

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

EVA HARTOG HAS HER DOUBTS

By  
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Eva den Hartog has her doubts. She doubts that God cares about mankind. She doubts in particular that He pays much attention to refugee camps. She doubts that "Christian" governments operate much differently from non-Christian. She doubts that neither she nor most other Christians could endure what the Buddhist Khmers endure. And she doubts that she'll ever receive any answers to her questions.

On the other hand, there are a few things of which she's sure.

"If I were a Cambodian, I'd be a rebel," she said. "Or I'd kill myself."

And if she were hungry, she would steal.

"When you see a couple of children who are very thin and someone is preaching, 'thou shalt not steal,' I say, 'would you not steal?' I would...And stop that silly preaching. You can't preach 'God is love' (to someone) who has an empty stomach and cold feet. I'd fill their stomachs (so) they do not have the temptation to steal."

Hartog is anything but your average, non-religious doubter. She's a registered nurse, a midwife and a major in the Salvation Army, a very conservative religious organization. The doubts she has have stayed in travels that have taken her to nearly every part of the world.

She said she doubted at the age of 19, when, in her native Holland, the German Gestapo took away an elderly Jewish couple whom Hartog had supplied with food. She doubted in Africa, where she operated a dispensary during the Belgian Congo's struggle for independence. She doubted in Bangladesh and Vietnam, where she faced overwhelming numbers of war refugees and battled bureaucracy and corruption. And she doubted in Thailand, where, until

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her recent return to Holland, she headed a Christian medical team that treated Indochinese refugees near the Thai-Cambodian border. At the age of 57, she carries her experience with disaster like battle scars, yet the booming authority of her voice constantly commands attention.

"I will never forget the children sitting on the border of Thailand and Cambodia or on the border of Bangladesh and India, still shaking because they had seen their families executed before their very eyes," she said. "I have to say that God is the center of my life and I am here because he sent me. But for my whole life I have to live with the thought that there are millions of refugees in the world struggling for survival...that sunken ( eyed) children with little hands are waiting for a little bit of rice with watery milk, that millions are going blind because of a lack of Vitamin A and good food."

She paused and then added: "And I believe I shall never get an answer to the question: 'Why is it happening in the world?'"

Some Christians in the refugee camps preach that the havoc endured by the Cambodians is their own fault. Not Hartog.

"We have people come into the camp who say, 'God does it all to the Cambodians because he wants them to go down on their knees,'" she said. "I say, 'This is our fault. People did that to the Cambodians, not God.'"

Hartog's staff members, who generally come from fundamentalist groups like her own, sometimes find her views hard to accept. Blessings over food in public places, repeated prayers of thanksgiving at the receipt of a small favor -- like being granted access to a camp -- are standard missionary practice.

Hartog recalled an incident with a woman staff member during a staff meeting held at a restaurant in Bangkok. The woman took out her guitar and prepared to sing a religious song.

"No, put your guitar away," Hartog said. "There will be no singing or playing here. We will have dinner and then we will have our meeting."

"But it's a good opportunity to witness."

"Then you should put your Christian love into action (providing medical service in the camps)."

"I think it is very good that they do not speak Cambodian," she said, referring to some of her staff. "They had to give (medical) care (rather than religious teaching)."

Staff members learned not to provide pat answers to the major's questions.

"One day I came in from a camp and I was so upset. I had found people dying and I was standing there with empty hands. 'Does God really care?' I said. 'I don't think any one of us could have taken what these people have taken.'"

One of Hartog's staffers demurred.

"Oh, major, there's grace enough for everyone," she said.

The major bristled.

"Now we live in a big house where...you have a cupboard and a bed and nice food and yet you can't stand each other...You're always asking me to (change you from room to room). And **yet** you're going to tell me you can stand the dirt at the refugee camps?"

Hartog's penchant for asking disturbing questions -- and sometimes providing even more unsettling answers -- extends to the world's leaders as well as its affluent societies. Many fundamentalist Christians believe the world's problems stem from having "non-Christian" governments. Not Hartog.

"The big nations that profess to be Christian are doing almost nothing about (situations that produce suffering)," she declared. "In the Netherlands, we have a Christian government and I thought they would be different, but they aren't."

Occasionally she goes on a lecture tour for the Salvation Army. She described a recent occasion when she spoke at a "luxurious Hyatt Hotel in Los Angeles." Her attention became riveted to the amount of food being served.

"I found it very difficult to speak at that luncheon," she said. "They came first with the salad, then with dish after dish after dish. There was so much food that was wasted."

Seeing the waste in America prompted yet another question from the major.

"Is this Heaven?" she wondered. "Is this all we get? I wonder if we in the West will get to Heaven and be told, 'You can't come in. You've already had yours.'"

In contrast to the niggardly charity of some of the affluent, Hartog cited the young man who approached her just over the border in Cambodia. He spoke fluent French and his family had been well-to-do before the Pol Pot takeover. His brother and sister had both been killed. At one time the young man and his sister made a pact: that when government soldiers came, she would say she was a maid and he would say he was a carpenter. But, when troops did come, the sister said, "I cannot lie. I am a student."

"Oh, you are a student; you know it all," a soldier replied.

And they killed her.

"I live with that," the young man told Hartog. "I live with the thought that I lied and I am alive and she couldn't lie and she was killed. Millions in our country had the same thing. I was Buddhist, but Buddha did not help me. And your God, you believe He created the whole world. But He did not help me. I don't know that any god could help us. I think the world is in the hands of the devil. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I understand you," Hartog said she replied. "I listen to your story and I cannot reconcile this with the God of Love. But I am here to help you."

The young man walked away.

About an hour later he returned, carrying a cup of water.

"He gave me the best that he had," she said. "I wonder how much we give? I walk in the midst of all this misery (and) I can't reconcile that. I always think, 'Is God here in this refugee camp?' I have my doubts. And I think you should."

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