

# The Washington Post

## Georgetown/On Faith

**Starting over in Cambodia**  
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Everyone in Cambodia has an extraordinary story of personal or family survival. Almost the entire population was displaced, often fleeing again and again, during the genocidal era of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, from 1975 to 1979. Most people lost everything they had. About two million people died. Schools were closed and destroyed, and anyone with an education was targeted. It is only in the past 10 to 15 years that it has been possible to talk of hope.

Most Cambodians are under 20 so they remember only more recent traumas - one young colleague described how in 1997 her house and her grandparents' house were set afire. She remembers vividly seeing dead and dying soldiers along the road as she walked to school. Cambodia's leaders all hold, not far below the surface of warm smiles and constant cell phone conversations, their vivid memories. With only a little encouragement they tell stories of a modern reality few of us can even imagine. At last, 30 year later, some of the perpetrators of the very worst atrocities are on trial at an international tribunal. The papers report on it every day and in the market every stall with a television is tuned to the trial.

But most Cambodians have their eyes on the future and the formidable task of rebuilding. They want to benefit from globalization, but also recapture some of the magic they see in their society, though it has known so much evil.

I've spent the last two weeks here trying to understand the current situation and where things are headed, with the basic question: what's religion got to do with it?

In a sense religion is so much a part of Cambodia's past and present that it is hard to separate out its distinctive roles. Few people mention religion when they talk of development but there are countless links. Cambodia is almost 95 percent Buddhist, and monks in bright orange are everywhere. Though many were killed during the genocide, today there are some 60,000 monks and over 4,300 temples. Cambodia has a fascinating Muslim community, the Cham, with their own ethos; the Cham were also targeted by the Khmer Rouge but the community seems to be reviving. And though the Christian community is very small, Christian organizations are extraordinarily active here in just about every field, from HIV/AIDS to helping abused children to campaigning against smoking.

Venerable Sareth Brak, a young monk from a small village about an hour from Phnom Penh, is determined to build a modern school for his community of about 12 villages. His story is one example of the complex ways that religion comes into the picture.

His temple (called the pagoda, or wat) has almost 50 monks today. That includes some young boys who are among the 27 orphans the pagoda cares for. The pagoda used to serve as the community's school, teaching many subjects, and welcoming, he said, girls and boys, young and old. But the system collapsed during the time of troubles and what was left was a desultory system where a few volunteers taught bits of knowledge to children, sitting under the palm trees or in the ruined pagoda. Fifteen years ago, when Ven. Sareth finished secondary school, he restarted the school, at the pagoda at first.

Then he gradually cobbled together funds to build a set of serviceable if mismatched buildings (UNICEF built one, the community itself most of the others). Today, the complex has more than 300 children, four government paid teachers, and nine volunteers.

Computer classes (only keyboarding, no internet within miles) and tailoring are taught in the pagoda. Ven. Sareth and other monks try to teach the adults and they work to resolve conflicts within the community. Domestic violence, they say, is widespread, one legacy of the period of turmoil. And it is increasing, as people come back from the city with many vices, angry at the limited opportunities to make a living.

Ven. Sareth stands out among monks I met because he shows a passion and determination to overcome formidable obstacles and he can show results. He talks the language of human rights. Where did he learn that? From his mother, he says, who was a teacher before the Pol Pot era. He argues that all Cambodians should learn about all religions and all cultures. Only knowledge, he says, can overcome the violence and pain he sees in the society. He sees Buddhist values as contributing to modern life as well as linking Cambodia to its happier past. And the pagoda itself, with some rebuilt structures and crumbling ancient remnants of the past, can help bridge past and present. It is the community center and development starts from there.

Ven. Sareth's is one of many stories that help answer that difficult question for a traumatized country: where to start. Cambodia is a classic example of what is termed a post-conflict society, where the needs are so enormous and the pain of conflict still so fresh. He started with what he had, engaged his community, took what he could find as resources, and forged ahead. It's an inspiration.