

Common experience, different spiritualities in Cambodia

Eve Lester

[I have developed] a genuine reverence for the Christian tradition and its capacity to create people of such goodness. I believe the purpose of all the major religious traditions is not to construct big temples on the outside, but to create temples of goodness and compassion inside, in our hearts. Every major religion has the potential to create this. The greater our awareness in regarding the value and effectiveness of other religious traditions, then the deeper will be our respect and reverence toward other religions. This is the proper way for us to promote genuine compassion and a spirit of harmony among the religions of the world.

In order to develop a genuine spirit of harmony from a sound foundation of knowledge, I believe it is very important to know the fundamental differences between religious traditions. And it is possible to understand the fundamental differences, but at the same time recognize the value and potential of each religious tradition. In this way, a person may develop a balanced and harmonious perception. Some people believe that the most reasonable way to attain harmony and solve problems relating to religious intolerance is to establish one universal religion for everyone. However, I have always felt that we should have different religious traditions because human beings possess so many different mental dispositions: one religion simply cannot satisfy the needs of such a variety of people. If we try to unify the faiths of the world into one religion, we will also lose many of the qualities and richnesses [sic] of each particular tradition. Therefore, I feel it is better, in spite of the many quarrels in the name of religion, to maintain a variety of religious traditions. Unfortunately, while a diversity of religious traditions is more suited to serve the needs of the diverse mental dispositions among humanity, this diversity naturally possesses the potential for conflict and disagreement as well. Consequently, people of every religious tradition must make an extra effort to try to transcend intolerance and misunderstanding and seek harmony. (The Dalai Lama: 1994 John Main Seminar, UK)

THese are radical words. Ignatian spirituality has always boasted a radical edge: a spirituality sitting comfortably in a country

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like Cambodia which lies far from the comfort zone of traditional perceptions of Catholic religious practice and belief. Indeed, for those perceptions there is no place. Cambodia is a place where there have been and continue to be deep-seated cultural, social and political tensions. Religious tensions, on the other hand, have been comparatively minor and do not manifest themselves significantly in daily life.

From July 1995 to December 1996 I worked with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Cambodia. I worked as a lawyer with asylum-seekers and refugees who, coming from as far away as the Middle East and North Africa, seek safe haven in that country. I am not Catholic, though that was not breaking new ground for JRS, and if one's yardstick is church attendance over the last ten years, nor am I a very good Anglican . . .

But there was, I suppose, something of a religious motivation behind my decision to join JRS. I can best describe it as small 'r' religious, denoting a belief system which, for me, has its origins in Christian traditions and at the heart of which is a commitment to humanity and social justice. A commitment to humanity and to what is just runs as a common thread across many religious traditions and self-styled belief systems, binding and securing recognition of a common purpose and spirit rather than deriving from a single ideology or doctrine.

It seems appropriate that part of the writing of this piece took place back in Cambodia again, at my old desk, with the same view of palms laden with coconuts, the same drone of rickety old motor-bikes out in the street, of children playing, cocks crowing, of the ice-cream man sending his message through a distinctive and unforgettably unmelodious metallic music box that distinguishes him from other folk selling other foodstuffs. The faces are the same but they now deliver an unspoken message which tells of the violence that shook Phnom Penh during the weekend coup of 5–6 July 1997.

A social and spiritual cocktail

The experience of working in Cambodia offered not just a mixture of spiritualities but a social cocktail full of flavour, colour and great depth. Those who come and go from JRS range across the social, political and religious spectrum: atheists and amputees; beggars and Buddhists; monks and Muslims; politicians and prostitutes. All are welcome. In one way or another, all belong.

Cambodia itself is a predominantly Buddhist society. In addition, there are the *Chham*, who are Muslim, and Christians (mostly Catholics), a community which appears to exist by and large as a product of the French colonial years and the refugee camp years of the 1980s. Many of the Christians are of Vietnamese ethnicity against which there is a deeply entrenched animosity. There are also those from the hill-tribes in the North East for whom religious belief is largely guided by animist traditions.

In the community of expatriates, many have come to Cambodia motivated by a commitment to make some contribution to the development of a nation which has been devastated by civil war and the brutality of successive regimes. They came to play a small part in the rebuilding of Cambodia during the four-year snapshot of peace that most of the country had enjoyed until the bloody coup of 5–6 July 1997. Many have stayed on. Some are troubled by the dilemma of whether one stays with the needy or whether doing so gives tacit approval to an administration installed by violence. They wonder whether they belong. It is not an easy question and it is even harder to answer.

Others hold on to an unqualified commitment to the poorest of the poor, knowing that it is they who bear the brunt of sanctions and other political statements on the playing field of international relations. Theirs is a belief in the evolution of civil society.

Other expatriates are driven by a religious motivation of a different and disturbing kind – they have come to bring Salvation to the people, to thrust the Word upon them, bringing the message of the Truth – and this, before all else. Riding on a claim to exclusive knowledge of where the truth lies, they deliver the Word in a paternalistic and artificial way rather than sharing it by living it.

Then there are the asylum-seekers and refugees, whose religious shades and persuasions are not what has brought them to Cambodia, although for some it is what keeps them going through hard and uncertain times. For some, there is a perception that a strategically chosen conversion provides a gateway to the realization of a tangible freedom – a way to find a sense of belonging, however contrived or constructed.

The question for all the ingredients in this human cocktail is not so much one of who belongs but of *how* one belongs and to what extent one can belong in a society, community, organization, family or friendship. There are those amongst us who stand on the outside

of a culture, looking in, sharing and learning but never truly able to become a part of it.

However, it is from the small 'r' religious perspective of a common purpose that I find myself wanting to tell a few stories, or rather vignettes, which describe a little of how those who share it live and work together. They are an attempt to illustrate the capacity of a community to recognize, respect and reflect a common purpose which embraces difference.

The novice monk

A young man appears on the stairs. A big smile breaks the apparition which has surprised its viewers. An occasional worker with JRS, he was a sort of Robin Hood in our lives. He would disappear from time to time for days on end, having taken his own money and borrowed from others to buy rice for the poor people back in his village. He was a simple man, who caused little but consternation to his family because he was so unreliable. He was. But his kindness and generosity were certainly reliable.

On this occasion he had returned to visit JRS, head shaven and draped in saffron robes. He had joined a nearby *Wat* (temple) as a novice monk. He sat down and told a little of his story and then came his plea to our Director: 'Sister, I don't think I like it very much at the *Wat*, I miss everyone here and I want to come back. I think I'd like to become a Catholic instead.' 'You go away and learn to be a good Buddhist before thinking about whether you want to become a Catholic!' was the affectionate but assertive reply. He stayed a while, for he was welcome and he left knowing that he always would be.

The policemen

Working with asylum-seekers and refugees in a country like Cambodia, you are acutely aware of the suffering and the needs of the asylum-seekers and refugees, but also of the struggles of the local population, and the priorities of a people seeking to rebuild. Sadly, but perhaps understandably, you see that the interests of refugees and asylum-seekers are not high on that list of priorities. But love emerges where one might least expect it, and gently and unobtrusively gives life like sun on your back on a cool day. In this case, a makeshift immigration detention centre holding illegal immigrants and staffed by uniformed and surly officials is transformed.

As children play together on a policeman's motorbike, a small group of Assyrian Christians are looking for a place to celebrate a Christmas mass, a place where they can share in one of the great moments of the Christian calendar. Another policeman understands that their faith is important to them and realizes it is hard to find a quiet place. He offers his own bedroom. Amidst military uniforms, bright pink satin trimmings and a Buddhist shrine, we celebrated a very real Christmas.

The social worker

In a country where asylum-seekers and refugees have little, and some members of the local population have even less, the climate is fertile for the growth of tension whether as a result of perceived inequities or as a result of deep-seated fear which has its origins in past ethnic tensions or ignorance. And in a country where AIDS education is minimal and the disease is spreading like wildfire, fear, misunderstanding and misinformation tend to guide the responses of the ordinary population who ostracize and reject even family members suffering from this terrible disease. But through this darkness, the beauty of goodness is overwhelming. Loving kindness (in Khmer, *meta karuna*) typifies the Buddhist way. In the social worker, who knew little about the AIDS virus, it was pure unadulterated goodness that enabled her instinctively to see the human being and not the disease in a man with AIDS. Her love was more powerful than her ignorance. She recognized his strengths and weaknesses, his fears, his flaws, his needs and his longings. Tempers frayed from time to time, but her gentleness and thoughtfulness never wavered.

The convert

The phenomenon of people professing religious faith where they perceive an advantage is not new. A refugee, convinced he was under surveillance and desperately in search of sponsorship to resettle, turned to religion.

He was baptized into a religious sect which appears to be doing little else but seeking to boost its numbers. 'I have discovered Jesus Christ', he learned to say. 'Jesus Christ has brought me to you.' And to prove it, 'Look! See? Here is my photo of when I was baptized.'

A person's faith or belief system must not determine whether assistance is given. You can never be completely sure of whether the perception that conversion will reap the benefit of resettlement is

one of the refugee's own making or whether a declaration of faith is actually described as a precondition to assistance. What is clear, however, is that responsible religious practice is to treat requests for baptism by extremely vulnerable individuals with the utmost care and caution.

Richie

Richie Fernando was a young Jesuit scholastic from the Philippines who was killed by a grenade in October 1996. The tragedy was unspeakable but the strength of the community response was an inspiration. There are no morgues in Cambodia so Richie's body lay in state in the house where he had stayed when he first came to live there. The students to whom he had been companion and friend, themselves war-weary landmine-survivors, moved quietly into the room where Richie's body lay and took their place to pay their respects. A mass was celebrated on the same afternoon. There were Buddhists, Catholics and non-Catholics. There were Muslims who had passed by to pay their respects. Each shared in the loss – whatever their beliefs, the sense of tragedy was no less acute, and the grief no less deeply felt. Each shared profoundly the loss, and found solace not only in the belief system to which they subscribed, but also in the solace they could see others seeking in places they knew not.

It is a Buddhist tradition to celebrate the life of a person who has died seven, thirty and one hundred days after their death. Although a Catholic, Richie was no different and his life was to be respectfully celebrated in this way. To bear witness to, and to participate in, the celebration of Richie's life in a way which so effortlessly embraced Buddhism and Christianity and welcomed others epitomized the sense of community to which JRS aspires. In so many practical ways, all members of the community rallied round and did what they knew best. Richie's family was told of the tragedy by those who could do that best. His body was prepared by those who knew how. In the same way, flowers were arranged, food cooked, a coffin built, reports written, authorities notified, certificates obtained and so on. Everyone fell into a role with remarkable ease, because they belonged and they knew they belonged.

The motorbike taxi-driver

One evening as a few of us lay at home doing battle with a tropical flu, one of the women who worked at our office arrived so distressed that she was unable to manage the pace and flow of her words. As it happened, those of us who were there had only a basic knowledge of Khmer. We all shared the frustration of the struggle to communicate and understand the cause of her distress.

It transpired that her husband, a school teacher who needed to supplement his meagre income by driving a motorcycle taxi, had been attacked and hit over the back of the head in a failed attempt to steal his motorbike. He was in a hospital out of town. We found him there, in a room with no doors, a bed covered only with a reed mat, curled up like a child and babbling nonsense. After he was transferred to three further hospitals during the next few days, his wife was advised that he would need surgery to remove a clot from his brain, that there was no hope if he did not have it, and that there was some hope if he did. His wider family set up camp in the hospital. In shifts with his four young children and his wife, herself a simple and uneducated woman, the family was left to shoulder the responsibility of monitoring his oxygen. Hospital staff visited occasionally. He came through the operation well but after a few days began to deteriorate. He died about four days later.

This time we gathered in a *Wat* to celebrate the life of a man who fell victim to the culture of lawlessness and impunity that pervades this sad place. The deaths of Richie and the motorbike-taxi driver demonstrate how cultural and religious gaps are easily bridged where grief and sorrow are a shared experience.

Mixed marriages

Happily, these gaps can also be bridged in joy. During my time in Cambodia, there were two marriages between staff of JRS. These were mixed religious marriages, one between two Cambodians, the other between a Thai and a Cambodian. As a mark of respect to both faith traditions, there were two ceremonies – one Catholic and the other Buddhist.

The Catholic celebration is low key, and, respecting the cultural heritage of those who have chosen the Catholic faith, many Cambodian traditions are maintained. These include sprinkling of holy water with a banana flower, passing candles three times around those gathered, and those older than the couple tying threads around

the couple's wrists. These are intended to bring the couple good luck, good fortune and long life.

A Buddhist ceremony is long. The omnipresent video records the highlights. The day is characterized by a cacophonous mix of Buddhist chanting, music and cheerful Cambodian banter usually delivered to the entire neighbourhood through a second-rate loud-speaker system. The bride and groom change their clothes up to seven times during the day. The wedding ceremonies start in the early morning when the guests, led by the groom and his chosen entourage, gather at the groom's house in a long line, two by two. Carrying gifts of soft drink, fruit, meat, biscuits and other foods, they snake through the streets to the bride's home where she greets the groom. The first ceremony is followed by breakfast which is in a marquee or awning attached to the side of the house. Celebrations capture the interest of the neighbourhood as tables and guests overflow into the life of the street and disrupt the traffic. Ceremonies continue through the day. Guests come and go as they please, gathering later for a meal. Sometimes, local children wander barefoot through the party, collecting empty cans to sell and helping themselves to leftovers. They come uninvited, but they are welcome.

In the mixed religious marriages, each celebration carried its own importance and significance for the couple, but it was clear that no matter how devout a participant's commitment to Catholicism, the strength of the cultural traditions made these 'double' weddings incomplete until the Cambodian/Buddhist celebration was concluded.

The refugee

Late one night, a person called at our gate from the darkness: 'Sister! Sister!' It was a refugee trying to get in, frightened out of his wits, standing in nothing but his underpants, having fled the aggression and threats of some drunken soldiers. To escape, he had swum through a lake in the middle of the night and was covered in scratches and scrapes.

A student of English literature in his country of origin, he would sit and listen to the BBC World Service in a little house on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. The squalor of the house was not noticeable to its occupant because at least he owned it — a single room, with a cat, a dirt floor, a small bunk, thatched walls and roof, and a windmill which did not seem to work but which you were clearly

expected to admire. The cultured clip of the British accent contrasted starkly with the place from which it emanated.

Consumed by his own troubles, he seemed completely perplexed by Richie's death the following day. Anxieties about the fate of his cat and his belongings occupied him for a while, but with time understanding took the place of anxiety. Secure in the knowledge that he was welcome in our home and able to share in and relate to our grief, he was able to wait patiently (most of the time!) until the time came when we could direct our interest to him.

One of the major aims and purposes of religious practice for the individual is an inner transformation from an undisciplined, untamed, unfocused state of mind toward one that is disciplined, tamed and balanced. A person who has perfected the faculty of single-pointedness will definitely have a greater ability to attain this objective. When meditation becomes an important part of your spiritual life, you are able to bring about this inner transformation in a more effective way.

Once this transformation has been achieved, then in following your own spiritual tradition, you will discover that a kind of natural humility will arise in you, allowing you to communicate better with people from other religious traditions and cultural backgrounds. You are in a better position to appreciate the value and preciousness of other traditions because you have seen this value from within your own tradition. People often experience feelings of exclusivity in their religious beliefs – a feeling that one's own path is the only true path – which can create a sense of apprehension about connecting with others of different faiths. I believe the best way to counter that force is to experience the value of one's own path through meditative life, which will enable one to see the value and preciousness of other traditions. (The Dalai Lama: 1994 John Main Seminar, UK)

To find a common purpose is not to seek a common faith. How dull it would be to merge the common features of our collective faiths – we would be sure to become an unwholesome 'one'. There is so much we can learn from the lives and beliefs of others, so much we can make relevant to our own lives and beliefs, whatever they are and howsoever they are expressed. By respectfully and humbly opening our hearts and minds, we are blessed with an invitation to grow, to celebrate what is shared and to rejoice in and respect what is different.

Eve Lester is an Australian refugee lawyer. She worked in Australia with Cambodian refugees before joining the Jesuit Refugee Service in Cambodia. She is now Research and Policy Officer on refugee issues with the Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre which incorporates the Jesuit Refugee Service in Australia.