Utilizing the Theology of Religions and Human Geography to Understand the Spatial Dimension of Religion and Conflict

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Abstract: This paper argues for an interdisciplinary approach within the study of religion and conflict. Using a religious studies framework, it demonstrates that tools from human geography, peace studies, and the theology of religions can be used to shed light on the intractability of conflicts where religion is not “innocent”. Within human geography, the spatial dimension of individual and communal identity, most particularly the concept of “mythical space”, can illuminate the non-empirical, affective factors that condition attitudes to religious and ethnic others. Similarly, within the theology of religions, the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism can aid understanding of tendencies within all human communities, religious and non-religious, when faced with perceived threats from significant others. Two case studies, Sri Lanka and Israel/Palestine, are examined through this interdisciplinary approach, using illustrative “moments” within each conflict. Both highlight the affective power of primal imaginaries that are informed by narratives about religion, land, and identity. Without dismissing the importance of political and economic factors in the arising of conflict, this paper argues that it is not enough to analyse these factors alone. Other disciplines are necessary and this paper argues for two important examples: human geography and the theology of religions.

Keywords: conflict; religion; land; space; exclusivism; inclusivism; pluralism; Sri Lanka; Israel; Palestine

1. Introduction

A Muslim leader in Bosnia in the late 1990s said to an inter-faith group, of which I was a member: “Religion is not the cause of the conflict. But religion is not innocent.” I have used his words frequently when teaching on the topic of religion and conflict. Religion is rarely the root cause of conflict; political and economic factors are often more important. Yet religion is not innocent in global conflicts. The argument of this paper is that analysis of the role of religion in conflict, if it is to be comprehensive, must be interdisciplinary. I will highlight two disciplines that I consider to be important examples—human geography and the theology of religions. First, I will outline the aspects of human geography and the theology of religions that I believe to be significant for the study of religion and conflict. Two case studies will then be examined: Sri Lanka and, more briefly, Israel/Palestine. I will give an introduction to each and will then examine illustrative “moments,” three from the first and two from the second. My paper, therefore, seeks to create porous boundaries between religious studies, human geography, peace studies, and theology. Since I began this paper, several years ago now, other scholars have also argued for such porous boundaries and I engage with some of these. On a personal note, my own primary academic belonging is within religious studies, most particularly Buddhist studies, but I have come to appreciate the benefits of porous disciplinary boundaries and have experimented with this in several publications, which give inspiration to the extension of my thought presented in this paper (Harris 2016, 2017, 2018).
2. Human Geography

Within human geography, I would suggest that it is the spatial dimension of individual and communal identity that can offer most to the understanding of religion and conflict. Scholars within religious studies have long recognized in their study of human communities and their religious traditions that religious identities have a spatial dimension, expressed, for instance, through narratives connected with land or holy sites, and the cosmology or eschatology these embody. Human geographers, however, go further than this. Kong and Woods argued in 2016 that the study of space as “a main conceptual framework for understanding religious competition, conflict and violence is not only desirable, but also essential” (Kong and Woods 2016, p. 9). They built on the work of philosophers such as Lefebvre, who convincingly argued that “space” was socially produced and intimately connected with power relations (Lefebvre [1974] 1991), and postmodern geographers such as Doreen Massey, who stressed in 2005 that space is not a neutral sidekick of time but a dynamic, political, and constructed category that is “predicated on the existence of plurality” (Massey 2005, p. 9). If Kong, Woods, Lefebvre, and Massey are taken seriously, therefore, spatial expressions of religious identity not only concern access to the sacred and the transcendent—but also condition power relations, inclusion and exclusion of religious or ethnic others, and the negotiation of inter-communal and inter-religious relations. All of this is relevant to the religious studies scholar. It is at this point, therefore, that human geography can contribute to the study of religion and conflict. Indeed, it is already doing so. Paul Hedges, for instance, in his 2021 textbook, Understanding Religion, devotes a chapter to ‘Geography’, engaging with writers such as Lefebvre and Massey in his exploration of religious identity and its relationship to the control and manipulation of space (Hedges 2021, pp. 398–420).

I argued in 2018 that one reason for space being key to the negotiation of inter-communal and inter-religious relations was that it bore “the weight and complexities of the human imaginary” (Harris 2018, p. 3). The human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan labelled the spatial component of a world view or imaginary, “mythical space” (Tuan [1977] 2008, pp. 88–89) “Mythical space” and the imaginaries that inform it frame and shape religious identities and can carry considerable authority, although they lie outside the empirically verifiable, as my case studies demonstrate. Using “space” as a conceptual framework, therefore, with insights from human geography, opens a window that can illuminate the non-empirical, affective factors that influence conflict and make some conflicts almost intractable.

3. The Theology of Religions

It is primarily with reference to the inclusion and exclusion of religious or ethnic others that the theology of religions becomes relevant to the study of religion and conflict. The tools used by human geographers demonstrate that inclusion or exclusion of others is often conditioned by the spatial dimension of religious identity, which can be informed both by the political and the “mythical”. The importance of the “mythical” to an understanding of religion and conflict can further be illuminated by a typology linked to the theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The typology was first developed systematically by an Anglican clergyman, Alan Race, who employed it to categorize the attitudes towards other religions that he had found amongst Christians (Race 1993). The typology has been praised but also critiqued, for instance for being overly wedded to a Christian soteriological framework, namely to whether practitioners within other religions can be “saved”. However, the typology need not be restricted to a Christian or a theological framework but is a tool that can throw light on tendencies within all communities, religious or non-religious, when faced with significant diversity in the religious or social sphere (Eck 1993, pp. 166–99; Harris 2003, pp. 117–18; 2017, pp. 214–15; 2018; Hedges 2016, 2021, pp. 303–24; Veléz de Cea 2016). As Hedges has pointed out, for example, when combined with identity theory, it can throw light on conflict between groups and provide models for healthy co-existence and encounter (Hedges 2014).
When used in these ways, exclusivism, in the religious sphere, is the tendency to draw a non-negotiable distinction between the self and others. Exclusivists imagine their own religious identities to be correct, pure, and superior, and the religious identities of others to be the opposite of these—deluded, impure, false, and human-made. Inclusivists appreciate religious others as having access to truth if their beliefs and practices are close to their own. An inclusivist Christian, for example, may identify what the New Testament terms the fruits of the spirit in another religion—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5: 22–23)—and conclude that the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is at work in that religion. A Buddhist might witness the self-sacrifice of Jesus and conclude that he was a bodhisattva (a Buddha-to-be), because he was able to master the perfection (pāramī) of generosity, which includes the ability to give one’s life for the benefit of others. Within inclusivism, a subordination of religious others to one’s own religion is present in that religious others are judged through categories belonging to oneself. I have coined the term inclusivist subordination to capture this aspect of the typology when embodied within the imaginary of a religious community, defining it as a “willingness to include, respect and tolerate the Other at a subordinate level,” within the cosmological framework of the self (Harris 2018, p. 4). In the context of religion and conflict, inclusivist subordination can inform a strategy aimed at taming religious others so that their threatening nature is neutralized. Pluralism, on the other hand, involves a willingness to see religious others as in possession of truth, purity, and dignity, in their own right, independent of categories linked to oneself. Respect is, therefore, given to the integrity of others and to the possibility that different self-definitions and different conceptions of reality are valid representations of truth. Religious others are not seen as a threat but as partners (e.g., Race 2013; Schmidt-Leukel 2016; D’Arcy May 2019).

Within the framework of this paper and its focus on religion and conflict, the typology can throw light on the imaginaries that fuel conflict, particularly their mythic and confessional aspects. I wrote in 2017, “if social anthropologists are to understand the re-imagining or re-constituting of religious culture through encounter with the Other, in phenomenological terms, they need to engage with the confessional ‘theologies’ at work in that culture” (Harris 2017, p. 211; 2018, p. 4), namely with the cosmologies and religious principles that condition how religious or ethnic others are judged. In conflict, religious cultures can be reinforced, re-constituted, or re-imagined, and conditioning these cultures are imaginaries and world views that yield to and can be better understood through this typology, particularly through the tendencies towards exclusivism and inclusivist subordination.

4. The Case Study of Sri Lanka

According to the 2012 census in Sri Lanka, Buddhists make up 70.2% of the island’s population, Hindus 12.6%, Muslims 9.7%, and Christians 7.4%. Just over two-thirds of the population, therefore, are Buddhist, with Hindus, Muslims, and Christians forming sizeable minorities. With only a handful of exceptions, all Buddhists are Sinhalas and all Hindus are Tamils. Christians are present within both ethnic communities and Muslims are usually seen as a separate ethnic community. This religious ratio, however, is not evenly distributed across the island. In the Moneragala district in the rural south, 94.5% of the population is Buddhist, 2.8% is Hindu, 2.2% is Muslim, and only 0.5% is Christian. In contrast, in the Jaffna district, in the extreme north, 82.9% is Hindu with 16.2% Christian and only 0.4% Buddhist. In the Mannar district, in the north-east, there is a further contrast: 2.1% is Buddhist, 23.7% is Hindu, 16.7% is Muslim, and 57.4% is Christian, the vast majority of these being Roman Catholic, whose ancestors were converts from the time of Portuguese dominance of the maritime areas of the island between 1506 and the 1650s (Strathern 2010).

The dominant Buddhist imaginary in Sri Lanka is that the whole island is holy to the Buddha and, therefore, to the Sinhalas, and this has been a major factor in inter-ethnic tension. Appeal is made to the vamosa tradition (ancient historical chronicles such as the Dipavamsa, the Mahavamsa, and the Rajavali, largely written by Buddhist monastics), which portrays the Buddha visiting the island three times to intervene in conflict and, on his
deathbed, arranging for special protection to be given to Sri Lanka as a repository of his teachings (e.g., Obeyesekere 2006, pp. 138–43; Scheible 2016). The Buddha’s visits are geographically placed so that both the north and the south of the island are encompassed, and additional narratives bring in the east coast, for instance that a tooth relic of the Buddha entered the island, hidden in the hair of Princess Hemamala, at Lankâpatuna. The whole island, in fact, is surrounded with Buddhist narrative, and round island pilgrimages to eight or sixteen sites became part of Sinhala Buddhist practice (e.g., Amarasekera 1922; Kemper 1991, pp. 76–78; Perera 2016; Harris 2018, p. 28). There is a sense in which Sinhala Buddhists see the whole island as a body linked inextricably with the Buddha and their own bodies. As a Sinhala Buddhist academic told a group of Christians in Britain in 1998, “For many Buddhists in Sri Lanka, the idea of a separate state in the north and east is similar to the idea of having your head cut off.”

Utilizing Alan Race’s typology and my modification of it, the Sinhala Buddhist imaginary in Sri Lanka when applied to ethnic or religious others has been characterized by inclusivist subordination. At the level of cosmology, the gods of Hinduism were subordinated to the Buddha. This process began in Buddhist India but developed further in Sri Lanka with gods taking a significant role in popular religiosity. For instance, Sinhala Buddhists worship Hindu gods such as Skanda (Kataragama) and Viśnū in order to gain help in mundane issues, such as passing an exam, buying a house, or becoming pregnant. Never are the gods linked with ultimate truth or liberation, since only the Buddha is believed to hold the key to this. At a political and communal level, this subordinating imaginary was concretely expressed through hierarchical spatial and administrative structures. As Tambiah insightfully argued, the ethos within the independent Kandyan Kingdom before the British imperialist takeover in 1815 was one in which state processes could be inclusive of minorities, but only if they could be “incorporated within the larger [Buddhist] cosmological and economic framework” (Tambiah 1992, p. 175; see also Duncan 1990). In other words, if minorities could accept their status as minorities, recognizing that Buddhism was the dominant religion, then harmony was possible within a framework that privileged Buddhist frames of reference. If they did not accept this status and could not, therefore, be included, then, within this imaginary, they could become a threat and, therefore, demonic, demanding a violent response (Roberts 2004, p. 134; De Silva Wijeratne 2014, pp. 42–44; Harris 2018, pp. 16–19).

After independence in 1948, English-educated Sinhala and Tamil politicians were willing to work together in government. A clause in the democratic but majoritarian constitution bequeathed by the British should have protected minorities. However, the imaginary that had held together the Kandyan Kingdom through inclusivist subordination re-emerged in the 1950s within a wave of grassroots Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that was exploited by a prominent politician, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, to gain power in 1956. One of the first acts of legislation passed under his leadership was the Official Language Act No. 33, dubbed the Sinhala Only Act, which made Sinhala the national language and linguistically crippled almost 25 percent of the population, since many Muslims speak Tamil as their first language (e.g., De Silva 1998, pp. 45–68; Richardson 2005, pp. 164–67; Keethaponcâlan 2009, pp. 19–22; Harris 2018, p. 163). To cut a long story short, this, together with other pieces of legislation judged discriminatory by the minorities and the failure of peaceful pressure by experienced Tamil leaders, eventually gave rise to militant Tamil youth groups that demanded a separate state in the north and east of the island, Tamil Eelam. This, in turn, led to an internal war that ended only in 2009, with the military defeat of what became the dominant and increasingly ruthless militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (See Richardson 2005; De Silva 2012; Wickramasinghe 2014; Hoole 2015).

The first “moment” I will examine to illustrate the importance of the spatial and the operation of inclusivist subordination is the violence that occurred relatively early in the conflict, in 1981, in the northern, Tamil-majority city of Jaffna, at the time of elections to District Development Councils, scheduled for 4th June. What were, in effect, local government elections, granted in response to demands from Tamil politicians for more
control over government in the north and east, should not have been contentious. However, standing in Jaffna were members of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). This was an established political party, committed to non-violent change but, in 1976, it had come out in support of a separate state in the north, in response to demands from the new militant youth groups (e.g., Gunasingam 2016, pp. 475–529). In spite of their non-violent stance, the very fact that the TULF supported a separate state was enough to draw the anger of some Sinhala nationalist politicians, who wanted a Sinhala-dominated party, the United National Party (UNP), to win the elections. According to the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), harassment by the security forces of people in Jaffna occurred well before the elections. One external trigger for the increased violence that occurred as the elections neared was the assassination, “allegedly by youths belonging to the militant organisations” of the lead UNP candidate (MIRJE 1983, p. 5). Then, on Sunday, 31st May, at a TULF meeting chaired by the Mayor of Jaffna, there was what MIRJE called “a scuffle,” which led to an exchange of gunfire that caused the deaths of two policemen, one Sinhala and one Tamil (MIRJE 1983, p. 6). Who engineered the “scuffle” was never established, leading to the surmise that it could have been artificially staged to justify the violence unleashed by police from 31st May onwards.

On the evening of the 31st, shops (48 near the Jaffna Bazaar alone), homes, vehicles, the house of the TULF MP for Jaffna, and the TULF offices were destroyed by fire. In an act of deliberate humiliation, pictures of the two most prominent twentieth century Tamil politicians, S. J.V. Chelvanayakam and G. G. Ponnambalam, were taken out of these offices and burnt in public view (MIRJE 1983, p. 7). On the second night, 1st June, the Jaffna Public Library was set alight. Its whole collection of over 95,000 volumes, some irreplaceable, was destroyed. The office of an independent Tamil newspaper, Eelanadu, was also torched. Acts of arson and intimidation continued for about a week afterwards, even after Emergency Rule was declared on 2nd June. Just before the elections, four Tamil parliamentarians were arrested and detained, including the leader of the TULE, Appapillai Amirthalingham (MIRJE 1983, pp. 6–9).

The events of 1981 seared themselves on the memory of Tamils in Jaffna and nearby areas, and became even more potent not only because no suspects in the arson faced trial but also because the attempts of TULF MPs to recount the events in the central Parliament in Colombo “were repeatedly interrupted by spurious denials, mocking laughter, and unseemly jeering and heckling” (MIRJE 1983, p. 17). The documentation done by MIRJE, which I have used in this account, was compiled through visits to the north in May and June 1981 and is reliable. The writers were convinced that two influential Sinhala politicians, both holding ministerial positions in the UNP government, were responsible for the violence (see also Gunasingam 2016, p. 529). The mindset of these politicians was certainly informed by the keen rivalry between political parties but it cannot be explained only in these terms. It was also conditioned by the conviction that the TULF, because it supported a separate state of Tamil Eelam, albeit through non-violent means, was a threat to Sinhala Buddhism and, therefore, no better than a terrorist, even a demonic, group, which threatened the unity of the country and had to be intimidated into submission and subordination.

My second “moment” is a colonization initiative during the years 1983 to 1988 that sought to change the demographic pattern present in the country. One model that emerged among some Sinhalas in the face of the demand for a separate state in the north and east involved a change in the demography of the country so that Sinhalas and Tamils lived “throughout the island in numbers proportionate to their national ratio” (Harris 2018, p. 148). If this could be achieved, they argued, there would be island-wide harmony. Each part of the country would have a Sinhala majority, with Tamils and Muslims as respected minorities. There would be no part of the country where a minority would be the majority, and so the question of a separate state would not arise. It was a model perfectly in line with what this paper terms inclusivist subordination and its expression was spatial. One of its proponents was planter and civil servant, Malinga Gunaratne. His passionate conviction was that the ethnic conflict was land-based, that separatism should be
defeated, and that Tamils and Sinhalas could live together as brothers and sisters throughout the island, albeit with Sinhalas in the majority (Harris 2018, p. 149). His plan was to make this happen in two places, in the Yan Oya (river) basin, on the border between the predominantly Tamil north and the Sinhala south, and in the Maduru Oya area, on the border between the predominantly Sinhala Polonnaruwa district and the predominantly Tamil Batticaloa district in the east (Gunaratne [1988] 1998, pp. 80–90). For the Maduru Oya project, he gained an ally in Matara Kitalagama Seelankara, head monk at a Buddhist vihāra (monastery or temple) in Dimbulagala in the Polonnaruwa district. Both Gunaratne and Seelankara believed they had government support to lead Sinhala colonists into an area on the right bank of the Maduru Oya, a majority Tamil area, claimed by Tamil separatists as part of Tamil Eelam. Gunaratne retrospectively gave a blow by blow account of what happened. The first penetration was in September 1983. About three thousand people, mostly men, gathered at Seelankara’s vihāra, bringing implements to clear land and build basic houses. Seelankara had arranged over 200 vehicles from donors in the Polonnaruwa district. Before the group set off, a Buddhist ceremony was held to “sanctify” the moment (Gunaratne [1988] 1998, p. 79) and Seelankara gave a sermon. After stressing that the colonizers were going into the east to break the “contiguity” of the land that the separatists called Eelam, he continued:

You are going to live among the innocent Tamil people as brothers and sisters. Not as enemies. Please remember that. That is my first lesson. We go into the midst of the peace loving Tamils and we live among them. We will protect them. It is only then that there can be a united Sri Lanka. We cannot allow anyone to draw a line across the country and say this is Sinhala land, this is Tamil land. The land of this country belongs to everybody—Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Malay, Burgher . . . Anyone has a right to live wherever he wants. (Gunaratne [1988] 1998, pp. 80–81)

He then stressed that, if “terrorists” should attack them, they were to “fight to the last” for if they fled, “the boundaries of Sri Lanka are not safe.” He warned them, however, not to harm any “innocent” Tamil and ended, according to Gunaratne, “We are going on a holy mission. No man can do better than to lay his life down for his country. It is my great honour to lead you to secure a united Sri Lanka” (Gunaratne [1988] 1998, p. 81).

More settlers followed the first 3000. At one point, Gunaratne heard that there were approximately 40,000 attempting to settle in the area (Gunaratne [1988] 1998, p. 90). A political maelstrom resulted. The Sri Lankan government insisted that it did not support the initiative. Only about 500 colonists had at first been anticipated and, if these numbers had been maintained, government support might have been given. As it was, the government faced criticism from the Government Agent of the Batticaloa district and even from India. There were reports of Tamils fleeing their land. The whole initiative was ultimately a failure. It fuelled further conflict and did not fulfill Gunaratne’s original vision of harmony between Sinhala and Tamil. Many settlers retreated and returned to their former homes. Those who persisted had to arm themselves against the threat of LTTE attacks as the island’s internal war deepened. The main reason for the failure was the shortcomings of the imaginary behind it: enforced inclusivist subordination ignores the aspirations and self-definition of those who are being subordinated and this was compounded by the seizure of land, believed by Tamils in the Batticaloa district to be theirs.

My last “moment” is post-war. After the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the then President, Mahinda Rajapakse, in his victory speeches, situated himself alongside Sinhala kings mentioned in the vamsa tradition, who had united the country in the face of enemy threat, although he also promised to work for reconciliation (e.g., Fernando 2013). One of the barriers to reconciliation, however, was the conviction among many within the Sinhala majority that the country could return to a “perceived golden past where minorities recognised the prior claim of the majority community and so lived in harmony with it” (Harris 2018, p. 192). Included within this was the assumption that minority communities should recognise that Sinhala Buddhism had been present throughout the island before
substantial numbers of Tamils had arrived and, therefore, that the land of the north and east should once again reflect and celebrate this. A re-buddhicization of the north and east, therefore, occurred after 2009, through the expansion of Buddhist vihāras that were present before the war, “the redevelopment of ancient sites identified as Buddhist; the discovery or creation of new Buddhist sites and centres; and the buddhicizing of sites that had not previously been exclusively linked with Buddhism” (Harris 2018, p. 201). I examined this in detail in my 2018 monograph, including the response of Sinhalas and Tamils to these developments, and will not repeat this material. Rather, I will use one example to evoke this “moment:” new Buddhist centres on the A9 road to Jaffna.

The A9 stretches from Kandy in the central hills of the country to Jaffna in the north. Roads from other parts of the island, including Colombo, feed into it in its progress north so that, by the time it reaches Vavuniya, it is the only main road to Jaffna from the Sinhala-dominated south. Who was in control of the A9 was a key factor during the war. Army camps were strung along it and these were continually under threat from LTTE attack, especially the closer the road came to Killinochchi, the LTTE “capital” when it was in control of large swathes of the north.

After the ending of the war, army presence in the north and east did not diminish. Smaller camps were amalgamated into larger ones, some of which were relocated away from the main roads into jungle areas. The army found themselves with less to do than when they were at war with a ruthlessly militant force. They turned to both commercial and religious activities. Buddhist shrines, some containing large Buddha images, had been present in most army camps during the war, either inside or, controversially for Tamils, outside the camps’ boundaries. After the war, two large Buddhist centres were created on the A9 south of Jaffna. Driving from Jaffna towards the south, the first was at Mankulam, a town in the heart of the Tamil-dominated north. Named Sri Sugatha Vihāra and situated close to St Agnes’ Roman Catholic Church, the centre was built by the military and formally inaugurated in 2013. I first visited it in 2012, when all I could do was peer through fencing at the one feature of the future site that was visible—a bodhi tree, surrounded by a new, decorative wall. A bodhi tree—the tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment according to tradition—is found in every Sri Lankan Buddhist temple. The military had either found one growing there or had planted one.

When I returned in 2015, the whole complex was complete. It had all the components of a southern vihara—a pristine white dāgāba or stūpa, a shrine to the Buddha, a now mature bodhi tree and monastic quarters. There was also “a golden orb feature” at the intersection of paths to the dāgāba, the bodhi tree, and the shrine (Harris 2018, p. 218) The spatial proportions of the complex were far more generous than in most southern vihāras. But there were no devotees. The only person there was an impoverished Tamil boy who was waiting for the monk, to see if he would give him some sugar, as he had done before. In the car park, however, there was an empty coach and I surmised that a group of southern Sinhala “tourists” had arrived and that the monk was with them. For the only devotees that would come to the centre were Sinhalas on their way to Buddhist sites in Jaffna, and Nāgadīpa (Nainativu in Tamil), an island off the coast of Jaffna, believed to have been one of the sites visited by the Buddha according to the vaṃsa tradition.

The second Buddhist site on the A9 is at Kanakarayankulam, between 10 and 15 kilometres further south from the first, still within a Tamil majority area. It is opposite one of the largest army camps in the region and is overseen by the army. On neither of my visits did I see evidence of resident monks. According to Fernando, the army planted a sapling from the Anuradhapura bodhi tree on a grassy mound and developed the centre around it, claiming that the land had been an ancient Buddhist site (Fernando 2013, pp. 201–5). In 2012, I could not enter the unfinished site; an army van was leaving as I arrived. In 2015, it was still unfinished and, as I wrote in 2018, I walked around in solitude before “a member of the army rushed up . . . saying he had gone for a cup of tea” (Harris 2018, p. 219). There was no dāgāba at this complex but the bodhi tree could now be approached by several flights of steps with traditional guardstones and moonstones at their base. At another
point, there was a raised ‘glass-encased shrine to the Buddha’ (Harris 2018, p. 219) and, at a lower level—ground level—there was a devale section, namely five shrine rooms to the gods: Durgā, Viṣṇu, Kataragama, Pattini, and Gānapati (Ganēsa) (Harris 2018, p. 220). The subordinate spatial positioning of these Hindu gods was blatant.

In the fieldwork I undertook in 2012 and 2015, these Buddhist centres arose again and again in conversation. In the minds of the Tamils I interviewed, they were a symbol of defeat, as were other instances of buddhicization. For them, Buddhism itself was not the problem. Several of my participants stressed that, if individual Sinhala families settled in the north and east, they had every right to bring symbols of their religion. The problem was “political Buddhism,” namely government- or army-sponsored Buddhism, since it was linked to the fear among many northern Tamils that it presaged further colonization of the north and east. It was known, for instance, that the larger army camps would expand to include army families, Sinhala schools, and other services. As a Tamil human rights worker whom I called Siva in my monograph—all names were changed to protect anonymity—said:

We are a multi-religious society. So any religious community must have its protected space to propagate its faith and mobilise its constituency. It’s a democratic right as laid down by the United Nations. Devotees also must have the right to go anywhere and propagate their religion. But how is this to be done? It should not be done through state patronage and through organised transfer of people from the South to the North to change the demography. (Harris 2018, p. 231)

A Hindu Tamil I called Ravikrishnan told me, “I primarily see putting up Buddha statues as not about Buddhism but as an act of Sinhala Buddhist ideology, in terms of capturing space in the North.” These views differed from the Sinhala views I gained. One Sinhala Buddhist woman, whom I called Nirmala, accused Hindu Tamils of “wrong-thinking” when I suggested that some resented the presence of Buddha images in the north, partly because Hindu temples could be built in the south. She argued that there should be more Sinhala colonization in the north and more intermarriage (Harris 2018, pp. 226–27).

There is no doubt that the Buddhist centres on the A9 have government patronage and that they were built to affirm the presence of Buddhism in the north. I believe, however, that another factor was at work, namely the example of those who unified the country against threat in the vaṃsa tradition. After bloodshed and the horror of war, according to this tradition, kings and warriors made merit by giving to the monastic community, building vihāras, and restoring irrigation systems. Within this frame of reference, the Buddhist centres on the A9 gave thanks for the ending of armed conflict and also assuaged feelings of terror and perhaps guilt connected with the war.6

To bring my three “moments” together in the light of my inter-disciplinary project, the intensity of the violence and the cultural vandalism in Jaffna during my first “moment” in 1981 might seem incomprehensible to an outsider, particularly from a contemporary human rights perspective. However, an awareness of the Sinhala imaginary that informed it, conditioned both by what Yi-Fu Tuan terms “mythical space” and by what I have termed inclusivist subordination, can shed light on the affective dynamic behind it. Spatial and confessional factors combined with the political to create a mind-set that was bent on intimidating the Tamils of the north into the subordinate position that the instigators believed would create peace and protect the unity of the land. My second “moment” was not characterized by violence but was driven by an idealistic urge to defend the unity of a land by demographic change that would again force Tamils into a subordinate position throughout the island. The rhetoric surrounding the colonization scheme spoke of friendship between Sinhala and Tamil but the ideology informing it was closer to inclusivist subordination than reciprocal co-existence. Neither of these “moments” achieved its aim. Each served only to fuel conflict. As for my third “moment”, the attempted buddhicization of the north and east was seen as a legitimate re-creation of the past by some Buddhists, when minorities were allowed freedom of religious expression on condition that Buddhism’s prior claim to the land of Sri Lanka was recognized. In all three
“moments”, contemporary human rights discourse and appeal to the rule of law could not find a foothold because of the strength of older affective models, connected with land and religious cosmology.

5. The Case Study of Israel/Palestine

I now turn briefly to my second case study, that of Israel/Palestine. As in Sri Lanka, the conflict in Israel/Palestine has been fuelled by spatial factors, informed both by what Yi-Fu Tuan terms “mythical space,” and also by a confessional “theology” within Jewish communities that has subordinated seemingly threatening religious or cultural others. Risking simplification, Jews became a global diaspora community after failed rebellions against the Roman Empire, the last of which was in 132–135 CE, losing their holy places in Jerusalem. After 135 CE, no Jew was allowed to live in Jerusalem, although some returned as pilgrims and settlers when Palestine was a province of the Byzantine Empire (330–634 CE) and later, under Muslim rule. When they left, they took their holy texts, which spoke of the land of Canaan (Palestine) as gifted by God to their community to be cherished within a covenantal relationship. This land and particularly the city of Jerusalem, home to two Jewish temple cultures, remained in the collective memory of diaspora Jewish communities not only through the recitation of biblical passages such as Psalm 35, but also in liturgy, for example the Pesach (Passover) seder, which culminates with “Next Year in Jerusalem” (Roth 1990, pp. 68–69; Sacks 2003, p. 99 from back). Memory of the land and re-enactment of the narratives connected with it—of conquest, God’s blessing and censure, and resistance against oppressors—became interwoven, therefore, with the Jewish community’s affective consciousness and identity.

The Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), writing before the creation of the State of Israel but after the arising of Zionism, the movement among Jews that sought to establish a homeland in “Zion” (Palestine), stressed the positive aspects for Jews of not having a land of their own, which, by definition, could be transient. Jewish identity, he argued, was not based on land but on the continuity of the community and its life through generations (Pattison 2015, pp. 315–16). He was not alone among Jews in eschewing Zionism. However, the reality of antisemitism in Europe (Cohn-Sherbok 2002; Hellig 2003) turned many towards it and “Aliyah” began, namely the return of Jews to Palestine. In 1880, Palestine contained 456,000 Arabs and 24,000 Jews, who made up about 5% of the population (Chapman 2002, p. 23). According to Embleton, about 35,000 more Jews moved to Palestine to buy land and settle among Arabs in the “First Aliyah” from 1882–1903 (Embleton 2015, p. 8). This was a gentle form of Zionism. A stronger political Zionism, however, emerged and strengthened in the twentieth century in a “Second Aliyah” from 1904 (Embleton 2015, p. 10). Even as early this, some Zionist leaders realized that a Jewish state could only come into being if the Arab population was relocated or made a subservient minority through land purchase (Embleton 2015, p. 57)—in other words, spatial exclusivism or, at least, inclusivist subordination. This early Zionism gained many more supporters after the extermination of six million Jews in the Sho’ah (the calamity), in the mid-twentieth century, the culmination of Europe’s antisemitism. To many Jews, the only answer to the Sho’ah was a Jewish state in “Zion.”

The narrative from this point to the formation of the State of Israel during a War of Independence from May 1948 to January 1949 is complicated and implicates Britain, which ruled Palestine under a UN Mandate from 1923 to 1948, at first with a commitment to the formation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, following the Balfour Declaration, in spite of hostility to the idea from the existing Arab population. It was a turbulent and violent period, which saw the British retreat from their support for a Jewish homeland in the face of Arab resistance (e.g., Cohen 2020).

I will examine two “moments” in the Israel/Palestine conflict, both of which illustrate the importance of spatial and confessional imaginaries informed by exclusivism and inclusivist subordination. The first is what Arabs call the Naqba, the calamity (e.g., Masalha 2012). The immediate causal roots of the Naqba lay in Britain’s declaration,
in February 1947, that it would hand back its mandate over Palestine to the United Nations, at a point when its policies in Palestine, the restriction of Jewish immigration for instance, had provoked a violent response from militant Zionist groups, who were demanding, with some support from the United States, that all of Palestine should become a Jewish state. The United Nations then recommended partition. UN Resolution 181 of November 1947, responding in part to US Zionist pressure, proposed that the Jewish State would have 56% of the land and the Arab state, 43%. According to Embleton, “Each state would have a majority of their own people, and a minority of the other group” (Embleton 2015, p. 55) but 400 Arab villages would be situated in the Jewish state. The UN would retain control over Jerusalem and nearby Bethlehem.

The resolution was never implemented. Arabs from Palestine and neighbouring countries rejected the plan and started to attack Jewish targets. After all, Jewish immigrants owned by purchase only about 7% of the land of Palestine and the partition plan gave over half of it to them (Embleton 2015, p. 56). On the other hand, Jews were delighted, except for the paramilitary Zionist groups, who sought the whole of Palestine, and these retaliated under Arab attack. The British refused the task of implementing the partition and did not intervene in the violence. One month before the end of the Mandate, the Jewish leadership launched a military initiative to secure the borders of the proposed Jewish state and to defend Jewish communities beyond these borders. Named Plan Dalet, it captured Arab villages and expelled the Arab population (Embleton 2015, p. 57). One of the most violent incidents was a massacre on 9 April 1948 in the Arab village of Deir Yassin, west of Jerusalem, outside the proposed Jewish state, in which ninety-three civilians were killed, including children and babies. Arab retaliation came: 77 Jewish civilians were killed in a medical convoy. To cut a long story short, even before the British left on 14 May 1948 and with UN staff present, 250,000 Palestinians had either been expelled or had fled from Palestine. At the point when the Mandate ended, Jewish leaders declared the establishment of the State of Israel and the US recognized the State. A multinational Arab force of Syrians, Egyptians, and Jordanians then invaded. By the time the conflict concluded in 1949, with an Israeli victory, Israel had gained 60% of the land given by the UN partition plan to an Arab state. Jordan had control over the West Bank, and Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip. The land that the partition plan had apportioned to the Arab Palestinians no longer existed and 60% of the Palestinian population had been chased from their villages or had fled. This was the Naqba or the “Catastrophe”. A searing oral history of the suffering this caused was published in 2018 (Abda and Masatha 2018; see also Sa‘adi and Abu-lughed 2007; Karmi 2015).

According to the Dutch Christian theologian, Lucas Grollenberg, 750,000 Arabs were evacuated or fled at this point (Grollenberg 1980, p. 60). Israel puts the number at 550,000 and the UN, at 725,000 (Embleton 2015, p. 60). More affluent Arab areas were settled by Jews. According to Nathan Weinstock, in 1954 it was estimated that “a quarter of the population of Israel was living in abandoned Arab land” (Weinstock 1969, p. 298, quoted in Grollenberg 1980, p. 61). As chroniclers of this period of history have noted, attempts were made to encourage the Israelis to allow those who had been evacuated or had fled to return but no effective action was taken.

I would argue that these statistics are only comprehensible if the spatial and confessional imaginaries behind the conflict are taken into account. That the evacuation of Arabs from their land was a breach of Arab human rights and the laws concerning ownership of property meant little in the face of an imaginary that envisioned the land of Canaan or Palestine as a divine gift to the Jews from God, and as the only answer to the reality and ongoing threat of antisemitism in Europe. Within this imaginary, Palestinian Arabs became threatening others, obstacles to Jewish security and prosperity.

I move now to my second “moment,” the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, named as such because of the mediation of Norway. Between my two “moments,” the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) was formed in 1964 and the Six Day War of 1967 occurred, when Israel, under attack from Arab guerrilla forces, took control of and occupied the
Gaza strip (from Egypt), the West Bank (from Jordan), East Jerusalem (from Jordan), and the Golan Heights (from Syria). In addition, the First Intifada (Palestinian revolt against the occupation of the West Bank) began. It was in the context of the Intifada that, on 13 September 1993, the Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin and Mahmoud Abbas, negotiator of the PLO, signed a Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements—the first Oslo Accord. There were compromises on both sides. Israel accepted the PLO as representative of the Palestinians. The PLO recognised Israel’s right to exist. That a Palestinian Authority (PA) would be established to govern the West Bank and Gaza for five years was agreed, after which further talks would be held. On the surface it seemed that something akin to a Palestinian state would be established.

A further interim agreement, Oslo II or the Taba Agreement, was signed in September 1995. It extensively addressed economic, civil, and constitutional matters, including establishing a Palestinian Legislative Council. The language of the Agreement spoke of cooperation, co-existence, human rights, and the rule of law. Significantly for this paper, however, it divided the land of the West Bank into three categories: land under Palestinian control (A), land with a Palestinian civil administration overseen by Israeli military control (B), and sparsely populated land that would remain under Israeli control (C). The result was that the areas under Palestinian control would be non-contiguous. Category A land would be surrounded by land that was under Israeli military control (see Bauck and Omer 2016; Makovsky 2019).

Using the theology of religions typology, the Oslo Agreements enshrined the principle of inclusivist subordination, in the interest of Israeli security. The envisaged PA was given extensive administrative responsibility over the Palestinian people but, in effect, this power was subordinate to Israeli military control. The major roads of the West Bank, for instance, continued to be under Israeli military control and so physical communication between the non-contiguous regions under the PA was controlled by Israel. It was this that caused the failure of the summit convened by US President Clinton in July 2000 at Camp David. The issue of non-contiguity within the PA became more acute in subsequent years as Israeli military control enabled the expansion and creation of Israeli settlements on West Bank land.

To bring these moments together, the Naqba cannot be understood without taking into account the affective power of the spatial component of the Jewish imaginary, which, in the light of antisemitism in Europe and the support of the United States, had no problem in affirming that the successful realization of a Jewish state justified the means used to create it, namely making refugees of hundreds of thousands of Arabs. The Oslo Accords were informed by the same imaginary but it was tempered by realism in the light of international pressure. What emerged was a compromise that is best understood when insights from human geography are combined with those from the typology of the theology of religions. The Accords recognized the dignity of the Palestinian peoples but only within a structure that gave ultimate control to the Israelis, a classic form of inclusivist subordination. For at the root of this subordination was again awareness of threat, namely that Palestinian Arabs could threaten the existence of Israel if they were not controlled. As in Sri Lanka, if religious or ethnic others do not accept subordination, they are in danger of being cast as terrorists, or even demonic.

6. Concluding Thoughts

I began this paper by arguing that analyses of religion and conflict must be interdisciplinary and have examined two case studies using the disciplines of human geography, particularly its insights into the spatial component of religious identities; and the theology of religions, with its exclusivism/inclusivism/exclusivism typology, as important examples. I could be accused of ignoring political science, conflict resolution theory, and economics. Each of these disciplines are also important but they can ignore the non-empirical, affective factors connected with the disciplines addressed in this paper that make some conflicts almost intractable.
Admittedly, conflict resolution theory and practice attempts to address the affective. For instance, Louis Kreisberg admirably argues in a handbook for those involved in conflict resolution that reconciliation after communal conflict requires parties to the conflict to work towards four beliefs, which include “honest acknowledgement of the terrible aspects of what happened”, “acknowledgement of each other’s suffering,” and “belief that injustices are being redressed” (Kreisberg 1998, p. 185). Within Sri Lanka and Israel/Palestine, non-governmental organizations have tirelessly worked across religious and ethnic divides to create these understandings for decades. Their success, however, has been limited and at most incremental. The reason for this, I would argue, is the affective power of primal imaginaries that are informed, on the one hand, by narratives about religion, land, and identity, and, on the other, by perceptions of religious or ethnic others as a threat unless subordinated. To understand the strength of these imaginaries and the dynamic that drives them, Kreisberg’s insights from conflict resolution theory are not enough. Other disciplines are necessary. I have argued for two: human geography and the theology of religions.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes
1 Statistics from the 2012 Census: A3 Population by religion according to districts, 2012.
2 Personal experience of a visit to Britain of an inter-ethnic and inter-religious group of Sri Lankans in 1998.
3 Section 29 (2) (b) and (c), which provided that no Parliamentary legislation could (b) make persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons from other communities or religions are not made liable; or (c) to confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions . . . (De Silva 1981, a note straddles pp. 511–12).
4 The vamsa tradition states that Venerable Sanghamittā, the sister of Venerable Mahinda, the person credited with bringing Buddhism to Sri Lanka, brought a sapling of the tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment when she came to Sri Lanka to found an Order of Nuns in the third century BCE. (See Guruge 1989, pp. 597–602).
5 I am grateful to Daniel Kent for being the first person to point this out to me.
6 In reconstructing the history of Israel/Palestine, in addition to the sources mentioned in the text, I have used Bunton (2013), Chapman (2002), Caplan (2009) and have also drawn on two visits to Israel/Palestine, in 2001 and 2014, within which I spoke with leaders in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. Also useful is (Gelvin 2014).
7 Psalm 137 v. 5-6: ‘If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem as my highest joy’.
8 The Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, embodies this message. I visited it in 2001, as part of an inter-faith visit, when it was undergoing major building works to create three connected complexes: a Visitors’ Centre; the Administration, Archives and International School of Holocaust Studies; the Holocaust Memorial Museum. We were taken around by a Director of the programmes held at the International School and his message to us not only concerned the horror of the Sho’ah but also the inevitability of the State of Israel as a response to the Sho’ah. The museum itself presented the idea of a Jewish State in Israel as an integral factor in resistance to Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’. One picture in the ‘resistance’ section showed a classroom in a Jewish ghetto where the teacher and the pupils were looking at a map of Palestine, and the very last picture of the museum at that time was of a prisoner in Europe holding the flag of Israel. We were told that all the lecture rooms in the School of Holocaust Studies faced outwards towards Jerusalem and when we ourselves emerged into the light after the museum, we found ourselves overlooking Jerusalem.
9 Britain’s Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, wrote to Lord Rothschild (a prominent Jewish leader) on 2 November 1917 that he viewed ‘with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people’ and would work to ‘facilitate the achievement of this object’. A further clause stated, ‘it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice
the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country’.

References


