

Introductory Blurb: Genocide in Cambodia: when the darkest side of our nature prevails

Giving examples from historical genocides, Dr Anastasia Somerville-Wong explains why, under certain conditions, people start to see those with different characteristics as subhuman. There is a particular focus on the 1975-1979 genocide in Cambodia, which had a devastating impact on members of her family. Anastasia goes on to explain how these tragedies can be prevented by creating and sustaining economic and political systems which thrive on diversity and nurture the better side of human nature.

Genocide in Cambodia: when the darkest side of our nature prevails

Hello, my name's Anastasia Somerville-Wong. I'm the Founding Humanist Chaplain at the University of Exeter and an Executive and Trustee of the Devon Faith and Belief Forum. I'm also a historian, with a special interest in marginalised and minority histories, and in the history of belief, philosophy and religion. The subject of genocides - how they happen and how they can be prevented – has significance for me both professionally and personally, because my mother-in-law and extended family on my husband's side are survivors of the genocide in Cambodia. My mother-in-law lost her first husband, her parents, some of her siblings and many other relatives and friends to the brutal killings carried out by the Khmer Rouge in the four years between 1975 and 1979, and this remains a tragic part of my husband's heritage and that of my children.

In recent times, Cambodia has been celebrated as a friendly and beautiful holiday destination, and archaeologists have used laser technology to reveal cities concealed under the earth not far from the ancient temple city of Angkor Wat. These cities made up the world's largest empire in the 12th century. It is right that the world should learn about Cambodia's long and impressive history, and celebrate its rich culture and natural beauty. However, the darker periods of colonialism, war and genocide are still very recent, the memories raw and painful for many Cambodians still living today.

The regime of the Khmer Rouge, led by the Marxist leader Pol Pot, claimed the lives of an estimated 2 million people, though some argue that the real death toll could be closer to 3 million. Declaring that the nation would start again at "Year Zero", Pol Pot isolated his people from the rest of the world and began a programme of regressive social engineering, abolishing money, private property and religion, and forcing millions of people out of the cities to work on communal farms. Anyone thought to be an intellectual of any kind was executed. Indeed, people were condemned for things as innocent as wearing glasses or knowing a foreign language. Particular targets were minority ethnic groups, such as Cambodian-Vietnamese, Cambodian-Chinese, Cambodian-Lao, Thai and Cham Muslims. Hundreds of thousands of educated middle-class citizens were tortured and executed in special centres such as the notorious S-21 jail, Tuol Sleng, in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, where as many as 17,000 men, women and children were imprisoned. Hundreds of thousands more, including many whole families, died from starvation, disease and exhaustion, as members of the Khmer Rouge, many of them indoctrinated teenage recruits, forced the population to do back-breaking labour. These crimes against humanity went largely unnoticed by the Western world, until the release of the 1984 film, 'The Killing Fields', which was named after a number of sites where collectively more than a million people were killed and buried.

Tens of thousands of children were orphaned by the genocide in Cambodia, and due to the loss and destruction of papers, many will never know to whom they belonged or whether any of their relatives survived. When the brutal regime ended, my mother-in-law looked after many orphans and even brought one with her to the UK along with her own baby daughter. She often tells family and friends the harrowing stories of how she lost loved ones, land and property. Her brother-in-law, who I met in Paris, where many fleeing Cambodians settled, described how he was forced to watch while his first wife and children were tortured and murdered. All the survivors in the family suffer from the long-term effects of trauma.

While the holocaust stands out in terms of the numbers murdered and the mechanisation of the killing, the murder of Jews has been disturbingly fetishized by the far right, and is fed by a seemingly endless run of programmes on Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich. While I think it is incredibly important to remember these events, especially on Holocaust Memorial Day, it is important also to remember that there is nothing in particular about Jews which might inspire hatred, just as there is nothing in particular about Germans which makes them especially prone to do evil. No indeed, any people may become the victims or perpetrators of genocide under certain conditions. No one should become complacent. As a descendant of holocaust victims said on a recent television series, "It's not really about the Jews. It's about hatred and where it can lead us". The Cambodian, Bosnian, Rwandan, Armenian and all other genocides and crimes against humanity should also be remembered, so that we remain alert to the dangers of extremism of any kind, and prevent such atrocities from happening again.

In terms of the signs and dangers, we know that there are certain conditions which make genocide more likely, including war and conflict, political instability and power vacuums, poverty and hardship, increasing competition for resources and economic inequality (especially if it's along racial or ethnic lines). If there are longstanding animosities between groups within society, these often come to the fore under these conditions, as people try to protect themselves and look for someone to blame. Also, it's under such conditions that opportunities arise for extreme political and/or religious groups to exploit the vulnerability of a population. Desperation, corruption, inequality, lack of opportunity and possibly even boredom can cause ordinary people to become open, often for the first time, to arguments based on ideologies they would once have mocked and to people they would once have viewed as fanatics. When people come to doubt their authorities, their sources of information and even their friends, they begin to look for truth in places they would not have considered before, and unfortunately, the sociopathic leaders of extremist groups are all too eager to tout untruths and manipulate such people for their own ends. Suddenly, the sorts of things they peddle, including conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, fake news, and pseudo-histories such as nationalist myths, start to gain a wider appeal.

Once such ideologies gain legitimacy in mainstream public life, it is often too late to prevent disaster in the form of a violent takeover by such groups or a gradual tightening of their grip on power accompanied by deepening systemic corruption. Those who have sold out to an extremist ideology then reinforce one another's beliefs with mass gatherings and collective hysteria, and suppress doubt with censorship. Thus, the darker side of human nature – greed, mistrust, hatred, envy, blame and fear of difference, however superficial – become the prevailing culture. In these circumstances, certain groups are deemed to be somehow alien, and therefore potentially disloyal and a threat. They become convenient scapegoats for all

the ills of the world. The distinctive characteristics of such groups are then mocked and exaggerated, resulting in their dehumanisation. Thus, the toxic ideology of a high-control group, which was once seen as fringe, and even insane, by the mainstream, becomes the dominant social force, and those who were once reasonable begin to behave in ways they probably never believed themselves capable.

I should mention here that while we often hear about genocide in wartime situations such as happened in Cambodia and Germany, there is also such a thing as slow genocide, which happens during peacetime over decades and even centuries. Examples of this can arguably be found in colonialism, the genocide of indigenous peoples and the transatlantic slave trade. In these cases, the political and religious ideology of the oppressors is used to justify atrocities, and enables a dominant elite class, driven by insatiable greed, to control and oppress peoples both in foreign lands and in their own. Moreover, in addition to killing and theft of land and property, there is also such a thing as cultural genocide, which results in a loss of identity, language and heritage, and which has terrible consequences for the psychological health and prospects of a people over many generations.

The solution to the problem of genocide in all its forms is not illusive. We know that societies which are the kindest, happiest and most stable, are those which celebrate diversity and include everyone, so that everyone has opportunities for growth and betterment and no one is left behind. They are societies which keep the wealth gap between richest and poorest to a minimum, and which guarantee a decent standard of living for all. These societies nurture our better selves and noblest aspirations by rewarding pro-social and creative behaviours. They nurture our ability to empathise and practice compassion, to reason and be reasonable, to think critically and independently... It is hard to poison people's minds against a minority group when they are educated and flourishing, but frighteningly easy to do so when they are ignorant and uncomfortable. Most important to recognise in our time, is that it will be the societies which make the greatest efforts towards sustainability, so that people's lives and their children's futures are secure, that will prove most resilient against extreme political and religious ideologies, because they will be less susceptible to the kind of insecurity and crises which open the doors to extremist groups.

As this is a Faith and Belief Forum event, it is especially important to state that every faith, belief or political group has a special responsibility for preventing genocide from happening again, since these are groups which claim to care primarily about ethics and how we should live. It is incumbent upon such groups to 'speak truth to power' and hold our government and institutions to account. We also need to lead the way in tackling systemic prejudice and injustices, which make it harder for people to be generous and kind, and which instead reward those who are selfish, greedy and ruthless. Those who engage in pro-social and altruistic activities should be the best paid, not those who work for their own profit at the expense of others and the planet. No group which claims to care about ethics should rest until such is our reality. Moreover, every political, faith or belief group has a responsibility to reflect on its own beliefs and practices with honesty and courage, and to question any beliefs and practices which diminish the humanity of others, whether they be women, children, minorities or foreigners with different traditions and cultures.

We all, as inter-dependent members of society, whether we're members of a faith and belief group or not, have a responsibility to develop our better natures – our reasonableness, empathy and kindness - through reflection, practice and education. All humans start out with an innate capacity for empathy and compassion, which can either be stifled or nurtured by the cultures and traditions in which we are raised. The only way our species can survive and flourish and prevent atrocities such as genocide, is to make continual efforts to teach, encourage, grow and develop the finer feelings and nobler aspirations of our children and young people. With this in mind, I'd like to finish with a quotation from Mengzhi, better known by the Latinised version of his name, Mencius, who was a philosopher and political adviser in China in the 4th Century BCE:

“All human beings have a constitution which suffers when it sees the suffering of others... If people catch sight suddenly of a child about to fall into a well, they will all experience a feeling of alarm and distress... Because we all have these feelings in ourselves, let us develop them, and the result will be like the blaze that is kindled from a small flame, or the spring in full spate that starts with a trickle. Let these feelings have a free rein, and they will be enough to give shelter and love to us all.”

Questions raised in the talk to discuss further:

1. What were the specific causes of the genocide in Cambodia?
2. What might be the ongoing challenges for survivors, orphans, refugees (and their descendants) of the war and genocide in Cambodia?
3. Why is it important to remember all genocides and crimes against humanity, and to assert that any people may become the victims or perpetrators of genocide?
4. How can we remember these tragic events in the most respectful and purposeful way?
5. What are the conditions which can lead to crimes against humanity, and are we seeing any concerning trends in our own societies today?
6. What are the extremist political/religious groups and ideologies of our time, and how might they be best countered?
7. Which groups in society today are vulnerable to (or are already experiencing) aspects of dehumanisation?
8. What are 'slow genocide' and 'cultural genocide', and are these things still happening in the world today?
9. What makes societies happy, stable and nurturing of the better side of human nature, and which countries are currently the best role models?
10. Humans have a great capacity for altruism and pro-social behaviour, after all, we need each other to survive. However, humans also have the capacity for extremes of cruelty. How can we enhance the former traits so that they overcome the latter?
11. Why is sustainability so important for preventing future atrocities?
12. Why do faith, belief and political groups have a special responsibility for preventing future atrocities?
13. Why do we all have a responsibility for preventing future atrocities, and what are the things we can personally do to fulfil this responsibility?