HISTORIES OF HUMANITARIANISM: RELIGIOUS, PHILANTHROPIC, AND POLITICAL PRACTICES IN THE MODERNIZING WORLD

Conference at the GHI Washington and University of Maryland, College Park, March 7-8, 2014. Conveners: Sonya Michel (University of Maryland), and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI). Participants: Emily Baughan (Columbia University), Jacqueline deVries (Augsburg College), Heide Fehrenbach (Northern Illinois University), Poppy Fry (University of Puget Sound) Rebecca Gill (University of Huddersfield) Christine Hartig (University of Flensburg), Julia Irwin (University of South Florida), Seth Koven (Rutgers University) isa Leff (American University), Susan Levine (University of Illinois) Yannan Li (Indiana University), Giulia Marotta (Sorbonne-Paris IV), Amanda Moniz (National History Center), Marian Moser Jones (UMD), Brian Phillips (Co-Editor Journal of Human Rights Practice), Francesca Piana (Columbia University), Richard Price (UMD), Alexandra Przyrembel (Free University Berlin), Robin Seelan (Loyola College).

Starting in the nineteenth century, societies on both sides of the Atlantic initiated a series of strategies and institutions designed to provide emergency assistance and humanitarian interventions across the globe. Such practices were rooted in earlier colonial and religious missions, in pre-modern government claims of responsibility for co-religionists even beyond national borders, and in the activities of domestic relief organizations. As NGOs largely independent of national governments, they became agents of globalization processes that reached an initial highpoint at the end of the nineteenth century.

Developments in the early twentieth century challenged earlier humanitarian practices as the formation of the League of Nations — the world’s first official intergovernmental entity — shifted the context for international relief work, while the scale of the crisis produced by the war demanded a new level of humanitarian response. At the same time, organizations themselves were becoming increasing bureaucratized and professionalized, displacing individuals who had previously been able to participate on a voluntary basis and questioning their motivation.

In the wake of World War II, the context for international assistance shifted once again with escalation in the scale of humanitarian disaster, the founding of the UN and its affiliated agencies, the wave
of decolonization, and the spread of the Cold War. Yet religious arguments for humanitarian practices persisted, with robust religious and secular NGOs existing alongside, sometimes cooperating, sometimes in tension with expanding international organizations. As humanitarianism became ever more a global enterprise on the part of the world’s wealthy nations and a tool of their foreign policy, recipient populations began to mobilize and assert agency in claiming aid and shaping it according to their own perceptions of need.

The workshop examined the roots of international humanitarian organizations, motivations for providing assistance, the rhetoric and visual iconography of aid, and the impact of race and gender. Papers considered individual motivation and the effects of professionalization and bureaucratization, and compared religious and secular humanitarianism. They also looked at the relationship between states and NGOs, and between NGOs and IOs.

The workshop began with opening remarks from the conveners, who asked, what is humanitarianism? This question recurred over the next two days. They also noted that humanitarianism may be studied and analyzed from multiple perspectives and in multiple disciplines.

The first panel, on Historiographical and Theoretical Perspectives, began with a paper by Amanda Moniz, “The American Revolution and the Politics of Early Humanitarianism.” Moniz argued that one of the conventional explanations for humanitarianism, which emphasizes economic motivations, should be extended to take politics into account. During and after the Revolution, philanthropists on both sides of the Atlantic used transnational humanitarianism as a tool for rebuilding the Atlantic world. This history, she noted, also pushes back the origins of humanitarianism to the late eighteenth century. Next, in a paper entitled “Global Moments and the Armenian Genocide: World Public, Violence and Religious Humanitarianism in the Early Twentieth Century,” Alexandra Przyrembel analyzed the Armenian Genocide as a “global moment” characterized by worldwide appeals for help. These were directed toward a “global public” whose consciousness had been growing since the late nineteenth century as new media, such as the press, news services like Reuters, and the telegraph, rapidly spread eyewitness accounts of the genocide. Although humanitarian aid was unable to keep pace, the “aid market” became professionalized, and a new public emerged. Giulia Marotta’s paper, “Human Rights and Humanitarianism: Religious and Secular Views of a Modern Dilemma,” compared two models
of establishing a right to humanitarian assistance, one based on political liberalism, the other invoking the principle of a natural right dependent upon divine will. Although the gap between them seemed to grow over the course of the twentieth century, the project of an organization like Amnesty International, which appears to be based wholly on the UN Declaration of Human Rights, actually “exceeds” the principle of secularism, suggesting that traces of the religious basis for humanitarianism may still be found.

The second panel, Religion and Humanitarianism, picked up on Marotta’s theme. In “Jewish Solidarity in Nineteenth-Century France: The Evolution of a Concept,” Lisa Leff focused on the moment in post-revolutionary France when the language of secular republicanism replaced that of Catholic absolutism as the dominant syntax of French national politics. Faced with a changing religious identity as French citizens, France’s Jews sought to extend support to co-religionists everywhere under the rubric of “Jewish solidarity.” This language resonated with French secular republicans, allowing them to demonstrate universal concerns for others without evoking explicitly Christian concepts. The next paper examined a case in which religion proved to be divisive rather than inclusive. In “Christian Religious Humanitarianism in Tamilnadu, India: A Historical and Philosophical View of the Protestant and Catholic Approaches,” Robin Seelan detailed the long history of Christian missionary activity in Tamil Nadu State of Southern India, with particular focus on the Christian critique of the Indian caste system. Through their schools, hospitals, and educational and relief services, he showed that the missionaries allowed lower-caste individuals and families to find new opportunities within the Christian community. Finally, Brian Phillips’ “The Supremacy of Divinely Ordered Human Relations: Twenty-First Century Reflections on the Quaker Humanitarians Ethos” explored Quakers’ work after the first and second world wars. Tracing the origins of humanitarianism to early Quaker thinkers, Phillips noted that the “radical realignment” of Quaker spirituality urged individuals to go beyond concerns with their internal states to “remake the world” and transform social ills. As both a scholar and practitioner, Phillips viewed recent trends toward professionalization as a betrayal of the humility and call to service that marked the Quaker humanitarian ethic.

The third panel turned toward a familiar theme in humanitarianism, “Putting Children First.” First, Francesca Piana returned to the Armenian question, this time focusing on the League of Nations and its
work on behalf of Armenian refugees, primarily women and children stranded in Syria and in Constantinople. Its efforts were hampered by the Armenians’ statelessness. Other organizations and individuals, particularly Americans and British, also undertook humanitarian operations, but their lack of coordination with the League led to the “emergence of the refugee regime of the inter-war period.” The next paper, Rebecca Gill’s “The Politics of Play: The Educational Development Work of the Save the Children Fund (UK), 1919-1939,” showed how social work shaped humanitarian methods of dealing with children both at home and abroad. As the war got under way, SCF transplanted methods first devised in nurseries for poor British children during the depression to projects for poor and refugee children in crisis sites around the world. Drawing on the latest theories of child development, including the principle of “play with a purpose,” the organization sought to burnish its own professional credentials while providing essential services to children. Concluding this panel, Emily Baughan explained how the “Save the Children Federation” gained financial support for its work by encouraging individuals to enter a quasi-adoptive relationship with the children they “sponsored.” In “A Child to Keep for a Dime a Week”: International Child Sponsorship Schemes and the Humanitarian Movement, 1915-1940,” she noted that while SCF emphasized individual connections between donors and recipients, it also framed support for child welfare as an “investment in a peaceful future,” with sponsors becoming “national ambassadors.”

These themes continued in the fourth panel, “Professionalizing Relief,” which Jacqueline deVries opened with her paper, “Doctoring Across Borders: Mary Scharlieb and the Creation of Modern Gynecology.” Scharlieb, an Anglo-Catholic physician and midwife trained in both Madras and London, served as a medical missionary in India in the late nineteenth century. Her experience not only aided Indian women but enhanced her status in the field of women’s medicine in England. DeVries argued that “Indian women played no small part in determining the conditions under which they received treatment” and gained medical knowledge as well. The final paper on this panel, Christine Hartig’s “Rescuing and Professional Standards: The Case of Immigration of Unaccompanied Jewish Children into the U.S. during the Second World War,” analysed German-Jewish social workers’ efforts to save Jewish children by placing them with American families. Hartig showed how the felt need to maintain professional standards shaped their practice. With their reputations riding
on "successful" placements, they carefully selected children and matched them with “suitable” foster parents, a process that could exclude children who appeared to be “less adaptable.”

In her keynote address, “The Humanitarian Eye,” Heide Fehrenbach invoked Thomas Laqueur’s definition of humanitarian discourses as those that keep “distant others within ethical range.” Noting that anthropology, humanitarianism and photography were co-emergent, Fehrenbach pointed out overlaps between ethnographic and humanitarian imagery. While photography has been used for fundraising purposes, she said, it also raises political and ethical concerns about humanitarian crises, giving form and meaning to human suffering and making it “actionable.” Images of children have been central, their presumed innocence helping to create a “self-conscious globalism.” Presenting dozens of photographs from 1860 to 1944, Fehrenbach covered crises ranging from war to poverty to hunger and famine. The humanitarian eye was, she concluded, often gendered female. Many of the makers and purveyors of humanitarian photography have been women, and their images often depict women and children, suggesting the inadequacy of patriarchal protection in times of crisis.

The concluding roundtable focused on “The Politics and Practices of Humanitarianism.” Poppy Fry began by looking at “Enlarged Views of Philanthropy: Competing Humanitarianisms in the Early Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony.” Cape humanitarians divided into two camps, a deeply conservative, community-oriented strain promoted by English missionaries, and the more pragmatic, liberal, capitalist approach of the colonial governor, Benjamin D’Urban, and some of the settlers. Driven by the contemporary international politics of abolition, these differences came to a head in 1835 over the issue of civil rights for non-whites, as the governor promoted a policy of tolerance that the missionaries feared would prove disruptive. Next, Yannan Li analyzed the establishment of “The Red Cross Society in Imperial China, 1904-1912.” While the corrupt and authoritarian Qing dynasty viewed such organizations as incursions into imperial power, the rulers were facing momentous humanitarian crises they could not resolve. Yet the idea of allowing the creation of a Red Cross chapter appeared galling since it came from the Japanese, who had invaded China in 1894. Under pressure from a modernizing, philanthropic-minded gentry, the weakening Qing Empire finally agreed to create a chapter, even using the Japanese society’s constitution as a model for its own. Julia Irwin then discussed “The Emergence of Disaster
Relief as an Element of U.S. Foreign Affairs,” showing how, over the course of the twentieth century, disaster relief became a way for the U.S. to extend its interests abroad. At the same time, it has brought non-state actors — NGOs like the Red Cross — into American foreign relations. As such, disaster relief forms part of a broader story of international humanitarianism and international civil society, with the U.S. and the global community influencing one other. Susan Levine was also concerned with how and when humanitarianism became a part of U.S. foreign policy. In the final paper of the workshop, “Cold War Humanitarianism: The Public/Private Nexus of American Food Aid,” she explained how CARE’s food relief program became part of American geopolitical strategy. America’s postwar abundance, along with its victors’ mentality, led to the belief that the U.S. had a responsibility to help out both sides — victors and victims — in rebuilding their lives and eliminating hunger.

The concluding discussion returned to some of the broad themes that had arisen throughout the conference, such as the relationship between humanitarianism and liberalism, and differences among humanitarianism, charity and philanthropy. Most agreed that involvement in humanitarian work, wherever and in whatever form, is nearly always bound up with governments. This can take different forms: foreign policy, the ratification of international treaties, or the choice of which humanitarian effort to promote.

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