

***Religion and Humanitarianism:
Floating Boundaries in a Globalizing World***

Conference Report

***Religion, Secularism, and Humanitarianism:
Exploring Differences, Boundaries, and Connections
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There is a dramatic disjuncture regarding what we think we know, what we really know, and what we want to know about the relationship between humanitarianism and religion. Religious organizations were at the forefront of humanitarianism in its beginning, and it is only a slight exaggeration to say “no religion, no humanitarianism.” Yet the conventional wisdom is that for much of the twentieth century secularism routed religion, only to find a resurgent religion at century’s end. What accounts for this pattern, which closely resembles arguments about the secularization of the world? Did religion hibernate? take on new forms? become embedded in the secular? Whenever faith-based institutions cross religious boundaries they seem to run into trouble with local populations, breeding misunderstanding, conflict, and violence. Christian agencies working among Muslim populations are accused of waging a holy war, and Muslim agencies working in the West are accused of exporting jihad. In this narrative, religion has the same negative impact on humanitarianism as it appears to have on the rest of the world. Yet religious forces have been instrumental in spreading an ethics of care, and *if*

humanitarianism is universal then much of the credit probably owes to the central place of compassion in the world's great religions.

Our collective ignorance regarding the relationship between humanitarianism and religion requires urgent attention for several reasons. Humanitarianism is undergoing a third wave of globalization. In the first wave Western aid agencies began spreading into the far corners of the world, leading to new kinds of cross-cultural encounters. In the second wave there was an explosion of agencies, largely coming from the West and frequently working in conflict zones in the Third World, triggering an attempt by aid agencies to identify common standards and vocabularies. The third wave has been defined by a dramatic growth in the humanitarian agencies from outside of the West. Like all such previous cross-cultural encounters, the consequences have included new kinds of challenges, new forms of competition, and confusion regarding whether words and actions have the same meaning. These complications have been accentuated by religious overtones, particularly because much of the growth in non-Western aid agencies is attributed to those with an Islamic identity. In the face of new tensions, there has been a surge of interest in dialogue and collaboration, which can lead to greater respect but may harden existing suspicions. The relationship between humanitarianism and religion mimics a defining narrative of contemporary globalization.

Against this setting nearly thirty practitioners from secular and faith-based agencies from around the world and scholars of humanitarianism gathered in Geneva, Switzerland for two days of conversation on the relationship between humanitarianism and religion. Organized by the University of Minnesota, the University of Toronto, the British-based Humanitarian Forum, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, and the Center on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and

made possible by a generous grant from the NY-based Luce Foundation, the conference was organized around two broad questions.

Does religion matter? The humanitarian sector operates comfortably with the distinction between “faith” and “secular” agencies, assuming but never fully exploring exactly how – or if – religion “matters.” Attempting to identify whether and how religion “matters” is no easy chore, requiring sensitivity to history, place, context, and culture.

Is religion a hindrance or help to cooperation, collaboration, and partnerships in the humanitarian sector? The need to act in concert has become more intense over the last two decades because of: the remarkable growth in the population of humanitarian organizations, especially from the global South; and humanitarianism’s expansion from relieving symptoms to tackling the root causes of suffering. Yet cooperation is easier said than done and the obstacles to cooperation are not merely technical but also are deeply political and cultural. What role, if any, does religion play in facilitating or hindering cooperation?

As expected, the meeting generated few conclusions and many new and unanticipated areas of debate and discussion. Based on the memos prepared in advance of the workshop by the invited scholars and the two-day dialogue, this report identifies three themes:

- § the ever-changing boundaries between religion and secularism and the omnipresent role of faith;
- § the triumph of religion over secularism;
- § the elusive search for a common framework in a world of diversity.

One caveat before proceeding. We do not expect everyone at the conference to agree that these were the three most important themes or with our interpretation of the. However, we hope that they capture the vitality, urgency, and necessity of further research and dialogue on the ever changing relationship between religion and humanitarianism in world affairs.

Religion, Secularism, and Faith

Although religion was always alive and well, many scholars, influenced by various forms of modernization and secularization theory, assumed that in the public sphere secularism had smothered religious belief. As scholars became painfully aware that their theories did not

reflect the lived experience of the majority, they began to explore the changing boundaries between the religious and the secular, how and why these boundaries have shifted ground over the decades, and how the religious and the secular are intertwined. The workshop's discussion reflected this more complicated and nuanced understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular, and four elements stood out.

No Fixed Relationship

The prevailing assumption is that faith-based action differs from secular-based action. But how? In attempting to identify whether and how religious identity matters, scholars and practitioners have offered a range of plausible connections, including its effect on: the motives, principles, ethics and content of humanitarian action; the relationship to the meaning and practice of politics and the readiness to spearhead social change; the agency's structure and willingness to adopt modern principles of organization; accountability to donors and local communities; and the moral economy, including fund raising patterns and portrayal of victims.

Perhaps the single clearest differences between religious and secular organization reside in their motives and legitimating discourse. Simply put, religious organizations cite God and secular organizations humanity. In fact, those participants from religious organizations, Islamic and Christian alike, were quite insistent that their differed from their secular counterparts with respect to the sources of inspiration and action. Those working in Islamic agencies commented on how: the Koran shaped their priorities, including providing clean water and food assistance during Ramadan; influenced their desire to find an Islamic-version of micro-finance; and an effort to work with Islamic scholars to translate principles of faith into development programs. Those from Christian agencies offered similar observations regarding the teachings of Jesus Christ. Yet even on matters of motivation and discourse the dividing lines were blurrier than

expected. Many so-called secular agencies were faith–founded even if they did not currently wear their religious faith on their sleeves. And, several scholars observed that secular agencies also operate with a type of faith and even with a discourse that has religious overtones.

Another promising line of argument concerned the relationship between religious identity and access to local populations. As suggested by Jonathan Benthall’s concept of “cultural proximity,” the argument is that the cultural proximity between the giver and the recipient is a good predictor of the ability of the giver to gain access to, and be accepted by, the recipient. So, Islamic agencies will have a relatively easier time working in a Muslim context than will Christian or secular agencies. Likewise, Islamic agencies will have a more difficult time working in Europe than will Christian agencies. Islamic Relief’s religious identity complicates its life in the West but improves its access, relative to non-Western aid agencies, in Islamic societies. In fact, the same Western governments who look suspiciously at Islamic Relief when it is working in the West have come to depend more heavily on it for distributing aid in the Islamic world. The impact of cultural proximity is also likely to be influenced by the level of instability on the ground and whether aid is being given to a religious minority. For instance, Russia has closed down Islamic Relief twenty-seven times in Chechnya. Although arguments regarding cultural proximity assume that differences between religions matter, Bertrand Taithe suggested that religious organizations, because they are religious, will have an easier time than secular agencies communicating with local populations, regardless of their religious orientation, because the discourse of religion is more familiar to most populations than is the discourse of secular humanism.

There is growing evidence that local populations use binaries rather than fine-grained distinctions to distinguish among foreign aid agencies. Whether or not agencies explicitly adopt

a secular or faith-based identity often matters little for how they are perceived; in many countries secular agencies are sometimes viewed as religious due merely to their Western identity. For example, some Sudanese viewed Save the Children as a Christian organization, despite the agency's professed and constantly publicized secular identity. Caroline Abu-Sada wrote that MSF has experienced similar challenges in various African contexts because of the belief that it is a Western religious organization.¹

Although secular aid agencies might feel frustrated that local populations do not see the differences that are so apparent to them, they need to acknowledge how they operate in a religious world. The omnipresence of religion is apparent in several dimensions. Religion is part of humanitarianism's past. It is not only that the origins of humanitarianism are partly religious. It also is that for many populations missionaries were their first encounter with Westerners bearing gifts and where the colonial encounter included the gun, the flag, and the bible. Bertrand Taithe writes that "NGOs intervene in a world mapped out for the purpose of interventions by missionaries,... they often occupy a similar niche, fulfill similar roles and enter in a dialogue with people who have experience of missionary work."² In a similar register, Abu-Sada discussed how MSF has encountered the legacy of Anglican missionary activity in various operations; indeed, for many societies missionaries were their first and only encounter with Europeans until the arrival of MSF.³ Contemporary humanitarians often are unaware of how their technologies owe much to missionary activity.⁴ Moreover, secular agencies often work alongside religious agencies, a pattern of fraternal cooperation that can potentially lead local

¹ Abu-Sada memo, 4-5.

² Taithe memo, 8.

³ Abu-Sada memo.

⁴ Taithe memo, 8.

populations to assume that they are one and the same. Lastly, humanitarians frequently operate in societies in which the religious and the secular are not at all divided, or divided in the same way as in the West.

Any differences that might exist between religious and secular agencies also might have narrowed over the recent decades because of institutional forces, international events, globalization, and the competition for funding.⁵ Barnett wrote how the forces of maturation, modernity, and money are compelling religious and secular aid agencies to look and act increasingly alike. Hopgood and Vinjamuri argued that the search for money can be a great equalizer. In the UK, for instance, the Charities Act defines transparency and accountability for all charities. In response to these memos, many practitioners observed the homogenizing effects of militarization, funding, and geopolitics. Faith-based organizations, and especially so Muslim agencies after September 11, face additional pressures from donor governments to gravitate toward common (Western) standards and to join professional associations such as International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).⁶ These global forces will not have comparable impacts on all agencies, and variations in response can be attributed to many factors, including but not only religious identity.

Creating the Religious and the Secular

Although the distinction between the secular and the religious are rooted in culture, history, and contingency, several participants noted how secular and religious agencies have a vested interest in creating and maintaining these boundaries. Consider, for instance, the

⁵ Hopgood & Vinjamuri memo; Barnett, memo.

⁶ See Benthall's memo for an overview of the US campaign against Muslim organizations. See Hopgood and Vinjamuri, 10-11 for a discussion of increased funding in the US and UK for FBOs.

marketing of humanitarianism. For some religious agencies their religious identity is an effective marketing device and gives them access to a built-in constituency, while for secular agencies their nondenominational character can also be part of the advertising campaign. Religious and secular agencies, depending on circumstances, accentuate these distinctions in order to gain access to populations in need. The important point is to recognize how aid agencies, by positioning themselves as religious or secular, help to recreate these distinctions.

A Surfeit of Faith

Our discussion of the relationship between religion and secularism in humanitarianism took a curious turn: it began with the presumption that there are clear differences between religious and secular agencies and ended with a general acceptance that humanitarian organizations are faith-based in one way or another. Whether using the language of cosmopolitanism, the transcendent, the universal, or some other enveloping discourse, most participants agreed that they believed that there was something “bigger than themselves” and that working in humanitarianism gave them an opportunity to connect the immediate and the practical to the divine and the supernatural. As Barnett wrote, “To paraphrase Leo Tolstoy’s quip about families, all humanitarian organizations are faith-based – but they are faith-based in different ways. We would do well to dispense with the humanitarian sector’s all too comfortable but misleading formulation of faith-based and secular agencies with its presumption that the only kind of faith is religious faith.” Paras and Stein similarly observed that even secular humanitarian agencies “see themselves as dwelling in a moral universe that transcends the here and now.”⁷ Secularism itself may be thought of as a type of faith.

⁷ Barnett memo, 2

Is “faith-based” a distinction without a difference? Perhaps. While the humanitarian sector operates with the distinction between religious and secular agencies, it is not entirely clear why this distinction is more important than any other, for instance, national identity, mandate, size, or funding source. Yet participants pointed again and again to evidence of patterns of difference.

The Triumph of Religion

“Missionaries win,” provocatively asserted Bertrand Taithe. Perhaps no other comment generated as much heat as this one. At the time he was referring to how religious agencies appear to have greater stick-to-itiveness, are prepared to remain in the field for longer periods of time and endure greater hardship than are secular agencies; this is an instance, he suggested, in which religious faith translates into concrete commitments that have meaningful consequences. Many participants returned to this assertion and used it to make broader points about why religious agencies might have more vitality than secular agencies; their enduring presence on the ground, some argued, means that they are more likely to be trusted, are more likely to be sensitive to local needs, and are more likely to be genuinely respectful of local cultures.

Yet the claim that “missionaries win” had another dimension – neither secularism nor humanitarianism can address the search for meaning. Secularism, and its liberal counterparts, are focused on individual autonomy, liberty, and equality, but after the individual is secured there remains the gnawing question of the individual’s relationship to society, community, and the cosmos. Humanitarianism is about needs, but once material needs are provided it says little about spiritual needs. Religion fills the void. Religious faith helps to give individuals greater meaning and humanitarianism a sense of purpose. But it is not only religion that might play that role, so, too might human rights, which is often called a secular religion. Perhaps one reason

why humanitarianism has become absorbed into the language of human rights is because human rights helps to fill a spiritual vacuum. If “missionaries win” it might be because, contrary to conventional wisdom in the West, religion never disappeared.

Unity Amidst Diversity?

One reason why those in the practitioner community are keen to convene cross-cultural dialogues is because of the desire to find common ground. Workshop participants identified three frameworks for unity - a humanitarian ethic, human rights, and technical knowledge. In each case, though, there was a countervailing demand to recognize the false grail of universalism and the importance of diversity. If this sounds familiar, it should – it is the siren of multiculturalism in a globalizing world.

A Humanitarian Ethic

Many in the humanitarian sector claim that humanitarianism, understood as the desire to provide life-saving assistance to those in dire need, is truly universal. It reflects a commitment to an ethic of compassion, which can be found in all cultures, religions, and traditions, and an ethic of humanity, in which all are equal and equally deserving of assistance. These ethics, in turn, inform the humanitarian principle of impartiality, and, with it, the secondary principles of independence and neutrality.

Yet many at the workshop challenged this conclusion on the grounds that not only is there no global consensus but Western aid agencies disagree among themselves regarding the meaning and principles of humanitarianism. The ICRC defends a narrow meaning of humanitarianism – the provision of life saving relief and emergency aid, which has lost out to a more expansive vision of humanitarianism that includes the attempt to tackle the root causes of suffering. Christian and Islamic agencies were united in their belief that humans have material

and spiritual needs and that humanitarianism must include various forms of interventions to end human suffering. And, when we go beyond the Abrahamic traditions we discover more interpretations. In contrast to Western traditions that, at times, discriminate between the deserving and undeserving poor, Erica Bornstein argued that the Hindu tradition of *dān* informs a view of humanitarianism as a disinterested gift without expectation of return.⁸

Nor is there agreement on the principles of humanitarianism. While some insisted that impartiality had a universal status, others suggested that the practice of impartiality was culturally conditioned. There was even greater disagreement on the principle of neutrality; some elevated neutrality to the same plane as impartiality, while others contended that it was highly context dependent and perhaps even impossible, especially for agencies who want to bear witness and demonstrate solidarity with the victims. One participant noted that a recent survey of NGOs revealed a diversity of interpretations of humanity, neutrality, and independence. In general, the ethic and principles of humanitarianism derive from particular configurations of moral, ethical, and religious understandings of humanitarianism, often times evolving from a negotiation between humanitarian agencies, both secular and religious alike, and those in political power.

Human Rights

Several practitioners reflected how their organizations had connected humanitarianism to the universal through the discourse of human rights. They spoke of how human rights had ascended to universal status and how their organizations were able to overcome differences over values by appealing to human rights. The possibility that human rights might unify what humanitarianism could not surprised many participants for several reasons. Humanitarianism,

⁸ Bornstein memo.

anchored in a language of needs, in comparison to human rights, with its discourse of rights, seemed a more promising platform for universal standing. The language of human rights is closely associated with various forms of cultural imperialism. The contemporary international rights discourse has Judeo-Christian roots (even if there is evidence of cross-cultural agreement on some aspects of rights). One participant speculated that if practitioners began to specify these rights they would encounter many disagreements over meaning.⁹

Humanitarian agencies and human rights agencies have clashed over the last two decades as, according to many relief agencies, the logic of rights has altered the logic of needs. Along these lines, Alex de Waal argued that the “Calvinist moral logic” of human rights deploys a discourse of good and evil, assuming that its imperatives are ethically and analytically superior to other demands for action.¹⁰ As the Darfur case illustrates, he continued, the discourse of human rights can foreclose possible responses. Once grassroots activists framed Darfur as a human rights emergency and the killings as a genocide then they became committed to military action and the International Criminal Court’s involvement – regardless of whether the rate of killing receded (which it did, precisely because of the efforts of aid agencies) and whether an indictment would jeopardize a political solution. To criticize their interpretation of events and their remedies, it appeared, was to situate oneself on the wrong side of history.

A Modern Sector

Religious and secular agencies also expressed the belief that the modernization of the sector might create a common ground. The humanitarian sector has modernized over the last several decades, becoming more bureaucratic and routinized in how it operates on the world,

⁹ De Waal memo.

¹⁰ De Waal memo.

professionalizing, and rationalizing with the creation of common rules to regulate their activities. Participants repeatedly pointed to the ability of the Codes of Conduct, Sphere, professional training, mechanisms of accountability, and of evidence-based assessments to overcome differences once defined over value. In short, the modernization of the sector was depoliticizing humanitarianism, turning what were once highly political and value-laden disputes into disagreements that could potentially be settled by objective metrics.

Yet many participants questioned the ability of techniques, codes, standards, and measures to overcome cultural divides. To begin, this process of depoliticization through technical standards does not remove the presence of values, it only alters their appearance. Consider, for the instance, the language of accountability; everyone agreed that it was important but there was little agreement on what definition to use or how to accommodate the diversity of meanings. For some it meant being transparent regarding their actions, which placed a premium on providing public justifications for their actions. For others it meant providing clear and accurate financial statements that could be delivered to donors. And for still others it meant taking into account those who might be effected by their actions.¹¹ No agency objected to the desirability of evidence-based programs, but they did not agree on what should be the policy priorities, and some worried that the emphasis on measurement would lead to the neglect of intangibles such as witnessing and solidarity. Professionalization and bureaucratization cannot always accommodate deeply cherished values; several participants from religious agencies worried that these modern principles might compromise their religious commitments. There was the additional question of whether the very same process of standardization that might help

¹¹ See Bornstein's memo for a discussion of differing notions of accountability in Hindu *dān*.

produce interagency collaboration might also create greater distance between the “experts” and local populations.

In addition to questions regarding whether technical knowledge could help produce greater cooperation, others challenged the assumption that conflict over values was truly an obstacle to cooperation. To begin, many practitioners suggested that they had little trouble cooperating with those from other agencies, including those from other religions, when they were working in the field. Humanitarianism is a practical project and is practically-minded. (One participant from an Islamic agency noted that the ability of different religious organization to work work together provided a role model for local populations in Bosnia.) Practitioners had various tales from the field, but religion frequently did not figure prominently; instead, more traditional, mundane, and worldly concerns came to the fore, including personality conflict, turf protection, competition for resources and status, and the lack of time.

Many of the participants spoke of the importance of tolerance, humility, modesty, and respect. Humanitarians needed to recognize that when they enter into a foreign country their ability to help is dependent on their ability to listen and learn. Tolerance and respect, moreover, are not the same. Tolerance, observes the political theorist Wendy Brown, can be a euphemism for our aversions: when we really do not like something but feel the need to live-and-let-live, we tend to use the language of tolerance.¹² In other words, I might not like you but I will tolerate you. As one participant put it, respect means “seeing another person like a human being, and not seeing oneself as superior.”

¹² Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in an Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Conclusions and Beginnings

Every question posed about the relationship between religion and humanitarianism generated several other questions and, by the end of the workshop, we had a roomful of questions. What are the different kinds of faith that exist and exactly how, when, and why do they translate into meaningful differences? How does faith interact with other factors to shape the behavior of aid agencies and converging and diverging trends that we see in the sector? Is faith the crucial variable, or, for instance, is it all about money? Knowing whether and how religion matters for inter-agency cooperation is important. How do the varied interpretations of the boundaries between the religious and the secular affect the possibility of cross-cultural cooperation and understanding? Both when it is present and when it is absent, it shapes the opportunities for collaboration.

Where should we start to try and tease out these differences? Are certain issues particularly instructive for better understanding the relationship between religion and humanitarianism? Although there was little mention of gender, in many areas of life gender is a flashpoint. Consequently, a comparison of aid agencies on issues pertaining to gender might help us better understand how different kinds of faith are translated into action. Other subjects, many of which touch on questions of sexuality, personal conduct, and cultural norms, also appear to be particularly interesting avenues of further discussion; topics like HIV/AIDS and reproductive health are areas of considerable controversy among many religious agencies and among devout populations. Are there particular cases and episodes that might be particularly illuminating?

A particularly important question is: how should those in the humanitarian sector find consensus? To what extent can discourses of ethics, human rights, and professional standards

create a common ground? What are their limits? What other areas might serve a unifying function? How can aid agencies balance the search for common ground with respect for difference? How will such decisions affect the prospects of cooperation? How should the conversation across aid agencies be structured? according to what principles? Some cross-cultural encounters, especially in professionalized sectors, are less of a dialogue among equals and more of an established elite informing the initiates what are the rules of the club. Can agencies avoid being paternalistic? What if aid agencies emphasize the quality of the dialogue itself rather than whether it leads to a preconceived set of standards?

To better understand these issues, practitioners and scholars will have to work together. Agencies have a wealth of data and experiences but they lack the resources or time to reflect systematically and rigorously on the past. Scholars, on the other hand, have certain skill sets but often do not have an understanding of the richness of the history and the changing complexity of relations from place to place. This meeting brought together an interesting cross-section of the humanitarian and scholarly communities, but future conversations would benefit from including missionaries, human rights activists, scholars of religion, and religious agencies that extend outside the Christian and Muslim orbit. It is critical that these conversations also take place in the global South and include local practitioners and scholars.