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## **Victims as moral beacons of humanitarianism in post-conflict societies\***

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## **Victims as moral beacons of humanitarianism in post-conflict societies**

### **Abstract**

This paper reports on interview data amongst victims of conflict and organised violence. Despite their victimhood, they evince a level of forgivingness, civility and tolerance that constructs in the very acts of atrocity that portend its demise, a form of humanitarianism which enables victims to be moral beacons in post-conflict societies that otherwise are largely devoid of any a moral or sacred canopy. Data cover victims in Sri Lanka, South Africa and Northern Ireland. The theoretical contribution of the paper is to proffer a view that humanitarianism in societies emerging out of conflict is best understood as a social practice constituted by victims' practices for tolerance and civility. This makes humanitarianism pro-social, having the potential to affect social consciousness and social understandings in post-conflict societies and to assist in the remaking of society after conflict.

### **Key words:**

Victims, humanitarianism, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, South Africa, post-conflict societies

## **Introduction**

This paper reports on interview data with victims of conflict in three post-conflict societies. The data offer a special route into discussing the nature of modern humanitarianism. Victims are people who might be expected to find humanitarian sensibilities difficult to practice as a result of their experience of the worst levels of atrocity; yet many are more capable than most to be moral beacons in their practice of humanitarian virtues. The forms of atrocity victims experience in modern warfare are deeply moral but it is not an over-arching framework of moral values that turns many victims into moral beacons. If it were, the moral landscape of post-conflict societies would be more uniformly humanitarian and compassionate. The research question which motivates this paper is therefore how best we can understand the source of the humanitarian virtues many victims display after conflict. We argue that the priority placed by some victims on justice, human dignity and emotional empathy *for all victims* after conflict constructs humanitarianism as a social process, such that, where it is found, it resides in the social practices of victims themselves rather than an over-arching moral framework of humanitarian sensibility.

Two implications of this approach are worth highlighting. First, the voices of victims, whenever they are captured in the modern literature on humanitarianism tend to be heard only in terms of how victims relate to professional aid workers and in terms of the specific (and usually failed) humanitarian intervention. By contrast, we capture the voices of victims directly, particularly for how they understand their victimhood and its implications for their relationship with the 'other'. This paper therefore advances an approach to humanitarianism that is more squarely victim-centred than current literature. Secondly, contrary to Fassin's claim that humanitarian interventions destroy social sensibilities (Fassin, 2012), we argue that victims' social practice of humanitarianism restores humanitarianism as one of the most important sources of sociability and social understanding in post-conflict societies. This paper

therefore propounds the view that a victim-centred humanitarianism makes humanitarianism localised and vernacular, grounded in the social practises of victims themselves in their specific social context, but also profoundly social at the same time. A victim-centred approach allows us to return to humanitarianism as a source of social renewal.

The paper will proceed in four stages. First we will highlight the ‘moral turn’ in conceptualisations of modern humanitarianism in order to show the way in which modern humanitarianism is understood. Secondly we discuss the nature of the moral landscape in post-conflict societies in order to show how inappropriate these kinds of society are to the ‘moral turn’ in the conceptualisation of modern humanitarianism. Thirdly we outline our own approach to humanitarianism as a social practice grounded in the practices of victims themselves. Fourthly, we illustrate this approach with interview data with victims in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka.

### **The ‘moral turn’ in understanding humanitarianism**

Three features mark debates about modern humanitarianism. The first is an emphasis on humanitarianism as an over-arching moral framework of sensibilities, ethics and reason; the second is a focus on the international and civil institutions and agencies that outwork this ethical framework; the third is a sense that humanitarianism is in crisis.

While Barnett and Weiss (2008) recognise there are contested humanitarianisms, they show that humanitarianism in its current phase has been both institutionalised and internationalised, represented as it is in international agencies and global civil society groups that concern themselves with aid and relief, as well as with wider issues of peacebuilding, democratisation and economic development. The sense that humanitarianism is in crisis (on which see in particular Rieff, 2002) comes as a result of its very institutionalisation and internationalisation, for a damaging critique has emerged of the way in which these agencies

and civil society groups protect the bureaucratic interests of the UN that employs them (Barnett 2011), serve the interests of the privileged (Calhoun, 2004), and get exploited to legitimise the hegemony of Western models of political and economic governance that perpetuate global inequalities and injustices (Fassin, 2005); to the point where Fassin (2012), perhaps the most vociferous critic of modern humanitarianism, argues that these agencies distort indigenous social understandings by facilitating new forms of social domination.

This article restricts itself to the first of these debates and argues that there has been a ‘moral turn’ in the way we conceptualise humanitarianism. This ‘moral turn’ forms the theoretical backdrop to our paper and constitutes the literature with which it engages. Very like human rights debates in the 1970s (Moyn, 2011: 3), there is now an appeal to morality in discussions of modern humanitarianism, which parallels what others have called the ‘cultural turn’ in social science generally (Rojek and Turner, 2000). By this we mean that humanitarianism is widely understood as a moral sensibility, describing ethical virtues of benevolence, kindness and emotional empathy towards fellow human beings; virtues which are themselves located within a broader ethical framework that functions as a moral or sacred canopy affecting the values of those living beneath the canopy. The word sacred in this sense refers to the transcendent qualities of the over-arching values rather than that they are religious. Ethical virtues such as these are certainly not restricted to religious systems of belief, let alone Christianity. Indeed, the close association between religion and conflict has often witnessed religion as the source of some of the worst humanitarian abuses in history. The ethical frameworks that predispose these virtues are of many sorts.

The idea that humanitarianism is an over-arching moral framework of virtues is reflected in references to a ‘humanitarian sensibility’ in late modernity (Simms and Trim, 2011), or to there being a general ‘humanitarian reason’, ‘humanitarian ethic’ or ‘humanitarian morality’. Didier Fassin (2012), for example, entitles his analysis

*Humanitarian Reason*, seeing his study as ‘a moral history of the present’. These terms generate further references to there being a ‘culture of compassion’ (Barnett, 2011), a ‘global moral community’ (Fassin, 2012), embedded in humanitarianism as a moral canopy. Fassin, (2012), for example, sees humanitarianism as based on a global moral community embedded in universal humanity, in which all lives are equal, arguing that the earlier language of rights and justice that infused humanitarianism has been replaced with a moral and ethical concern with suffering and compassion. This sort of ethical and moral language is replete in many modern studies of humanitarianism. Fassin’s French compatriot, the sociologist Luc Boltanski (1999), for example, reinforces this ‘moral turn’ in humanitarianism studies when he refers to the growth of cosmopolitan humanitarianism that encourages an emotional empathy with the ‘distant suffering’ of the marginalised and strange other, which is consistent with what Barnett (2011: 8), in his comprehensive history of humanitarianism, calls the ‘expanding international ethics of care’.

We are not here disputing the existence or importance of moral virtues like compassion, tolerance, civility, benevolence and the like, nor are we contesting that they constitute the very bedrock of humanitarian sensibilities. This paper critically engages with the ‘moral turn’ in modern humanitarianism in two ways. First, we argue that we need to better theorise how these moral virtues work in practice. We claim that they do not work in simplistic ways as if forming a sacred canopy whose moral precepts envelope all those living beneath it and inculcates ethical humanitarian virtues to people uniformly. We suggest that humanitarianism should instead be theorised as a social practice grounded in and affected by conditions within culture, the market and the state. By so doing, we are able to see moral virtues like compassion, tolerance and civility as embedded in the social practices and behaviours of people themselves, some of whom are not capable of practising humanitarian sensibilities.

Secondly, by illustrating these theoretical claims with research data from victims of conflict, we offer a victim-centred approach to humanitarianism that contrasts fundamentally with the existing humanitarianism studies literature on victims, which portrays them as passive, subjected to and dependent on the care and activities of aid agencies rather than as agents capable of transforming their own moral landscape. Despair, hopelessness and emotional dependency are very real amongst victims of conflict, but some victims have agency sufficient enough to become ‘moral beacons’ (a phrase borrowed from Thomas, 1999) in their capacity to practice moral virtues like civility, tolerance and compassion as the foundation to a victim-centred humanitarianism. What we need to understand therefore, are the conditions under which some victims can and others cannot practice these virtues.

In his account of human rights, Moyn (2010, 2011), drew a useful distinction between human rights as they are talked about in the public sphere, and the practice of human rights by activists themselves. This led him to emphasise the importance of the vernacularisation of human rights, the way in which they are rendered into local idioms by activists themselves on the ground (Moyn, 2011: 136). We suggest that this finds a parallel in the way humanitarianism should be conceptualised. The focus should be on how humanitarianism is practised by victims and rendered into idioms that differ remarkably from the way humanitarianism is conceptualised by professionals in the modern literature.

In what follows, we explore this view of humanitarianism with respect to the social practices of one specific social category of people, victims of communal conflicts and organised violence, and in only certain social spaces, societies emerging out of conflict. Despite the harrowing victimhood experiences to which they were exposed, some victims’ social practices after conflict nonetheless evince a level of forgivingness, civility and tolerance that constructs after the very acts of atrocity that portend its demise, a form of humanitarianism that enables some victims to be moral beacons in post-conflict societies.



To develop this analysis, it is necessary next to demonstrate that post-conflict societies are largely devoid of, or struggle to express, humanitarian sensibilities. This means that the moral virtues that define modern humanitarianism and which are practised in post-conflict societies by only some people cannot be located in or understood as caused by a new over-arching compassionate and benevolent moral framework.

### **The moral vacuum in post-conflict societies**

There is no sacred canopy of moral virtues to generate humanitarianism in post-conflict societies; societies emerging out of conflict largely experience a moral vacuum. It is ironic that organised violence and communal conflict in late modernity is deeply moral by nature but that its cessation does not end up in peace processes that create a new moral and sacred canopy by which those living beneath it can practice humanitarian virtues like benevolence, kindness and emotional empathy toward their erstwhile enemy. Peace processes are fragile (Brewer, 2010) and the threat of renewed outbreaks of violence is ever present (Darby, 2001), at least in the medium term. The legacy of the conflict lives on in polarised communities, mistrust, and in difficulties in learning to live together. It is for this reason, for example, that Graham (2016) argues that social capital theory, which normally encapsulates the processes through which ethical virtues are socially disseminated, is not well suited to divided societies. However, the moral nature of this conflict serves to intensify the levels of atrocity and thus the scale of abuse that constitutes the victimhood experience. In the moral vacuum that exists in post-conflict societies, victims thus often have to create their own humanitarian renewal.

An account of this irony is worth giving as context to the empirical data in order to better appreciate that respondents' victimhood experiences are the very medium through which they can construct their own ethical practices.

The moral nature of contemporary organised violence is reflected well in the description of it as representing a new kind of war (Kaldor, 1999). In new wars two key boundary markers disappear by which innocent civilians were formerly protected from purposeful harm (rather than collateral damage). In new wars the distinction between combatant and non-combatant disappears, making civilians purposely targets; and there is no longer a set battlefield, resulting in civilian areas being turned into war zones. Attacking civilians, after all, is the main point of most forms of organised violence. Moreover, in new wars the human body itself has become a battlefield, particularly women's bodies (see Hynes, 2004). Degradations of the human body, with gross levels of atrocity perpetrated on it, reflect the moral enervation of one's enemy, in which the enemy is no longer recognised or treated as a moral being. This has witnessed the return of de-technological forms of violence, in which the machete and sword are the preferred weapons of degradation; and beheadings and body mutilations the choice of attack. Even cannibalism has been known to occur in some communal conflicts. It is only by stripping one's enemy of moral value and denying them human dignity as moral agents that this level of barbarity can be perpetrated – even boasted of. New wars are thus not only highly sophisticated as technological weapons of destruction become readily available on the black market; they are simultaneously de-technological, as moral enervation permits atrocities being carried out in face-to-face human encounters of the most vicious kind and not just by drones hundreds of miles in the sky from vantage points oceans away. It is processes like these that make contemporary conflicts inherently moral irrespective of their political cause.

Respect for the other's human dignity is not easily restored after this level of moral enervation. Rather than a new moral and sacred canopy that reshapes the moral landscape in societies emerging out of conflict, the relative decline in levels of violence gets turned into contestation over the morality of the conflict, whether or not it was justified, for what

purpose, and whether its legacy makes it worth it. With the political arrangements in the peace process bedding in, even if not wholly successful, contestation can get focused on the morality of the past violence. Post-conflict societies therefore tend to experience a downwardly spiralling cycle of moral recalibration that is both counter-productive to the development of a new moral and sacred canopy that might reshape their moral landscape.

Moral recalibration is evident in selective moral condemnation of the past in at least three ways. The first, is the use of a victim hierarchy in which one's own community is said to have suffered the most, with the 'other' community's behaviour being the more heinous; secondly, in the use of blaming strategies in which the 'other community' is always the one with the primary responsibility for the conflict and for any abrogation of the peace; and thirdly, in the avoidance of acknowledgement by which people and organisations reflect on their own acts of commission or acts of omission, during both the conflict and the peace. Moral recalibration leads to fruitless debates about who killed more, who suffered more, and who was the more heinous. No worse measure of the moral vacuum that can exist in post-conflicts societies is found than to engage in a bloody headcount of who killed the least – or the most (Brewer, 2015).

In using selective moral condemnation, people are, of course, locating the various problems arising from the legacy of the conflict within different and competing moral frameworks. The moral vacuum they experience is not so much an absence of values but a failure to establish a new moral framework that might facilitate humanitarianism. For a long time after the ending of conflict, these kinds of society tend to have no shared peace vocation, no shared moral vision as to what peace means and what it might deliver in the future, and no common value orientation promoted by any shared commitment to humanitarianism. In the medium term, post-conflict societies tend to suffer the same polarised moral frameworks they always had and which helped to shape the conflict in the first place. Therefore they lack an

over-arching moral framework that might serve as a moral or sacred canopy to furnish the values in which humanitarian sensibilities can embed.

This impacts on how we must understand humanitarianism in post-conflict societies. Humanitarianism cannot be viewed solely as a set of moral precepts towards other human beings that nestles beneath a sacred canopy or over-arching framework of values that reshapes people's beliefs and behaviour after conflict. No such value system exists in societies emerging out of conflict. As the following two sections argue, humanitarian consideration towards erstwhile enemies resides in the social practices many victims engage in as they search for justice, human dignity and emotional empathy for *all victims* across the communal divide.

### **Understanding humanitarianism as a social practice**

The term social practice is not used loosely. It is a meeting point for philosophy and the social sciences and has a technical meaning. Tuomela's (2002) philosophy of social practices, describes social practices as the specific mental states of agents that are orientated towards collective attitudes and social interests, and as such are the building blocks of intersubjectivity and eventually of habit, custom and tradition in society. More broadly, in sociology the term social practice is treated almost as an equivalent to social action, describing forms of relationships, activities and discursive strategies that are normative. Normative is meant in both its sociological senses: something that is based on norms (that is, grounded in actual values, beliefs and behaviours) and is also socially desirable (that is, it has virtue attached to it as an ideal). Sociologically, therefore, social practices constitute the norms, values, habits and behaviours that describe the regular patterns of social life (the way of living together and talking to one another as practised in society) and the aspirational ideals on which social life ought to be lived (the virtuous way to practise living together and

talking to one another in society). In sociology, social practices are not rendered as certain forms of mental state, but as forms of social relationships that reproduce society, either as it is mundanely practised (made into the norm) or idealised into something better (made normative).

In this definition, humanitarianism in post-conflict societies is a social practice that involves believing in and performing the ritualised behaviours and forms of talk that enact ethical virtues like kindness, benevolence and emotional empathy towards former protagonists in the public sphere, which end up promoting tolerance and civility. Humanitarianism is both a norm (capable of being practised) and normative (virtuous as an ideal).

While humanitarianism amongst victims after conflict works through civility and tolerance it is different from them. There is a long-established philosophical debate about civility and toleration in which toleration is rendered as discrete practices within the public sphere that assists democratic dialogue (O'Neill, 1993) and in which civility is portrayed as the *exercise* of tolerance in the face of deep disagreement (Calhoun, 2000: 256). Social order and political stability in deeply divided societies is recognised in Rawls's notion of justice as depending on the practice of toleration (1996: 10). However, while humanitarianism is outworked through civility and tolerance in our approach it is not equivalent to them. For victims of conflict, civility and tolerance are premised first on the ability to practice ethical virtues, and only by this practice are civility and tolerance possible. Civility and tolerance are thus the *outcome* of the practice of humanitarian ethical virtues, not their cause. A social practice approach to humanitarianism is thus less concerned with clarifying the meaning of civility and tolerance than in specifying the conditions under which the practice of ethical virtues by victims allows them to flourish or not. These are the sorts of issues we develop further in the next section.

## **Victims as moral beacons**

At this juncture it is necessary to give some detail of the research project from which this data is drawn. The data come from a 6-year Leverhulme Trust-funded project entitled ‘Compromise after Conflict’ (see <http://www.compromiseafterconflict.org>) that focused on the development of compromise amongst victims of conflict in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka. These three societies were deliberately chosen because they represent different kinds of peace process: Sri Lanka a victor’s peace involving a military defeat for one side; South Arica the colonial model of elite change at the top with little changing at the bottom; and Northern Ireland, the classical mutually-agreed second-preference negotiated political settlement in which parties give up on their first preference. This choice allowed us to establish whether the type of peace impacts on victims’ capacity for compromise. The project ended in 2015.

We conducted sample surveys in all three countries and in-depth qualitative interviews. The interviews, which are reported on here, were conducted with a cross section of victims, garnered through victim support groups, personal contacts and the snowball technique. Interviewees thus do not represent statistical national samples, as with our quantitative research, but are what is commonly called purposive or judgemental samples, where people are approached according to their fit with the theoretical ideas of the research; in this case that they had experienced conflict-related harm and that they represented one or more of the groups involved in the conflict in each society. Over the period 2011-14, in all 60 victims were interviewed from across Northern Ireland, 80 across Sri Lanka and 51 across South Africa. Interviews in Sri Lanka were conducted by our research partner in indigenous languages and the translations back into English checked by fluent speakers. A standard

interview schedule appropriately acculturated was used in all three cases to ensure comparability of the data.

Empirically we defined victims as those who have experienced conflict-related harm. Harm was understood in its broadest sense to cover medical, emotional, relational, and cultural hurts. Hurts can be real or imagined. They can also be direct (to the individuals themselves and their immediate family), indirect (to others whom they know personally), or collective (to whole social groups). Where group membership is important to the individual victim's sense of identity, people will experience harm to the group(s) with which they identify and develop a sense of groups as victims. This is different from 'collective hurts', since this term describes the scale of the experience (that it affected everyone). To describe groups as victims encapsulates that individual victims feel they belong to particular groups that suffered specific harm.

If victims are defined by the experience of harm, 'victimhood' is different. It is the process initiated by the (real or imagined) experience of harm and describes the course over time that the harm and its consequences take and the procedures by which they are managed. Victimhood is a developmental process, involving change in how the experience is packaged and handled over time (captured in the phrase that victims 'move on') and varies with time according to all sorts of cognitive, relational, political, social and cultural factors. Developmental processes, however, do not necessarily go only in the forward direction; 'moving on' is matched, in colloquial terms, by 'hanging on' or 'going back'. Clearly not all victims experience the conditions that facilitate benevolence, kindness and emotional empathy. To understand humanitarianism in such societies therefore we need to locate it in the social practices of those victims who reproduce it.

This point bears repeating so we are not misunderstood. Interviewees in our samples were not all able to practice humanitarian virtues. What is necessary therefore is to

understand the conditions under which some can and others cannot practise humanitarian virtues. This is precisely the importance of a victim-centred approach to humanitarianism that locates it in victims' social practices, for these practices vary, such that some are incapable of practising benevolence and compassion to erstwhile enemies. It is necessary to understand the conditions that lead to this differentiation.

Social practices lie in behaviour learned over time and can sometimes be unintended consequences of other behaviours, relationships and social networks. Very many victims talked of the benefits of social networks that included members of the 'other' community through which they learned trust, understanding and empathy. As a Northern Irish Protestant said referring to his social network of other victims, 'we have gone cross community, which I would not have done. This group has brought me to this stage, it is not the government; it is my own understanding, because I do not want my grandchildren to go through what my children went through'. Other Protestants from this formerly dominant group said much the same: 'we became involved in this cross border project, it was brilliant. We were able to go down and we met women from down the South of Ireland and you listened to their stories. So I think the more you hear from other people, as well as relate to them, and you can see they are just like us. People can set aside their differences then'. 'We have been away on many residential with Catholic groups and there are people you'd think you knew all your life. We stand as one big group'. Victims who lack these cross-communal social networks are the ones less capable of practising humanitarian virtues.

It is not surprising that Northern Irish victims are most likely to express benevolent views because cross community engagement is more advanced in their peace process, for the constraints of geography in Sri Lanka's case and the enduring legacy of group areas left over from apartheid limit the possibilities there, but a Black South African said much the same of his experience in a multi-racial support group: 'something will come up and it will trigger the



memories of a night, or being in a cell, of what was said [but] we still share our experiences amongst each other and that it important, it keeps the friendship'. Other Black South African victims explained from where they learned these social practices. 'When I got to [Robben] Island I was an ill-disciplined man and the elderly comrades took me under their wings and started to teach me. So there you learnt that it is not about yourself, it is about taking your country forward.'

However, it is not just cross-communal social networks that encourage humanitarian social practices. Another social practice is an emotional empathy with the erstwhile enemy. This empathy reflects itself in many ways. Sometimes it is outworked in the realisation that the subordinate and powerless 'other' suffered as much, if not more, than those in the dominant group they were fighting against. Many Sinhalese victims in Sri Lanka expressed this. 'I think more than ourselves, the Tamils were miserable. Seeing things like this I cried. I saw much of this misery.' 'In the last days of the war, the Tamils suffered a great deal. When I saw this tears came to my eyes. Those people (Tamils) had nothing. I know they were indeed miserable.' Sometimes this realisation comes from meeting the other after conflict for the first time. As a Sinhalese victims said, 'when we spoke to them, we found that they had suffered more than we did'. The same happened in Northern Ireland. 'I have moved on, we have friends now who are Catholics and we get on very well with them. You empathise with them and you sort of understand what they went through, and that gives you a bond. Everybody bleeds the same and everybody hurts the same' (Northern Irish Protestant). 'Well, I go and do courses with Catholic people. They have been through the same thing. They are just ordinary people like me; they went through the same things, maybe worse. And I can empathise with that. I would turn round and say I am sorry' (Northern Irish Protestant).

Sometimes empathy is evidenced in victims wishing to deny any side won and that all sides lost as a result of the violence. 'All are losers, no winners, both parties lost miserably'

(Sri Lankan Tamil); 'There is nothing like winners and losers. Even the Tamils have not lost. We have not lost. We have not won.' (Sri Lankan Sinhalese); 'We are one country, we are one nation and people; division is a loss for both parties' (Sri Lankan Tamil); 'We cannot make a distinction between winners and losers. Speaking as human beings, it was humanness that was lost. All suffered a lot of harm. No one has won or lost. In fact all have lost.' (Sri Lankan Sinhalese); The reference to 'humanness' by this relatively poor and uneducated Sinhala comes nearest to putting into words what humanitarian sensibility means to them.

Empathy is also outworked in new revelations and social understandings that some victims develop, such as the realisation that victimhood is a shared experience and that victims should treat each other the same as a result. 'They speak of a mother whose husband was shot dead by the army in some Tamil village. She cries of the death of her husband. They do not treat us [as an army widow] differently' (Sri Lankan Sinhalese); 'If you take the actual [Sri Lankan] soldiers and Tamil militants, both these groups have been duped, thus there is some equality between the two. Living in a situation of misery, both the LTTE militants and the Sri Lankan soldiers were dragged into war. In that respect poverty is the same for both the north and the south' (Sri Lankan Tamil); 'I have learnt that there are two sides to a story. Before, it was they are wrong, we are right, end of story' (Northern Irish Protestant). As a Sinhalese victim said, 'the Sinhalese and Tamils are two groups. The Sinhalese cannot be treated better than the Tamils. If both are treated equally then the peace process will continue'.

Another new revelation arising from empathy is respect for the erstwhile enemy. This respect is another differentiating condition that separates victims' social practices. 'I think the change for me', said a Northern Irish Catholic, is 'just respect for other people'. From respect comes the narrowing of differences. 'I think I can [consider reconciliation]. Peace has dawned. Now people are not so polarised as earlier' (Sri Lankan Sinhalese). As a Northern

Irish Protestant said, 'we live that close there is only a wall and a road between us but you still wouldn't bother with the other side. Now it is different'. Empathy is also about working together to deal with differences, since these differences do not suddenly disappear. As a Northern Irish Catholic said, 'I hope we can all work together. If we can get down to the reality, the basics, food, water, light, heat, we could talk about those'. Given that empathy can affect new social understandings and new patterns of behaviour toward the other, there is a sense that all victims deserve recognition without fear or favour. As one Northern Irish Protestant put it succinctly, it is a question of 'justice and peace for all the victims'.

This is often easier said than done, for patterns of power and inequality very rarely change with peace processes, such that social transformation does not often accompany conflict transformation (for the distinction see Brewer, Higgins and Teeney, 2011). As a Sinhalese victim noted in Sri Lanka, 'it is going to be a tough task for the oncoming generations in terms of justice, fairness in all aspect of their lives'. Many Black South African victims spoke of their disappointment that socio-economic redistribution had not accompanied non-racial democratisation and many recognised the continuance of economic apartheid. Sri Lanka's victor's peace imposes different burdens on the victorious and the vanquished. With the military defeat of the LTTE and the feelings of loss amongst Tamils, Sinhalese need to recognise the added issues involved in Tamil victimhood, and Tamils have very strong feelings of powerlessness and loss to overcome. Social structural constraints operate in post-conflict societies that add to the difficulties of victims in practising empathy, forgiveness and tolerance.

Nonetheless, despite the obvious and real perception of the likelihood of continued inequality in the short to medium term, many victims expressed a remarkable capacity for forgiveness. As a Black South African said, 'I didn't regard a white person as a person. I regard[ed] him as a person to be killed. After that I had to go into exile [and] I was trained as

a soldier, a freedom fighter, though now I am relieved. I had to forgive and love the people. Although the scars are there, I have forgiven.’ ‘You have to learn to forgive or you won’t move on’ (Northern Irish Protestant); ‘We do not have much of an animosity towards them. Now we have got peace. I do not have any ill-feeling towards the Tamils even though I lost my father’ (Sri Lankan Sinhalese); ‘We can live without fear and doubt’ (Tamil). ‘We as black people, we have forgiven white people, already we have forgiven them. And what we need now from them is to embrace us [as] equal’ (Black South African). ‘We forgive them all for the wrongs they did to us’ (Black South African).

Sometimes this capacity for magnanimity and forgiveness was altruistic, recognised as something that was needed as a lesson if others were to move on. ‘I think we need to move on and start trying to build the country for the kids’ (Northern Irish Protestant); ‘[South Africa] reached a political solution in the interest of the greater good’ (Black South African). In some other victims magnanimity was motivated by self-interest, residing in the realisation it was essential if they as an individual victim were to move on and progress. As a Northern Irish Catholic said, ‘you can’t let it [victimhood] drag them down. They have to move on. Obviously you can’t forget about loved ones and some of the atrocities, but you do have to move on’. This was echoed by a Protestant counterpart. ‘Yes, there are some people who live in the past, and I feel sorry for them really. But they have a different make up to me. And while I don’t forget the past, I can also share and want to move into the future.’ A Black South African victim expressed a similar view in this way: ‘Of course, there are instances when you remember things in the past but, of course, one tries hard not to dwell on that, because dwelling on that really keeps back one’s progress in life.’

Whatever its motivation, one of the consequences of the ambition to move on was hope for the future. Regardless of the social structural travails victims find themselves in, especially victims under a victor’s peace and those who have experienced little socio-

economic redistribution, many victims could state: ‘I still feel hopeful because I think it is a slow process and I still think that eventually we will get to the stage where people can really live together’ (Black South African); ‘Your period in prison is a learning curve because in prison you meet all these ANC leaders, so they equipped you, those very senior ANC cadres actually teach you hope’ (Black South African); ‘I don’t want my grandchildren going through all this again’ (Northern Irish Protestant).

Another of the consequences of these victims’ new social understanding was the practice of tolerance. Many victims recognised the public practice of tolerance as crucial to the construction of a new society even when in private tolerance is not what is felt or experienced, and even when in public such tolerance is difficult to maintain. ‘The issue of tolerance toward those who violated us is a true fact because in public it is expected from us to project the idea of a good patriot that needs to walk in the footsteps of Mandela, the great reconciler and for the sake of nation building’ (Black South African). ‘At times you have to display tolerance and exercise control even toward previous oppressors. And that is coupled with assessing your behaviour and utterances in public space’ (Black South African). ‘It [tolerance] is a journey we need to undertake. It is going to be “give and take along the way” and we will need to negotiate’ (Black South African).

There was even recognition in some victims that tolerance is the outcome of victim’s social practices rather than the cause. As we argued earlier when outlining our social practice approach to humanitarianism, for victims of conflict civility and tolerance are premised first on the ability to practice ethical virtues, and only by this practice are civility and tolerance possible. Civility and tolerance are thus the *outcome* of the practice of humanitarian ethical virtues, not their cause. A Northern Irish Protestant expressed this clearly and with great insight. ‘I feel that tolerance comes after reconciliation. Some people may say it comes before, but I feel it comes after. Because the fact is, we go and meet people from different

communities, we have youth groups, cross community as well, and after a wee while, people realise they are not so much different.’

We repeat, however, that no one should be Panglossian, for the ambivalence of the victimhood experience carries forward into the social practice of humanitarianism in post-conflict societies. For all this capacity for victims to be moral beacons, there is nothing in our conceptualisation that suggests that the public practice of humanitarian ethical virtues is an easy thing for victims to do. As one Black South African victim said, ‘I physically survived [but] people can still remain trapped in moments of history’. Their social practices do not necessarily leave victims happy, with new ‘rainbow nation’ identities, able easily to love erstwhile enemies, readily willing to turn the other cheek and with a sense of wholeness and completeness in their relations with former protagonists. In her discussion of political widowhood in South Africa, Ramphela (1997), the widow of the murdered Steve Biko, argues that such an elevated public status can also be a personal burden and a form of social entrapment, and is fraught with ambiguities (1997: 102). These include the sense that the political widow is publicly owned and open to political exploitation (1997: 110). Our data show that civility and tolerance come at a cost, and feelings of grief and loss are slow to dissipate. Feelings of retreat co-exist in victims with reconciliation; wholeness and brokenness exists side-by-side in degrees of disharmony. Life for victims is a ‘just tolerable discomfort’, as the poet and classicist AE Housman once described his own life, in which victims oscillate between remembrance and forgetting, reconciliation and retreat, despair and elation, and wholeness and brokenness. In interviews, victims reflected on this disharmony within themselves, and told of the circumstances in which they found it difficult to maintain the public practice of civility and tolerance. The conditions under which humanitarianism can be garnered and sustained, which facilitate or constrain public civility and tolerance, therefore need summation and clarification.

Victims' capacity for practising humanitarianism is affected, for example, by whether or not a 'victim identity' has emerged which restricts victims' social networks in ways that inhibit the practice of the ethical virtues that constitute humanitarianism. In these cases the victim experience becomes, in Max Weber's terms, the 'master status', the central defining identity marker. Victims (individuals or groups) develop 'victim identity', therefore, when the victim experience consumes all other identity markers and is used as the 'mental map' to explain life's subsequent fates. The development of a victim identity seriously impacts the social connectedness of victims, evident in social withdrawal (lack of connectedness) or participation in restricted social networks with similar others (partisan connectedness), such as with own-group members or within their small victim support group. It was for this reason that many of our interviewees without such a victim identity preferred to see themselves as 'survivors' not 'victims'. Practising humanitarian virtues is near impossible for them.

Even for those with a survivor identity, however, our empirical data suggest that humanitarianism is envisaged as being easier for people to practice publicly according to several mediating factors. These following conditions are not comprehensive and more can be imagined. They are often personal and manifold, but amongst them are included, for example, feelings of hope, trust, the capacity for forgiveness, the ability to transcend divided memories of the former conflict, senses of the fairness of the concessions, views about whether in practice the concessions remain reciprocal, and participation in open and inclusive the social networks that transcend ancient divides, such as mixing with victims from the 'other' community under the impulse that they share a common victimhood. These mediating conditions help explain the ambivalent, bitter-sweet nature of humanitarian social practices for victims of conflict and why some victims find them difficult or impossible to practice.

We contend, therefore, that a victim-centred approach is necessary if we are to understand the conditions that facilitate the practice of humanitarian in post-conflict societies.

With such a victim-centred approach, victims are able to reflect on this disharmony within themselves and to examine the conditions under which their practice of these humanitarian virtues in the public sphere is reproduced or breaks down. For as one Black South African victim said, ‘people ask victims, “have you forgiven the perpetrator”, to me it waxes and wanes’.

## **Conclusion**

Victims of conflict are usually voiceless, made even more so in peace processes that often portrays them as an obstacle to progress. Morris (1997: 27) refers to this as the ‘silence of suffering’ and it is reflected well in the following extract from our interview with a Black South Africa: ‘there is no platform for us to speak, how we felt, what we went through, because people are saying today “apartheid was here, it’s gone” and “don’t speak about apartheid because it’s gone”. For us to speak out, that is important to us.’ In taking a victim-centred approach that captures victims’ voices directly, this paper has argued for a victim-centred approach to understanding humanitarianism in post-conflict societies, which locates the ethical virtues that mark humanitarianism in the social practices of victims themselves as they search of dignity and justice for *all* victims regardless of past conflicts and despite enduring social cleavages.

These social practices are not easily performed and are not without significant ambiguities and difficulties. Our data show that only some victims create their own humanitarian renewal. Victims can sometimes feel emotionally repressed, under an obligation to be tolerant and civil, and unable to express the resentment, hate and revenge that sometimes exists within them. A Black South African victim captured well the oppressiveness of this silence: ‘tolerance is preached everywhere to a point that talking about one’s experiences under the apartheid regime becomes a taboo’. Some victims remain locked



in a victim identity. Sri Lanka's peculiar 'victor's peace' leaves particularly problematic experiences for many Tamil victims. As a social category, victims are also open to exploitation as political groups use victims' embodiment of the conflict as a way to mobilise the competing moral frameworks through which the conflict is still partisanly understood.

Despite all these vulnerabilities however, many victims are what Thomas (1999) calls moral beacons, showing exceptional displays of magnanimity (stressed by Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008). In our samples, a very large number in all three societies displayed an extraordinary capacity for forgiveness, tolerance and civility, able to emotionally empathise with victims of other groups. It is for this reason that we appropriate Thomas's description of victims as moral beacons, offering a light to how others more generally might respond in societies emerging out of conflict. Some non-victims claim ownership of the hurt for their community without the imprimatur of the victims themselves and use this hurt in ways that politicise victimhood and encourage un-forgivingness and retribution.

However, victims shed a stronger and more powerful light than that on the un-forgivingness of many others in post-violent societies. They point toward the meaning of humanitarianism in these kinds of society. Victims with a survivor identity have a capacity to practice ethical virtues that are outworked in civility and tolerance and which constitutes, we argue, the social practice of humanitarianism. This makes humanitarianism a pro-social practice. It encourages us to a view of humanitarianism that highlights how it contributes to the acquisition of new social consciousness, revised social understandings and the re-making of society after conflict. We thus openly admit our moral standpoint, as Wilkinson and Kleinman (2016: 157) put it, that people are inherently social, or as Runciman described it (1999), are social animals, immersed and bounded by social life, with no potential for existence outside society. Even after experiencing the worst humanitarian abuses, most victims in our data are able to live a moral life as immanent social beings and are able to

confer humanity on their former enemies. To return to a point we made earlier, for our respondents at least a victim-centred social practice approach to humanitarianism reveals humanitarianism to be both a norm (capable of being practised) and normative (virtuous as an ideal).

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