since many religions are inherently global—existing beyond national, ethnic, or any other particular division—religious bodies as a whole have the ability to encourage peace among conflicting parties on the local levels. Such was case when Pope Jean Paul II urged solidarity among Catholics to stand against violence and oppression in Communist Poland, against apartheid in South Africa, and against military dictatorships in Latin America.

In terms of global peacebuilding, interfaith peace work can benefit from an understanding of how peace can be motivated through the structure of religious belief and religious experience, not just from the particular teaching of religious doctrines. Some faith-inspired peace work certainly takes on neo-colonial forms that can hardly be said to promote peace. Such is the case with US evangelical groups that speak in idioms of peace and justice while financing brutal and repressive antigay campaigns among fundamentalist groups in

Uganda, presenting homosexuality as a sinful Western import that weakens society and leaves Uganda more vulnerable to violence and exploitation from the West.<sup>55</sup> However, a great deal of peace work can be undertaken by fundamentalist movements which are often maligned in scholarship and in commentaries of world affairs.

Fundamentalism is a religious response to the marginalization of religion or religious groups, either socially, politically, or economically. A fundamentalist intention to restore the role of religion in society and politics need not be violent, intolerant, or repressive. In fact, fundamentalism can be a source of peace—in so far as the fundamentalist identity is not based on rigid distinctions between the insider and outsider, or the religious ideal and the profane that exclude the other from the realm of equal humanity or ethical responsibility. Such rigid divisions can deny the principle of reciprocity necessary for meaningful dialogue between conflicting groups.<sup>56</sup> When any group, fundamentalist or not, insists on the legitimacy of particular traditions simply because they exist, or draw boundaries of tolerance around dogmatic interpretations of inerrant texts, “the critique of fundamental assumptions is thereby inhibited from the beginning.”<sup>57</sup> Because the basic aspects of personal identity and religious experiences are often intertwined with the structuring parameters of material interests,<sup>58</sup> when the material basis of conflicts are expressed in idioms of fundamentalist religious belief and identity, the material basis of conflict can be placed beyond the purview of dialogue and mediation. However, fundamentalist movements can be sites of tolerance and peacebuilding since nothing prevents the fundamentalist group from discrediting violence and favoring peace-related values such as restraint, forgiveness, hospitality, or compassion.<sup>59</sup>

Peace activists and NGOs can also benefit from a greater understanding of religious contributions to cultures of peace. Religious leaders and religious institutions, Lederach writes, are respected midlevel actors who control networks of social groups and institutions where conflicts are played out on a daily basis. In such a way, they are often key actors in adjudicating conflicts and resolving religious hatreds and bigotry, and are frequently viewed in their own communities with more legitimacy than foreign-funded NGOs or aid organizations.<sup>60</sup> In the case of the spirit cults in Cambodia, we find a type of “strong-religion” peacebuilding that Appleby identifies, where religious actors did not think of themselves as religious actors or peacemakers or radicals, but nevertheless saw a form of peacemaking as a sacred duty and strove to sublimate and delegitimize the structural violence of landgrabbing.<sup>61</sup> The tendency among human rights workers and global aid workers is to conflate liberal values with human progress and peace, so that they direct their actions toward trying to create the liberal subject in the “local” world and promote societies based on the liberal social contract.<sup>62</sup> Yet, in the Cambodian case, the religious behaviors provided by the tradition of the spirit cults provided authentic responses to the sacred that resonated in the local political culture, and had the potential to achieve the kinds of reciprocity and social justice that liberal visions of peace often claim to uphold.

In terms of understanding religious contributions to peace through the lens of global politics and international relations, it is important to remember that most scholars have preferred to adapt the study of religion to their existing theoretical paradigms.<sup>63</sup> The reason, why, is because the primary unit of analysis in international relations is nation-states, the indispensable units for organizing human societies and security in the contemporary world.<sup>64</sup> While many have argued that globalization diminishes the role of the nation-state in world affairs, the predominant view among scholars is that states continue to set the basic rules of the global order and define the environment within which transnational movements and institutions such as religious groups and religions must function.<sup>65</sup> Many current theorists of international relations believe that religion fulfills a role in international politics because it serves as a vehicle for mobilizing mass participation in domestic politics, which can shape how a nation-state acts internationally. Others believe religion can also be used as an institutional force to demand a more responsible form of government when the secular state fails to address popular needs.<sup>66</sup> Others have argued that religion constitutes an imagined community that rationalizes self-sacrifice and uses divine authority to set standards of appropriate behavior through norms that produce different kinds of political commitments among members of a religious community than the commitments held by the populace of a state.<sup>67</sup>

Inverting our analytical lens and looking at world affairs from the perspective of global institutions and transnational social movements—and not states—highlights the potential for religion to contribute to peace. Not only do the world’s current human rights laws and movements draw on religious sources and share ethical visions of the world, but many of the humanitarian institutions that work to constrain the action of states in both domestic politics and international relations were formed out of religious movements. It was Christian social movements, after all, that forced the international system of states to outlaw slavery and human trafficking.<sup>68</sup> International humanitarian law in its current form is inconceivable without the influence of the International Committee for the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which were founded on explicitly Christian and Islamic principles of compassion and charity.<sup>69</sup> Transitional justice institutions in Guatemala, Brazil, Chile, South Africa, and Timor-Leste have been deeply influenced by Christian communities, leaders, and institutions that contained a moral authority capable of shaping their states’ approaches to justice.<sup>70</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone and the Special Court for Sierra Leone have likewise been shaped by Muslim faith groups and the Islamic community in the country, as has the Moroccan truth commission, which was also influenced by the country’s Jewish community, although to a lesser extent.<sup>71</sup> Even the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia—despite the overwhelming tendency of international observers to see it as an institution trading in the discourse of secular and liberal idioms—has been steeped in Buddhist idioms of peace and justice.<sup>72</sup>

Jürgen Habermas has argued that the global public sphere is a realm of rational arguments in which religion can be an inhibiting force because religious

faith and revelation cannot be understood by those who do not experience them, nor spoken about in universal idioms.<sup>73</sup> For Habermas, including religious voices and perspectives in the public sphere is instrumental. Religious voices will almost certainly violate the “truths” of global citizens who hold secular, scientific, or other religious worldviews. However, such dialogue establishes the foundation of reciprocity and respect necessary for the public sphere to be a source of global solidarity and human creativity. To take the case of the Cambodia discussed in this chapter, Habermas’ perspective would require that the religious citizen in Cambodia must “translate” her truth about peace and reconciliation into a discourse that does not depend upon religious idioms so that she may contribute to the public sphere. Likewise, the secular citizen has a corresponding duty to try and interpret what is being said on religious grounds about the nature of peace and reconciliation in Cambodia, whether in regard to post-genocide reconciliation or contemporary economic justice. Certainly, this view still privileges the standpoint of the secular. But, Habermas assumes that a universal point of reason exists beyond religious experience, and he does not demand that the religious discourses justify themselves in the frameworks of secular discourses.

Habermas, in his famous book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* had argued that there was a universal public sphere that protected individuals from the state, where grievances could be expressed and political ideas exchanged. From this standpoint, recognizing religious contributions to nurturing cultures of peace—from the global to the local—requires an understanding that human thoughts, actions, and pursuits of peace can correspond to deeply held moral commitments, values, and beliefs. Whether it is the use of the practices and idioms of *neak tā* spirit cults to articulate political goals against landgrabbing or to express a legitimation of international criminal tribunals, or the Buddhist peace walks of Maha Ghosananda, religious peacebuilding also requires an understanding that the pursuit of peace will always require some form of “translation” within the public sphere—whether we are looking at the public sphere at the national level or the global.

The task of translation is crucial to religious peacebuilding, in both interreligious pursuits of peace and peace work that engages secular and religious partners. But this translation must be connected to peace work that is cosmopolitan in essence. If the goal of understanding the Other is simply to be able to use a partnership with the Other as a means for achieving other ends, then such tolerance in the name of pragmatism might be able to secure short-term gains and negative peace but, in the long term, such tolerance would undermine the true acceptance of the Other as an equal that is required for building just and lasting peace.<sup>74</sup> As such, interreligious peacebuilding built around this act of translation—between the secular and the religious, and between religious traditions—becomes cosmopolitan in a Kantian sense when all people are considered to belong to a single moral community where the Other is valued as an ethical end in and of herself, regardless of her subjective identity, or beliefs, or particular group belonging. In terms of the case study explored in this chapter,

the peace walks of Maha Ghosananda worked because they employed Buddhist idioms and practices that allowed individuals who were victims and perpetrators to begin to view and imagine themselves as equals. These same cosmopolitan principles would also require, for example, that secular actors working to promote just peace recognize as equals, and act in solidarity with, those who pursue the same goals through the practices and idioms of the *neak tā*.

## NOTES

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6. Weiner, (2003), p. 112.
7. Ibid., pp. 114–116.
8. Ibid., pp. 120–121.
9. Heder and Ledgerwood (1996); Linton (2004).
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16. Chandler (2008), pp. 355–369.
17. Sriram (2007), pp. 579–591.
18. Bonacker et al. (2011), pp. 113–134.
19. Curtis (1998), p. 129.
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22. Zizek (2005), pp. 115–131.
23. Hinton (2013), pp. 42–48 at p. 49.
24. Ledgerwood et al. (1994), pp. 1–26.
25. Levy and Sznajder (2011), p. 98; Clark (2010).
26. Hinton, (2013), p. 49.
27. Kammerer (2003), pp. 40–68.
28. Geertz (1973).
29. Ang (1995), pp. 213–238. Spirit cults are different from founders’ cults, which are made up of the spirits of the first occupants of an area or region: see Tannenbaum and Kammerer (2003).
30. Holt (2009), p. 6.
31. Evers (1968), pp. 541–550; O’Lemmon, (2014).
32. Harris (2005), pp. 52–53.
33. Holt, (2009), p. 15.
34. Harris, (2005), pp. 52–53.
35. Edwards (2007).
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37. Gyallay-Pap, (2007), p. 92.

38. Chandler (1996), pp. 95–96; Harris (2007), pp. 145–176.
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45. Beban and Work (2014).
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48. Ibid., p. 2.
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52. O’Lemmon (2014), pp. 25–49 at p. 31.
53. Lederach (1997), p. 45.
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56. Bronner (2007), pp. 157–158.
57. Ibid., p. 158.
58. Ferguson (2003), pp. 1–58 at p. 27.
59. Appleby, (2000), p. 286.
60. Lederach, (1997), p. 25.
61. Appleby, (2000), p. 9.
62. Sabaratnam (2013), pp. 259–278.
63. Snyder (2011), pp. 1–23.
64. Ibid., p. 5.
65. Krasner (1995), pp. 257–279 at p. 279. And see Tarrow (2005).
66. Snyder, (2011).
67. Toft (2011), pp. 115–140.
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