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University of Bath

Faith in forgiveness?
Exploring conversions to Christianity within a former Khmer Rouge community

Peter Manning, University of Bath
Keo Duong, Royal University Phnom Penh
Daniel Kilburn, University College London

ABSTRACT: This article explores stories of former members of the Khmer Rouge who have converted to Christianity. It sheds light on the intersections of patterns of religious change in Cambodia, which implicates peace-building, redress, and development trajectories in the wake of conflict and atrocities. The case raises important questions about why former members of the Khmer Rouge convert to Christianity and the social, political, and ethical implications of their conversions. We explore these questions to show that – while Cambodia's transitions and attendant redress efforts have been principally explained at the level of the state – we should pay closer attention to the granular experiences of former Khmer Rouge members as they navigate Cambodia's changing post-conflict terrain, and the social and cultural sites through which they have made their experiences of the past meaningful.

Keywords: Conversion; Christianity; Khmer Rouge; peace; reconciliation;

Dr Peter Manning, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, Claverton Down, BA2 7AY, United Kingdom. Email: p.manning@bath.ac.uk

Introduction

In 2009, Comrade Duch, the former head of the infamous Tuol Sleng S-21 interrogation center in Phnom Penh, was tried on charges of crimes against humanity at the United Nations – backed Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) for his role in the atrocities perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, a period during which 1.7 million people died from hunger, disease, or execution. During his testimony, Duch spoke of his contrition, invoked his conversion to Christianity, and remarked of his victims "…that I had to kneel down and pray for forgiveness from those souls. As a Christian, too, I had to pray for their lost souls."[1] Duch converted to Christianity in 1996.

In Samlot on Cambodia's western border with Thailand, Sang Horn, a former Khmer Rouge soldier who fought against the government in a bloody civil war that lasted until the late 1990s, is now a Christian pastor. Sang Horn has publicly proclaimed that "God will polish the souls" of former Khmer Rouge members who convert to Christianity and confess their past sins.[2] In Anlong Veng on Cambodia's northern border, the last stronghold of the Khmer Rouge insurgency to fall to government troops in 1999, Ung Khorn, a former soldier, now proselytises in partnership with churches based in the United States, performing baptisms in a lake in the center of the town. Ung Khorn has reflected on his role in the perpetration of "very vicious and cruel acts," but believes that his conversion to Christianity had made him a "gentler" person.[3]

The conversions of Comrade Duch, Sang Horn, and Ung Korn have occurred within a wider landscape of religious change in Cambodia that includes patterns of conversion to

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[1] Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. Compilation of Duch's trial statements, 2011
[2] Sua 2011
[3] Leitsinger 2004

Christianity among former Khmer Rouge members.[4] Such conversions raise a series of questions about the way religious beliefs can make experiences of conflict and atrocity meaningful and the social and of the political implications of religious change after conflict. They are important to consider because conversion has the potential to reconfigure social, political and ethical worldviews. Conversions among former Khmer Rouge therefore implicate and intersect with wider processes of peacebuilding and transitional justice. Peacebuilding and transitional justice are fields of practice that also lay claim over – and seek to explain – experiences of conflict and atrocities, but they do so predominantly only on collective and structural levels. On this basis, we argue that patterns of religious conversion among former Khmer Rouge offer a window that allows us to begin to reframe and rescale our understanding of Cambodia's various transitions. Indeed, while Cambodia's transitions have principally been appraised and analyzed at the level of the state – based on bargains between elites, or through the interventions and the direction of external international actors – less attention has been paid to the individual experiences of Cambodia's former combatants as they have navigated the changing terrain and milieus of Cambodia's transitions, and the various social and cultural resources that they have encountered and employed that have made their experiences of conflict and transition meaningful.

　　　We argue that tracking and exploring these experiences helps opens a wider lens for thinking about processes of transition, peace, and redress. Such processes must be, in part, constituted and realized through the lived experiences of those on the ground. In turn, the lived experiences, perspectives, and beliefs of those same constituents can complicate processes of transition, peace, and redress, because they can come to occupy social, political, and moral worlds that can stand in conflicted and ambivalent relationships to both formal programs and their wider communities. To illustrate these questions, we offer provisional reflections that seek to explain why former Khmer Rouge members convert to Christianity. We recognise that religious beliefs, ideas, and doctrines offer competing moral and ethical worldviews (even as these are contested and contingent in practice), that may influence how a faith might become salient, while highlighting how conversion tends to become attractive through specific personal relationships and associations. At the same time, we emphasize the

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[4] We approach conversion as a phenomenon that is significant for its social and political implications as a form of meaning making after atrocities, we note that there are outstanding questions of the extent and rate of Khmer Rouge conversion that remain important contextual considerations. Data providing the overall picture of conversion to Christianity in Cambodia is limited, especially so in respect to the exact numbers of former Khmer Rouge converting. There are significant general problems of observation of church membership and attendance, with the number of "registered churches" differing from "recognised" and undeclared "places of worship" (See *Phnom Penh Post*, "Cambodians Turning to Christianity", 2011). The Cambodia General Population census reports religious identification. However, 2018 is a census year and we consequently face the limitation of 2008 census data that is currently at its most out-of-date point (the last available 2008 census reports 0.37% of the population identifying as Christian). Robust comparison between available 1998 and 2008 census data is not possible because both releases handle missing and non-response variables differently. A more recent US Government Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour report (2010) provides perhaps the most recent potentially-reliable estimate of the Christian population (2%), and this would indicate a significant increase on the 1998 census nationwide (0.45%). Existing survey data provides no information on former membership of the Khmer Rouge. Despite these limitations, we can point to significant and longstanding local and international media coverage of former members converting to Christianity (see, for example, Kurczy and Neou 2009, *Cambodia Daily* "Duch's Path: From KR Zealot to Soldier of Christ", or Se and Mairs 2018, *Phnom Penh Post* "Im Chaem Converts to Christianity"). Media coverage further indicates significant efforts to proselytize within former KR communities. For example, in one Khmer Rouge district, among converts to Christianity, some 70% were estimated to be former Khmer Rouge (see Burke, 2004 *The Guardian* "Khmer Rouge Embraces Jesus"). Recent comment and analysis further indicates the significance of conversion among former Khmer Rouge as a social and political phenomenon (see Ly 2018, *Phnom Penh Post* "The shadow of religions in the peace making process").

social and political implications of conversion for questions of peacebuilding and redress. We stress the importance of locating individual stories within wider histories for our understanding of peacebuilding and transitional justice. Exploring conversions among former Khmer Rouge, as they intersect with processes of transition, foregrounds the importance of the spaces, ideas, and networks within which people might "become" peaceful, reconciled, or, indeed, as we show, stand in ambivalent relation to claims for peace or redress. In doing so, we highlight the possibility of developing more complex accounts and explanations of how Cambodia's post-conflict orders have come to be constituted, thinking further how people make experiences of suffering and violence meaningful, often in ways that appear dislocated from formal or state— sponsored bids to do so.

The article has seven additional sections. In section two, we summarize recent debates in peacebuilding and transitional justice, pointing to approaches that are critical of a tendency to approach transition as a state-level process, and that instead call for greater attention to the lived experiences of those navigating the changing terrain of periods of complex social and political upheaval. Section three draws on these critiques to appraise Cambodia's high profile experiences of peacebuilding and transitional justice, namely the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). Section four outlines the religious landscape in Cambodia, examining the role of Buddhist institutions and beliefs as a context from which converts to Christianity depart. Section five addresses questions of religious conversion, emphasizing the importance of explaining conversion as a phenomenon involving personal, institutional, and wider structural influences, before drawing on recent anthropological accounts of conversion to Christianity to highlight the need to approach religious belief as a cultural phenomenon and take seriously the implications of conversion as a form of social, political, and ethical rupture with converts' past sense of self. In section six, we describe our data collection methods and interview strategy. In section seven we organize our findings around three themes. The first emphasizes the centrality of rupture and renewal in conversion stories among former Khmer Rouge, where we highlight the ambivalent implications for peace and redress as conversion stakes out new ways of thinking about experiences of conflict and atrocity. The second appraises the changing contemporary landscape Khmer Rouge converts navigate, as members of both a "new" religious minority and formerly stigmatized political faction. The final theme addresses the role of church organizations and Christian international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) – groups that offered important material support and peer relationships to the converts we spoke to. These organizations offer forms of surrogate governance to areas along the Cambodia—Thai border. Section eight offers concluding reflections, highlighting the need to take seriously the potential incommensurability of different civic, legal, political, and spiritual ways of apprehending the past, the importance of recognizing the ways that constituencies of peacebuilding and transitional justice processes can change, and the need to approach peacebuilding and transitional justice scholarship and practice beyond limiting conceptual scaffolds, such as the state and its institutions, ideas of national community, and clear definitions of victims and perpetrators.

Rethinking peacebuilding and transitional justice

Societies that experience war and atrocities confront a series of challenges concerning how to end and then redress experiences of conflict and suffering. Two overlapping fields of advocacy and scholarship have come to lay claim over these dilemmas: peace-building and transitional justice. The liberal peace-building paradigm – prominent sponsors of which are supra-national bodies including the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – provides a set of policy repertoires that seek to end and prevent

conflict. Among these are interventions to stop wars and demobilize combatants, develop the strength and capacity of civic institutions, liberalize post-conflict economies, and encourage democratic governance.[5] Adjacent to peace-building, transitional justice has developed over the past three decades as a set of institutions and approaches – such as war crimes trials, truth commissions, disclosure, and memorial initiatives – that respond to questions of accountability for grave crimes under authoritarianism and in war, and how best to satisfy the needs of victims who experienced them.[6]

Transitional justice and peace-building share important characteristics and limitations. They aim to provide a set of shared outcomes including deterring conflict, encouraging democratization, building civic institutions, and enhancing the rule of law. Each tends to assume that the inculcation of pluralist democracy, liberal rights, and market mechanisms will consolidate peace.[7] Both fields tend to address the state and work to rehabilitate and reshape its institutions, while largely treating social and cultural constituencies as homogenous blocks. Both fields of intervention tend to be enacted in the global South, sponsored by countries of the North, raising concerns over continuity with past forms of imperialism and colonialism.[8] Interventions within each field have a record of failing to meet their aims, or doing harm as well as good.[9] Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations are afforded primacy in both transitional justice and peace-building, and often come to play a key role in arbitrating and supervising domestic public political space in post-conflict contexts. Lastly, both peacebuilding and transitional justice practitioners tend to treat interventions as episodic, and therefore overlook the longer term effects of their work and the experiences and trajectories of the people whom they address.

Recent debates in peace-building and transitional justice have attempted to address some of these concerns and provide some helpful cues for further analysis. The emergence of a "local turn" in each field has inaugurated attempts to move beyond overly technocratic and top-down approaches.[10] These tend to highlight the role of local actors in shaping peace and the potential for local approaches to justice and reconciliation to inform transitional justice (though there remains a great deal of variation in the conceptualisation of locality, expressions of culture and tradition, notions of informality, domestic interests, or popular will). More critical scholarship has queried the central conceptual scaffolds of each field, eschewing approaches that locate the state and its institutions as a principal unit of analysis and instead considering the constitution of social order in the wake of conflict from its margins, borders, and peripheries.[11] There is greater recognition that crisis and conflict are not experienced as discrete episodes but are, rather, a "…terrain of action and meaning" that people "navigate."[12] Greater recognition has been afforded to the embodied decisions, relationships, performances, and perspectives that actors in societies that experience conflict adopt,[13] especially in respect of the tools that individuals use to make their sense of "everyday peace" meaningful.[14] Moreover, greater attention has been shown to the kinds of

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[5] Paris 2004.
[6] Mutua 2015; Nagy 2008.
[7] Chandler 2010.
[8] Mutua 2015.
[9] Loyle and Davenport 2014; Subotic 2009.
[10] See Ojendal and Ou 2015; Shaw, Waldorf, Hazan 2010.
[11] Goodhand 2008; Goodhand, Klem and Walton 2016.
[12] Vigh 2008, 5.
[13] Utas 2005.
[14] Henry 2015; Mac Ginty 2014.

experience and narrative in post-conflict milieus that remains unintelligible to, dislocated from, or ambivalent towards the formal work of transitional justice and peace-building.[15]

Religion features strongly in both peacebuilding and transitional justice. Scholars and advocates treat religion as both a site of conflict and source of peace making and reconciliation, tendencies that reflect the "ambivalence of the sacred."[16] Mathew Walton and Susanne Hayward, for example, point to the potential for Buddhist belief in Myanmar to frame and furnish narratives of both inclusion and exclusion.[17] John Brewer has argued that religious networks themselves can contribute to peace because their key institutions can provide "bridging" capital between communities.[18] Daniel Philpott haa gone further, actively appealing to religious ethics as a source of reconciliation.[19] Religious narratives and idioms have been central to the presentation of key transitional justice interventions, such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where offered amnesty from prosecution in exchange for "truth" through theological ideas of forgiveness and redemption.[20] Yet there remains a tendency among scholars and advocates to treat religious constituencies and belief systems as static, when we should pay closer attention to the way religion, as a form of culture, tends to be heterogeneous and internally contested. Moreover, in recognizing that religious beliefs and doctrines are uneven, changing, and contingent, we should consider the implications of patterns of religious change as it intersects or coincides with peacebuilding or transitional justice interventions.

Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice in Cambodia

Cambodia has, at different moments, experienced high profile peace-building and transitional justice interventions. In 1991, the Paris Peace Agreement brought together warring republican, royalist, Khmer Rouge and government groups. The agreement established an interim administration (the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia, UNTAC) to oversee elections. coinciding with one of the largest international peacekeeping operations to date, in size, scope, and cost. UNTAC was tasked with pacifying the Cambodian interior, repatriating some of the hundreds of thousands of refugees displaced by conflict and living along the Cambodia—Thai border, and overseeing the introduction of a new constitution. UNTAC coincided with a proliferation of NGOs working in Cambodia, enhancing capacity and "doing" development.[21] UNTAC failed to end the civil war between the government, Khmer Rouge, and other rebel factions; fighting continued until amnesty programs secured key defections by remaining Khmer Rouge insurgents in 1996 and 1998. As the war ended, accountability for Khmer Rouge crimes became a realistic possibility. The Cambodian government requested UN assistance with the establishment of a tribunal to prosecute Khmer Rouge leaders in 1997. After fraught negotiations between the UN and Cambodian authorities over the composition of what would be a hybrid international and domestic court,

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[15] (Author XXXX; XXXX).
[16] Appleby 2000.
[17] Walton and Haywood 2014. It is beyond the scope of this article to review the extensive literature on Buddhism and peacebuilding or transitional justice. See Appleby, 2008 for analyses of the importance of local and transnational religious actors in post-conflict spaces. Keown, 2011, has highlighted strong deterrent principles in Buddhist doctrine that are complementary to conventional peacebuilding programming. Gellman, 2007, has called for greater 'localisation' of peacebuilding in Cambodia to ensure cultural resonance in practice. In regard to transitional justice, Hancock, 2008, has explored potential frictions between (western) retributive justice principles underpinning the ECCC and local moral economies.
[18] Brewer 2010.
[19] Philpott 2009.
[20] Moon 2008.
[21] Hughes 2003.

the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was established in 2006 and began prosecuting senior Khmer Rouge leaders and those deemed "most responsible" for crimes committed during the Democratic Kampuchea regime.[22] To date, the ECCC has found three former leaders guilty of crimes against humanity.

The UNTAC intervention and ECCC prosecutions have provoked fierce criticism. UNTAC oversaw the drafting of a new constitution but failed to cement the longer term democratic protections purportedly central to a liberal peace-building worldview. This has led, critics argue, to a locally constituted but "unfinished,"[23] "virtual,"[24] and "negative hybrid" peace[25] characterized by the cooptation and subordination of efforts to democratize by Cambodian elites. Similarly, the ECCC prosecutions have been denounced as a form of "show-trial" in which prosecutors have protected favored domestic clients, offering politicized redress at the expense of international standards of justice.[26] These critiques raise important questions. Firstly, they have tended to treat the role of domestic elites as an expression of locality within the Cambodian peace process, and therefore treat locality as an authoritarian impediment to democratization. In doing so, these critiques reproduce state centric and narrowly institutional accounts of Cambodia's experience, furnishing a story of the center or state imposing a peace settlement on the peripheral.[27] What is missing are more granular accounts of the trajectories, milieus, and experiences of the constituencies of conflict and peace as they have made Cambodia's various transitions meaningful.

In other words, we seek to shift the focus of peacebuilding and transitional justice in Cambodia away from institutions and toward individuals. As we will show, conversions to Christianity among former Khmer Rouge members – while acknowledging the import of Christianity as a non-indigenous faith – offer one optic (among many) that enables us to tell these stories in different ways.

Religion in Cambodia

The majority of Cambodians identify as Theravada Buddhists. Theravada Buddhism has been central to claims over Cambodian identity and the state narration of the national biography in modern Cambodia.[28] Hansen, for example, explains how the "…self conscious imagining of a "Khmer" identity associated with a distinctive language, ethos, culture and nation, and particularly with a distinct way of being Buddhist, was a product of the cultural politics of the nineteenth century"[29] coincided with public and political reforms that helped to constitute the modern Cambodian polity. Since the reintroduction of Buddhist practice in the 1980s, the end of the civil war in 1999, and rapid economic liberalization and political upheaval, Buddhist institutions in Cambodia have occupied conflicted and uneven roles in public life. Pagodas are thought to be the traditional anchors of spiritual and moral order in Cambodia which, alongside practices of merit making particularly, have played an important role in furnishing

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[22] Royal Government of Cambodia 2004, Law on the Establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers.

[23] Ojendal and Ou 2013.

[24] Ojendal and Ou 2015.

[25] Simangan 2018.

[26] Ciorciari and Heindel 2014.

[27] Goodhand 2008.

[28] Harris 2008. Anne Hansen, for example, explains how the "…self conscious imagining of a "Khmer" identity associated with a distinctive language, ethos, culture and nation, and particularly with a distinct way of being Buddhist, was a product of the cultural politics of the nineteenth century" coincided with public and political reforms that helped to constitute the modern Cambodian polity. See Hansen 2014, 41.

a sense of security following the experience of genocide.[30] Yet the Buddhist *sangha* in Cambodia has been politicized and co-opted by both the ruling and opposition political parties. As Kent suggests, the maintenance of clear boundaries between the religious as a "sacred" field and the profane world of the "political" has become increasingly fraught.[31]

The presence of Christian groups in Cambodia has varied historically. Catholic missionaries worked alongside the French colonial apparatus across Indochina, and the first presence of Protestant evangelical groups was noted in 1923 with the arrival of the Christian and Missionary Alliance.[32] Under the Khmer Rouge, Christian minorities (especially Vietnamese Catholics) were all but wiped out. After the fall of the regime in 1979, Christian relief organizations and churches became active along the Thai border in refugee camps, where a strong religiosity among refugee Khmer converts was noted.[33] There remains scant research on the presence of Christians in contemporary Cambodia, with notable recent exceptions such as Baird's account of increasing outreach and proselytizing among minority communities such as the Brao.[34]

The question of conversions from Buddhism to Christianity invites further consideration of Buddhist beliefs as they are practiced in Cambodia. Importantly, these are not static, and competing readings and applications of doctrines intersect. On the one hand, Khmer Buddhism is often practiced, interpreted, and realized in vernacular form, interspersed with locally embedded animist beliefs and cosmologies.[35] On the other hand, as Hansen has shown, members of the Buddhist *sangha* have historically made influential attempts to render official, singular doctrines. For example, the Khmer *sangha* promoted a specific reading of a Buddhist positivist canon in the 1930s, utilizing print mediums and enmeshing doctrine within folk stories that prioritized individual and collective purity.[36] The possibility of *true* mass or popular – as well as elite – moral conduct and discernment, and specific temporal conceptions of moral action between past and present, became important features of the Cambodian polity.[37] The emerging official modernist Khmer Buddhism that followed portrayed the individual as an entity constituted by moral action within social relationships, but based on a finite and causal moral economy of good and bad deeds. The centrality of *karma* as an underpinning principle and grammar for recognizing moral consequences is key. On the one hand, it requires the continuous discernment and awareness of one's moral conduct; it is a regulatory principle that produces moral agents who are acutely aware of their own conduct. Yet, on the other, as Hallisey and Hansen note, *karma* has an opacity that makes it difficult to discern clear causes and effects: it both promotes and militates against ethical resolution. In each case, seeing past or future *karma* is difficult.[38] Our interest here arises in the ways that religious beliefs and ideas offer different ways of thinking about the world, rather than with the purpose of judging the relative value of the beliefs therein. In recognizing that religious beliefs, ideas, and doctrines offer competing moral and ethical worldviews, even as these are contested and changing in practice, we can begin to gauge how a new faith becomes salient and attractive.

Religious Conversion and Christianity

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[30] Kent 2006 .
[31] Kent 2007.
[32] Phan 2011, 142.
[33] Smith-Hefner, 1994, notably observed lower rates of conversion to Christianity than among other Southeast Asian displaced communities.
[34] Baird 2009.
[35] Choulean 1988.
[36] Hansen 2007.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Hallisey and Hansen 1996: 319.

Religious conversion has been a longstanding topic of interest in the social sciences. Sociologists and social psychologists have, until recently, principally focused on conversions within European and U.S. contexts – especially in early formative debates on conversion processes to New Religious Movements and "cults" that emerged in the 1960s. While anthropological scholarship has avoided the Eurocentrism of some cognate disciplines, it is only in recent decades that anthropologists have started to pay serious attention to Christianity, situating it as a form and field of cultural life. Following Cole Carnesseca's call for cross-disciplinary dialogue in approaches to the study of religious life, and greater scrutiny of the assumptions from which different disciplines situate religious phenomenon,[39] we approach frameworks for explaining religious conversion via two strands of thinking. The first, dominant among sociological approaches to conversion, has focused on examining the causal factors and influences that precipitate or drive conversion, conceptualized variously at the micro-, meso-, and macro levels, especially as conversion implicates wider debates concerning the place of religion within modern societies. The second strand, drawn especially from the recent proliferation of work within the anthropology of Christianity, has shed light on the implications of conversions, and their social, political and ethical consequences.

The sociology of religious conversion proliferated around the growth of New Religious Movements and the question of why individuals might join deviant religious groups. Lofland and Stark (1965) 's seminal work on conversion sought to separate individual background factors, such as experiences of tension or strain that might precipitate conversions, alongside further "situational contingencies" that enable and cement conversions, including encountering new faiths at pivotal life moments.[40] They mapped the terrain for further explanations of conversion as a protracted career rather than single break,[41] and the need to account for the way people actively seek new religious affiliation within a longer "life-cycle" as this implicates other forms of identity.[42] Religious ideas themselves matter: the content of doctrines, systems, and beliefs intersects with individuals' biographies, perspectives, and appetites to make conversion more or less likely.[43] Conversion is thereby a dependent outcome that follows from the fit between converts, contexts and the beliefs and activities of different religious groups.

Although the formative analyses of conversion were principally oriented to mapping individual factors precipitating conversion, they still tended to acknowledge the importance of social ties and networks are key aspects of religious change. , inviting questions about the role of social, cultural, and institutional context in conversion trajectories. These networks, in particular, have been shown to work in complex ways. Based on fieldwork conducted with evangelical Christians in Venezuela, David Smilde argues that the specific qualities, locations, and effects of networks play a role within conversion: conversions can be more forthcoming in asymmetric relationships in which converts are subordinate to their new peers, or less forthcoming when prospective converts have strong countervailing network pressures, such as family ties.[44] Fenggang Yang's extensive work on conversions to evangelical Christianity in China and among Chinese migrant communities in the United States illustrates the importance of ecological factors in conversion, including the ethnic, cultural, and political composition of congregations at prospective new faiths, and the

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[39] Carnesecca 2016.
[40] Lofland and Stark 1965, 874.
[41] Richardson and Stewart 1977, 828.
[42] Goorens 2007, 348.
[43] Jindra 2011.
[44] Smilde 2005.

specific role of outreach and proselytizing, such as bible study groups.[45] In China, Yang found that younger and more affluent people tended to convert to Christianity, despite its stigamatization as a foreign faith, – and counter to individualist models of conversion based on 'strain' or deprivation – suggesting that contextual factors and the decline of traditional religious cultures also play a role in engendering appetites for new faiths.[46]

Yang's work illustrates the importance of situating conversion within cultural contexts, while connecting deeply personal conversion experiences to wider 'meso' and 'macro' processes. Yang is keen to locate his analyses of Chinese evangelical conversions within the wider landscape of "coerced modernisation" experienced in China.[47] Yang argues that in post-reform China, in the context of economic liberalisation, Christian conversion has offered a stabilizing lens that helps anchor experience within the flux and chaos of an emerging market.[48] A wider resurgence among world religions in non-Western contexts, including evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity, has required a reconsideration of modernist assumptions about the decline of religion. Instead, we should be attentive to the 'multiple modernities' that are visible today, as religion remains a constitutive force in social orders,[49] while increasingly vernacular and trans-local as it is manifest in cultural context.[50]

Hefner stresses that the presence and traction of Christian belief systems in the non-Western world is contingent. The appeal of Christianity in non-Western places is often conditional on specific trans-local efforts, and the material and political access of church groups, which are often bound to the belief systems historically permitted or favoured by colonial administrations, or the presence of foreign missionaries around them.[51] Today, as Wuthnow points out, Christian outreach is itself conditioned within capitalist globalization, accelerating the speed at which Christian communities deploy and are invested in projects and proselytizing efforts across international contexts.[52] Indeed, Wuthnow identifies the cultivation of a global worldview among Christians, enabling transnational reach and scope in religious practice, including the efforts of internationalised faith-based NGOs, and the provision of projects oriented to humanitarian and developmental aims.

Explanations for conversions to Christianity oblige an understanding of individual biographies, perspectives, the importance of religious ideas, contextual and cultural factors, the institutional configurations and dynamics of religious organisations, all situated within a wider landscape and flux of late modernity. Identifying each set of explanatory factors contributes to a causal economy of why people may be more or less likely to convert. Yet explaining why people might convert to Christianity needs to be extended to develop further appreciation of what happens when they do, especially in terms of the social, political, and ethical implications of conversion. Patterns of conversion change societies, producing new religious minorities and new questions for the organization (and regulation) of religious difference. As a cultural form, conversion "…challenges an established community's assent to religious doctrines and practice."[53] In other words, conversion generates possibilities to reconfigure, critique, and resist existing forms of national, political and ethical identity.

Examining the implications of conversions to Christianity requires closer scrutiny of the belief system at hand. Following Cannell's appeal, this requires us to take 'ideas'

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[45] Wang and Yang 2006.
[46] Yang 2005.

[48] Yang 2005, 432.
[49] Casanova 2011.
[50] Hefner 1998.
[51] 1993, 22-24.
[52] Wuthnow, 2009.
[53] Viswanathan 1998: xi.

seriously.[54] Like all religious beliefs, Christianity is a cultural phenomenon. While cultural formations are often syncretic amalgamations of vernacular and trans-local beliefs, Christian doctrines specifically invite and require dramatic change and departure from past lives to new ones. It specifically organizes time to allow the possibility of dramatic "rupture" as a form of renewal.[55] As Robbins argues, 'Moments of conversion are cast and continually recast as central to the Christian experience, and therefore are constitutive of the wider possibility of redemption within Christian eschatology, even as many conversions might, in reality, be protracted, uneven, unresolved, or based on vernacularized readings of faith. The radical breaks, discontinuities, and ruptures that conversions imply may not correspond to lived conversion experiences, but become pivotal in the retrospective articulation of the self.[56]

What are the social, ethical and political implications of such "ruptures"? Spencer *et al.* point out that religion can "…reshape people's ideas of what is politically and socially possible or desirable".[57] In this sense, conversion affords new opportunities and worldviews that work in uneven, ambivalent ways. Joel Robbins' ethnographic work with Christian converts among the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea illustrates how the adoption of moral frameworks of a new belief system can engender moral discord and anguish.[58] In the 1970s, Urapmin communities experienced a resurgence of Christian faith, foregrounding sin, millennial beliefs, and euphoric worship. Pre-existing moral values remained incongruent to new ones, leading to moral "torment." In other cases, new faith acts as a salve in contexts fraught with stress and tension. Schneider and Feltey have shown how imprisoned US women who convert to evangelical Christianity and have suffered domestic violence, have used their faith to renegotiate and "free" themselves from their experiences, guilt, and victimhood.[59] Wanner has highlighted how, after Ukraine's transition from authoritarian socialism, evangelical Christian beliefs and groups offered renewed moral authority and practical community support and services, exactly as conversions were generating forms of discord between newly formed religious minorities and majorities.[60] Indeed, in the post-socialist Caucasus, political and religious authorities have closely regulated and denounced the work of evangelical missionaries.[61] The role of religion as an authenticating nationalist trope means that minority or recently arrived faiths can be quickly cast as foreign.

A note on interviews and data

The article is based on nine depth interviews at church sites and converts' residences in northwestern Cambodia along the Thai border, conducted jointly by the authors in April 2015. As one author is a native Khmer speaker, interviews were conducted in Khmer and translated simultaneously into English. Given the sensitivity of the topic, all informants have been anonymised and fieldwork sites and organisations discussed have been left unspecified. Informants were interviewed based on a narrative format in which converts were invited to retell their encounters with Christianity and experiences since conversion. Interviews were secured through existing networks of contacts the authors developed through past research in the field, followed by "snowball" sampling within the Christian community across adjacent and nearby districts and communes. Informant backgrounds were varied, including seven men and two women, who occupied varying roles under the regime. A brief biographical note

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[54] Cannell 2006.
[55] Robbins 2007.
[56] Engelke 204, 106.
[57] Spencer et al 2014, 155.
[58] Robbins 2004.
[59] Schneider and Feltey 2009.
[60] Wanner 2009.
[61] Pelkmans 2009.

detailing age, current role, and an indication of role under the Khmer Rouge is offered at first usage of informant interview data. Five of the nine converts we spoke to occupied leadership positions at their churches. All informants self-identified as Protestant and evangelical. Informants were drawn from a necessarily small and hard-to-access population and our analyses treat interview data with due caution: we do not offer exhaustive or generalizable claims in respect to wider patterns of conversion to Christianity in Cambodia, and the implications we identify for peace-building and reconciliation are presented as illustrative of instructive possibilities, tendencies, and questions.

Rupture, redemption, forgiveness?

How did members of the former Khmer Rouge – a group once committed to the abolition of all religion – come to encounter Christianity? In the conversations we had with former members two periods were presented as significant: meeting members of Christian relief organizations at work on the Cambodia-Thai border in the 1980s, and exposure to Christian outreach around faith-based development projects in the late 1990s and 2000s. After the fall of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979, Khmer Rouge members, along with large numbers of refugees – who were quite often as fearful of the 'liberating' Vietnamese troops as they were of the Khmer Rouge – were pushed across the Thai border in Cambodia's north and west. As global attention was drawn to the plight of refugees along the border zones, the refugee camps became the target of international humanitarian aid efforts, including relief delivered by Christian faith-based organizations. As one former Khmer Rouge medical staff explained:

> After the invasion of Vietnamese troops, I went to live in a refugee camp at the border. It took about one month to go there. Some people did not have food and also many died along the way. There were thousands of people. When we arrived there, there was a humanitarian organization that helped us as refugees of the war. I asked myself: Where do these donations came from? Then I knew that those donations were from all Christians from all over the world. Then we had enough food to eat.[62]

Similarly, a former Khmer Rouge soldier described his experiences of displacement and conflict, then, with the advent of peace in 1999, meeting evangelical church members conducting outreach:

> I was so young during that time. I was seventeen years old in 1970 and then I became a soldier and [was] fighting in the war. In 1979, when the Vietnamese came, I went to the jungle… There was a lot of difficulty because we had no houses in the jungle and no food to eat and it was the most difficult time. I came to live here in 1999 and I became a Christian in 2007. I believed in Christianity because there were believers… who came and shared good news. They had a film screening about Jesus. When I converted to Christianity, there were teachers who led me to have baptism…The words of Christ says that we should show the world that we are the family of Christ, we are true children of Christ, and make us change our mind.[63]

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[62] Informant A. Born in the late 1950s, he served as a battlefield medic during the 1970s civil war and as a medical staff under the regime. He later helped in the construction of a church a decade ago and now serves as a church leader.
[63] Informant F. He joined the Khmer Rouge in the early 1970s and served as a soldier during the regime and throughout the subsequent civil war.

These two respondents present their encounters with Christianity as moments of revelation that followed experiences of hardship and conflict. Such accounts gesture to causal theories of religious conversion that emphasize how faith might become attractive as a result of periods of turmoil and strain. Religion here plays a socially integrating role. Indeed, elsewhere in Cambodia, Zucker has shown how communities have drawn on religious traditions and practices as they reconstitute 'moral order' in the wake of the Khmer Rouge,[64] while Kent has pointed to the traditionally central – but increasingly political role – that Buddhist institutions play as moral and spiritual anchoring points in Khmer life.[65] In reading the reflections of informants above, we might make similar observations of these conversions to Christianity, where religious beliefs act as a morally constitutive force (irrespective of Christianity's place as an "imported" belief system). Religion, as a general category, is thought to offer an integrative social role in this respect, especially so within peace-building literatures, where it is considered a potential "reconciliatory" discourse.[66] While we might observe the generic role religion plays in these accounts, our interest lays specifically in respect to religious change. We might, then, consider how conversions and conversions to Christianity are particular in the case at hand.

Conversion may happen as a response to difficult circumstances and experiences. But, as Engelke points out,[67] conversion itself also tends to retrospectively shape converts' stories and accounts of their own conversions. It acts as a lens for understanding one's own past, through which all experience is reconsidered, while furnishing a new way of organizing recollections of past experiences, imposing its own sequences and temporalities, and staking out its own narrative points of renewal. In other words, we might read the arc of our informant stories – from disorder, to resolution, and renewal – as features and idioms of conversion to Christianity as much as causes of them. As conversion, then, reorders knowledge about past conflict; how did Khmer Rouge converts talk about the problems of the regime that they might have witnessed or be implicated in? One former soldier sought to place the question of "sin" at the centre of his account of conversion:

> When I was fourteen years old, there was military recruit. All men went to join the army fighting in the war. I was in a military unit [during Democratic Kampuchea] and I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old. And in 1978, I got seriously injured... I was stationed in Kampong Cham and when I stepped on a mine and my leg was cut [amputated]. I was in a handicap unit then. Since I lost my leg in 1978, I had nothing to do.
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> After the regime ended, I was sent from Phnom Penh to Battambang and then I was sent to Thailand. In Thailand, food was donated from the U.N. humanitarian agencies and NGOs… I read the bible and I found that there was a person who created everything. And the good news talked about the rescue of the Christ and all people are rescued by believing in Christ. I was the person who had bad sin. So, I need Christ to stay in my life. This is what attracted me to believe in Christ and it is a must in my life. In my life, having Christ, I have

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[64] Zucker 2008.

[65] Kent 2006.

[66] For example, where the capacity of faith to diffuse grievances (Appleby 2000); through religious ideas (Philpot 2009); or religious networks to establish interfaith social 'capital' (Brewer 2010).

[67] Engelke 2004.

hope.[68]

Another informant explained:

> [What] I understand about Christianity… is saying that when you give love to Christ, Christ would give back love to people… The words of Christ talk about rescuing people from bad sin. …before I believed in God, I was a soldier fighting in war and I had a lot of bad sin. And believing in Christ, Christ would help me to clean those bad sins… Christ teaches us through this Bible and wants us to change the old thinking and build new life with Christ.[69]

Here, "rescue" from "bad sin" through Christ is presented as a form of redemption. It produces a sense of rupture with the past, which is designated as a space that contains "bad sin" alongside traumatic experiences as a child soldier, followed by a serious injury. Crucially, such a break creates a sharp distinction between past and present selves. Why would such a discontinuity matter? Redemption and salvation are central and necessary parts of the Christian world-view,[70] especially for Protestant evangelicals who emphasize personal and individual relationships with God. On the one hand, in this sense, new faith retrospectively recasts all pre-conversion actions as 'sinful', subsuming particular 'sinful' acts in a general envelope of past 'sin'. On the other, as a sense of rupture with the past is marked in accounts of conversion and produces a general division of past profanity, and even as these are presented less as spectacular moments of damascene change as protracted and drawn out personal shifts, we can read these stories as attempts to navigate experiences of violence that involve disowning identification with a sense of who they were during past conflicts. In other words, conversion supports disengagement with past ideas, commitments, and beliefs, that may have sustained war, even as it reconfigures new dispositions that might generate new social cleavages.

To be "rescued" from "bad sin" is as much a moral and political claim as it is a theological and spiritual one. Two issues follow from this that invite us to think further about how people make experiences of suffering and violence meaningful, often in ways that are dislocated from formal or state sponsored bids to do so. First, in the wake of conflict and atrocities, as conversions seem to subsume moral questions about past actions within a generalized sense of absolution, conversion displaces other ways of thinking about past violence. As one convert explained when asked about accountability for Khmer Rouge atrocities:

> Talking about the tribunal, it is hard to talk about it. Like for Duch, he can clean his sin from within himself but law in this world, we cannot do. I do not know about that law of national law and the international law. But for God, as he [Duch] knows and believes in God, all his sin have been cleaned. God forgives people who had done bad things or killing people during that time. So, they had no sin if they believe in Christianity and change their mind not to do it again.[71]

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[68] Informant C. Born in the early 1960s, he was conscripted as a teenager during the civil war and served in a military unit under the regime. He is now a a pastor at a church.

[69] Informant E. Born in the early 1960s, he was conscripted by the Khmer Rouge during the civil war and fled to Thailand in 1979. He now leads a small church congregation.

[70] Cennel 2006; Robbins 2007.

[71] Informant H. Female born in the mid 1960s. Served in a Khmer Rouge mobile unit under the regime before transfer to a medical unit. Now worships at a nearby church.

Questions of legal accountability are excluded and questions of civic responsibility to wider communities that experienced suffering are displaced by new faith obligations. Another informant remarked, when asked about the tribunal, "…because I serve Christ, I do not care much about this."[72] This is not to say that when religious beliefs conflict with a particular transitional justice mechanism – or with secular civic and juridical discourse more broadly – the success or otherwise of transitional justice and peacebuilding is necessarily jeopardized or invalidated. Rather, beliefs are dislocated from the prevailing retributive appeals for justice for Khmer Rouge atrocities that emanate from the ECCC. Judgement is thereby reserved for religious or spiritual (rather than state) powers. This perpetuates ways of thinking about atrocities that are incommensurable – but not necessarily in conflict – with secular, juridical approaches to violence.

It is worth pausing to note and reflect on one high profile occasion in which religious and judicial responses to atrocity collided. An outstanding question remains of how those that suffered from the Khmer Rouge would respond to former Khmer Rouge converts' religious claims of absolution. Examples from Duch's trial at the ECCC are instructive in this regard. During the early phases of the trial, Duch admitted full responsibility for his crimes, claiming to be "…tormented by remorse…", and offered statements of contrition toward victims that were heavily inflected with Christian idioms of redemption and renewal.[73] Victims in the audience were conflicted; some saw value in his apology, while others questioned Duch's sincerity, assuming his cooperation was a bid for leniency. During closing arguments, Duch performed an abrupt volte face and requested release, to the consternation of victims in the audience. Judy Ledgerwood has suggested that Duch was trying to "…play the tribunal…"[74], while Chy notes Duch's aggressive and condescending attitude toward victim witnesses.[75] Given Duch's actions, commentators have questioned how sincere his conversion ever was, or to what extent his conversion – and Khmer Rouge conversions more broadly – genuinely transform the disposition of a new believer. Nic Dunlop, the journalist responsible for finding Duch after years in hiding, is agnostic on the issue. Dunlop documents Duch's humanitarian work in his years living on the border, contrasts Duch's contrition with the non apologies of other Khmer Rouge leaders, while still noting that Duch minimised and lied even during confession.[76] Duch's pastor since 1995, Christophe Lapel, remains adamant Duch regrets his actions, and that he is a reformed person.[77] It is impossible to conclusively ascertain if Duch's contrition or conversion were authentic. Rather, we can make two observations. Firstly, if taking Duch's conversion seriously we can, at the least, remind ourselves that conversion is often conflicted, ongoing, and unresolved, even as ideas of conversion demand absolute rupture with a past sense of self.[78] Moreover, even as gestures of contrition – heavily inflected with Christian idioms of remorse and redemption – are deployed within secular and juridical crucibles, victims may refuse or reject them. Indeed, in Duch's case, some victims responded to his apologies with anger, while others, reading Duch's behaviour at trial, interpreted his actions as a secondary form of violence.[79]

Conversions to Christianity, in the cases at hand and during high profile moments of apology such as Duch's trial, furnish ideas and beliefs that intersect with claims for peace and justice in seemingly ambivalent ways. Our intention here was not to situate conversions from

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[72] Informant C.

[73] Chy 2014.

[74] Ledgerwood 2009.

[75] Chy 2014.

[76] Dunlop 2005, 273-274.

[77] Leng 2009.

[78] Robbins 2008.

[79] Ledgerwood 2009.

Buddhism to Christianity within clean or neatly competing moral economies, where one is more complementary to the work of transitional justice and peacebuilding than the other. Rather, we can observe why beliefs structured around discontinuity, resolution, and redemption become attractive and salient in these contexts. At the same time, our informants' conversions, and the high profile example of Duch's apologies, provide an optic for making sense of past experiences that simultaneously buttress and disrupt the kinds of teleological, linear narratives central to transitional justice and peacebuilding, where idioms of renewal, atonement, and forgiveness are thought to inaugurate shifts from disorderly to orderly states. Indeed, as illustrated in the case of Duch's trial, the authenticity and extent of any conversion may be uneven or disputed, and gestures of contrition informed and obliged by conversion can themselves cause offense to victims.

Christians in the community: new inclusions, new exclusions

Cambodian communities have dealt with former Khmer Rouge members within their communities in varied and complex ways. In the immediate aftermath of collapse of the regime in 1979, widespread revenge attacks against Khmer Rouge were documented.[80] Since then, lower-level Khmer Rouge have come to stand in uneasy relation to the communities that they live in, where even their former peers may have suffered at their hands. Zucker's detailed ethnographic work indicates that the treatment of former Khmer Rouge is complicated and often contingent to highly localised histories. For example, former Khmer Rouge can remain highly stigmatized and excluded, within and between communities, reframed as "victims of circumstance" within a wider state-sponsored narrative of national reconciliation, or have been able to reintegrate through participation in traditional religious practice as a source of renewal and moral order.[81] For former Khmer Rouge who convert to Christianity, significant questions arise in respect to their departure from indigenous moral and spiritual anchors of community – distancing them also from other former Khmer Rouge – and the implications of conversions that necessarily constitute a rupture between their past and present senses of self, generating the possibilities of different ways of thinking about experiences of violence. In other words, when converts self-identify as Christians, new religious minorities are produced within their communities. This means that while conversion might contribute to their rejection of past cleavages and identifications, that may have been present during war, it makes new ones possible.. Cambodian's past experiences of the Khmer Rouge and subsequent conflicts were, in part, characterized by competing claims over national integrity and identity, inflected with ideas about "race" and authenticity. The Khmer Rouge idealized a Khmer identity rooted in an image of the chaste rural poor, juxtaposed against ideas of 'foreign' bourgeois society and ethnic Others. In this light, it was notable that the Christian former Khmer Rouge converts we spoke to now find themselves doubly marginalized: as former members of an nationally stigmatized movement and, simultaneously, as members of a foreign religious constituency. within an otherwise Buddhist polity. Therefore, they face challenges as they navigate positions between these communities.

These former Khmer Rouge described their current religious life of their congregations to us: worshipping at each others' houses, or spending Sundays together when they would read the Bible, sing, pray, and eat together. Yet they were also open to the wider non-Christian community and sensitive to the presence and views of local authorities regarding their faith. Although the Cambodian constitution guarantees religious minorities enjoy basic right to religious freedom, rumors of coercive proselytizing by larger foreign

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[80] Gottesman 2003.
[81] Zucker, 2013a, 2013b.

church groups coincided with a government ban on direct evangelical work in 2007. This perhaps explains why our informants were anxious to note that they sought permission from district and commune authorities to hold Christmas and Easter events, and ensure that their designated spaces of worship were officially authorized. At the same time, they spoke enthusiastically about the services and goodwill they felt they could show their non-Christian neighbors, inviting them to festivals and sharing rice, and admitting non-Christian children to the classes and language tuition that they offered through their churches. This was often, though not always explicitly, raised in discussions of outreach and evangelism:

> Firstly, we share good news. Secondly, we teach English to small children in the community. We also have a children's club, having books for them to read... We also built a dirt road for the community. Before when village chief raised money to do anything in the community, he could not collect that much because people did not trust him. But with us, people trust us and when we raise money to do anything in the community, we could raise more. Because when we do anything, we have invoices and documents to prove our spending and that's why people in this community trust us.[82]

Church groups, according to this picture, perform a pastoral role within their communities alongside their "first" obligation to share "good news," offering public services while conducting outreach. The above informant emphasizes the moral integrity of his congregation in contrast to the 'untrustworthiness' of local authorities. The Khmer Rouge converts we spoke to were, in other words, negotiating a delicate balance between collective self-affirming sacred practices of worship while withdrawing from a wider community seemingly profane in its non-Christian beliefs, even as they assumed a spiritual and material obligation to non-believers and a duty to spread the "good news." This tension of exclusion and inclusion was present in discussions of the challenges of outreach:

> It is difficult because they don't want to spend their time to participate with us. And they can't change their mind and behavior. They can't stop drinking alcohol, can't stop using bad words... One more reason is that they can't stop praying for their ancestors. They said they can't stop doing those old traditions. If we talk in term of physical relations is normal. But in terms of soul, it is different. We cannot be the same in terms of soul because we get and follow the pure soul of Christ. We work for Christ and we follow the leadership of Christ. For them, they rely on themselves. But we still provide love to them because whatever they do is their right to do it. We have a principle to pardon them and provide them love... So, the love overwhelms the mistakes they made, so, we can live in this community as normal.[83]

The Khmer Rouge converts we talked to found this tension difficult to reconcile. They actively marked themselves as distinct from their neighbors, designating fields of sin and profanity, while also felt obliged to redeem them, all the while being *seen* to respect the formal provisions of religious plurality and sensitivity to their own place as a new religious minority and former Khmer Rouge members. Several informants mentioned that they often encounter hostility, suggesting non-Christians "hate us" because they see Christianity as

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[82] Informant A.
[83] Informant G. Born in the late 1960s, he was recruited to join a child unit under the regime. He now leads a small church.

foreign religion.[84] It is striking that, as these conversations took place around villages along the Thai border that are home to large numbers of Khmer Rouge ex-combatants, where their relationships to their former peers – articulated socially and spiritually – were fraught. Converts' descriptions of their former comrades tended to envelope specific mention of the Democratic Kampuchea regime and of the conflict as past "mistakes," which were in turn cast within a general perception of the profanity of the non-Christian majority. Moreover, several converts were keen to point out that outreach and education services provided by their churches specifically did not mention Khmer Rouge history, or the conflict, which is perhaps unsurprising given the general absence of Khmer Rouge history from the Cambodian public education system. Yet former Khmer Rouge non-Christians also seemed to pose specific challenges to converts' sense of a duty to evangelize as a distinct constituency:

> There are many in this district. Even if they did very bad things in the past, when they believe in Christianity, Christ would clean all of those sins by giving his life to die on the cross. Christ can forgive them. God forgave us.[85]

As another convert noted:

> We know that the Khmer Rouge regime killed a lot of people. So, we tell young people not to follow that path again. So, if many people believe in Christianity, the killing would be reduced. Those who believe in Christianity do not kill each other. We love each other as we are all the children of god. But those who do not believe they said that they are not children of god. If we believe in god, there is no killing, only loving each other.[86]

In this sense, even as a general demarcation between Christian and non-Christian communities had been drawn, a distinctive place for former combatents was designated within a worldview ordered around idioms of redemption and renewal. Christian converts, in this sense, retained a conviction that their faith can both redeem the subjects of conflict and prevent its recurrence, even as they recognize that their place within the community can be a source of friction.

What is important for our purposes here is not the validity or likelihood of the claim that Christianity contributes to peace. Rather, these claims matter because they emerge as convictions from ex-members of the Khmer Rouge in ways that make their experiences of a chaotic, changing post-conflict landscape meaningful, independent of any notion of a formal peace or reconciliation process. These ideas are not addressed to – or even concerned with – the principal units of peacebuilding or transitional justice practice and scholarship, such as the state apparatus, idioms of the nation, or the entitlements of the human rights bearer to legal redress. Moreover, they present a puzzle because we should be wary of categorizing these stories as reflecting intelligible forms of localised or grassroots led peace and reconciliation; they do not emerge in the name of peace or reconciliation and, indeed, they generate their own contemporary community frictions, notwithstanding the vexed questions of atonement for past atrocities that many victims of the Khmer Rouge would find troubling.

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[84] Informant C; Informant G offered similar reflections.
[85] Informant A.
[86] Informant I. Born in the early 1960s, he was conscripted as a Khmer Rouge soldier during the civil war and continued in a military unit under the regime. He now worships as part of a small congregation at another residence.

Pastoral networks

The majority of our informants' first encounters with Christianity were either in refugee camps in the 1980s and 1990s, or through contact with faith-based NGOs that have operated in Cambodia since then. While our informants emphasized the personal and private nature of their faith, they often referred to faith-based organizations active in development work with an overt public role, such as education or infrastructure. Such organizations, operating often in border zones where the state and its institutions can simultaneously *feel* present within communities and yet be very distant from them, fulfil public roles that constitute forms of government that otherwise the state is expected to perform.[87] In other words, Christian faith-based NGOs – and the churches around them – occupy influential positions in shaping specific kinds of social order and post-conflict subjectivity. Historically and in the present, state and development stakeholders have understood border regions through a constellation of ideas about "ungoverned space"[88] where a lack of state capacity is read as a disorder or security risk and therefore the *necessary* sites of development and peacebuilding work. Yet the history of border spaces has been far from absent of politics: the Cambodian border has been ordered around specific domestic and international, political, cultural, humanitarian, and, indeed, religious forces.[89] In so far as we cannot separate the conversion stories presented here from these influences, we might recognise that further attention should be paid to the wider universe of perspectives and stories of those navigating such terrains, both in their minutiae and as they intersect with wider peacebuilding and development initiatives, which are constitutive parts of Cambodia's varying transitions. In other words, the present day terrain of Cambodia's post-conflict order is made up of a myriad of stories that intertwine personal and institutional elements with local, regional, and international forces. The role of a large Christian INGO was central to the story of one convert's experience of the early post-war period:

> I knew Christ since 2000 and I had baptism in September 2007 but I served Christianity before that baptism. Actually, when I knew Christianity at the beginning, I did not fully believe in Christ. In 2004, I got married but I lost my position at work [at a Christian INGO] after this organization reorganized positions in its institution. I was so poor and even had no food to eat. Then I moved to live at the bank of a canal to grow vegetables for my living but still in hard conditions. Then I prayed for Christ. I prayed that God know whatever my living condition… and help me to change it and have enough to eat. Then I sold that land and bought this land. When I came here, my living condition was still hard. But I kept praying for God because the only God who could support our lives and God is a master. So, [then] I was a motor taxi driver. Three months later, my chief at [Christian INGO] called me back to work. Later God changed my life and I served church.[90]

This conversion narrative reflects those discussed earlier in the way it presents a tale of hardship and then resolution through new faith, even as it offers a story that is uneven and protracted. This account is instructive, however, of the kinds of relationships and networks at work that precipitate conversion as much as it illustrates the attraction of faith after periods of turmoil. Specifically, conversion here is presented within a story about employment and the

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[87] Ferguson and Gupta 2002.
[88] Duffield 2007.
[89] Olivius, 2017.
[90] Informant G.

opportunities afforded through work for a faith based NGO. Two issues are important here key. As Smilde has argued, the particular qualities of relationships and networks between converts, churches, and their sponsors shapes conversion trajectories, especially where these involve asymmetric power dynamics, such as employment. [91] At the same time, these accounts should not necessarily be interpreted as instrumental or opportunistic calculations for converts, as "bad faith" conversions, or as the coercive power of evangelical faith-based INGOs. While informants often remarked on the problem of "rice churches" – in which religious authorities elicit attendance through gifts or food, and can be understood more as a transaction than indicator of faith – their conversion stories reflect a more complex sense of debt and obligation to church groups. As one convert noted when talking about his experience in border refugee camps, "I still remember the good deeds of Christ and the humanitarian organization that brought food for us."[92] The social ties and bonds that make conversions possible are conditioned within these relationships and – where they might be a rare avenue for formal employment – we might see how evangelical outreach has greater salience.

The role of faith-based INGOs along the border and the conversion stories that emerge around them intersect with issues of development and peace-building. They do so, however, in ways that often only coincide with – or are not explicitly expressed through – ideas about peacebuilding or development. As one convert enthusiastically explained:

> The staff of [Christian INGO] worked here, my village, and he communicated with me and talked to me about the belief in Christ… There are many [infrastructure] projects. They help everyone in the community without any selection of any group or religious. They help us in terms of [the] agricultural sector. For example, they gave us animals and small trees and so on. For infrastructure, they built bridges, roads. For [the] educational section, they give learning materials for children, and they also help health [care].[93]

In this vision, Christian INGOs and the churches they sponsor play a vital role in the provision of basic material services in the area. Such services, from infrastructure to education, are foundational aspects of peacebuilding and development. Yet again, we see the role of Christian organizations stand in ambivalent relation to such fields. The place of Christian INGOs and churches as developmental actors raises finely poised political questions concerning the devolved surrogacy of ostensibly state services to churches that are, at the same time, positioned as "foreign", "non-Khmer", and therefore unwelcome entities within wider communities as well as sources of potential discord and friction. The ambivalent relationship between the (development) work of church organizations and the aims of peacebuilding is further reflected in the kinds of post-conflict subjects that each seeks to create. Several informants, for example, mentioned access to credit through church finance schemes that were conditional on their starting businesses. or other entrepreneurial activity. In other words, Christian INGOs seek to support and nurture "peaceful" (Christian) communities, but they do so, as practice in peacebuilding also prescribes, on terms that are calibrated through the logic of markets. What is perhaps most striking here is that former members of the Khmer Rouge – a group formerly hostile to foreigners and committed to the abolition of all markets and religious practice – now work closely with a foreign religious

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[91] 2005

[92] Informant B. Born in the early 1960s, she served as a medical staff under the regime.

[93] Informant D. Born in the late 1960s, he served in a child unit during the regime and under the Khmer Rouge in refugee camps during the 1980s. Now leads a Christian group that worships from his home.

organization that seeks to cultivate a type of religious and economic citizen so at odds with their past convictions.

Conclusion

Khmer Rouge conversions to Christianity have implications for peacebuilding and transitional justice trajectories in Cambodia, in so far as they furnish different lenses for thinking about experiences of suffering, violence, and atrocity. As we have tried to show, for the converts we spoke to the attraction of conversion was conditioned within relationships to churches, Christian relief organisations, and Christian INGOs. Yet the salience of conversion was concurrently anchored around ideas of renewal and discontinuity, idioms that powerfully reconfigured converts' relationships to their experiences of the war and Khmer Rouge. Converts were, on the one hand, emollient and contrite in their appreciation of past suffering. On the other, they remained dislocated from a sense of moral responsibility and resolution beyond that dictated by their own faith. Indeed, Duch's trial at the ECCC provoked questions about the authenticity of his conversion, and victims questioned the sincerity of his gestures of remorse and contrition that were inflected with Christian idioms. In other words, if conversion acts as a form of meaning making and renewal for former Khmer Rouge members in the aftermath of violence, vexed questions remain in respect of their relationships to wider communities of victims. Given that peacebuilding and transitional justice rely on strong public narratives concerning moral responsibility and resolution, greater attention needs to be paid to the potential incommensurability of different civic, legal, political, and, indeed, spiritual ways of apprehending the past, in the case at hand and beyond.

Secondly, in so far as we can offer lessons for approaches to peacebuilding and transitional justice more broadly, conversion is instructive of how post-conflict constituencies and subjectivities *change* in ways that are potentially different from the forms envisioned in peacebuilding narratives. In this sense, religion is less a repository source (or salve) of conflict, but can emerge as a response to conflict that is itself contingent, lived, and unfolding. We should pay greater attention, in Cambodia and beyond, to the way those involved in conflict and atrocities negotiate and navigate new relationships related to their experiences. As with the case at hand, new subjects can even emerge in uneasy relationships within the communities they are embedded. While further research on the extent and prevalence of conversion among ex-combatants and former Khmer Rouge will be an important parallel area for future research to develop a full sense of the challenges arising, the emergence of a new religious community, here sometimes cast as foreign and thus a site of suspicion, troubles the linearity of approaches to peacebuilding that assume neat transitions from conflict to harmony, just as the presumption within transitional justice that reconciliation relies on restoring lapsed relationships between "old" foes is troubled by the sense that converts considered those selves already discarded.

The story of Cambodia's transition from atrocity and war, to peace has tended to be told at the level of the grand bargains struck between international stakeholders, the state, and domestic elites, through spectacular moments of intervention, such as UNTAC, or the amnesty deals offered to Khmer Rouge leaders in the 1990s. These narratives are a story of of the state and supra-national imposed on the local and peripheral. Conversions to Christianity among former Khmer Rouge are one small optic that enables us to see and tell these stories in different ways, focusing our attention on how those that experienced conflict have navigated the shifting terrain of these periods of rapid change and upheaval. The converts we spoke to narrated trajectories that were ambivalent towards personal responsibility for violence and suffering, tended to elide a sense of identification with national community, often physically transgressed national boundaries and borders (as they

became refugees), and, in the present, rely on the support of church groups and Christian INGOs to fulfil the basic material needs within their community. Such groups themselves occupy complex roles as a foreign presence and, simultaneously, a surrogate provider of public services – and therefore social order – in Cambodia's border zones. While our informants' experiences of conversion are imprinted by broader state-led, international, and , indeed, transnational forces in complicated ways, they also seemed to destabilize and challenge the principal units of analysis at work in peacebuilding and transitional justice scholarship and practice: the state and its institutions, ideas of national community, and clearly defined victims and perpetrators. In so far as these are attempts to make meaningful experiences of transition and upheaval, they offer a different lens for considering the resonance and varied negotiations of such processes.

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