

Secular and Religious Dynamics in Humanitarian Response

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Aid
worker
1

Religions are not and should not be
involved in international aid

Aid
worker
2

Religions are always involved in
international aid

What is “secular-religious dynamics”?

Secular-religious is a spectrum

Not either/or

Religious and secular positions are dynamic

Ever-changing, context specific, internally diverse

Secular ≠ neutral

Secular is not only the absence of religion, but a whole systems of beliefs and practices itself

Why do secular religious dynamics matter to international aid?

If you ignore religions, you can do more harm than good

“As the Tsunami struck in the early morning, women were dressed in whatever they were wearing indoors... Some of them were very, very unhappy with the way that service delivery was provided: having to line up, and stand in a queue without having a headscarf to wear was very uncomfortable for them ... It was very important, when we were designing what we call ‘dignity kits’ or ‘hygiene kits’, for us to put scarves in the kits.” (Stakeholder Interview, UNFPA staff, from Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager 2015)

If you ignore an unconscious bias, you can do more harm than good

“There’s a perception that ‘religion’ will be troublesome, but all would say they try to be culturally sensitive.” (International humanitarian staff member interview, Philippines, November 2014)

Applying secular-religious understanding to a humanitarian response

After Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013):

- Humanitarian staff reported that impartiality was a defining feature of a secular approach to humanitarian response
- Disaster-affected people said that a lack of neutrality and impartiality was a defining feature of a secular approach to humanitarian response



A chapel destroyed by Typhoon Haiyan, re-purposed for drying laundry