Religion, Secularism, and Humanitarianism:
Exploring Differences, Boundaries, and Connections

Religion and Humanitarianism:

Floating Boundaries in a Globalizing World

10-11 October 2009, Graduate Institute of International and
Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland

THE GRADUATE INSTITUTE | GENEVA

**CENTRE ON CONFLICT,
DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING**

HUBERT H. HUMPHREY
INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
MUNK CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
AT TRINITY COLLEGE

THE
HUMANITARIAN
FORUM
PROGRESS THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

icva

AGENDA

Villa Barton, 132 Rue de Lausanne, Auditorium Jacques-Freymond (AJF)
The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva

Saturday, October 10

10:00–10:30   **Welcome and Introductions**

10:30–11:45   **Belief, Faith, and Religion**

What beliefs drive a desire to help suffering people? Do the sources of these beliefs matter for the meaning and practices of response? Are religious beliefs discernibly different from other kinds of beliefs and spiritual commitments? How do different kinds of beliefs lead to different understandings of which suffering strangers matter? What are their physical and spiritual needs? What kind of world is being imagined and created through their actions and commitments? Do different kinds of beliefs lead to different "hierarchy of needs?" Can we identify any generalizable relationship between different kinds of beliefs and different commitments? If so, what are they? If not, what does that say about how we think about the world of humanitarianism.

Chair: Dr. Hany al-Banna
Panelists: de Waal, Alex; Hicks, Rosemary; Taithe, Bertrand

11:45–12:00   **Coffee Break**

12:00–13:15   **Differing Faith Organizations, Developing in Similar Ways?**

What is the evidence that external pressures – such as competition for funds and the need to professionalize and develop accountability mechanisms – caused agencies to converge around similar organizational structures, marketing strategies, and the like? What is the evidence that aid agencies are converging around a common language and set of humanitarian principles? If they are, why? Given the external pressures to conform, how do (religious) agencies maintain their identity and sense of purpose?

Chair: Jonathan Benthall
Panelists: Hopgood, Stephen and Vinjamuri, Leslie; Barnett, Michael; Bornstein, Erica

13:15–14:30   **Lunch**

14:30–15:45   **Deliverers and Recipients**

Do different kinds of agencies choose different places to work? If so, why? How does this affect the principle of impartiality? How does religion affect the relationship between the deliverers of aid and the local recipients? How does a common identity between the deliverer and recipient affect how aid is delivered? How does aid affect the kinds of relationships that can develop between aid agencies and local populations? What kinds of space do agencies require to operate? How do local populations perceive aid agencies from different/shared cultural backgrounds? Does it affect the willingness to trust? The kinds of institutions of trust that must develop between agencies and populations?

Chair: Ed Schenkenberg
Panelists: Stein, Janice and Paras, Andrea; Benthall, Jonathan; Abu-Sada, Caroline

15:45–16:00   **Coffee**

16:00–17:30   **Informal Discussion on Sudan, led by Alex de Waal**

19:00   **Dinner**

Sunday, October 11

09:00–10:15   **Cooperation Between Agencies**

Cooperation is always a challenge because of the existence of competition, suspicion, and mistrust, and there is no reason to believe that religious identity, or any identity for that matter, is the principal obstacle to long-term cooperation and genuine partnerships. What are some of the principal obstacles? How can these obstacles be removed or reduced?

Chair: Janice Stein

10:15–10:30   **Coffee Break**

10:30–12:30   **Break Out Session: A Universal Humanitarianism?**

Instead of asking whether humanitarianism is universal, this session asks: how might humanitarianism become universal? What form of dialogue would be more likely to lead to a wide-ranging consensus? Do all elements of humanitarianism have to be universal? Do such agreements need to be translated into "codes" or declarations? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?

12:30–13:00   **Report Findings**

13:00   **Lunch and Next Steps**

14:00   **Authors' Meeting**

Religion, Secularism, and Humanitarianism:
Exploring Differences, Boundaries, and Connections

Religion and Humanitarianism:
Floating Boundaries in a Globalizing World

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 would be a slight exaggeration to say "no religion, no humanitarianism." Yet conventional wisdom holds that for much of the twentieth century secularism triumphed over religion, within humanitarianism as in the wider world, only to find a resurgence of religion at the century's end.

What accounts for this pattern? Did religion 'hibernate'? Take on new forms? Become embedded in the secular? In this line of thought, religion has had the same impact on humanitarianism as it appears to have had on the rest of the world. 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*. 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 existing relationship between humanitarianism and religion requires urgent attention for several reasons. Humanitarianism is undergoing a third wave of globalization; during the first wave, Western aid agencies began spreading into the far corners of the world,

leading to new kinds of cross-cultural encounters. The second wave witnessed a significant increase in Western agencies often working in conflict zones in the developing countries: the consequence of this trend was the attempt by aid agencies to identify common standards and vocabularies. The third wave has been defined by a dramatic growth in non-western humanitarian agencies. 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 across contexts. 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 also can harden existing suspicions in the process. 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 on October 10-11th 2009 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 **Centre 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 research.[1] 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.

---

[1] The authors of the report would like to highlight that it was not expected from all panelists at the conference to agree that these were the three most important themes, or with our interpretation of them. However, they hope to have captured 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 secularism had silenced religious belief in the public sphere. As scholars came to recognize 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 three 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 clearest differences between religious and secular organization reside in their motives and legitimating discourse. Simply put, religious organizations cite God and secular organizations reference Humanity. In fact, those participants from religious organizations were quite insistent that they differ from their secular counterparts with respect to the sources of inspiration and action. Those working in Islamic agencies commented on how the *Koran* shapes their priorities, including providing clean water and food assistance during Ramadan; influences their desire to offer an Islamic-version of micro-finance; and spurs 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 do 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

> " Simply put, religious organizations cite God and secular organizations reference Humanity. "

recipient.[2] So, Islamic agencies will have a relatively easier time working in a Muslim context than will Christian or secular agencies. But, they will have a more difficult time working in the West than will Christian agencies. 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.[3] Also, there is growing evidence that local populations use binaries rather than fine-grained distinctions to differentiate 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.[4]

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. 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".[5] In a similar register, Abu-Sada discussed how MSF has encountered the legacy of Anglican missionary activity in various operations; indeed, in many societies, missionaries were the first and only encounter of the local population with Europeans until the arrival of MSF.[6] Contemporary humanitarians are often unaware of how much their technologies owe to missionary activity.[7] Moreover, secular agencies often work alongside religious agencies, a pattern of fraternal cooperation that can potentially lead local populations to assume that they are one and

---

[2]   Benthall, Jonathan (University College- London), "Thoughts on 'Cultural Proximity'", Memo to the Conference

[3]   Taithe, Bertrand (University of Manchester), "Transparency, Compassion and Faith", Memo to the Conference

[4]   Abu-Sada, Caroline (MSF-Switzerland), "Reversing the Optics: How Beneficiaries See Aid Workers", Memo to the Conference: 4-5

[5]   Taithe, Bertrand, *Op.cit:* 8

[6]   Abu-Sada, Caroline, *Op.cit:* 4-5

[7]   Taithe, Bertrand, *Op.cit:* 8

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.[8] Barnett wrote about 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 Muslim agencies after September 11, face additional pressures from donor governments to gravitate toward common (Western) standards and to join professional associations such as the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA).[9] These global forces will not have comparable impacts on all agencies, and variations in response can

> **"The important point is to recognize how aid agencies, by positioning themselves as religious or secular, help to recreate these same distinctions. "**

---

[8] Hopgood, Stephen & Vinjamuri, Leslie (School of Oriental and African Studies- University of London), "Faith in Markets", Memo to the Conference- and Barnett, Michael, "Faith in the Machine? Humanitarianism in a Bureaucratic Age", Memo to the Conference

[9] See Benthall, Jonathan (University College- London), "Thoughts on 'Cultural Proximity'", Memo to the Conference, Hopgood, Stephen & Vinjamuri, Leslie (School of Oriental and African Studies- University of London), "Faith in Markets", Memo to the Conference: 10-11

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 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 same distinctions.

A Surfeit of Faith
Our discussion on 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 is something "bigger than themselves" and that working in humanitarianism gives 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"[10]. Paras and Stein similarly observed that even secular

---

[10] Barnett, Michael (University of Minnesota), "Faith in the Machine? Humanitarianism in a Bureaucratic Age", Memo to the Conference: 2

> **All humanitarian organizations are faith-based – but they are faith-based in different ways.**

humanitarian agencies "see themselves as dwelling in a moral universe that transcends the here and now"[11]. Secularism itself may be thought of as a type of faith.

"Faith-based" might imply a sign of distinction without carrying a real difference. While it is clear that 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, be it national identity, mandate, size, or funding source.

THE TRIUMPH OF RELIGION

"Missionaries win", asserted Bertrand Taithe provocatively. Perhaps no other comment generated as many heated debates as this one. Taithe 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.[12] 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 religion triumphs over secularism 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 by giving individuals greater meaning and providing humanitarianism with 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 adopted the language of human rights is because human rights help to fill a spiritual vacuum. If "missionaries win" it might be because, contrary to conventional wisdom in the West, religion never disappeared.

> **Humanitarianism is about needs, but once material needs are provided it says little about spiritual needs; Religion fills the void, so too might human rights, which are often called a secular religion.**

11   Paras, Andrea, Stein, Janice and Vipond, Rob (University of Toronto), "The Sanctity of Humanitarian Space: Religious and Universalist Discourses", Memo to the Conference

12   Taithe, Bertrand, *Op.cit*

Conference Participants

Al Banna, Hany; *Humanitarian Forum*

Abu-Sada, Caroline; *Médecins Sans Frontières – Switzerland*

Antoun, Georges; *International Orthodox Christian Charities*

Argun, Selim; *Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief*

Barnett, Michael; *University of Minnesota*

Barras, Amelie; *PhD Student, London School of Economics*

Benthall, Jonathan; *University College – London*

Bornstein, Erica; *University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee*

Captier, Christian; *Médecins Sans Frontières – Switzerland*

Gross Stein, Janice; *University of Toronto*

Hassaballa, Ibrahim; *International Islamic Charitable Organization*

Hicks, Rosemary; *Columbia University*

Hirsh, Dean; *World Vision International*

Hopgood, Stephen; *School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*

Jansen, Annette; *Independent Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy Advisor*

Jütersonke, Oliver; *Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding*

Kalckreuth, Georg von; *Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies*

Karafis, Jamal; *Islamic Relief Switzerland*

Kennedy, Denis; *PhD Student, University of Minessota*

Khan Ajaz, Ahmed; *Islamic Relief Worldwide*

Krause, Jana; *Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding*

Mohanna, Kamel; *Amel Association – Arab NGOs Network*

Mu'ti, Abdul; *Humanitarian Forum Indonesia*

Ndiaye, Mamadou; *Office Africain pour le Développement et la Coopération*

Ofteringer, Ronald; *International Committee of the Red Cross*

Paras, Andrea; *University of Toronto*

Pilar, Ulrike von; *Independent consultant for Humanitarian Policy and Practice*

Pilegaard, Lisbeth; *Norwegian Refugee Council*

Rana, Raj; *The WolfGroup*

Sahin, Izzet; *Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief*

Schenkenberg, Ed; *International Council of Voluntary Agencies*

Shäublin, Emmanuel; *Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding*

Shaw-Hamilton, James; *Humanitarian Forum*

Taithe, Bertrand; *University of Manchester*

Thaut, Laura; *PhD student, University of Minnesota*

Vinjamuri, Leslie; *School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*

Volkman, Toby; *Luce Foundation*

de Waal, Alex; *Social Science Research Council*

Memos

AUTHORS AND TOPICS

Abu-Sada, Caroline (MSF-Switzerland). "Reversing the Optics: How Beneficiaries See Aid Workers", presented to the panel "Deliverers and Recipients".

Barnett, Michael (University of Minnesota). "Faith in the Machine? Humanitarianism in a Bureaucratic Age", presented to the panel "Differing Faith Organizations, Developing in Similar Ways?"

Benthall, Jonathan (University College-London). "Cultural Proximity" in Humanitarian Aid", presented to the panel "Deliverers and Recipients".

Bornstein, Erica (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee). "Garnering Trust: Hindu dan and Humanitarianism in New Delhi", presented to the panel "Differing Faith Organizations, Developing in Similar Ways?"

Hicks, Rosemary (Columbia University). "Needs and Rights in Humanitarian Action", presented to the panel "Belief, Faith and Religion".

Hopgood, Stephen & Vinjamuri, Leslie (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London). "Religious and Secular NGOs and the Marketing of Humanitarianism", presented to the panel "Differing Faith Organizations, Developing in Similar Ways?"

Jansen, Annette. "Drawn by Disasters: Why the Human Rights Movement Struggles with Good News Stories".

___. "Towards an Anthropological Analysis of the Human Rights Worldview".

Paras, Andrea & Gross Stein, Janice (University of Toronto). "The Sacred Space of Humanitarianism", presented to the panel "Deliverers and Recipients".

Taithe, Bertrand (University of Manchester). "Transparency, Compassion, and Faith", presented to the panel "Belief, Faith and Religion".

de Waal, Alex (Social Science Research Council). "The Problem of 'Evil' in Secular Humanitarian and Human Rights Discourse", presented to the panel "Belief, Faith and Religion".

“ *Western aid agencies disagree among themselves regarding the meaning and principles of humanitarianism.* ”

UNITY AMIDST DIVERSITY?

One reason why those in the practitioner community are keen to convene cross-cultural dialogue 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.

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 a devotion to 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 ground that not only is there no global consensus but Western aid agencies disagree among themselves regarding the meaning and principles of humanitarianism. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defends a 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. Erica Bornstein argued that other non-Abrahamic traditions

such as the Hindu tradition of *dan* informs a view of humanitarianism as a disinterested gift without expectation of return.[13] Similarly, many participants agreed that there is no consensus on the principles of humanitarianism. While some insisted that impartiality has a universal status, others suggested that the practice of impartiality is culturally conditioned. Greater disagreement manifested on the principle of neutrality; some elevated neutrality to the same plane as impartiality, while others contended that it is highly context dependent and perhaps even impossible, especially for agencies who want to bear witness and demonstrate solidarity with victims. One participant noted that a recent survey of NGOs revealed a diversity of interpretations of humanity, neutrality, and independence. In general, the ethics and principles of humanitarianism derive from particular configurations of moral, ethical, and religious understandings of humanitarianism, often evolving from a negotiation between humanitarian agencies, both secular and religious alike, and those in political power.

Human Rights

Several practitioners reflected on how their organizations are able to universalize humanitarianism through the discourse of human rights. They spoke of how human rights have ascended to universal status and how organizations are 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. The humanitarian discourse, in comparison to the human rights one, is anchored in a language of needs and seems a more promising platform for universal standing. The language of human rights is closely associated with various forms of cultural imperialism. Moreover, 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.

---

13 Bornstein, Erica (University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee), "Garnering Trust: Hindu Dan and Humanitarianism in New Delhi", Memo to the Conference

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.[14] 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 genocide, they became committed to military action and the International Criminal Court's involvement – regardless of the dynamics of the conflict and whether an indictment would jeopardize a political solution in Darfur and in South Sudan. To criticize the activists' interpretation of events and their remedies, it appeared, was to situate oneself on the wrong side of history.

> **"** The possibility that human rights might unify what humanitarianism could not surprised many participants. **"**

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 in the world, 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, and mechanisms of accountability to overcome differences once

---

[14] *Ibid*

defined by values. 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. This process of depoliticization through technical standards does not remove the presence of values, it only alters their appearance.

Yet many participants questioned the capacity of techniques, codes, standards, and measures to help them overcome cultural divides. For instance, everyone agreed on the importance of the concept of accountability but there was little agreement on how to accommodate the diversity of meanings. For some it means being transparent regarding their actions. For others it means providing clear and accurate financial statements delivered to donors, or taking into account those who might be affected by their actions. 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 helps produce interagency collaboration might also create greater distance between the "experts" and local populations.

In addition to such questions, others challenged the assumption that conflict over values is truly an obstacle to cooperation. Many practitioners suggested that they have little trouble cooperating with those from other agencies, including those from other religions, when they are working in the field. (One participant from an Islamic agency noted that the ability of different religious organization to work together provided a role model for local populations in Bosnia). Humanitarianism is a practically-minded project; practitioners had various tales from the field in which religion seldom figured 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 to efficiently tackle a project.

Many of the participants spoke of the importance of tolerance, humility, modesty, and respect. Humanitarians need 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.[15] 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."

---

[15] Brown, Wendy, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in an Age of Identity and Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008

"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."

Conference Participants

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 for further research; what are the different kinds of faith that exist and 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 is it all about the availability of funds? 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?

On another note, although there was little mention of gender, 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 than they are an opportunity for the established elite to teach initiates 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 experience 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.

> 66 To better understand the link between Humanitarianism and Religion, practitioners and scholars will have to work together. 99

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Barnett is the Harold Stassen Chair of International Relations at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota,

Denis Kennedy is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at the University of Minnesota,

Janice Stein is the Belzberg Professor of Conflict Management in the Department of Political Science and Director of the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto,

Laura Thaut is a PhD Student in Political Science at the University of Minnesota.

The CCDP is a research centre of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. It aims to offer policy relevant research built upon strong academic foundations on a variety of themes and issues, including: peacebuilding and reconciliation; post-conflict transitions and state-building; armed violence and development; and multi-stakeholder initiatives and the politics of monitoring and evaluation. The CCDP also participates in and supports a variety of outreach initiatives, including training modules, lectures and briefings, publications and other activities designed to disseminate the fruits of its research projects to relevant stakeholders beyond the academic community.

CCDP Conference Reports result from conferences and events hosted and organized by the centre. Their aim is to secure the findings and opportunities for further research discussed during the conference.

For more information, please visit **www.graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp**

The conference was hosted by the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland.

The conference was organized in partnership with
University of Minnesota, **www.umn.edu**
University of Toronto, **www.utoronto.ca**
Humanitarian Forum, **www.humanitarianforum.org**
International Council of Voluntary Agencies, **www.icva.ch**

The conference was funded by a generous grant from the New York-based Luce Foundation, **www.hluce.org**