

Not in our remit

Maurice Herson

When secular organisations are responding to the needs of displaced people, the religious practices and needs of the communities may not be high on the list of things to be thought about. Indeed secular organisations may struggle to recognise the importance of religion, in life and in death.

At the end of 1990 the Tamil Tigers expelled all of the Muslim residents from Sri Lanka's Northern Province. Many of those who were now internally displaced went to the Puttalam area on the west coast where Oxfam, a secular organisation, took on much of the task of working with the local government to create camps, providing – among other things – shelter materials.

The most easily available and common roofing and wall material are *cadjans*, the leaves of a local palm, which are used to make a waterproof form of thatch. However, given the rainy environment and the shallow water table, we also provided rolls of plastic sheeting to be cut up as groundsheets. Quantities were calculated by the number of huts and their area, and the IDPs were instructed to cut the sheeting and give it out for use in each hut. However, when I went to monitor the distribution in one of these settlements I found that a substantial area of sheeting had been designated for use on the floor of the mosque (which had been constructed, like the huts, out of poles that we had provided and *cadjans*). As the person responsible, my reaction was that we could not provide sheeting for the mosque as it had been given for use in dwellings.

I find it difficult at this distance in time to recall with certainty my arguments and those of the community of IDPs but mine included both the 'fact' that, as a secular organisation, it was not in our remit to provide for a building devoted to religious observance rather than residence, and the objection that the mosque

was for the exclusive use of men and boys rather than the whole community, including women and girls.

Whatever their arguments were, in the end they 'won' both by virtue of the *fait accompli* and because I was not able to persuade them otherwise. But in any case we were all of the same mind, that it was in the interests of all that we remained on good terms and continued the work – not just immediate assistance but also capacity building with a new IDP organisation they were forming.

I recall reporting what had happened to my managers, in-country and in the UK, and nothing came of it. Except I have often thought back to it and reflected how I, on behalf of the organisation, did not take notice of the value to the people of having a mosque, or maybe of the loss of community to them in not having one. I had worked with them, and against the local authorities, to let them build village-like settlements rather than rigidly aligned camps but I had not taken the further step of seeing their religious needs. I am still not sure I was wrong but even this bare outline of the situation and its pros and cons indicate some parts of the core difficulty.

By way of contrast, when I was in Somalia in late 1992, we willingly provided shrouds to enable people to bury, with due religious observance, the many people dying of violence and starvation. A far more extreme situation but, somehow, recognising the importance of religion in death seemed easier for an avowedly secular organisation, and staff member, to actively respond to than the importance of it in life.

Maurice Herson maurice.herson@qeh.ox.ac.uk
is Co-Editor of Forced Migration Review at the
Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.
www.fmreview.org