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Religion and Peacemaking

Dr Elizabeth J Harris

Secretary for Inter Faith Relations, Methodist Church in Britain

In 1999 I visited Bosnia with an inter faith group connected with a small Muslim Christain NGO called SANA. At one point we asked a religious leader whether religion was the cause of the conflict that had wracked the country. He replied, 'Religion is not the cause of the conflict. But religion is not innocent.' That is the baseline from which I believe we should start when looking at religion and peace-making. Religion is rarely the primary cause of violent conflict. The main causes are more often economic or political - access to land, water and other resources, or the failure of parliamentary structures to give a voice to minorities or to recognize their language rights. In conflict after conflict, however, religious factors are present, contributing to cycles of violence. The birth of the International Association for Religious Freedom recognized this, I believe, in its championing of liberal religious values in the face of the absolutist claims of some religious bodies.[1] Religion is not innocent, whether in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Israel/Palestine or the Balkans. Particularly disturbing for me is that religion is a contributory factor in some of the world's most intractable conflicts such as Israel/Palestine and Sri Lanka.

In situations where religion is not innocent, can religion or people of faith contribute to conflict transformation? Some people say, 'No'. In Sri Lanka, for instance, I have met people who have rejected religion because they believe it has done nothing to solve the long-standing ethnic conflict there. But I would like to argue today that people of faith, you and I, can and must be part of the solution to conflict. And that in being part of the solution, we can be more effective if we draw insights not only from the texts of our religious traditions but also from the experience of those living with conflict, using what John Paul Lederach, an American Mennonite, has called 'the moral imagination'.[2]

Before looking at the 'how' of this, let me first say a word about myself. Between 1986 and 1993 I lived in Sri Lanka, studying Buddhism. Three conflicts burned whilst I was there: the long-standing ethnic conflict; a conflict between the government and a southern militant group of insurgents; and conflict between Buddhists and Christians, and Hindus and Christians, over what was coming to be known as 'unethical conversion'. Since returning to Britain, in my work as Secretary for Inter Faith Relations for the Methodist Church in Britain, I have visited several other places where there has been internal war or inter-religious tension: Israel/Palestine; Gujarat in India; Pakistan; Cambodia; Bosnia.

I will use examples from some of these countries to reflect on three interlinked areas that I believe are crucial to understanding and transforming conflict:

- Breaking cycles of contempt
- Passing over to the side of 'the other'
- Imagining peace and taking risks

In daring to speak about these things, I owe debts to many peace activists and spiritual teachers, who have been my teachers, in countries such as Cambodia and Sri Lanka: Venerable Maha Ghosananda, Bob Matt, S Balakrishnan, Rev Yohan Devananda and Audrey Rebera, Dr Aloysius Pieris and John Paul Lederach.

Breaking Cycles of Contempt

I come to my first factor, breaking cycles of contempt. I start with 'contempt' because it is often the unrecognised key to understanding a conflict. Anger, resentment and violence very often have their roots in the conviction that contempt is being directed towards one's ethnic, linguistic or religious identity. When a community believes that it is viewed with contempt, the defence of self-respect and dignity becomes all important - and violent ways of doing this can so easily be judged the only option. Let me use the example of the tension caused by the perceived threat of 'unethical conversions' in Sri Lanka. The accusation is that Christians are bribing poverty-stricken Buddhists and Hindus to become Christians through promises of material benefits. In the last two years, it has resulted in attacks on churches and the tabling,

but not so far the passing, of anti-conversion legislation in Parliament. The roots of this, according to research I have done over several years,[3] goes back to the nineteenth century when Sri Lanka was under British rule, and evangelical Christian missionaries were seeking to convert Buddhists and Hindus through condemning what Buddhists and Hindus believed.

This is how one Anglican Bishop from Britain described a conversation with some Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka in 1863:

> They were moved when I said that I came to them as the teachers of the people, feeling sure that if they could be convinced that my Religion was true they would wish to teach it instead of their own. They told me that nothing had more turned them against Christianity than finding themselves treated with marked contempt by its professors.[4]

In nineteenth century Sri Lanka, the eventual cause of conflict between Christians and Buddhists was not that the Christians preached Christianity, or that they gained some converts. It was not the differences between Christian and Buddhist belief and practice. It was that the Christian missionaries rejected the respect-filled co-existence Buddhists and Hindus sought, contemptuously undermining what Buddhists and Hindus held precious. The result? Some Buddhists and Hindus, in defence of their self-respect and identity, threw away their wish for peaceful co-existence and adopted the competitive methods of the missionaries. Inter-religious conflict began. And the experience of contempt is the key to understanding it.

To move to the twenty first century, contempt was an important factor in the recent reactions of Muslims to the cartoons of the Holy Prophet Muhammad that were published by the Danish broadsheet, *Jyllands-Posten*¸ and then in other European papers. Most people of faith can tell jokes against themselves and Muslims are no exception to this. But there is a difference between humour and contempt. The cartoons showed contempt for Muslim self-understanding in a world where many Muslims already feel vulnerable. Another example of contempt playing a key role is Israel/Palestine. The Government of Israel declares the recently-erected wall between Israel and the West Bank is necessary if suicide bombers are to be deterred. And it

cannot be denied that, since its erection, bombings have decreased. Some Palestinians, however, see it as an embodiment of contempt - for Palestinian livelihoods, well-being and identity, since it cuts some villages off from their fields and olive groves. Similarly the refusal of Hamas and Iran to recognize the State of Israel is seen by Israelis as an expression of contempt for their Jewish identity and the horror of what happened to the Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe.

How can people of faith transcend, or help others to transcend, this element in conflict and the resentment, anger and self-assertive action it nurtures? There are no easy paths. For it demands change both in those accused of acting with contempt and in the objects of that contempt. However, this is where the idea of moral imagination can come in, the kind of imagination that can take what is present in any situation and create what is new. Lederach describes it as a force that possesses 'peripheral vision', the kind of vision that is curious, and open to the unexpected. It requires, he stresses, the capacity 'to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies' and to step 'into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence. [5] One way to enable 'peripheral vision' to develop in situations of conflict, I have come to believe, is to create spaces where people involved in conflict are helped to imagine what it is like to be on the side of the 'other' in the conflict. So let me move now to this.

Passing over to the side of 'the other'

The kind of imagination that can pass over to the side of 'the other' is not easy to evoke. One reason for this is that conflict is often accompanied by competitions in comparative suffering, each side claiming that it is they who have suffered the most. Let me again take Sri Lanka as an example, this time with reference to its ethnic conflict. There are three main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. The Sinhala people, predominantly Buddhist, speakers of Sinhala, are about 73% of the population. The Tamil people, mainly Hindu, speakers of Tamil, are about 18%, and there is a Muslim presence of about 8%. In the ethnic conflict that has caused suffering in the country since the 1950s, most particularly after 1983, all these groups consider themselves to be the victims in the conflict and a minority under threat. Muslims look to 1990 when the militant Tamil group that then controlled the North of the country, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), gave Muslims living in the North only a few hours to

leave, in a blatant example of 'ethnic cleansing'. Many are still in refugee camps. Tamils see themselves as the victims of a centralized Parliamentary structure that cannot be other than Sinhala-dominated. They refer to numerous state-inspired incidents of discrimination, oppression and violence. Both Tamils and Muslims see themselves as minorities in the country. As for the Sinhala majority, they also see themselves as victims - of the numerous LTTE suicide bomb attacks that have killed innocent civilians in the South. And some also see themselves as a minority in the face of the millions of Tamils across the Palk Straits in Tamil Nadu.

When I visited Israel/Palestine, I found a similar dynamic. Both the Israelis and Palestinians see themselves as the side who has suffered the most and both consider themselves to be the threatened minority, the Palestinians in the face of the might of Israel, the Israelis in the wider geopolitical area of Syria, Lebanon and Iran.

In these contexts, how can people be helped to move imaginatively over to the other side so that they can glimpse how people on that side sees themselves? Nurturing empathy and providing knowledge that was previously unknown are important keys. In Sri Lanka, empathy for 'the other' has been encouraged through language learning. In June 1998, for instance, Ven Dr Kadurugamuve Nagitha Thero, then Head of the Linguistics Department at the University of Kelaniya, arranged a Tamil Day, where students sung, danced and staged dramas in Tamil. But the participants were not Tamil. They were all Sinhala, some of them Buddhist monks. All had taken a certificate course in Tamil and so had glimpsed the linguistic and cultural world of 'the other'. When Ven Nagitha was asked about his reasons for encouraging Sinhala students to learn Tamil, he replied, 'When you understand the other side better, you learn to respect the other's cultural identity. Just as much as we are Sinhalese and proud of it, we must learn to respect Tamil culture and their way of life'.[6]

Some multi faith peace organizations in Sri Lanka organize workshops on the ethnic conflict in Buddhist villages. The organizers usually find that the villagers are willing to hear about the experiences of Tamil villagers if given the opportunity, whether of not being able to communicate with government bodies in Tamil, of hiding in the jungle for fear of attacks, seeing religious buildings and schools bombed or losing their children to the war. Their reaction is, 'Why didn't we know this!' Knowledge

then gives birth to empathy as they compare their own experiences of economic hardship and bereavement with the lives of unknown Tamil villagers. The knowledge that nurtures empathy, however, is increased not only through lectures and seminars, but through sight, touch and sound. On 25 February 2006, the Anti-War Front, a coalition of groups, both religious and secular, organized a commemoration in Colombo to mark the fourth anniversary of the Ceasefire Agreement. About 10,000 people gathered in Colombo for a rally that included music, song and drama. In preparation for this, three caravans of cultural activists had travelled around the country, helping local groups with District-level events. They performed street theatre and music with four focal points: opposition to a return to war; condemnation of all acts of violence by parties to the Ceasefire Agreement; and a call for the government and opposition parties to work together in the Peace Process. About 25 such events were held, some in Buddhist and Hindu temples. Central to this initiative was the awareness that it is easier for people to 'pass over' into the experience of groups considered 'other' through music, art and drama than through speeches.

Imagining peace and taking risks

So let me move to the last part of my talk: imagining peace and taking risks. I want to begin with a well-known example from Cambodia: the Dhammayietras or Pilgrimages of Truth pioneered by the Buddhist monk, Ven Maha Ghosananda. May I apologize to anyone who has read my book, *What Buddhists Believe* for using the same material again. The first Dhammayietra took place in 1992 soon after a UN-brokered peace treaty had brought four of the warring factions together. The second came in 1993, on the eve of UN-brokered elections when the situation was again volatile. I use the description of it given to me in 1995 by Liz Bernstein, who was working with the Ven. Maha Ghosananda at this time. She began by stressing that fear was widespread in 1993. Political assassinations were part of life. Some doubted whether elections would ever happen or, if they did, that people would vote. She continued:

> The walk began from Angkor Wat (a complex of temples) and went through one of the heaviest areas of conflict to Phnom Penh. On the eve of the walk there was a fire-fight between the Khmer Rouge and the government soldiers right in the grounds of the temple. As everyone huddled in the temple and rockets and grenades were flying, one grenade

> came into the temple where three or four hundred people were huddled and landed next to the Buddha image. It didn't explode.
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> Afterwards, the walkers decided to continue. There had been two or three walkers injured and they sent messages from their hospital beds that the walk must continue. So the walk left Siem Reap and went through areas where the UN peace-keepers were stationed but where they did not leave their bases. They didn't walk five hundred metres from their bases because of the conflict between the government and the Khmer Rouge. So, people along the road saw that even where the peace-keepers wouldn't go, here was this line of five hundred monks and nuns walking for peace. Again we had an incredible welcome from the people. They said, 'We have never seen peace. We have heard on the radio that they have signed a peace accord but we are lying in our bunkers at night. We have never seen peace until we have seen this walk.' At the bridges the soldiers who were guarding laid down their weapons and came to Maha Ghosananda and said, 'Give us a blessing so that our bullets don't hit anyone and so that their bullets don't hit us.'
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> So the walk went on. When we were about to arrive in Phnom Penh it was just the day before elections and the city was very tense with fear. The UN had ordered their staff to send their families abroad because the situation was unstable. They were expecting attacks from the government or the Khmer Rouge and people were very, very frightened. When the walk entered the city, tens of thousands joined the walk and just kept walking around Phnom Penh calming people down, stopping at monuments and temples to meditate in silence for fifteen minutes. We then appealed for peace and for calm.[7]

The walk lasted for three days and helped to make the elections a success. Since 1993 there have been yearly walks.

One reason why the 1993 Dhammayietra in Cambodia worked was because it called people back to what was already in their Buddhist culture: non-violence and

fearlessness in the face of outside threat. According to Lederach, protracted conflict can be seen as 'a narrative broken'. Using this concept, the 1993 Dhammayietra restored a narrative already present in the culture.[8] It helped people reconnect with values and traditions long known.

I like this image of narrative broken and narrative restored. In Sri Lanka, a narrative exists of all peoples living harmoniously. I have so often been told, 'Before this war happened we lived so harmoniously.' The state of Israel began with the ideals of the Kibbutzim, the communal settlements that were set up in the 1950s, such as the sharing of resources, joint decision-making and making the desert bloom through work. In many situations of conflict there are narratives, which are often religious, that speak of harmony and non-violence. Imagining peace involves finding the spaces where people can re-connect with these narratives and inject new meaning into them. Offering symbolic images of these narratives is one method. Five hundred Buddhist monks and nuns walking for peace in Cambodia in 1993 was a symbolic image of fearlessness and peace. But there was risk for the participants. Several were injured. There was risk for the group of Christian peace activists that went to Iraq in 2005 to offer the Iraqi people an image of the West and Christian-Muslim relations that was unconnected with aggression and violence. Norman Kember and his colleagues were abducted and are still in captivity (may have to be changed). There was risk for the Sri Lankan Catholic priest, Fr Michael Rodrigo omi, when, in his sixties, he went to live in a remote and poor Buddhist village in his country, seeking to roll back over a hundred years of mistrust between Buddhism and Christianity there. He was killed, not by the villagers but by other interests opposed to his actions. Using 'moral imagination', as Lederach also points out, involves risk

To re-make and restore narratives of peace is, therefore, no easy task. One reason for this is that narratives of peace often compete with narratives of conflict, embedded in past centuries or in religious texts. In the Balkans, alliances made in World War II still affect the conflict. In Sri Lanka, some Sinhala extremists have drawn on stories of conflict in the ancient historical chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, and on material from the Pali Buddhist canon, to justify their view that the threat to Buddhism posed by the LTTE can only be eradicated through military means.

Even the circulation of a pamphlet drawing attention to a narrative of conflict that happened hundreds of years ago can be enough to re-start violence in the present.

I have learnt much from Buddhism about why peace-making is so difficult. Last November I gave a talk at the launch of a new educational centre at the Dhammatalaka Buddhist Pagoda in Birmingham, England, on 'What can Buddhism offer a violent world?' Let me quote two paragraphs from that presentation:

> One popular reaction to extreme violence whether perpetrated by an individual or a group is: 'How could any human do that?' Of suicide bombers we exclaim, 'How can a human blow himself and others up?' Of those in the Third Reich who helped Hitler's genocide we cry, 'How could ordinary men - husbands, fathers, lovers - carry on with their everyday life and at the same time send thousands of Jews to be killed in gas chambers?' It is as though the violent ones are placed in a sub-human category, far away from us, the civilized, peaceful ones.

I continued:

> We will never understand violence if we stay at this level. Buddhism can help here in two ways. First, it can teach us that violence is to be expected in a world that is in the grip of greed, hatred and delusion. Second, it can force us to see that the perpetrators of violence are not aberrations within the human race. They are formed by a web of conditioning factors that implicate many more people than the actual perpetrator.[9]

There is another talk here and I have no time to begin it. In brief, what I was trying to say in Birmingham was that the arising of conflict should not surprise us. For we live in a world that is in the grip of greed, hatred and illusion - forces that have considerable power. And this means that those involved in conflict - and also in peace-making - are not free agents. Even those who seek to exercise moral imagination can make mistakes, can be compromised, can experience lack of courage.

Setbacks in peace-making are therefore without number, as the peace processes in Sri Lanka, Israel/Palestine or the Balkans testify.

In conclusion, however, let me turn again to narratives of peace. All religions and cultures contain them. I believe that most ordinary people aspire to them, however far away they may seem. Conflict resolution theory sometimes speaks of developing a 'critical mass' of support for peace - a critical number of people who can tip the balance away from conflict and towards peace. But there is another picture that comes from several of our religions - that of one or two people who can work against gravity. Lederach, again in his book, *The Moral Imagination*, speaks of 'critical yeast' rather than 'critical mass',[10] echoing the words of Jesus in the Christian tradition that the Kingdom of God is like yeast which, when mixed with flour, eventually leavens the whole, even though it is the smallest ingredient.[11] Lederach's point is that a few people, strategically placed, can sometimes do more for peace than hundreds of people believing the same thing.

I have mentioned three factors in peace-making: breaking cycles of contempt; passing over to the side of 'the other'; imagining peace and taking risks. It is not necessary to be religious to realize how important they are. But they all have spiritual content. They are rooted in qualities dear to all the religions present here: empathy; compassion; forgetting of self; transforming the mind and heart; and the willingness to take risks in faith. My hope is that these qualities will increase and that people of faith will be at the forefront of this, bringing good news to our world.

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[1] See for instance Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*, London: SCM Press, pp.47-62.
[2] John Paul Lederach, 2005, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford University Press
[3] See Elizabeth J Harris, 2006, *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka*, Routledge.
[4] Bishop Claughton writing to Rev E Hawkins from Colombo, 13 January 1863, Ceylon Letters Vol II (SPG Archives) quoted *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter*, p. 189
[5] *The Moral Imagination*, p. 118 and p. 5
[6] T. Dissanayaike, ' "Malar Kothu" from Sinhala students' in 'The Sunday Times Plus, 14 June 1998: 1 quoted in Elizabeth J Harris, 'The Cost of Peace: Buddhists and Conflict Transformation in Sri Lanka' in *Can Faiths make Peace?*, Damien Keown (Ed.), I. B Tauris (forthcoming 2006).

[7] Elizabeth Harris, 1998, *What Buddhists Believe*, Oxford: Oneworld, p. 116-117
[8] *The Moral Imagination*, p. 146
[9] A shortened form of this was published as Elizabeth J Harris, 2006, 'What can Buddhism offer a violent world?' in *Interreligious Insight*, Vol. 4, No. 1: pp. 54-66

[10] *The Moral Imagination*, pp. 92-93
[11] Luke 13. 20-21