

Importance of Building Trust in Post Conflict Reconciliation: An analysis of the Significance of Religious Zones of Peace in Sri Lanka

Maneesha S. Wanasinghe – Pasqual

Department of International Relations, University of Colombo

Introduction

Abu-Nimer, Said, and Prelis notes that “There are complex relationships among the four different but interrelated concepts of peace, justice, reconciliation, and coexistence.”¹ Trust is therefore a core requirement for peace, justice, and reconciliation and underpins it in co-existence. Despite this fact, all who speak of ‘reconciliation’ focus mainly on the significance of ‘justice’ despite the fact that no one has yet to find a way of successfully and consistently achieving reconciliation.

The assumption that underpins this research is that any attempt at reconciliation that does not strive to (re)build trust as a prerequisite and as a core component within the process, would not be a fully realized reconciliation. Therefore, it is vital to focus on existing unifiers that can help build trust. In the case of Sri Lanka, these would be the religious zones of peace.

1. Objective

The core objective of this article is to illustrate the importance of existing religious

¹ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Abdul Aziz Said, and Lakshita S. Prelis, “Conclusion: the Long Road to Reconciliation” in Mohammed Abu-Nimer (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice* (Lexington, VA: Lexington Books, 2001), p. 339.

zones of peace – which in itself is a unique feature in a country that faced almost forty-years of violence – in the reconciliation process.

To achieve this, this article examines the concept of ‘reconciliation’ as understood by different stakeholders and the generic components in its application. Subsequently, this article examines zones of peace that exist within Sri Lanka in the hope that these might become focal points for building trust and reconciliation.

2. History of Reconciliation

It is vital to emphasize that post-conflict reconciliation has become a crucial element of any post-conflict scenario but also that this concept is relatively new. The concept however has existed, in religious teachings and in nature. Despite this, and especially not-withstanding the fact that in the 21st century, this concept has become a byword for any post-conflict scenario, the word remains elusive and often misunderstood.

3. The Complexity of Reconciliation

As aptly stressed Desmond Tutu, There is no handy roadmap for reconciliation. There is no short cut or simple prescription for healing the wounds and divisions of a society in the aftermath of sustained violence. Creating trust and understanding between former enemies is a supremely difficult challenge. It is, however, an essential one to address in the process of building a lasting peace. Examination the painful past, acknowledging it and understanding it, and above all transcending it together, is the best way to guarantee that it does not – and cannot – happen again.²

Inherent within the concept is the notion that reconciliation is required to:

- i. A determined effort to increase contact between (victor-defeated) parties to the

² Desmond Tutu, “Forward” in David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse (eds.), *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: a Handbook* (International IDEA Handbook Series, 2003).

conflict, since often-than-not, parties to the conflict in the post-conflict setting have reduced contact.

- ii. Undo or repair the damage aggression/violence has caused the relationships: to repair the harm done due to a wrong.

These two constitute the invisible and visible effects of a long-drawn out conflict. Reconciliation is therefore about healing. As noted by Galtung, there are many approaches to reconciliation, thereby adding to the already existing confusion about meaning of reconciliation:³

1. The exculpatory nature-structure-culture approach
2. The reparation/restitution approach
3. The apology/forgiveness approach
4. The theological/penitence approach
5. The juridical/punishment approach
6. The codependent origination/karma approach
7. The historical/Truth Commission approach
8. The theatrical/reliving approach
9. The joint sorrow/healing approach
10. The joint reconstruction approach
11. The joint conflict resolution approach
12. The ho'o ponopono approach

While different approaches exist, the one constant appears to be the notion of reconciliation involves closure and healing. Furthermore, as noted by numerous specialists, “*reconciliation* as a process of peacebuilding, has more transformative connotations than the term *coexistence*. Reconciliation in its deeper sense ... releases the parties from the trauma of violence”⁴ and to achieve this requires rebuilding

³ Johan Galtung, “After Violence Reconstructive Reconciliation,” in Mohammed Abu-Nimer (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice* (Lexington, VA: Lexington Books, 2001), p. 4.

⁴ Abu-Nimer, Said, and. Preliis. *op cit.*, p. 340.

relationships. This requires building trust.

4. Sri Lankan Conflict

Often defined as an ethnic conflict, the protracted social conflict that existed in Sri Lanka had its roots in the dissolution of the trust in the democratic system leading to a militant response in the 1970s. The war situation began in the mid-1980s with an ever increasing use of violence by all parties concerned. The demand for a separate state by segments within the Tamil ethno-linguistic group saw this conflict being portrayed as an ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. This simplified interpretation not only excluded Muslim people⁵ among other group involvement, but it also disregarding areas where ethno-linguistic (and religious) different appeared non-existent.

Irrespective of the terminology, over seventy-thousand people died in the conflict, and in the process, creating over 400,000 internally displaced people and an even a larger refugee crisis. The conflict/Eelam wars I-IV, has also resulted in a traumatized people, war widows, single-headed households, and most significantly, the deterioration of trust. Trust issues exist between: the ethnic groups Sinhalese – Tamils as well as between Tamils – Muslims; between religious groups, especially Buddhist – Muslim; between regions such as north – south; and between Tamil diaspora groups and pro-Sri Lanka groups.

The religious zones of peace existed in Sri Lanka prior to, during, and since the termination of the war. This intriguing fact provides a vehicle for building trust, which, as stated above, is required for successful reconciliation. Indeed, the overarching idea of reconciliation as it is understood in this research, is the (re)build a peaceful society. To achieve this is to move beyond what is termed ‘negative peace’ – i.e. the absence of war – towards ‘positive peace’. This entails not merely increased

⁵ Note: the Muslims were not only marginalized when it came to seeking solutions, but the ‘ethnic cleansing’ that occurred in the 1990s in Jaffna created a victim society.

contact but also ensure justice for all and ‘reconcile’ with the past. Thus, in a post-conflict scenario, as in Sri Lanka, the tasks at hand involve not merely ending of military hostilities, rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants, developing the areas, and introducing democratic institutions. Reconciliation has to occur where ordinary people become the catalysts for building bridges between themselves.

To this process, both internal and international actors have increasingly become involved. International actors include the United Nations. But it is vital to illustrate the difficulties of achieving reconciliation. As noted by Quinn, “In Northern Ireland, despite real efforts to fashion a political solution, there has been little healing of a deep, pervasive sense of pain and injustice mainly, but not exclusively, within the Catholic nationalist community ... There has been much violence and continuous mistrust.”⁶ As noted at the outset, reconciliation is rebuilding and “restoring the shattered relationships between ... actors”⁷. However, even in a post-settlement scenario as in Ireland, reconciliation is problematic.

5. The Approach for Sri Lanka

A crucial aspect of reconciliation that has to be taken into account is the fact that any reconciliation effort must be culturally acceptable to the people. Any mechanism to build trust should also therefore be culturally suitable. This research does not however questions the best approach required for reconciliation in a post-military victory scenario. Rather, it questions what is needed either prior to or to coincide with any approach for reconciliation. While which approach to take is a problem in itself – i.e. it is difficult to envisage some of the approaches presented by Galtung being acceptable to the Sri Lankan culture – this article examines what needs to occur concurrent to any

⁶ Joanna R. Quinn, *Reconciliation(s): Transitional Justice in Post-conflict Societies* (Ontario: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009).

⁷ Krishna Kumar, “Promoting Social Reconciliation in Post-conflict Societies: Selected Lessons from USAID’s Experience,” in USAIR Program and Operations Assessment Report No. 24, 1999, p. 1. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/51/9/35112635.pdf> (accessed on 4th March, 2012).

reconciliation process – building trust.

This article presents the need to build trust as a pre-requisite/concurrent requirement for true reconciliation to work. In a sense, this illustrates the ‘chicken-or-the-egg’ conundrum. Lack of trust is at the heart of the conflict but for reconciliation to succeed, trust must be present. As emphasized by Kumar, it is both unrealistic and impolitic to talk about restoring mutual trust in the aftermath of severe, brutal conflict, when memories of the violence perpetuated by the warring groups are still fresh and the social vestiges of destruction still quite visible. Under these conditions, the reconciliation process can at best promote intergroup tolerance, an attitude of live-and-let-live.⁸

What is exceptional about the Sri Lankan context is that the live-and-let-live attitude existed even in the midst of the most devastatingly violent periods in the over thirty-year conflict. This was through the religious zones of peace.

6. Zones of Peace

Traditionally a Zone of Peace is a declared site with sacred, religious, historic, educational, cultural, geographical and/or environmental importance, protected and preserved by its own community and officially recognized by a governmental authority. It is not merely a “Demilitarized Zone,” but a sanctuary that operates within ethical principles of non-violence, free from weapons, acts of violence, injustice and environmental degradation.⁹

The zones of peace as an area defined and proclaimed as such by individuals, groups, countries, or global institutions. Though the declaratory aspect of zones of peace has been in existence only since the 1970s, this is not a new phenomenon.¹⁰ These are, as the definitions illuminate, areas which individuals and/or groups have

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See of Zones of Peace Website: <http://zopif.org/zop-definition.htm> (accessed on 4th March, 2012)

¹⁰ Louise Diamond, “Zones of Peace,” Available at <http://thepeacecompany.com/peacelibrary/pdf/ZonesOfPeace.pdf> (accessed on 4th March, 2012).

proclaimed as off-limits to combatants. However, it is also important to mention that that “zones of peace are a rare breed. And when they do form, their durability can by no means be taken for granted¹¹. The existence of any form of a zone of peace is encouraging and in Sri Lanka, there exists numerous religious zones of peace. These religious-cultural zones of peace existed prior to the outbreak of conflict and, a majority of them even survived the worst atrocities of the war.

7. What constitute a “Zone of Peace”?

As noted by Mitchell, the ‘zones of peace’ concept is inherently linked to the notion of sanctuary¹². It is a “place that declares itself a refuge from those who would seek to harm or threaten those within the zone”¹³.

There are several types of zones of peace. The most prominent – albeit still very rare – is the territorially defined safe heavens during conflict. Some, such as the externally declared safe haven of Srebrenica was a failure while the locally designated Naga city in the Philippines was a success. A second type are the demilitarized zones as was in Ache where parties to the conflict agree not to bring weapons into the area. There are other personalized zones of peace include ones for children – e.g. the Butterfly Peace Garden project in Sri Lanka¹⁴ and sacred localities. It is the last example this research intends to examine in detail.

8. Sacred Zones of Peace

¹¹ Charles Kupchan, *How Enemies become Friends: the sources of Stable Peace* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 414.

¹² Christopher Mitchell, “The Theory and Practice of Sanctuary,” in Landon E. Hancock and Christopher Mitchell (eds.), *Zones of Peace* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarine Press, 2007).

¹³ Sara Cobb “Preface,” in *ibid.*

¹⁴ See the Butterfly Peace Garden Website: <http://butterflypeacegarden.org/index.php/who> (accessed on 4th March, 2012).

More often than not, the concept of Zones of Peace is used to declare a region, such as the South Atlantic Ocean region, Indian Ocean region¹⁵ or the Central American declaration on South America being a zone of peace.¹⁶ This began in the United Nations as far back as the 1970s. There is also a trend to declare areas within a country, such as in west Papua,¹⁷ which are internally-led processes. A more significance zone of peace exists when local people – the grassroots – strive to create a de-militarized zone in the midst of war, where “whoever enters this zone of peace should not bring any guns with them.”¹⁸

A zone of peace can be considered practical pacifism. Under this guise, it is even possible to consider the Cold War (1945 – 1990) a period when absence of war – albeit between the two super powers – resulted in a zone of peace. It is even possible to utilize this term to denote absence of ‘inter-state’ wars. Indeed, as noted by Kacowics, the phenomenon of Zones of Peace is equal to existence of negative peace.¹⁹ However, the modern notion is more in terms of sanctuary than negative peace. What is common in all these is the existence of a territory within which certain acts are encouraged and certain others excluded.

In the context of Sri Lanka, this takes on a different interpretation. The zone of peace that has been practiced traditionally fall into a special category – sacred sites and localities – under which certain cultural and religious places become unofficial zones of peace. Hancock and Iyre note the Catholic church at Madhu in Mannar as being an example of the existence of a zone of (cultural/religious) peace and its subsequent destruction as an incident of zones of conflict.²⁰

¹⁵ United Nations, *Index to Proceedings of the General Assembly: fifty-eighth session 2003/2004* (United Nations Publications, 2005).

¹⁶ United Nations, “General Assembly: South America as Zone of Peace and Cooperation,” GA/10099 Available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/ga10099.doc.htm> (accessed on 4th March, 2012).

¹⁷ David Little, *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Tenenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, 2007).

¹⁸ John Dean, *A Persistent Peace: One man’s Struggle for a Nonviolent World* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Arie Marcelo Kacowicz, *Zones of Peace in the third world: South America and West Africa in Comparative Perspective* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998).

²⁰ Landon E. Hancock and Pushpa Iyre, “The Nature, Structure, and Variety of Peace Zones,” in Landon E. Hancock and Christopher Mitchell (eds.), *Zones of Peace* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarine

9. Potential Trust-building Zones of Peace

Not only is it important to examine these religious zones of peace, thereby emphasizing its uniqueness. It is also vital to emphasize its potential to anchor intergroup interactions and thereby increase understanding and trust.

Religious sites which have remained as zones of peace even in the midst include places such as the Adam's Peak²¹ and Kataragama²² existing historically as sacred areas where multi-religious groups congregate without confrontation. These sites and others allow for different ethnic groups having different beliefs to congregate at one place, to worship either the same or a different entity. Adam's Peak (aka Samanala kanda, Sri Pada in Sinhalese) is a case in point. Buddhist believe the sacred footprint is of Lord Buddha while the Hindu's believe it is of the God Shiva. Christians and Muslims believe this to be the footprint of Adam as he left Eden.²³ People of all religions walk/climb this sacred mountain, singing prayers in different languages, to different entities, based on different beliefs.

These zones of peace where devotes from different religions congregate were never the target of the conflicting groups. The one exception – the Madhu temple – proves the rule. The zones of peace were respected as such by the parties to the conflict even in the midst of the worst of the war.

Building on intergroup interaction among devotes at such multi-religious sites would help build trust. Since intergroup interaction appears to have existed for hundreds of years. The intergroup interaction continued even during war. Therefore, it

Press, 2007).

²¹ William Skeem (1870) *Adam's Peak: legendary, traditional and historic notices of the Samanala and Sri-pada, with a descriptive account of the pilgrims' route from Colombo to the Sacred Foot-Print*. http://sacredsites.com/asia/sri_lanka/adams_peak.html (accessed on 4th March, 2012).

²² See the following websites: http://kataragama.org/centers/kgama_zop.htm; <http://culturalsurvivaltrust.org/cst-zop.htm>; <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2003/08/10/fea01.html> (accessed on 4th March, 2012).

²³ See the following website of "Sri Pada or Adams' Peak: Lanka's Holy Mountain."

is possible to build on the trust that such zones of peace provide in order to ensure the success of any reconciliation process.

References

- Aluko, Olajide (1981) "African response to external intervention in Africa since Angola," *African Affairs*, vol. 80: pp.159-179.
- Bond, Gilbert I. (2005) *Paul and the religious experience of reconciliation: diasporic community and Creole consciousness*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Crocker, Chester A. (1995) "Lessons on Intervention," Conflict Research Consortium.
- Galtung, Johan (2001) "After Violence Reconstructive Reconciliation," in Mohammed Abu-Nimer ed. *Reconciliation, justice, and coexistence: theory and practice*. Lexington, VA: Lexington Books.
- Galtung, Johan (2001) "After Violence Reconstructive Reconciliation," in Mohammed Abu-Nimer ed. *Reconciliation, justice, and coexistence: theory and practice*. Lexington, VA: Lexington Books.
- Gregor, Thomas (1996) *A natural history of peace*, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Gruchy, John W. (2003) *Reconciliation: restoring justice*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press. <<http://butterflypeacegarden.org/index.php/>>
- Kumar, Krishna (1999) "Promoting Social Reconciliation in Postconflict Societies: selected lessons from USAID's experience," in USAIR Program and Operations Assessment Report No. 24. 1. <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/51/9/35112635.pdf>>
- Lambourne, Wendy (2004) "Post Conflict Peacebuilding: meeting human needs for justice and reconciliation," in Peace, Conflict and Development – issue four, April 2004. <<http://www.peacestudiesjournal.org.uk/dl/PostConflictPeacebuilding.PDF>>
- Prendergast, John and David Smock (1999) "Post-Genocidal Reconstruction: building

<http://sripada.org/> (accessed on 4th March, 2012).

peace in Rwanda and Burundi,” *USIP Special Report No. 53*.
<<http://www.usip.org/publications/post-genocidal-reconstruction-building-peace-rwanda-and-burundi>>

Quinn, Joanna R. (2009) *Reconciliation(s): transitional justice in postconflict societies*, Ontario: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Whittaker, David J. (1999) “Conflict, resolution and reconciliation,” *Conflict and Reconciliation in the Contemporary World*.

Whittaker, David J. (1999) “Northern Ireland: reconciliation delayed,” *Conflict and Reconciliation in the Contemporary World*.

World Bank (2005) “Conflict in Somalia: drivers and dynamics,” unpublished report.
<<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSOMALIA/Resources/conflictinsomalia>>