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A Catholic Perspective on Interreligious Peacebuilding in the Himalaya

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Abstract:

Armed conflict, economic poverty, human trafficking, and gender discrimination are among the problems that most impact vulnerable women in the Himalaya. These challenges, common to the rest of South Asia and other parts of the world, are exacerbated by political, social, and cultural norms in mountainous regions that promote violence and facilitate insurgencies. Furthermore, geographic separation and cultural biases contribute to the political and economic marginalization of mountain peoples, which can lead to the belief that violence is the only reasonable option for gaining a voice. Nevertheless, the Himalaya encompasses a variety of vibrant religious traditions that promote peace and justice, of which Catholicism is a small minority. As such, it is crucial for Catholic peacebuilders to adopt an effective interreligious, intercultural, and cooperative approach for these problems. This project will examine Catholic peacebuilding to identify the reasons, methods, and implications for an interreligious approach in the Himalaya. After summarizing the foundation and principles of Catholic peacebuilding, I will consider the specific challenges in the Himalayan context. Subsequently, I will examine the similarities and differences in Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist understandings of peace. Finally, I will offer an analysis of how Catholic peacebuilding can be most successful in the Himalaya. While the predominant models of Catholic peacebuilding have been successfully implemented in regions that are largely Christian, these approaches can struggle to effectively engage across religious, cultural, and political boundaries. In summary, this essay argues that an interreligious approach is necessary to build peace amid these challenges.

***Keywords**:* Peacebuilding, Interreligious Relations, Catholic Social Teaching, Justice

Himalayan society includes millions of poor especially women and children who are exploited and socially marginalized. They face religious and ethnic discrimination, violent conflicts and human rights violations that result in displacement, ecological destruction, and political and economic oppression supported by powerful elites (Amaladoss, 1997, p. 135). These challenges, common to the rest of South Asia and other parts of the world, are exacerbated locally by political, social, and cultural norms, ubiquitous in mountainous regions, that promote violence and facilitate insurgencies. For example, there are various stages of conflict and instability throughout the region. Violence and armed conflict in Kashmir have persisted since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Nepal suffered from a devastating ten-year civil war at the end of the twentieth century, from which it continues to recover. Tibet remains in a state of political uncertainty with its spiritual leader in exile in India and much of its population scattered as stateless refugees in India, Nepal, and other parts of the world. Geographic separation and cultural biases further contribute to the political and economic marginalization of mountain peoples. For instance, women suffer disproportionately during and after conflicts from the threats of sexual violence, magnified stress of family care, and loss of economic viability.

After centuries of understanding a political concept of peace as simply the absence of war, the Roman Catholic Church redefined its understanding at the Second Vatican Council, admonishing Catholics "to join with all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about" and acknowledging that "the concrete demands of the common good are constantly changing as time goes on. Hence, peace is never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly" (Gaudium et spes, 1965, § 78). Therefore, Catholic peacebuilders attempt to engage with all components of society through interfaith dialogue and cooperation to protect human dignity and to address the root causes of conflict in pursuit of justice and a sustainable peace. Amid this context of political instability and suffering, the Himalaya encompasses a variety of vibrant religious traditions that promote peace and justice, of which Catholicism is a small minority. Catholic social teaching contains the elements of a comprehensive approach to pursue peace and justice that transcends religious and cultural boundaries.[1] As such, it is crucial for Catholic peacebuilders to adopt an effective interreligious, intercultural, and cooperative approach in order to find ways to effectively contribute to addressing these problems. This essay offers a Roman Catholic perspective on the necessity and possible methods for interreligious peacebuilding in the Himalaya.

Interreligious relations in the Himalaya vary depending on the locality. For example, descriptions of the Kashmir conflict often emphasize the Hindu-Muslim conflict, yet there are also examples of interreligious cooperation among villagers seeking to overcome hardships (Nazir, 2018). Alternatively, relations among different religious traditions in Nepal tend to be harmonious although there are some instances of anti-Christian persecution, which may be attributed to concerns about conversion or the spreading influence of Hindu nationalism from India.[2] Church teaching and the Christian gospels require Catholics to seek peace. As a minority in the Himalaya, this must be done through interreligious cooperation. Muslim scholar Ali Ahmed, reflecting on peace efforts in Kashmir, notes that Interreligious relations can help to promote peace and harmony necessary for the flourishing of the community, state, and region (74). Therefore, this research is primarily praxis oriented but with an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation. The qualitative research includes theological and religious ethics with specific attention given to marginalization, inculturation, and historical and cultural studies in the Himalaya. Quantitative sources include observations, case studies, and insight from local peacebuilding organizations. Finally, my conclusions are influenced by my experience as a U.S. military officer and former diplomat in South Asia.

What is Catholic Peacebuilding

Catholic peacebuilding attempts to engage with all levels of society through interreligious cooperation to protect human dignity and address the root causes of conflict in pursuit of a sustainable and just peace. The three primary ways that peacebuilders attempt to counter violence, and the effects of violence, are through conflict prevention, mitigation, and transformation. Conflict prevention is an attempt to prevent violence from occurring before it starts by attending to the factors, which are often related to injustice, that lead to war. This is done by addressing the root causes of violence and responding to unjust relationships and structures that prevent communal harmony. Conflict mitigation consists of direct measures to reduce the effects of violence on the victims and communities. This approach often relies on changing the attitudes and perspectives of the belligerents, while addressing the effects and symptoms of conflict to protect and defend human dignity and the common good. Specific examples include facilitating dialogue among opposing factions and seeking protection for noncombatants impacted by the violence. Conflict transformation attempts to restore justice and peace to communities and regions damaged by violence. This process involves reconciliation and the restoration

of sustainable structures to promote a peaceful and vibrant society. In this approach, peacebuilders seek to capitalize on indigenous non-violent approaches and strengthen those aspects of society that will contribute to a lasting peace. Given the consistent threat, existence, and effects of armed conflict in the Himalaya, peacebuilding is an integral component of living the Catholic faith. Catholic peacebuilders in the Himalaya, however, cannot work directly or unilaterally in peace efforts, but must cooperate by joining with other organizations to pursue peace and justice (Amaladoss, 2017, p. 220).

To build on this process, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has developed a three-step approach for interreligious peacebuilding that emphasizes reconciliation through applying binding, bonding, and bridging activities. This process, referred to as the 3Bs, was designed to cultivate alternatives to violence on (intra- and inter-) personal, communal, and municipal levels (Omer, 2017, p. 6-7). Binding activities focus on promoting self-transformation, including trauma healing and dialogue. This allows the person, whether a victim or a perpetrator, entrance into the community to prepare for reconciliation with others in their own group. Bonding activities focus on strengthening intragroup relations and understanding with the hope that improved intragroup relational patterns will benefit intergroup action and dialogue. These relationships can facilitate arriving at a consensus on ways to address conflict by bridging with the "other." Bridging activities, eventually, cultivate intergroup trust and activities, such as interfaith celebrations, community-based reconciliation projects, joint legal literacy trainings and intergroup dialogue. The desired outcome of this process is a set of mutually agreed upon, pragmatic and implementable resolutions that can generate support by conflicting groups and from stakeholders at all levels (Omer, 7).

Catholic peacebuilding seeks practical methods to reduce violence and unjust systems by engaging with all stakeholders, especially the relevant political apparatus. This process also includes those who are responsible for and involved in the conflict. Although there may be discomfort with including perpetrators and victims in the same process, this is an essential component and must be carefully navigated by peacebuilders. Thus, justice should take shape within existing social relations, giving due consideration to the contextual location (Jenkins, 2013, p. 116). Lisa Sowle Cahill prescribes a "networked reinforcement of conditions of peace" that involves all levels of civil and governmental actors, international organizations, and interreligious partners for this process.[3]

Engagement at the local level helps to bring communities together to allow for further dialogue and participation of those at the national and international levels. This description of peacebuilding illustrates the importance of integrating religion and politics. Finally, this methodology must be based on a sincere long-term commitment.

Within these communities, however, there are actors who are often not trusted, or even feared. An obvious example is the combatant forces who are visibly responsible for the perpetrated violence. A second example seems as if it would prevent the possibility of interreligious peacebuilding efforts; therefore, careful discernment and navigation of the situation is crucial. Catholic peacebuilding relies on the assumption that religious figures will be respected at the local level. Religious peacebuilders are often considered to be "uniquely well-positioned to gain access to local leaders" and build trust in communities. Although this is true in some circumstances, there are often situations in which religious actors, especially Christians, are not welcome or are met with suspicion.

A more significant obstacle is when religious figures are perceived as complicit in violence or oppression. The Catholic Church contributes to peace and social welfare in South Asia, yet its historical ties to colonialism and association with Western imperialism result in some persistent skepticism. In Kashmir, Hindus are deemed complicit with the oppressive Indian government while Muslims are accused of links to terrorist activity that ostensibly emanates from Pakistan. In other parts of the Himalaya, Buddhist monks can be looked at with suspicion for not following nonviolent paths in their political, social, and similar struggles given their participation in religious wars in other parts of Asia and the militarized monasteries in Tibet. These examples complicate the influence of religious figures on a local peace process, yet suspicion or distrust of religious actors is not an insurmountable obstacle for Catholic contributions to peacebuilding. At each level, these actors must discern their appropriate role while assessing the best approach for contributing in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration. For local Catholic actors, it is conducive to work through and with community religious figures and organizations to ensure that their contribution is not perceived as outsider meddling.

While this endeavor becomes more of a challenge at the national and global levels, the Catholic Church has clearly articulated the obligation for its leadership to pursue a just peace. In *Pacem in terris*, Pope John XXIII directs the Church to give "serious thought" to the problem of peaceful relations between world political communities through

"mutual trust, sincerity in negotiations, and a faithful fulfillment of obligations" (1963, § 118). More recently, Pope Francis has continued to emphasize the need to generate a lasting peace through a recognition of our common humanity to place fraternity at the center of people's lives.[4] This should serve as the impetus for bishops and the Vatican to diplomatically engage with thoughtful messaging and dialogue. This includes the Asian bishops, who must navigate between the survival and flourishing of the institutional Church and standing up for the values outlined in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12). Their statements need not attack any government and should also account for the intransigence, history of violence, and acts of terrorism that provoke military action and oppression from the state. Moreover, they should highlight the tension among development, stability, and just peace while at the same time considering solidarity, the common good, and a spirit of cooperation. Catholic social teaching from the past century provides a framework to link political, economic, and social development toward a just peace.

Grassroots efforts for building peace start at the most basic levels in communities to counter systems of injustice that promote conflict. This concept allows for developing cooperation that is based on ethical and political common ground. Using community-defined needs as the foundation and involving as many stakeholders as possible can help to generate a sense of involvement (Headley and Neufeldt, 2010, p. 131). For example, community participation allows for shared perspectives in cooperative political institutions that enhance the value of agreements among divergent interests. Starting at the ground level promotes building momentum to increase pressure on more powerful figures and institutions in local, national, and international communities. Cahill describes how the different sides meet "to build or restore conditions of peace by working for structural justice and reconciliation at the grassroots level" (Cahill, p. 294). A focus on grassroots peacebuilding is the starting point for Caritas in South Asia but can be the limit in the Himalayas because of political limitations that restrict most Catholic institutional efforts beyond the local level. These challenges include political and cultural impediments at the local and state level

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Political limitations and sensitivities are a significant hindrance for peacebuilders to strategically engage at the national and international level in the Himalayas. Local bishops, who may be concerned with the survival of their church, must balance between defending their flock and values with sustaining a relationship with the state power, who

perceive their intervention as a further example of colonialist interference. Messaging from the Vatican, which is notably absent in the case of Tibet or Kashmir, could be related to possible backlash on local Catholics or perhaps that most of the victims are not Catholic. A crucial component is that input from the magisterium must account for the power imbalance between governments and militaries with the marginalized. I agree that dialogue for a just sustainable peace must include all possible stakeholders; however, reconciliation must be on the terms of the victims, not the powerful. Unfortunately, Catholic peacebuilding scholarship does not effectively articulate how this might occur in a Himalayan context.

Challenges in a Himalayan Context

To account for the contextual cultural and societal realities requires attention to the possibilities of suspicion of religious actors, political sensitivities at all levels, faulty assumptions of nonviolence, and attempts to navigate between development and stability. For example, peacebuilders in the Himalaya must be fully cognizant of the amalgamation of religion and state politics. Just as Hinduism has become an ideology of—and is sustained by—the Indian state, the influence of Hindu nationalism extends beyond India's borders into other parts of the Himalaya (Fernandes, 2021, p. 93). A second problematic aspect arises when institutional Catholic peacebuilding efforts link development with a just peace. It is essential, however, that they avoid conflating concepts of peace related to order, stability, and profit with those that emphasize justice, equality, and human flourishing. The connections between economic and social development, with both peacebuilding and militarized political narratives, are a considerable complication for strategic engagement.[5]

As the Church attempts to balance relationships with the state and defend the most vulnerable, it must navigate the divergence in methods that ostensibly seek the same goal of peace. Kashmiri political scientist Nitasha Kaul notes that "in armed conflict, the vested interests entrenched in profiting from conflict seek to limit the range of possible political options that might lead to demilitarization, dialogue, conciliation, a just peace, and eventually resolution" (viii). This mentality contradicts peacebuilding objectives despite a mutual goal of development. The Indian government argues that development will help to eliminate terrorism and build stability. Alternatively, Bhan argues that Indian development efforts are "lived contradictions of an occupying power" where humanitarian policies of the state and military that emphasize compassion and goodwill "seamlessly morph into

heartless tactics" of militarism disguised as democracy or development (Kaul, 2020, 14). Such "lived contradictions" also apply to other efforts that pursue development to improve state economies, often at the expense of the marginalized, which can then provoke further violence.

Likewise, a desire to embrace and build on indigenous nonviolent approaches to conflict transformation and reconciliation in local communities can be problematic if those communities exhibit a proclivity for violent behavior.[6] Himalayan examples of communal violence can often counter accepted narratives that shape peacebuilding assumptions. The evidence that conflict is more likely in mountainous regions indicates that a presupposition of nonviolence is problematic. Those who live in high-altitude regions are often inclined toward violence due to their neglect and isolation from dominant culture and governments.[7] At the grassroots level, a disposition toward violence can be an ingrained defense mechanism against external oppression. Thus, it seems counterproductive for peacebuilders to assume that Himalayan communities will naturally adopt nonviolent methods to address conflict.

Although Catholic peacebuilding's assumption of relying on indigenous nonviolence may not always be effective, an appeal to peaceful and nonviolent narratives and examples across religious traditions is possible. For example, there are multiple historical examples across the subcontinent of Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders encouraging unity and nonviolent approaches for religious cooperation and peace. Incidents of violence will continue to occur in the Himalaya, often as a reaction against perceived or real oppression and state violence. As the Catholic Church has articulated, "if peace is to be established, the primary requisite is to eradicate the causes of dissension" (Paul VI, § 83). Violence is more than the use of force, but includes patriarchal and ethnic oppression, gender-based-violence, and other forms that result from power imbalances. Therefore, Catholic peacebuilders should encourage the nonviolent narratives of other traditions while embracing grassroots efforts to counter patriarchal oppression, caste and ethnic discrimination, as well as physical violence directed from and against state militarism.

Interreligious Understanding of Peace

There is a difference between social peace, or communal tranquility, and a religious idea of spiritual peace. Peacebuilding practice tends to emphasize the political aspects of social peace; however, as I will illustrate with the understanding of peace across different religious traditions, these two notions are interconnected. Jesus offered a notion of peace by saying, "do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid" (Jn. 14:27); this peace is not the absence of conflict or war but is present in those times. True peace must be grounded in the pursuit of justice, dialogue, truth, and reconciliation, although integrating justice with peace is one of the most challenging aspects.

Peace is both an objective and a means pursued through dialogue, starting with the individual, growing at the grassroots level, and then expanding globally in a long-term commitment to counter injustice. Each of the four religious traditions described in this essay (Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist) approaches peace at three levels: peace in relation with and from God; peace in relationship with others, including interreligiously; and a peace that incorporates justice and emphasizes—but is not limited to—nonviolence. Peace and justice are integral and inseparable components of Catholic social thought, Mohandas K. Gandhi's nonviolence, Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Islamic peacebuilding, and the appeals of the Dalai Lama.

While lacking the magisterial institutions of the Catholic Church, Islamic teaching has maintained a consistent understanding of peace. The noun form of the word Islam, *salaam*, means safety or submission to God in peace (Omar, 2015, p. 22). This is evident in the Qur'an, as God, the source of all Peace, greets His creation with Peace (Q. 36:58). Islamic teaching has emphasized reconciliation and mercy as crucial aspects of achieving peace. The Prophet Muhammad not only projected a concept of peace that was both internal and communal, but "was also able to develop a complete methodology of peaceful activism" (Khan, 2009, p. 29). This model of building peace was based on patience, reconciliation, and calmness to avoid hostility and violence. Among Muslim theologians, *al-silm* (peace, reconciliation) is a fundamental term. Peace is defined in the sense of a relationship with others; however, God remains "the very source of all peace" (Omar, 2015, p. 22).

These Quranic teachings of peace were exemplified by Ghaffar Khan, a prominent twentieth-century Muslim voice for nonviolence, in the Pashtun tribal areas of Pakistan. He was a close friend and follower of Gandhi, both of whom sought nonviolent means

to achieve a peace that was related to God (Omar, 2015, p. 27). Ghaffar Khan's peace efforts—which relied on the Qur'an, Islamic teaching, and Gandhi—were directed at injustices resulting from British colonialism, as well as moral and social reform in the Pashtun community (Gandhi, 2008, p. 268). Ghaffar Khan's struggle for peace focused on the rights of the poor, weak, and threatened. Exhibiting tolerance in the face of suffering, Islam helped impel him not toward power, but toward social and humanitarian purposes of relieving poverty and fighting oppression and injustice (p. 273). Nevertheless, he recognized the limits of his efforts through his honesty in addressing the Frontier's women by stating "today we [the men] are the followers of custom and we oppress you," indicating that he was promoting peace but with an incomplete notion of justice (p. 274).

As the Islamic and Catholic understandings of peace begin with God, Hinduism starts with an inner spiritual peace. The phrase *Om shanti* (peace) is understood as tranquility of the mind from listening to silence (Mohanty, 2015, p. 180). Peace reflects a spiritual consciousness, beginning within each person, but it is relational with others in a political peace, as it extends to the home, community, nation, and beyond. The meaning of peace and nonviolence is explicitly discussed in Hindu texts with ties to the gods and societal peace. For example, the *Mahabharata* describes nonviolence in all of its forms as "the marks of one who is naturally endowed with divine virtues."[8] Likewise, there is a similarity with the Gospels when the *Vedas* proclaim the practice of nonviolence (*ashimsa*) as the way to achieve harmony, or peace between people, and the *Upanishads* state that "when we love others we love ourselves…"[9] These reflect not only Jesus' actions, but his words, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 19:19).

Gandhi's understanding of peace was influenced by Hinduism and other Eastern religions, but also by his familiarity with Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7). It was both political and internal but promoted nonviolent means to overcome injustice. In Gandhi's mind, nonviolence was a useful political tactic for liberating people from foreign rule, but the spirit of nonviolence required an inner realization of spiritual unity in oneself (Merton, 1965, p. 6). Thus, inner unity was a prerequisite for achieving broader peace. Gandhi's Hindu understanding of peace reflected a similar relationship with God as that of Ghaffar Khan, where achieving peace must first happen by "a state of complete resignation to the Divine Will" (p. 6). His peacebuilding method, *satyagraha*, used nonviolence to resolve political, social, religious, and economic conflicts (p. 75).

Unlike Catholicism, Hinduism, or Islam, Buddhist teaching on peace is predominantly concerned with the internal personal nature of peace; in practice, however, there is a communal and political application. Peace is central to Buddhism as a state to pursue or as the primary spiritual goal. Corresponding to the teaching of other major South Asian religions, Buddhist thought is consistent in that one cannot approach or reach a state of peace by violence or other nonpeaceful means, whether of thought or action (Rosch, 2015, p. 149). In early Buddhism, peace was primarily understood as the peace of mind of individuals, with ultimate peace only obtainable after death. Relationality is evident in that anyone on the path of peace must practice peace to be of benefit to themselves and to others. As Buddhist thought developed, more of an emphasis has been placed on a fundamental peace that embraces peaceful and nonpeaceful states of mind and of the world (p. 150). What is missing from the Buddhist understanding of peace is a connection to justice, although this aspect is articulated in peacebuilding practice, especially by the Dalai Lama.

The fourteenth and current Dalai Lama is the foremost spiritual leader of the dominant school of Tibetan Buddhism. As a refugee, he sees his "efforts in promoting peace, nonviolent approaches to resolving conflicts, and understanding across boundaries of race, religion, and nations" as rooted in ancient teachings (Dalai Lama, 2010, p. 38). While relying on traditional Buddhist concepts of peace necessary, he reaches across religious boundaries to correlate peace with selflessness, frequently citing Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Calcutta. For instance, he describes Mother Teresa as a "model of altruism" who exhibits "the centrality of the compassionate ideal in Christianity" (p. 60). Likewise, he notes the striking similarity between Francis's peace prayer and the writing of the eighth-century Buddhist teacher Shantideva: "May I be a protector for the unprotected; a guide for travelers; a bridge for those who long to cross to the other shore. May I be a lamp for those who wish for light, a shelter for those in need of rest; a servant for those in need of service" (Bodhicaryavatara 3:17-18) (p. 61). With an emphasis on the connections between different religious traditions, the Dalai Lama's public expressions of peace are a relevant model for cooperative peacebuilding.

Peace, as described in the examples above, is a crucial topic for interreligious cooperation. The frequent political and ethnic violence, poverty, and marginalization, as well as increasing religious nationalism, indicate a need for collaborative efforts to pursue peace and justice. The descriptions of peace in the Catholic, Islamic, Hindu,

and Buddhist traditions indicate three common themes. The first is that peace must be found in relation with and through God or the divine. Secondly, Catholic peacebuilding principles parallel the efforts of Khan, Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama to underscore an interreligious coincidence of seeking peace in relationship with others. Thirdly, there is a decided emphasis on the integration of peace and justice through nonviolence. While these examples feature internationally recognized peacebuilders, the frequency of violence and conflict indicates that the pursuit of justice through nonviolence is not universally accepted. Therefore, the doctrinal and scriptural concepts of peace must be invoked to convince fundamentalists who are less inclined toward interreligious cooperation and communal peace.

Catholic Peacebuilding Approach in the Himalaya

There are numerous approaches for Catholic peacebuilding that have proved to be effective in different parts of the world. Many of these methods, however, have succeeded in places where Christianity is the majority, such as Latin America, Africa, and the Philippines. Likewise, other cultural and social factors require a nuanced approach for the Himalaya. First, Catholic peacebuilders must recognize and appreciate their minority status. This often requires partnerships and collaboration, where others take the lead or serve as the representative face of the effort. There must be thoughtful consideration of the appropriate time and place for contributions to build peace. This can be accomplished through interreligious dialogue that is focused on determining common values and areas of shared concern related to poverty and violence. This method can accomplish the goals of prevention, mitigation, and transformation by starting with the individual and then promoting intragroup or communal harmony to build bridges among different groups to foster societal changes.

The first steps for Catholic peacebuilding in a Himalayan context should start with individuals. These include victims of violence or injustice, as well as perpetrators and other members of society. This process, which CRS refers to as binding activities, focuses on promoting self-transformation, including trauma healing and dialogue, which allows the person entrance into the community to prepare for reconciliation. These efforts can help to prevent further violence by helping to resolve the root causes of the conflict.[10] The healing process helps to mitigate the effects of violence on individuals. Transformation, in

this stage, begins at the grassroots level through individual change. This is demonstrated in the specific efforts that Catholic peacebuilding institutions make to address the unique challenges for women in armed conflict. For example, the most recent conference from the Catholic Peacebuilding Network focused on women's leadership in peacebuilding processes (Montevecchio, 2024).

Religious peacebuilding organizations promote women, peace, and security through a variety of cooperative programs. Catholic teaching, which stresses a special concern for the vulnerable and marginalized, facilitates the participation of all stakeholders in the peace process. There is particular attention to ensuring that women have a decision-making capacity, as well as including combatants from both sides of the conflict (Love, 2010, p. 56). In terms of protection, religious peacebuilding organizations are often effective in recognizing and mitigating the effects and symptoms of armed conflict, such as human trafficking, sexual violence, and economic struggles. Church sponsored organizations, like Caritas and CRS, seek to mitigate the impact of war on women by addressing the root causes of violence and creating just societal relationships (Headley, 2010, p. 131). A significant component of Caritas' conflict transformation process is to strengthen and contribute to a vibrant civil society that promotes peace through reconciliation and restoration of infrastructure.

The next stage of Catholic peacebuilding in the Himalaya should then build on the individual efforts by promoting intra-group or communal peace. These activities, referred to as bonding, focus on strengthening intragroup relations to facilitate the possibility of intergroup action and dialogue. Developing harmonious relationships within groups can help to prevent violence by addressing the root causes of the conflict. Tensions within or between communities are less likely to escalate to violence when individuals or groups can see the humanity in others. Likewise, this process helps to continue the reconciliation process to mitigate the damage caused by war and injustice. While seeking nonviolent options, Catholic peacebuilders must find appropriate paths to strengthen civil society through truth and reconciliation. An example of how this can be implemented is a project conducted by Caritas Nepal following the Maoist insurgency.

Caritas Nepal, which works to empower the marginalized and disadvantaged to reduce poverty, provide humanitarian assistance, and realize social justice and peace, also works in the areas of human rights and gender equality. Peacebuilding programs tend

to focus on the grassroots level in communities affected by violence and disaster. The organization implemented a "National Peace Programme" project after the insurgency to support conflict affected people with community-based projects that promoted peace, harmony, and human rights.[11] The project was successful in helping more than a thousand conflict-affected persons return to their villages, participate in reconciliation programs, and formed over ten mediation centers in targeted areas. Other peacebuilding projects have emphasized youth training and gender equality in communities and in conjunction with development programs.

Given the religious plurality of the Himalaya, effective peacebuilding must seek to build bridges across religious and ethnic boundaries. Engaging in dialogue can help to identify shared values and concerns that affect all members of society. Only through this process can peacebuilders truly find a path to overcoming structural injustice that are often the root causes of violence. This can be done when there is something that will promote unity and bring groups together. The specific place or event will be contextually specific to every situation, although a helpful model can be found with the Catholic shrine to Our Lady of Madhu in northern Sri Lanka, which served as a place of peace both during and after the thirty-year conflict. Although it is not located in a mountainous region, it bears many cultural similarities to much of the Himalaya. Catholics are a minority in Sri Lanka, yet this shrine attracts thousands of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim devotees each year.[12] During the war, this location in Madhu was a place of refuge for those fleeing the violence, regardless of their religious affiliation. Although Mary is recognized as a Catholic figure, the shrine has proved to be a source of unity and harmony to build bridges among both Tamils and Sinhalese from across the religious spectrum.

Building a sustainable and comprehensive peace must include all stakeholders. This includes bridgebuilding across ethnic and religious lines, as well as ensuring that everyone involved in the conflict is included. This means that victims and perpetrators, the oppressed and the oppressor, must all have a seat at the table. Moreover, engagement must be pursued at all levels of society. Religious peacebuilders must find the appropriate place for their contribution within this context. More importantly, however, they also must overcome any apprehension to include those who might seem to have different objectives or values.

Conclusion

For Catholic peacebuilders to engage amid the political and cultural realities of the Himalaya in pursuit of a sustainable and just peace, they must offer relevant and appropriate contributions to their non-Christian interlocutors. While Catholics have a clear mandate and proven success in building peace, as a minority, they must partner with others. Nevertheless, by maintaining an emphasis on prevention, mitigation, and transformation, existing programs can be expanded and other models could be considered. Peace should not be considered as only the absence of war, but as a comprehensive effort that includes spiritual and political stability, as well as justice. An enduring and sustainable peacebuilding process must include all stakeholders and an enduring commitment to evolve with the ever-changing reality of society. The Catholic Church has years of experience in building peace throughout the world, there is much to be learned from the numerous Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and even secular peacebuilding organizations in the Himalaya.

Religious actors and beliefs can promote sound and coherent views on peace, especially by promoting reconciliation. This research illustrates that it is in the interest of religious minorities to work toward building interreligious relations and promote peace. Therefore, Catholics must work outside of their own communities by emphasizing shared areas of concern and values that can facilitate such collaboration. In the broader context of peacebuilding, this is essential for a Himalayan context, given the religious plurality. Accordingly, this project focuses only on Catholic peacebuilding and could benefit from additional research that offers non-Christian perspectives. Further research should look specifically at challenging problems, such as the frequent exclusion of women from peace processes despite their unique challenges during war and conflict.

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