Introduction

The First World War began a global revolution in religious humanitarianism that reconfigured the spectrum of sacred and secular in world affairs. The conflict changed the religious landscape of the globe, expanding religious belief and unbelief to include mass politics motivated by atheism and messianism. At the extreme ends of this spectrum, this resulted in the rise of the Soviet Union, increasingly opposed by the United States.¹ If one views this history as the triumph of secularism, a limited Euro-centric vision misses the vital story of how religiously informed humanitarianism became a major global player in the long-term history of emergency relief to development.² This is also a tale of how humanitarianism became intertwined in the global history of human rights.³ As vital as Europe was, the modern history of religious humanitarianism needs to decenter Europe to account for the extremes of the spectrum: The rise of the USA and the USSR as global superpowers. The emergence of modern China in the twentieth century, from a colonialist object of humanitarian aid transforming into a superpower hegemon and a humanitarian donor, highlights the revolutionary transformations that continue.

What was religious humanitarianism? The deceptively simple starting point is that it was a form of humanitarianism in which faith and beliefs about the sacred mattered, where metaphysics went along with material aid to human beings. However, as Michael Barnett and Janice Stein have written, the attempt to distinguish “faith-based organizations” from “other kinds,” including secular ones, is not so easy as it might appear, with scholars making classifications in theory that are much less clear in practice.⁴ There are the complications of history with its demands for empirical evidence, context, and viewpoint. At first glance, assessing religious or secular belief looks easy enough for contemporary organizations, many of which talk about themselves in such language and especially in their mission statements. This, however, does not account for history: Organizations are evolving, complex entities with missions that have changed over time. Even regarding entities in the present, there are varieties of individual workers’ and donors’ motivations, as well as the beliefs and understandings of aid

² For the global importance of faith-based humanitarianism in modern history, see Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein, eds., Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism (Oxford University Press, 2012).
Contemporary totalizing visions of either sacred or secular at one fixed moment obscure the historical nuances and difficulties of the role of religion in humanitarianism. This phenomenon must be considered on a global spectrum of belief and unbelief with effects that do not offer simplistic, linear, and teleological narratives. Sacred and secular mattered in history, and it is important to keep them in mind about the limits of the analytical spectrum. Nevertheless, instead of polarizing dichotomies that reflect total war’s legacies, historical truths about metaphysics and materialism are better studied in an analytical middle ground that does not produce easy, one-sided answers. It is necessary to discuss explicitly faith-based organizations as well as global humanitarian organizations that include some element of religion in their operations along the spectrum of belief and unbelief. There is a wide, sometimes bewildering, variety of humanitarians with different agendas, and this diversity reflects global historical experience.

From worldviews shaped by forms of belief, social action was key to the practice of humanitarianism in the modern world. The etymology of the word “humanitarianism” itself was steeped in religious meaning, and questions of long-term and short-term focus are key to evaluating historical change. “Humanitarianism” was an eighteenth-century theological concept reflecting the “doctrine that Christ’s nature was human only and not divine.” This theological notion became reframed in the nineteenth century, as humanitarianism began to concern itself with the Social Question inspired by ideas of charity and compassion toward others disadvantaged by new processes of industrial capitalism. The word “charity” had a religious etymology: Caritas was a form of love according to the Roman roots that influenced Christian notions of charity. The nineteenth century was a decisive era for the “birth of the modern world” in which humanitarian ideas of charity and compassion started locally and became globalized as never before. As key global histories have shown, the nineteenth century was an age of both secularization and renewed assertion of the sacred, intertwined processes often in tension with each other, helping to transform the world. This interplay of sacred and secular did not stop in 1914; it continued through the upheavals of the twentieth century.

This conceptual history also hints at humanitarianism’s relation, but not equivalence, to human rights as an idea of what constitutes the human being.

5 For an excellent overview of attempts to distinguish faith-based and secular organizations, see Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings, eds., Development, Civil Society, and Faith-Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular (Palgrave, 2008).
While human rights thinking was oriented more toward long-term legal frameworks, humanitarianism focused on more short-term existential relief. As humanitarian interventions provided emergency relief, they tended toward maintaining a long-term presence on the ground, in the context of “development.” Thus, humanitarianism could change, and sometimes transform, societies for which stabilization was originally the aim. Questions of restorative justice and cultural survival blur the focus between short-term and long-term aims.

The First World War was the world’s first “total war,” with an unprecedented global shift in the formation of modern beliefs and practices related to views of humanity. Individual and collective identities were rethought: The ways that states used their peoples – and how peoples used their states, as well as an emerging host of nongovernmental organizations that gained global prominence. In the wake of war, masses of people now lacked a clear relationship to either the old or new order in formation. When the old empires and state structures changed or collapsed, new methods emerged to deal with the unprecedented global magnitude of existential suffering. From the ruins of the old regimes, some people no longer fit into the new post-1919 world order, especially refugees and those displaced by war that had shattered imperial systems of governance in 1914. Total war expanded states’ war-making capacities, with the resources to wage war increasingly regardless of civilian status. Thus, the First World War caused extreme contradictory actions toward human beings in wartime, with both soldiers and civilians as makers and targets of total war. Depending on viewpoint, the “Other” now could be either an enemy to be destroyed or a fellow human being deserving protection from violence, hunger, disease, and displacement. Beginning in the First World War and taken to a horrific extreme in the Second World War, this destruction and protection would even create a new word, genocide, to describe the targeted extermination of entire categories of people.

The history of the world wars tends to focus on the violence of combat and its life-destroying effects through new industrial technologies designed for mass killing. By contrast, the humanitarian impulse, reaching out to save lives, has received much less comparative historical attention. It is a burgeoning field of inquiry, with modern historians focused on the changes wrought by the First World War. With the beginning of the Italo-Turkish War and the subsequent conflicts of imperial entanglements and population displacements that led to Sarajevo in 1914, the “Greater War” from 1911–1923 is fundamental to understanding modern humanitarianism and war.8

The religious dynamics of this are an inescapable part of understanding humanitarianism and war. Indeed, for the First World War, Branden Little has proposed viewing humanitarianism as the “dynamic of redemptive interventionism” or the “dynamic of salvation.” Excellent global histories of humanitarianism place the era of the world wars in long-term perspective, stressing religiosity and religious-inspired thinking as key parts of the analysis. There is a growing historiography on the emergence of humanitarianism in modern times, increasingly with reflection on humanitarianism and human rights.

With limited exceptions, the religious elements of faith-based humanitarianism have been marginalized in secular stories of modernization. Empirically and theoretically, this marginalization misrepresents the key role played by religious humanitarianism during the era of the world wars and the post-1945 era, either through faith-based organizations or with religious ideology as a component. Here, the role of American ideals and practices was inescapable, with religious or quasi-religious ideology a crucial part of worldview projection. In a global competition with the Soviet Union, the USA emerged

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13 David P. King, *God’s Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Rachel M. McCleary, *Global...
as an economic and cultural superpower during the First World War, with legacies for the contemporary world. It is necessary to rethink the religious elements of humanitarianism and cultural development for the continuities and changes in both world wars. This Element proposes that including a religious impulse, and particularly the role of faith-based groups and organizations with a religious feature, is a key ideological development that contributes to a global history of humanitarianism from 1914–1945. One needs to look at belief and unbelief in a complicated relationship. By looking at both world wars, one can better appreciate historical continuity and change in the era of total war, looking at the similarities and differences in humanitarian endeavors. This connects the pre-1914 world of European global hegemony with the post-1945 world of European loss of power in the superpower contest of the Cold War dominated by the USA and the USSR – and now, increasingly, China. Vital to understanding processes of humanitarian development, this will involve bringing decolonization movements and the Global South into discussions that are too often Eurocentric. Humanitarianism needs to account for both sacred and secular impulses, which were interrelated and in contestation, especially in the twentieth-century global power struggle that emerged after 1917. Simply reducing everything to religion, or the absence of religion, obscures the motivations of the historical actors on a complex field of mentalities in flux. Nevertheless, there is not a perfect historiographic balance, and this Element will focus on the “faith-based” humanitarian impulses because one needs a counterbalance to the secularizing master narrative.14

Humanitarianism was part of the entangled, interreligious history of conflict and cooperation. One must foreground the First World War’s legacies and its connections to genocide and human rights development in the Second World War and its aftermath. This includes several key areas of identity formation and nongovernmental organization, assessing the actions and motivations of historical actors (including the agency of victims, resisters, bystanders, and perpetrators), and the vexed questions of justice and remediation. The First World War was the moment when international aid began to focus on civilians, providing immediate relief. The era of the world wars saw the rapid rise of a web of private and public associations often with religiously based missions and goals, also working with an emerging order of international governance and transnational

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14 Compassion: Private Voluntary Organizations and U.S. Foreign Policy since 1939 (Oxford University Press, 2009).

For a nuanced philosophical and historical approach that examines religion as the “default option” in premodern society changing to a place as “one option among many,” see Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (The Belknap Press, 2007).
aid to populations that did not fit the new post-1919 reordering. By contrast, international, intergovernmental planning for the postwar order began before hostilities of the Second World War ceased. Thus, the story of humanitarianism in wartime, while rooted in events of 1914–1945, also challenges these chronological boundaries as insufficient to understanding the historical change of war.

After elaborating on some fundamental actors, actions, and authorial viewpoint in the history of humanitarianism, this Element will proceed in an overall chronological and thematic development. Ambiguities, omissions, and disputations will remain. Certain thematic elements are placed in arbitrary positions in the narrative: for instance, the discussion of the Save the Children Fund, the flu pandemic of 1918–1920, or the role of visual imagery of women and children. These phenomena could be discussed in other sections; nevertheless, their placement in certain sections should provoke reassessments of ideas such as the end of the First World War. Other narrative choices, however, are more deliberate and insistent: for instance, the Nanjing Massacre of 1937–1938 as an event of the global Second World War that challenges the standard Eurocentric periodization of 1939–1945. The Element will conclude with the era of post-1945 humanitarianism and its relevance for the contemporary world.

Who Were the Humanitarian Actors, and How Did They Act?

The humanitarian impulse takes place between diverse groups of historical actors, exacerbated by emergency conditions, especially in times of war. As Didier Fassin has argued, at the heart of humanitarianism is a paradox of unequal power between human beings trying to help other human beings, a “tension between inequality and solidarity.” As Fassin elaborates, moral sentiments focus on the “poorest, most unfortunate, most vulnerable individuals” in which the “politics of compassion is a politics of inequality.” At the same time, however, the basis of moral sentiments is a “recognition of others as fellows” and thus the “politics of compassion is a politics of solidarity.”

Continuing the darker implications of this paradox, as Alex de Waal has noted, humanitarian intervention involves fundamental and intrinsic elements of cruelty. Arising from the tension of trying to advance common humanity in the strained circumstances of war, the cruelty can be individual: A clash of ideals and realities, where would-be do-gooders have their ideals dashed by circumstantial constraints and end up feeling themselves to be marginalized failures, having not altered the greater social good. Also, in managing overwhelming needs in desperate circumstances, humanitarians are sometimes

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forced to compromise their principles similar to ideas of medical triage. Finally, humanitarians themselves can be blamed for creating impossible dreams for victims, obscuring the fact that an alternate reality is sometimes impossible.\footnote{Alex de Waal, “The Humanitarians’ Tragedy: Escapable and Inescapable Cruelties,” \textit{Disasters} 34, S2 (2010): S130–S137.}

Drawing on the globalization of the American Red Cross, what Julia F. Irwin has called the “humanitarian relationship” took place between donors, would-be donors, authorities (local, national, and international), and recipients of aid.\footnote{Julia F. Irwin, \textit{Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening} (Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Little, “An Explosion of New Endeavours,” 5–6.} There was a fundamental power dynamic of inequality: The recipients were dependent on foreign aid. The recipients of aid were the most difficult to find an authentic historical voice for, and they must be incorporated into the history of humanitarianism. Beyond wounded soldiers, the most common recipients of aid were now children, widows, and refugees. This was a reversal of the pre-1914 notions of humanitarianism in war, which had focused on soldiers, with international law taking increasing care to specify the distinctions between combatants and noncombatants.

In the hierarchy of needs, humanitarianism was about emergency life-saving relief. The most common aid items were food, clothing, bandages, and medicine. These items combatted the scourges of starvation and disease, providing immediate relief. With lives preserved, concerns for more long-term cultural stability came to the foreground. As time passed, prototypical development work took over as the focus of aid, maintaining and developing schools, missions, and religious institutions as key sites of cultural preservation.

Religious humanitarians professed beliefs that often fell short of their universalist ideals and propagandistic pronouncements. Racism, colonialism, and selectivity toward favored groups highlighted the potential hypocrisy of actions that, despite apolitical intents, were often profoundly political. Charity had limits. The unprecedented destruction of the First World War caused a surge of humanitarian organizations and efforts, increasing in both quality and quantity. Religious humanitarians during the war often stylized their efforts in language of absolute dogmatic conviction and Manichean thinking, in which they, of course, were on the side of light against the darkness. They championed their own cause as moral crusaders creating a new world order and bettering the human condition. This paralleled and reinforced propaganda efforts by the various conflicting states – and sometimes even explicitly using the loaded language of a virtuous crusade. While preaching universalism, religious humanitarians were often unintentionally particular, channeling assistance...
toward members of their own religious faith. It was hypocritical at times, but it was nevertheless historically significant. This was a period of rethinking the human subject and its right to existence. Total war had overturned the stability of prewar society, creating a dynamic new world of uncertainty, despair, and hope for the future. International actors of religious humanitarianism now operated in a transnational framework that went beyond the limits of organized charity in the prewar imperial bourgeois era in which European imperial sovereignty ruled the globe.

Atheism and messianism reconfigured the ideological spectrum, and scholarship of humanitarianism needs to account for the global interaction that the USA and the USSR intervening in world affairs. The Russian Revolution saw the emergence of atheistic communism as a global power player. The pivotal point with the entrance of America into the war was 1917: Wilson’s 1916 successful re-election campaign slogan, “He Kept Us Out of War,” was quickly discarded in favor of the mantra: “The World Must Be Made Safe for Democracy.” The USA and the USSR highlighted the global dimensions of religious humanitarianism in the First World War, yet these powers remain marginalized in the Eurocentric historiography of the conflict, with the American and Russian collective experiences of the First World War as a marginalized war, displaced by the triumphalist collective arcs of twentieth-century narratives.\(^8\) With the fall of the Tsarist Monarchy in 1917, the disappearance of Eastern Orthodoxy and its replacement with a victorious Bolshevistic atheism reshaped the global dynamics of religious interaction. Also in 1917, the evangelistic fervor of the United States, above all its President, Woodrow Wilson, represented the opposite end of the sacred-secular spectrum. Histories of humanitarianism must account for this new globality.

One must explore tensions between sacred and secular in the rapidly changing political context of collapsing empires. This conflict saw the fundamental reordering of ideological power structures, creating the emergence of the modern religious landscape. In Jenkins’s portrayal, a geologic metaphor of “tectonic faith” helps to conceptualize how deep traditions suddenly shifted during a period of cataclysmic upheaval.\(^9\) The 1917 collapse of Eastern Orthodoxy’s throne-and-altar alliance, coupled with renewed global surges for Judaism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam, helped reconfigure the religious landscape globally. The “normative” model of European secularization, even narrowly conceived in its original theoretical terms, did not fit global

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