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Faith and the Discourse of Secular Humanitarianism

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This article argues that functional secularism frames the discourse of contemporary humanitarianism. While in principal 'neutral' to religion, in practice this framing serves to marginalize religious language, practice and experience in both the global and local conceptualization of humanitarian action. Illustrated with examples from a range of humanitarian contexts, it is argued that the resulting discourse fosters a humanitarian response that is ill-equipped to engage with dynamics of faith within displaced populations. Humanitarianism needs to acknowledge the advent of post-secularism signalled by many social theorists, and engage with greater awareness of the role of faith—both liberal materialist and religious—in addressing a range of issues of core relevance to the field: the clarification of core humanitarian values, the retention of a human rights framework able to define and protect human dignity, and appropriate means of addressing religious experience and well-being in the course of humanitarian programming.

Keywords: faith, humanitarianism, secularism, human rights

Introduction

Accounts of humanitarianism regularly address the historical influence of religious traditions and commitments in shaping our understanding of this field. Whether focused on ancient writings regarding obligations to others, the religious views and backgrounds of key humanitarian figures of the nineteenth century such as Henri Dunant or Florence Nightingale, or the role of religious leaders in the formulation of the contemporary human rights regime, faith is acknowledged to have been a determining influence on the development of humanitarian thought and practice (Moorehead 1999; Ferris 2005; Bucar and Barnett 2005; Barnett and Weiss 2008; Calhoun 2008; Walker and Maxwell 2009).

However, from the late nineteenth century and gathering pace through the twentieth, the codification of humanitarian principles and law, accompanied by the institutionalization of humanitarian actors and accountabilities, saw the establishment of a distinctively secular humanitarian regime (Calhoun 2008; Walker and Maxwell 2009). With non-governmental actors increasingly enmeshed within intergovernmental structures and governmental agendas, the principles and policies of humanitarianism were increasingly articulated in secular terms. Organizations with varying connections to faith traditions remained strongly active in the field, but generally adopted an approach and discourse that rendered it difficult to distinguish them on many criteria from secular agencies (Thaut 2009; Hopgood 2010). There were clear benefits from this incorporation of faith-based organizations within a secular humanitarian regime. The move supported co-ordination and governance of the sector, facilitated faith-based organizations' access to sources of public funding and fostered transparent commitment to humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality (Ferris 2005; Walker and Maxwell 2009).

Recent years have seen developments both external and internal to humanitarianism that have led to challenge of this secular framing, however. Externally, forces of globalization and political events have encouraged greater attention to the role of religion and religious institutions in public life (Berger 1999; Bhargava 2005). Internally, there has been an emergence of an increasing range of faith-based humanitarian agencies, including prominent work by Islamic, and a growing diversity of Christian, faith-based organizations (Benedetti 2006; Thaut 2009). These two trends are clearly potentially linked, with de Cordier noting how 'the expanded space for religion resulting from globalisation and the social changes that it causes have... expanded the space for faith-based development and relief actors' (2009: 663).

There is thus a degree of re-examination taking place regarding the role of faith-based humanitarian agencies within the context of an evolving humanitarian regime. This re-examination—reflected in the coverage of this Special Issue and of the conference on which it draws—generally recognizes the importance of fostering discussion on the opportunities (and threats) posed by humanitarian engagement by faith-based organizations, and dialogue between such organizations and non-faith-based humanitarian agencies. The central focus of this article is the framing of religion and secular humanitarianism required for effective discussion and dialogue on these issues. We argue that while secularism is in principle 'neutral' to religion, in practice the secular framing of the humanitarian regime marginalizes religious practice and experience in the conceptualization of humanitarian action at both global and local levels. Further, such framing serves to privilege certain liberal materialist assumptions implicit within the discourse of western elites, representing a form of neo-colonialism. We argue that this situation stems from an intellectually weak engagement with contemporary social theory with its recognition of the global emergence of post-secularism, and results in a humanitarian

response that potentially fails to relate effectively to the dynamics of faith within displaced populations.

The Framing Discourse of Functional Secularism

Central to our argument is the issue of discourse, by which we mean the language and assumptive frame used to pursue an analysis (Fairclough 1992). Clearly, there are alternative discourses available to consider the relationship between religion and humanitarian needs, motivations and responses. A religious framing of such questions will be different from one framed in terms of liberal materialism (Calhoun 2008; Walker and Maxwell 2009).

We want to suggest that the conceptual structure generally adopted to accommodate such divergent discourses is what we can term *functional secularism*. In general, secularism can be seen to constitute the separation of the state from religion for specified ethical, moral or political ends (Bhargava 2005). Its aim is to provide a:

framework for general interaction...through the protocols of universal reason...under terms universally shared regardless of the particular religious commitments of participants (Jakobsen 2010: 34).

The intention of secularism is to be ideologically neutral. Its purpose is not to promote a particular ideology, but to set the terms by which pluralism and multiplicity can function (Bender and Klassen 2010).

Although this framework is generally premised on the legal responsibilities of the state, in practice, the secular model is extended to a much broader range of social contexts. That is, it becomes not only a constitutional mechanism governing public life, but a *functional* framework influencing discourse in a wide range of contexts. The strong forces for secularization of public life and debate are plotted by Taylor (2007), for instance, in his work *A Secular Age*. However, such analyses recognize the expectations—within liberal democracies at least—regarding the legitimacy of what is, essentially, ‘privatized’ religious belief (see Torpey 2010). Few, with the exceptions perhaps of Dawkins and Hitchens, call for a public discourse and polity based on scientism and a culture devoid of opportunity for religious structure or sentiment. Few, other than some proponents of the extreme US religious right and jihadist Islam, advocate hegemony of a particular religious discourse. Rather, we work in an era when across an increasingly broad array of ‘public’ contexts our discourse reflects the language and mindset of secularism, while acknowledging domains within which individuals or communities may legitimately deploy faith-based thinking and actions.

As a social model that seeks to provide a basis for common purpose amidst plurality, secularism is an admirable proposition. However, it faces many challenges. There is broad awareness, for example, that its implementation is politically complex, with regular contention regarding the appropriate

boundaries of secular hegemony and religious legitimacy on such issues as the schooling of children (e.g. Gardener *et al.* 2005), or the wearing of 'religious dress' in public settings (e.g. El Hamel 2002). There is generally less discussion of our central concern here: the manner in which secularism serves to legitimize some discourses and delegitimize others.

Jakobsen's definition of secularism above highlights a key source of this tension with the appeal to 'the protocols of universal reason'. The secular vision of a public sphere where reason regulates participation necessarily excludes participants for whom reason alone does not arbitrate truth. By appealing to reason as universal, secularism exhibits a specifically *materialist* character; that is to say that only that which is materially verifiable is deemed reasonable. Materialism—generally in the form of liberal materialism—thus becomes the determining ideology of functional secularism. Indeed, it may be represented as a *fundamentalist* ideology to the extent that its users assume its universality and self-evidence.

The presumptive acceptance of the ideology of materialism as the 'lingua franca' of a globalized, secular world is essentially a corollary of the secularization thesis, which assumed the progressive adoption of a secular worldview with the advance of economic development and modernization. However, this conceptualization has been increasingly critiqued from the perspective of social theory (e.g. Casanova 1994; Habermas 2003). Torpey (2010) notes how the focus on American exceptionalism, regarding high levels of religiosity sustained through significant economic development, is being displaced by a conceptualization of European exceptionalism. Once assumed to be the norm, it is now Europe's loss of religious consciousness through that region's economic development that appears an oddity, given that many economically emerging nations have seen the stabilization or enhancement of religiosity through this process. Berger, once a champion of the secularization thesis, has abandoned its prescription, acknowledging the resurgence of religion and the onset of processes of desecularization (Berger 1999), while Hurd, in exploring the influence of secularism on international politics and diplomacy, has added her support to Taylor's and Teschke's critique of the 'myth of 1648' (2008: 3). Hurd queries whether the 'cosmopolitan ethic' in Europe following the Peace of Westphalia (that sought, in the interests of a public peace, to marginalize religious conviction to individual private life) was ever an effective means of banishing religion from the public sphere, let alone a prescription for international relations in the modern world.

Kahn (2010), writing on the Immanent Frame website established to consider the implications of Taylor's treatise on secularism, notes the arrival of a 'full-blown period of recovery from the dominance of the secularization thesis' resulting in a field marked by:

the tremendous variety of theorists of different political and religious commitments who have come to agree on one thing: that it is both philosophically

incoherent and phenomenologically inaccurate to posit a secular [world] scrubbed free of religion and committed to a neutral and rational public discourse (Kahn 2010).

Faith, Functional Secularism and Humanitarianism

It is not the political, philosophical or conceptual challenges of functional secularism, however, with which we wish to principally engage in this article. Rather, our focus is on the tensions and ambiguities evident when this framework works its way through to the arena of humanitarian agency strategy and personal humanitarian engagement. In contexts where open dialogue is crucial, functional secularism disables necessary discussion by requiring the separation, indeed hermetic insulation, of the public discourse of humanitarianism from the discourse of faith. We suggest that this separation brings many risks and problems to the humanitarian arena.

Lest we be seen to be too ‘soft’ on faith-based actors in this analysis, let us clarify that one of these risks is a divisive exceptionalism on the part of some religious organizations that seeks to hide the naivety and ill-grounded rationale for their activities from appropriate critical, rational scrutiny. Whether their efforts take the form of humanitarian tourism, decontextualized evangelism or other similarly ill-conceived, neo-colonial enterprise, faith-based actors in humanitarian arenas need to demonstrate publicly defensible practices, not ‘privatized’ commitments (Ferris 2005). Faith needs the scrutiny of reason.

However, reason needs to be informed of the true nature of faith. It is our contention that functional secularism, rather than providing a neutral framework, bears a *decision* to assess value in materialist terms (as Hurd observes, ‘approach[ing] religion as epiphenomenal to more fundamental material interests’, 2011: 71). The value of a religious tradition to a secularist humanitarianism, then, is only in terms of what it may offer to a material agenda—social capital, community cohesion, social structure, etc. Churches and mosques may indeed be usefully ‘co-opted’ in the task of community mobilization, but such instrumentality needs to recognize that the committed mission of these institutions is drawn on a broader canvas. Analysing a community’s religious gathering solely in terms of social capital (or some similar material construct), while ignoring truth claims and experience of revelation, is no less reductionist in its approach than would be considering the value of the conference on ‘faith-based humanitarianism’ that gave rise to this Special Issue purely in terms of the warm buzz of collegiality and the successful collaborations that it may have established. These were indeed potentially valuable aspects of the meeting, but to assume the meeting represented ‘nothing but’ social connection and to ignore the analytic insights and evidence presented would be, for committed participants, to construe the value of the meeting from an inordinately shallow perspective. Imposing a

secular materialist ‘filter’ on the dynamic of local religious practice represents a similar danger. It is not the interpretation of religious belief and practice in communities impacted by humanitarian crisis in terms of liberal materialism that is wrong, it is the fundamentalist presumption that the latter accounts for what is ‘really’ happening.

This principle is vividly illustrated by research involving the first author which addressed mechanisms of religious coping in the context of conflict-affected communities on the Eritrea–Tigray border (Abebe 2004; Ager *et al.* 2005). Following the cessation of hostilities, the re-establishment of religious associations such as *sewä sanbat* and *mähebar* provided a key foundation for local recovery. Such groups provided not only a basis for solidarity and encouragement, but also a context for the provision of mutual practical support. On this basis, our social ecological analysis identified such associations as a key modality for community engagement by humanitarian agencies (Ager *et al.* 2005). This judgment was clearly framed in the liberal materialist terms readily accessible to humanitarian agencies fostered by a functional secular approach. However, an alternative framing of these gatherings in the terms of Coptic Christian theology provided deeper insight into the cosmological significance of *sewä sanbat* and *mähebar* as means of facilitating identification of current suffering—and future recovery—in the trajectory of personal saints (Abebe 2004). The former account is more easily incorporated within the secular humanitarian discourse, but such ease of incorporation should not be a basis for concluding that to be the superior explanatory framing. For understanding strategies of local post-conflict recovery the theological account—largely inaccessible to secular humanitarian actors—was, indeed, potentially the more relevant.

In working through the interplay of faith and reason in humanitarian action, functional secularism presents humanitarian workers with two major challenges. One relates to the lack of legitimate space for discussions linking faith and humanitarianism; the other concerns the potential for the secular frame to obscure the external imposition of liberal materialist values. With regard to the first issue, it is apparent that for ‘persons of faith’ who are able to engage with both the secular discourse of the international humanitarian regime *and* shared worship with fellow believers from displaced and dispossessed communities, there is an enforced ‘splitting’ of the contexts where the respective accounts are deemed legitimate. The lack of a means for their connection diminishes both. If humanitarians who have access to both ‘worlds’ are unable to relate them to each other in a meaningful manner, what prospect is there for those separated by these world views to relate meaningfully with one another? The lack of ‘space’ for such dialogue is a major theme of much recent writing (e.g. Schafer 2010; Religions for Peace 2010), with Deneulin and Bano’s (2009) analysis structured around the need to negotiate a ‘script’ that can accommodate both religious and secular discourse. Kahn (2010), writing very much from the

perspective of a social theorist rather than a religious apologist, documents the challenge particularly vividly, albeit in a different field. He determines that the sanctioned discourses on US liberal arts college campuses (a natural ‘home base’ for functional secularism) leave faculty and students alike reporting to be:

perplexed by how to substantively engage with and learn from deep commitments different from their own (Kahn 2010).

On the second issue, as noted earlier with regard to the critique of an increasing number of social theorists, secularism is, in reality, not so much a system for managing a diversity of beliefs as it is a mechanism of promoting specific ones. It is, in the words of Torpey, ‘an ideology, a set of beliefs about a possible state of affairs that one seeks to bring about’ (2010: 281). There is danger for our field in the general lack of recognition of such beliefs and assumptions consistently shaping the humanitarian discourse. This is not just a question of these implicit assumptions rendering humanitarianism resistant to faith-based agendas at the global level. More crucially, blindness to the ideological content of secularism risks the imposition of such values on communities affected by humanitarian crisis on the basis of a ‘just cause’.

Secular Humanitarianism: as Neo-Colonial Imposition

We may legitimately frame the situation as a collision between a powerful northern discourse (with a sense of moral purpose) and indigenous understandings of generally southern, often disempowered, communities. The colonial history of Africa renders the writings of African theologians on such themes of particular interest (Parratt 1997; Knighton 2004). African theology has paid significant attention to the marginalization of religious identity through centuries of imperialism. Let us contextualize the question of authentic African identity in the post-colonial period. Modern western society universally condemns the centuries that Europe exploited the African continent, its people and resources; such condemnation is admirable and well-founded. However, nineteenth century imperialism, French, Portuguese and British alike, was characterized by a more subtle injustice, that of the attempt to ‘civilize’ the ‘uncivilized’ world. In a speech in 1884 the two-time Prime Minister of France, Jules Ferry, condemned prior European exploitation of the indigenous populations of colonized provinces and summarized the contemporary vision for ethical involvement in Africa:

[T]he superior races have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize the inferior races... In the history of earlier centuries these duties, gentlemen, have often been misunderstood; and certainly when the Spanish soldiers and explorers introduced slavery into Central America, they did not fulfill their duty as men of a higher race... But, in our time, I maintain

that European nations acquit themselves with generosity, with grandeur, and with sincerity of this superior civilizing duty (Robiquet 1897: 200).

With our contemporary perspective on colonialism, it is no surprise for us to learn that some 80 years later, in his inaugural address to the UN as President of Algeria (now independent, following 130 years of French rule), Ahmed Ben Bella rejected the moral sentiment of dutiful imperialism as strongly as slavery before it, suggesting that '[T]he credo of Algeria's political and diplomatic action [is] the liquidation of colonialism in both its classic and disguised forms' (Adi and Sherwood 2003: 8). For Ben Bella and other Pan-Africanists in the latter part of the twentieth century, colonial powers in Europe were not only guilty of implementing the most egregious instruments of empire—slavery and extreme violence—but also of constructing a narrative of humankind that held Europeans apart from and above 'inferior' Africans—colonialism's 'disguised form'. Without this narrative, the '*mission civilisatrice*' would have been unthinkable. In the words of pre-eminent African theologian John S. Mbiti (1989), the later colonialism was in actual fact 'the colonization of the African mind.' European powers, religious and secular, were agents of cultural imposition. Jomo Kenyatta famously described Africans as being seen by Europeans as 'blank slates on which to inscribe the truth' (Kenyatta 1965: 211).

There are uncomfortable parallels here to the modern era, where the marginalization of religion in humanitarian discourse follows much the same pattern as late nineteenth century marginalization of autochthonous African identity. In both situations, a linear narrative of human progress is posited. Whereas in the nineteenth century, the vocabulary was concerned with civilization, and even salvation, for African populations, modern Western nations are now concerned with 'development.' The word itself demands a linear model: 'development' is progress, advancement. This has two significant ramifications. The first is that the more powerful group inevitably defines progress, refusing to fund or support programmes that do not meet the demands of progression. Second, a linear approach requires that progression is understood as a process of emulation (Farmer 2005). We change the terms regularly that define the continuum: 'first world', 'third world'; 'developed', 'developing'; 'high-income', 'low-income'. But the presumptions that sustained the specification of 'superior' to 'inferior'—expressions anathema to modern sensibilities—remain intact. Religion, if considered at all, is viewed either as an index of under-development or as a barrier to progress (Religions for Peace 2010). Religion is seen as a failure to advance to reason.

The pattern of nineteenth-century colonization is thus arguably repeated today by a development agenda (with respect to which we may in this context legitimately align humanitarianism¹). Prophetically, Meinrad Hegba (1962) spoke of the 'eternal juniority' of the African in relation to the West. There is a great clash of cultural values at this moment of globalization: the dominant West patronizes the African worldview and culture as 'less

developed' and works to eliminate authentic identity by endorsing with its considerable means only programmes and communities that cohere with the Western worldview (Mveng 1983; Knighton 2004; Makoni 2008). With respect to both, the imposition of external culture is understood by the dominant partner as entirely positive and charitable, with criticism barely comprehensible. Only the words have changed: the 'civilizing' action of the West is now the 'modernizing' action, 'primitive' African culture is now in need of 'capacity strengthening' (MacLachlan *et al.* 2010), and, in the most acute of turnarounds, 'pagan' African culture, once weaned onto Christianity, must be weaned again, now to secular 'modernity.'

In summary, we suggest that in the context of humanitarianism, functional secularism not only denies a legitimate space for the consideration of faith, but also serves to promote the hegemony of an ideological agenda of liberal materialism. With respect to the latter, we have suggested parallels with late nineteenth-century colonialism to draw attention to the ease with which a self-evident moral purpose can blind us to implicit subjugation of alternative worldviews.

We now turn to some concrete examples of the outworking of these issues in the context of humanitarian practice.

Functional Secularism and Issues of Faith in Humanitarian Practice

The two challenges outlined earlier—the marginalization of the religious in the humanitarian discourse and the lack of awareness of the values implicit in a 'secular' approach—are played out regularly in the formulation and implementation of humanitarian action. We illustrate here with respect to field experiences of the first author. Through 2005 and 2006 a team from Columbia University was conducting a situational analysis of child protection issues in Darfur on behalf of UNICEF (UNICEF 2006; Ager *et al.* 2009). A number of agencies had introduced pre-school activities in IDP camps that, as *sheikhs* and *umars* (male community leaders) correctly observed, constituted a 'khawaja'² curriculum that promoted a (late twentieth-century) western view of childhood. This was at the same time as agencies seemingly ignored requests for support of Qur'anic studies (despite convention rights and obligations to do so). These programming judgments appear to have been made by agencies with little explicit recognition of the implicit values they signalled.

A recent student on a humanitarian studies programme displayed similar unselfconscious imperialism in her work in post-conflict Liberia. There she had led programmes in local communities seeking (and effectively achieving) shifts in social behaviour and attitudes towards women and reproductive health issues prioritized by the agency with which she was working. On her return, she expressed concern that another NGO, Samaritan's Purse, being explicit in its faith-based foundation, risked inappropriate 'proselytizing influence'. Most faith-based organizations (appropriately) proscribe

evangelization. But this is typically not done on the basis of religion not being an issue worthy of debate and challenge, but rather that the inequity of power relations and vulnerability of populations in humanitarian settings render such debate and challenge likely to be coercive.³ Such analysis appears rarely to be applied to ‘awareness-raising’ or ‘consciousness-raising’ activities of humanitarian and development agencies, however. Indeed, agencies working on psychosocial issues have explicitly noted the ‘opportunities’ presented for supporting ‘transformation’ of social relations in the wake of humanitarian crises (with the programming agenda supported by such fluidity being clearly heralded in the Psychosocial Working Group documentation available on the forcedmigration.org portal; see also Ager *et al.* 2005).

In a training course for northern Ugandan teachers scheduled to deliver a psychosocial structured activities programme in schools (see McCollister *et al.* 2008), participants were asked by the expatriate trainer to suggest appropriate activities for the ‘opening circle’ with students that marked the commencement of the session. ‘Pray together’, suggested by one participant, was clearly not the response anticipated by the trainer, drawn from a culture with strong proscription of religious activity in schools. Ill-equipped to engage comfortably with discussion of the appropriateness or otherwise of this suggestion, the trainer was visibly relieved when a further suggestion, ‘play a trust game’, was made that more clearly fitted her assumptive frame. Critically, the trainer of this humanitarian intervention displayed no awareness of the modernizing, materialist ‘filter’ that her respective reactions reinforced.

To clarify, the issue for us here is not that the humanitarian response engaged in these examples was clearly inappropriate, and still less that faith-based agendas in these settings would inevitably have been more appropriate. Rather, it is to note firstly, that there was little or no awareness of the comparative judgments of religious and secular values being made in the course of these programming decisions. Secondly, it is to highlight the difficulty in meaningfully advancing critiques of such programming assumptions for the lack of any clearly legitimate context, code or method with which to do so. The frame of secularism fosters a functional blindness regarding the presumption of secular values trumping religious ones that is not only partial and imperialistic but, crucially, potentially weakens humanitarian engagement with communities by eliminating space for consideration of the place and role of faith in their recovery.

Beyond Functional Secularism: An Emerging Agenda for Humanitarianism

We want to suggest, therefore, that we need to find a way past, or through, functional secularism. Religious narratives and institutions, whilst at the margins of international humanitarianism and academic accounts of its operation, are at the core of the experience of the vast majority of communities facing crisis and, perhaps as crucially, of the majority of national humanitarian agency staff that typically constitute 90 per cent of the humanitarian

workforce (Stoddard *et al.* 2006). We need to construct accounts for engagement in such contexts that are true to the dynamics of faith and action within communities, as well as the broader principles articulated in the vernacular of humanitarian policy makers and analysts. Such accounts will require humanitarianism to explore the ‘post-secular age’ envisioned by Habermas (2003) and Torpey (2010) and wrestle with a number of very challenging questions. Here we signal three of the more compelling of these: the clarification of core humanitarian values in a post-modern and post-secular age; the retention of a human rights framework able to define and protect human dignity; and identifying appropriate means of addressing religious experience and well-being in the course of humanitarian programming.

First, building upon the foundation of principles such as impartiality, on what basis are the liberal, enlightenment values of freedom, reason and self-determination to be asserted within the humanitarian discourse at the expense of distinct notions such as obedience, sacrifice and communitarianism, elements of humanitarian impulse more associated with religious sentiment (as not only reflected in scripture, but in the public oratory of King, Tutu and the Dalai Lama)? Acknowledging that secularism has distinct content, despite its routine presentation as a neutral medium, provides an opportunity for secularism to reconsider its account of religion. Rather than consigning faith to individuals ‘further behind’ on a linear, objective path of universal progress (an eschatological vision of secularism now widely abandoned by secular theorists, Taylor 2007; Torpey 2010), religion needs to be seen as reflecting the use of a *different* lens to identify priorities and agendas. Religion is not *irrational* so much as it is *non-rational*. It simply does not consider ‘pure reason’ (that is reason uninformed by faith) to be the ultimate arbiter of truth.

What implications does this have for our current notions of humanitarianism which, as Walker (2008) has recently observed, are so closely tied to interpretations of the work of the Enlightenment? Walker and Maxwell (2009) note that many actors are having ‘second thoughts’ about the classic humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality in the contemporary context. While much of this is attributed to the politicization of humanitarian assistance and the loss of ‘humanitarian space’, the influence of work seeking to address ‘causes’ rather than ‘effects’ is also noted:

In the case of some humanitarian crises—famines in Africa being the classical example—it is clear, both in theory and in practice, that the ‘event’ of a humanitarian crisis is only the tip of an iceberg. Underlying processes of chronic poverty, deteriorating natural resources, global climate change, and political marginalization are the *real* [emphasis added] problem to be resolved (Walker and Maxwell 2009: 140).

Seeking to address fundamental causes of vulnerability rather than respond at the point of crisis makes clear sense, but draws humanitarianism into developmentalist agendas and ambiguities about the *real* problems and who

defines them. Further, humanitarianism being increasingly populated by agencies rooted in the global South raises additional questions regarding the sustainability of core humanitarian principles so clearly linked to historical, social and intellectual traditions of the global North. The post-modern, post-secular world we are facing requires a framework for coherent humanitarian action. The non-rational assertion of human values, principally—although not exclusively—through religious discourse, potentially plays a key role in shaping this framework.

This leads to a second key question: what is the basis of our confidence in human rights as a key framework to understand humanitarian action? Rigorously applied, a secular frame leads to the social constructivist critique of the international human rights regime as principally reflecting social movements and political contingency, and undermines any claim for its legitimate authority based on ‘natural rights’ or legal positivism (Stammers 1999). If, as argued by Stackhouse (2005) this leaves the ‘standard secularist account’ of human rights deficient for defining and protecting human dignity, what role do discourses of faith, which were central to the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, now have in securing such a concept for the twenty-first century? Is the global commitment to human rights so tenuous that—as Maritain noted at the time of the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)—discussion of the basis of presumption of human dignity risks dissolving it? Indeed, does the widespread contemporary failure to secure human rights protection reflect, in part, the reluctance to engage in discussion of the basis of what Bucar and Barnett (2005: 2) have termed the ‘unnamed, unspecified, ungrounded “common understanding”’ on which the UDHR was constructed (the Preamble to the UDHR using this term ‘common understanding’ as a foundation for all that follows, but failing to engage in any discussion of the basis of such shared values). Recent work by Religions for Peace and UNICEF (2010) regarding child protection and religious communities in conflict settings points to both the promise and challenge implicit in opening up such discussions. In short, if secularism cannot intellectually sustain a robust defence for the foundation of human rights, can religion (once more) be effectively mobilized to protect it?

Third and finally, in practical terms, what are the appropriate means of addressing religious experience and well-being within humanitarian programming? Schafer (2010) has recently given an honest and insightful analysis of the challenges for World Vision International (WVI) of determining an appropriate and legitimate response to the spiritual needs of crisis-affected populations in the context of the Haiti earthquake response. The first author recently spent time in Uganda with a WVI Monitoring and Evaluation Officer seeking to define appropriate indicators for the domain of ‘Loving God and Their Neighbours’ within the agency’s Child Well-Being Outcomes framework (WVI, no date). It was a struggle to find the appropriate conceptual vocabulary to do this, torn between a DFID-trained concern

for ‘objectively verifiable indicators’ and the earnest aims of this programming commitment. Subsequently, a cohort of Ugandan humanitarians working for NGOs based in Gulu was studying a Columbia University class on child protection through our ‘global classroom’ initiative (Columbia University 2009). The Ugandan humanitarian staff worked through the material in parallel with a group of students based in New York, most of whom were Americans with experience of working in the NGO sector, frequently in child protection programmes. The class involved presentation of a framework suggesting domains relevant to a child’s wellbeing. While there were no dissenters to this model in the New York class, the Gulu group raised the omission of both ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ in the framework, with most drawing clear distinctions between these two ideas. This was interesting enough, but it was the subsequent email trail that proved most compelling. In it, a number of deeply experienced humanitarians, eager to incorporate the perspective of the Ugandan students, contested whether the place of these concepts was in the ‘social domain’ or the ‘cultural domain’, with one suggesting that religion probably best belonged in the ‘cognitive domain’. Is there any better metaphor for the challenges of engaging with issues of faith—and the dangers of presumptive framing of concerns within a secular mindset—than this spectacle of seeking to accommodate transcendence and grace within a simplistic, utilitarian programming framework serving the categorical agendas of humanitarian bureaucracy (which these Ugandan humanitarians felt unable to challenge as an appropriate frame for their experience)?

In terms of our earlier analysis, this encounter usefully addresses the first challenge identified in providing a welcome and unusual space to ‘bridge’ the discourse of secular humanitarianism and that of faith. The faith articulated was not a personal piety suited to the ‘private’ domain. It was a faith understood by Ugandan participants as a defining public consciousness relevant to the humanitarian task in hand: the protection of children in a post-conflict environment. Furthermore, the opening of such a space potentially had an impact on the American participants, who were led to explore the basis of meaning and value outside the security of the familiar secular frame. However, the follow up to the session reinforces the second challenge identified earlier: the manner in which secularism promotes the ideology of liberal materialism. The earlier dialogue was welcome, but it did not lead participants to distance themselves from privileging the materialist framing of religion and spirituality as a ‘resource’ to serve human needs.

Notwithstanding this latter point, this experience highlights a key source of expertise for ‘bridging’ the discourses of faith and humanitarianism. While such dialogue is challenging for all the reasons noted previously, the reality is that the majority of national humanitarian workers (who, as noted earlier, represent over 90 per cent of the global humanitarian workforce) are ‘people of faith’ who will often engage in such bridging on a daily basis. Further, the

majority of humanitarian emergencies occur in contexts where functional secularism has a significantly weaker influence on public discourse than in the northern headquarters of the majority of international humanitarian agencies. With moves towards regionalization and localization, humanitarianism is ‘moving South’ to contexts where engaging with the discourses of faith and reason may be more easily secured. While northern humanitarians may be perturbed by the prospect of desecularization, it will be a less disorienting process for many from the South. Engagement of southern humanitarians in developing the structures and mechanisms to manage the evolution of the humanitarian regime—with respect to each of the three questions identified above—will be crucial.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have three ambitions for the current debate regarding the place of faith in humanitarianism. First, is a more sustained acknowledgement of the importance of local religious practice and belief in shaping humanitarian strategy. We have provided some illustrations supportive of this in the current article, but many other articles in this Special Issue provide contextualized evidence of humanitarian action being valuably informed by greater awareness of religious custom and belief relevant to processes of resilience and recovery. It is clear that humanitarian policy seeks increasingly to demonstrate sensitivity to indigenous resources and perspectives in this manner (e.g. IASC 2007). In truth, however, such acknowledgement can represent little more than the selective accommodation of sentiments and practices coherent with the goals, strategies and suppositions of a secular humanitarian agenda. More radically, therefore, our second ambition is that greater exposure to, and engagement with, perspectives of faith-based actors (both within agencies and communities) will lead to more critical awareness of the implicit ‘articles of faith’ in contemporary secular understandings of humanitarianism. We believe that humanitarianism has much to gain from a more open, purposeful reflection on the epistemological fragility of functional secularism as a foundation for concerted, sustainable and just action. Third, therefore, we hope that such reflection will inform humanitarianism as it negotiates the transition from a context of confident modernism to one of complex post-modernism, and from an assumed secular world to a contested post-secular one. Humanitarians—drawn as they are from diverse intellectual, cultural and religious traditions—are potentially well-equipped for the dialogue required to negotiate common purpose amidst such complexity. Rather than a threat, we believe that this can pave the way for the conceptualization, and implementation, of a more authentic and truthful, a more human (to reflect that key humanitarian principle) humanitarianism: more complete in its analysis, more real in its terms of engagement with the dynamics and traditions of local communities, and more

honest in its wrestling with diverse understandings of value, protection and identity.

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1. There are clear distinctives of humanitarianism—with respect to humanitarian values, for example—that are considered later. However, we generally share the view of Walker and Maxwell regarding the ‘false dichotomy of development and relief among Western or northern agencies’ (2009: 124), particularly in relation to protracted humanitarian crises in such settings as Darfur, northern Uganda and southern Sudan.
2. ‘Khawaja’, while literally meaning ‘lord’ or ‘master’, is an Arabic term commonly used across Sudan and Egypt to refer to ‘white Westerners’.
3. See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011) for an illustration of such imbalance of power in a humanitarian setting.

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