

Forces of Compassion

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An Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism

Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein

Imagine, for a moment, that during the Spanish sack of Tenochtitlan a team of medics had arrived to treat the wounded, pleading with combatants to spare civilians. Or that television cameras had relentlessly broadcast the aftermath of the great Chinese earthquake of 1556 to concerned audiences worldwide, or that sympathetic peasants in fourteenth-century Japan had launched a campaign to sponsor Italian orphans in the wake of the Black Death. The surrealism of imagining contemporary humanitarian techniques applied to historical events indicates more than dramatic technological transformation; it also suggests limits to contemporary assumptions about common human feeling and associated action. We highlight the temporal specificity of phenomena that now appear “humanitarian” in order to underscore their current moral fervor. What is it about the present, we might wonder, that casts the care of strangers in such a leading role?

Suffering and charity both have long histories. The sorrows of human experience and efforts to alleviate them were amply familiar to previous generations, as world literatures and religious traditions attest. Nonetheless, the final decades of the twentieth century witnessed an emergence of reconfigured forms and norms of both on an international scale. Natural disasters and civilian casualties in war now feature as “humanitarian crises,”

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recurring dramas presented by international media, while an extensive complex of interstate entities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) seeks to supply aid to victims. Alongside development and human rights, the humanitarian impulse to alleviate suffering constitutes a central element in international moral discourse, referenced by advocacy groups, states, and military forces alike. The mediated experience of “distant suffering” (Boltanski 1999) features prominently in the discursive production of global sentiment (Tsing 2000). At the same time, efforts to intervene produce both extensive connections and local effects (for example, Leopold 2005; Nordstrom 2004), fueling an aid industry that effectively promotes and reproduces itself (De Waal 1997; Terry 2002).

Although anthropology can claim a long and tormented engagement with development, and similar association with discourses and practices of human rights and environmentalism, the humanitarian sector of the aid world has only recently registered on the disciplinary horizon (see, for example, Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Minn 2007; Saillant 2007; Wilson and Brown 2008). Anthropologists may now be aware of the dynamics of displacement and the significant role that NGOs and advocacy groups play in international governance, particularly amid states of emergency. Nonetheless, they do not always distinguish between humanitarianism and human rights, on the one hand, and humanitarianism and development on the other, conflating what at times may be conflicting claims, allegiances, and temporal assumptions regarding resolutions.¹ Nor do they recognize the comparative range between different sorts of aid organizations, their ideological commitments, and infrastructural practice. In order to clarify such categorical distinctions—as assumed in official reports, or asserted and contested in specific projects—we first differentiate humanitarianism as understood by its professional adherents from other related efforts to “do good” in the world. We then offer several possible genealogies for the present moment, noting both religious and secular traditions of aid and charity. Finally, we review anthropology’s engagement with humanitarianism and survey some recent literature relevant to the topic. Throughout, the term “humanitarianism” itself will remain a matter of some contest. Whereas actors in the aid world and most political scientists might stabilize it in their accounts of international affairs, anthropologists cast a wider net through geography and history, remaining attuned to differences in how people claim and define the value of humanity. We ourselves will therefore deploy the term in several ways, seeking both to situate its dominant usage in international aid and to suggest the limitations and tensions of that understanding.

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HUMANITARIANISM IN THE AID WORLD

Advocates of humanitarianism, development, and human rights all broadly seek to ameliorate and improve aspects of the human condition. However, amid the contemporary aid world each key term suggests a different emphasis, temporality, and potential mechanism for doing so. Although some organizations embrace multiple mandates, or migrate from one mandate (such as relief) to another (such as development) over time, they also recognize these distinctions when advocating a course of action, planning its execution, and justifying its approach. Even efforts to blend approaches such as “rights-based development” only underscore the assumed divides and failings they seek to overcome. For the larger public on both donating and receiving ends of the aid equation, however, definitional lines generally remain less clear. In addition, political actors can and do appropriate these terms at every level, deploying them in multiple ways. Indeed, as a number of the essays in this volume suggest (for example, Bornstein, Feldman, Pandolfi, Redfield), the expansion or delimitation of categories like humanitarianism can precisely serve instrumental and political ends in given settings. Nonetheless, general distinctions between aid “sectors” remain significant in discourse and practice, and hence are helpful points of reference for analysis. To that end we offer brief capsule descriptions.

Although full of additional connotations, development focuses on the economic end of political economy. The contemporary conception grew out of the era of European colonial empire and crystallized in its Cold War aftermath; once established as a staple of international relations it has refused to fade despite copious criticism. Whether derived from top-down planning or grassroots empowerment, the official language of development commonly filters through statistical and technocratic measures, in which livelihood defines well-being. At its core, development seeks to confront poverty, which is usually identified through material lack. In temporal terms, development discourse is inherently and resolutely progressive; conditions *should* improve, with the promise of an open and potentially infinite future.

By contrast, human rights claims emphasize the political end of political economy, in legal form if not always specific content. Although rights discourse has several lineages (most classically that of European liberal political theory), the founding of the United Nations following the Second World War and its adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 marks a nominal watershed. Whether conceived strictly as political liberties, or more inclusively to encompass social and economic concerns,

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the language of rights is fundamentally legalistic and philosophical: justice defines well-being. At its core, human rights advocacy seeks to confront general wrongs usually identified through specific violations. Where development frames human good through an imagined future, human rights discourse defines its version through past failure.

Humanitarianism, by contrast yet again, emphasizes the physical (and increasingly the psychological) condition of suffering people above all else. Although it has several lineages in charity and beyond, as we shall outline below, its institutionalized form defines itself primarily through exceptional states of misfortune, of which the mid-nineteenth-century founding of the Red Cross in response to war constitutes an oft-cited landmark. Whether motivated by religious faith or secular adherence to human empathy, the language of aid world humanitarianism is both moral and broadly medical, identifying well-being through species-level needs and health. Religiously inflected forms of humanitarianism, such as Mother Teresa's charitable order, Mahayana Buddhist humanitarian movements, Islamic *zakat*, and Hindu *dān* (all of which we will address in greater detail below), focus on the care of the soul or spiritual duties through the material world. Hence they differ in orientation from the life-saving norm of international aid, which at its core seeks to confront immediate suffering, usually understood as bodily or psychological anguish. In temporal terms this secular, contemporary strand of humanitarianism remains inherently presentist; the lives and welfare of those now living fundamentally matter and cannot be conscientiously sacrificed in the pursuit of other goals.

In an even more crude heuristic, we might divide the aid world by professional expertise, noting that economists long played a lead role in development, that lawyers established a subspecialty in human rights, and that doctors and nurses have deep ties to humanitarianism. That said we would need to qualify such a suggestion immediately. Not only does humanitarian aid comprise a significant economic activity in many settings (whether or not calculated in terms of profit), but the Geneva Conventions hold a significant place in international legal tradition. Moreover, beyond the artificial preserve of aid professionals, humanitarianism's resemblance to religious charity and military action suggests alternative professions, from mission priest to quartermaster. Thus we ultimately find it most useful to think of these distinctions as historical orientations, trajectories, and tendencies rather than categorical certainties, focusing on when and how they appear in practice. At the same time, we emphasize again the tendency of contemporary humanitarian actors to focus on the immediate needs of living humans in distress. Amid the aid world's landscape of good works,

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such tasks as advocating reparations for dead victims or planning the happiness of future generations usually fall to others.

RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR CONCEPTIONS OF SUFFERING

Much writing on humanitarianism assumes the current framework of nation-states and international organizations, and thus presumes a secular division between politics and religion (see Barnett and Weiss 2008 for an excellent recent compilation). As anthropologists we seek to orient this project around a wider geography and a deeper history. Although the chapters that follow focus largely on contemporary experience, our discussions reference contours and limits to contemporary humanitarian concern for suffering and the ethical force of “care” (Wilson and Brown 2008; Tronto 1993). To better situate these structures of moral feeling, we briefly shift attention in the direction of comparative religious history.

States of suffering have long played a significant role in many strands of religious tradition. Most generally and superficially, we might note that religious practice has offered solace in response to moments of misfortune, whether in the form of small rituals of mourning or the construction of elaborate theological accounts of misery. Interpreting suffering as spiritual disequilibrium, a sign of divine displeasure, or the result of a greater Manichean struggle allows those who are afflicted the possibility of cosmological explanation, if not immediate relief. More directly and provocatively, we might also note that suffering at times offers the possibility of purification and the transcendence of bodily states. Thus coming-of-age ceremonies worldwide often feature forms of deprivation such as fasting, monastic orders from Buddhism to Christianity and Hinduism withdraw from the world to seek a more spiritual life, and the tribulations and sacrifices of Catholic martyrs and saints render their lives exemplary. As Talal Asad observes in reference to torture, physical pain has a proud pedigree in religious festivals (Asad 2003; see also Faubion 2003). However abhorrent pain might now appear in official forums of international law—which ensure the bodily comfort of even the most egregious offenders in trials and imprisonment—the longer profile of suffering in religious history has been as much that of a productive force as of a negative condition, inspiring both contemplation and action.

For our purposes we will focus on religious responses to suffering that have taken a this-worldly focus in the form of charity, ministrations, and care, as well as different understandings of the gift. Acts of mercy may indeed represent something of a panhuman heritage, as the Red Cross

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museum in Geneva makes a valiant effort to suggest (ICRC 2000; see also Isaac 1993). Institutional interest in the needs of strangers appears more novel, however, and historically variable (Ignatieff 1984). World religious traditions have certainly featured provisions for charitable action, ranging from Buddhist doctrines of compassion, Jewish *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*, Christian alms, and Islamic *zakat*, to Hindu *seva* and *dān*. However, these examples differ not only from the dominant assumptions of the contemporary aid world, but also from each other. Before outlining the background of dominant secular assumptions, therefore, we will first examine comparative religious understandings of the act of giving in greater detail. Although many religious groups claim ancient scriptural heritage for the contemporary humanitarian imperatives of their members, as anthropologists we emphasize the significance of historical context and caution against treating any tradition as timeless.

In his classic essay, *The Gift* (1990), Marcel Mauss highlighted the role of giving in maintaining social and moral order. He argued that as a collective action performed by groups, giving involves social contracts and reciprocity. Noting that the Arabic and Hebrew terms for “alms” derive from the word for “justice,” Mauss (1990:15–16) drew an explicit linguistic tie between gifts and a larger moral field. Giving, he argued, has less to do with utility and the circulation of goods than with a type of social solidarity. It is through the exchange of gifts that individuals are connected to a larger society and hierarchy is established. Since this classic work, an extensive literature on the gift has emerged, including significant elaborations, inversions, and critiques of Mauss’s analysis (for example, Bataille 1989; Derrida 1992; Godelier 1999; Gregory 1982; Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986, 1989, 1994; Raheja 1988; Schrift 1997; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1992). Nonetheless, the original insight that the act of giving mobilizes a distinctively moral category of person remains highly relevant to the topic of suffering.

Salvational religions define giving as a sacred act with other-worldly incentives (Weber 1946a, 1993). In Islam, *zakat* is a religious duty in which the practice of almsgiving purifies the giver (Baeck 1991; Benthall 1999). The Islamic injunction for charitable giving has found institutionalized form in Islamic charities (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009) just as the Christian injunction for “good works” has produced Christian missions (Bornstein 2005; Bowie, Kirkwood, and Ardener 1993; McCarthy 1990; Tucker 1988). Religious giving explicitly demarcates boundaries between sacred practice and its profane alternative—the dangerous failure to recognize moral obligation. The injunction to engage in religious giving

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speaks to what will happen, whether in this world or the next, if one does *not* give, and challenges one's status as a properly virtuous person.

Within this shared understanding of the potential moral value of gifts, however, lie significant differences. In some traditions of religious giving, the worthiness of a particular recipient or group is an important consideration. For example, in the messianic religion of Judaism, it is the suffering of a *community* rather than the suffering of individuals that offers the hope for religious salvation (see Weber 1946b for a comparative account of approaches to suffering and injustice).² As Benthall (1999, this volume) notes for Islam in the case of zakat granted to "the poor," the Qur'an specifies the appropriate qualities of those who should receive it. Beyond the destitute, this scriptural injunction includes the administrators of alms, as well as potential converts and those who might further the cause of Islam. In the case of Hinduism, sacred writings such as the Manu Smriti (the Laws of Manu) and the Bhagavad Gita dictate worthy recipients of *dān* as well as appropriate contexts for giving (Heim 2004). Given that the relative purity (or impurity, as the case may be) of the recipient reflects back upon the merit of the giver, scriptural Hindu *dān* directs giving to specific types of people, such as Brahmin priests and world renouncers. Contemporary forms of zakat and *dān* may model themselves more along the lines of secular humanitarianism, as Benthall and Bornstein suggest in this volume. Nonetheless, the moral logic of both Islamic and Hindu traditions identifies appropriate recipients of aid by other criteria than simple suffering. Not just any human will do.

The study of traditions of Islamic zakat and Hindu *dān* de-center other basic assumptions surrounding aid world versions of humanitarianism, including the liberal emphasis on individual choice and the modernist focus on the present. Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan's work on zakat (2009; also see Benthall 1999) demonstrates how this form of giving itself constitutes a form of worship. Zakat is a social and religious duty—not an individual moral choice. As religiously structured action in some cases, it can take the form of literal taxation, collected by a religious state. In other cases, specific zakat committees structured as nongovernmental organizations provide for the welfare and emergency relief of specific local communities. Although Hindu *dān*, similarly, may now manifest itself in the form of NGOs receiving donations, it remains articulated as a duty of charitable assistance, offered without any expectation of benefit or return (Bornstein 2009). The examples of zakat and *dān* offer radical contrasts to forms of religious humanitarianism that focus on a universal moral "self" and its transformation. Hindu charitable *dān*, moreover, challenges the

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presentist, this-life focus of secular humanitarianism by emphasizing karma and the desire to be released from a repeating cycle of rebirth. In contrast to the problem-solving emphasis of most aid-world fund-raising, many who give *dān* speak explicitly of attaining merit toward their next life.

In addition—as highlighted by the case of Islamic *zakat*—religious giving does not necessarily aim to be neutral or even worldly at all. The post-September 11 denunciation of Islamic charities as inappropriately “interested” in political and spiritual terms (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2009; Benthall, this volume) only reinforces the point that classic humanitarian concepts like neutrality and impartiality derive from a particularly secular political history (Redfield, this volume). There is, of course, a potential rhetorical double standard in play when some strategic giving to promote alliances—such as the military “interests” of Islamic charities—counts as terrorism, while other strategic giving—such as the charitable activities of Western military forces—counts as humanitarianism. But the point we want to emphasize here is that a case of social and relational assistance, such as the care of fellow Muslims, differs both from a generalized care of strangers (Sontag 2003 and Boltanski 1999) and from the neutral, impartial ideals of secular humanitarianism as advocated by the UN.³

Christianity, by contrast, makes fewer distinctions between worthy recipients at a scriptural level. The concept of “brotherly love” and the parable of the Good Samaritan are models for Christian giving in which all in need equally deserve care. Since all human beings can potentially be saved spiritually, they can also potentially be rescued through worldly action. Actual Christian behavior in response to this precept has obviously varied vastly through time. Nonetheless, the framing of the gift as an expansive expression of love resonates with the egalitarian sensibility of the aid world, even as it differs from its sense of self and care. The figure of Mother Teresa, a Catholic missionary who started her charitable order in India, offers an example of this religious tradition in contemporary practice.

Mother Teresa is both an icon of saintly Christian charity and a Nobel Prize-winning humanitarian. She has also been the subject of substantial critique from secular intellectuals for valorizing poverty while not attempting to change the structural conditions that produce it (Hitchens 1995; Prashad 1997) and for being part of bourgeois philanthropic ideology that, as Prashad argues, acts as the “mirror of bourgeois guilt.” At the same time her aim of saving souls rather than lives has engendered criticism from secular humanitarians. Although the cosmological intent of humanitarianism inspired by the work of Mother Teresa addresses suffering in the moment, it is not oriented toward a presentist conception of life as is, say, the work

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of a medical organization like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Redfield 2005). To her critics, the sources of Mother Teresa's funding for the Missionaries of Charity (including dictators and wealthy criminals) as well as the use of the funds (medical care without medical training) suggest further grounds for hypocrisy. While these objections reveal aspects of the global context in which humanitarianism takes place, they also miss an essential element of this form of humanitarian practice. Religion designates more than ideological commitment here; it is also a specific habitus of the gift (see Bourdieu 1977).

As we outline below, Christianity played a particular role in the emergence of both the aid world and the secular order of institutions that surround it. While seeking to broaden the frame of reference for discussions of "faith-based humanitarian action" and to signal the significant distinctions between traditions, as well their differences from the secular universe of state-centered aid, we must also emphasize that these religious alternatives are hardly simple survivals of local tradition. Rather, the forms of belief involved in humanitarianism (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Mahayana Buddhism) are "world" religions with long histories and ever-evolving networks. Although the activities of religious-based humanitarian organizations may exist below the radar of state-level accounting, they frequently operate at their own expansive scale.

The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, for example, is a transnational Hindu spiritual organization supporting the work of a guru named Amma whose "self-professed mission on earth is to alleviate the sorrows of humankind" (Warrier 2006:181, 2003). She is known for her particular style of interacting with her devotees, hugging each devotee individually and offering miracles and advice for personal needs. Like Mother Teresa, Amma attempts to alleviate and attend to humanity's everyday suffering, but in contrast to Mother Teresa her work embraces improvement and progress. To that end she has established schools, hospitals, and orphanages, as well as sponsored disaster relief, free food and clothing programs, and pensions for abandoned women and widows. The resulting institutional imprint is significant (an Indian newspaper claimed Amma's income to be around eighty million dollars in 2006), and she has mobilized tens of thousands of volunteers.⁴ However, the best known calculation of Amma's impact comes in the form of personal interaction: over twenty-six million hugs, counted on a clicker as a testimonial to the number of people seeking her assistance.⁵

Devotee-driven forms of transnational humanitarianism can also adopt the more conventional techniques and institutional contours of an NGO. For example, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Foundation,

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a Mahayana Buddhist lay movement comprised of devotees running global outreach programs, emphasizes building a “pure land” in this world through the secular action of concrete contributions to humanity (see Huang 2005). Founded in 1966 by a nun and a group of housewife devotees, the group’s initial goal was to defray medical costs for the poor through daily donations. In the first year, monthly charity funds came to less than US\$30, but three decades later, Compassion Relief had five million members worldwide, with branches in twenty-eight countries, and gave away over US\$157 million annually. The group runs a TV channel, a secular four-year university with a standard medical school, and two “state-of-the-Western-art 900 bed hospitals” (Huang 2005:187).⁶

Even when religious organizations surrounding the activities of charismatic leaders like the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission or Mother Teresa’s Sisters of Charity inhabit recognizable institutional forms of the aid world, however, they do so uneasily. Much of the voluntarism in these types of devotee-institutions remains undocumented and uncalculated, since devotees and volunteers of these organizations are itinerant, informal humanitarians beyond the framework of government regulation. This can lead to tensions with state authorities, all the more when religious organizations respond to humanitarian emergencies in highly charged political environments or fill gaps of responsibility for the social welfare of citizens (cf. Bornstein 2005, 2009). Lay religious movements can either legitimize or become an opposition to oppressive state regimes when they blur the artificial line between humanitarianism and human rights (see Jordt 2007, for case of Buddhist monks in Burma).⁷

Accounts of humanitarianism, as we suggest below, usually assume a more secular focus in the frame of global politics (Minear 2002; Nichols and Loeschner 1989; Nichols 1988; Weiss and Collins 1996). A faith in fundamental human equality plays a central role in this secular discourse, often appearing in tandem with efforts to spread democracy. Although actual practice often demands distinctions regarding who is most “in need” of humanitarian assistance, such decisions are inherently controversial (see Fassin 2007a and this volume on hierarchies of humanity; and Redfield 2008a on triage and sacrifice). Measures of lives saved or lives lost presume an ethical ideal of equality, echoing Christian ideas of brotherly love. They also recall the legacy of the Christian pastorate, which defined leadership through the care of a good shepherd who preserved the flock (Foucault 2000, 2007).

Secular humanitarianism likewise resonates with salvational narratives of rescue. However, in contrast to the legacy of Mother Teresa, the aid

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world redefines its worthy recipient in terms of a this-worldly, present conception of need. The growth of secularism and its temporal relation with internationalism (see Calhoun 2008) is evident in contexts where NGOs present themselves as helping all people rather than a particular group. Secular humanitarianism thus defines a new population: needy victims. Yet, as with forms of religious charity that specify the conditions of a worthy recipient, “need” likewise requires evaluation and confirmation, being weighed in a moral balance that abhors any suggestion of fraud or corruption. Secular neoliberal subjects are responsible selves, capable of their own development (Pandolfi 2008b; Englund 2006; Bornstein 2007a). Those who do not demonstrate the proper will to improve are morally suspect. Similarly, situations that fail to respond to repeated interventions provoke talk of “compassion fatigue.” To follow such shifts in moral feeling from charity to philanthropy and humanitarianism we must first examine not only how pity entered politics (see Boltanski 1999; Arendt 1963), but also how humanistic feeling inspired moral fervor and forms of direct aid.

THE BIRTH OF HUMANITARIAN AID

Alongside centuries of colonial violence, European expansion also inspired counter-arguments about the moral significance of common human feeling. Following the conquest of what Europe considered a “New World,” the Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas wrote *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), decrying atrocities committed against native peoples and emphasizing their humanity as potential Christians.⁸ A few decades later the French author Michel de Montaigne penned his famous essay “On Cannibals” (1580), suggesting the need for comparative perspective when denouncing acts of savagery. When viewed from the present, such works appear ancestral to a broad complex of cosmopolitan humanisms, as well as the related assumption that even unfamiliar peoples and their lives might hold equal worth to one’s own kin.

Contemporary humanitarianism, as described and understood in the aid world, has its most obvious roots in European experience from the eighteenth century onward. Here we will briefly cite four critical junctures that appear in the literature. Two are events—the formation of the Red Cross in 1863 and the response to the Lisbon earthquake in 1755—and two are longer historical shifts—the movement to abolish slavery and the efforts of administrators and missionaries to care for colonial populations. Navigating between them suggests ties both to specific historical events and to the larger trajectories of Enlightenment rationality, secularism, capitalism, and colonialism.

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As mentioned above, one canonical landmark for humanitarian norms within international affairs is the emergence of the Red Cross movement and the subsequent adoption of the initial Geneva Conventions. Although Henry Dunant was but one of a wave of reformers horrified by the effects of modern warfare and lack of provision for the wounded, the publication in 1862 of his account of the battle of Solferino (Dunant 1986) prompted a distinctively international, as well as national, response. A deeply religious man, Dunant appealed openly to Christian sentiment and inspired a pragmatic attempt to “civilize” warfare. Once embraced by the sovereign powers of Europe, the movement spawned a complex of national Red Cross societies to provide aid, as well as an “international committee” (the ICRC, International Committee of the Red Cross) that strove to establish appropriate rules and monitor compliance (Hutchinson 1996; Moorehead 1998). Initially limited to the care of wounded soldiers, the scope of the organization’s purview expanded to include sailors, prisoners, and civilians and responses to natural disaster. Although not, strictly speaking, a “non-governmental organization,”⁹ the ICRC figures prominently in the world system that NGOs would later help create (Boli and Thomas 1999).

The emergence of the Red Cross does serve as a convenient watershed and underscores the extent to which contemporary humanitarianism has been entangled with warfare and addressed legal states of exception. Certainly the combination of mechanized weaponry and conscript citizen armies with war correspondence and photography suggests a dramatic new template for regarding “the pain of others” (for example, Sontag 2003). Moreover, war is the classic edge of law, the moment in which norms can be altered or suspended (Agamben 2005). The effort of the Geneva Conventions to constrain its brutal effects clearly represents an effort to curtail the exercise of sovereign power by proposing “humane” limits and responsibilities. At the same time, however, the very convenience of this marker and the frequency of its citation risks exaggerating its historical significance. Neither the Red Cross nor the Geneva Conventions were the only expressions of humanitarian sentiment during the nineteenth century, and neither played a significant role in the colonized world until well into the twentieth. Moreover, the very symbol of a red cross used by the organization, and its presumed religious connotations, became a source of lasting controversy (Benthall 1997). And finally, the initial actions that inspired the Red Cross focused on easing death alongside saving life. “I spoke to him,” Dunant wrote of a particular stricken soldier, “and he listened. He allowed himself to be soothed, comforted and consoled, to die at last with the straightforward simplicity of a child” (Dunant 1986:66).

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Washing wounds and bringing solace to the dying, the Genevan businessman was as much a part of Christian lay charity as any secular, professional humanitarian tradition.

Another commonly cited formative moment in intellectual history is the dramatic Lisbon earthquake of 1755, news of which circulated across the continent and incited commentary from figures like Kant, Voltaire, and Rousseau. The event thus foreshadows the contemporary form of disaster, in which sudden rupture acquires enlarged significance through media representation and affects people well beyond its immediate reach. Reactions to the catastrophe varied widely, but left an imprint on the European history of ideas; Lisbon both inspired Kant to study seismology and likely shaped subsequent aesthetic and philosophical debates about the sublime (Ray 2004). The earthquake further featured in Voltaire's rejection of theological optimism, one landmark in moral claims to Enlightenment reason. Rather than reconciling himself to the existence of evil and tragedy as part of a larger divine plan, the French satirist began to ridicule any suggestion that "all is well" or that this might be "the best of all possible worlds." Finally, Voltaire's poem about the disaster also prompted a response from Rousseau, in which he noted the artificiality of "natural" disaster, created as much by urban crowding and hazardous construction as by geological instability. Such analysis, as Russell Dynes (2000) suggests, prefigured that of later social science, in which events—even those of the most exceptional nature—are understood in relation to worldly experience rather than religious tradition or scriptural authority. Choosing this historical moment as a foundation risks simply reproducing the linear self-narrative of Enlightenment history, as well as suggesting that elite ideas represent (or shape) popular sentiment. Nonetheless, it does suggest the possibility of catastrophe as both a moral sublime and a humanist justification for action, in social fact if not transcendent value.

Avoiding the seductions of a single event, we could focus on a more complex pattern of emergence around the international movement to abolish chattel slavery. As Craig Calhoun (2008) notes, the term "humanitarian" itself dates from the early nineteenth century, used first to describe a theological position stressing the humanity of Christ, and subsequently efforts to alleviate suffering or advance the human race in general.¹⁰ In this understanding, instances of disaster or war were not necessary for action, and a feeling of kinship could extend across national and even colonial differences. The most dramatic historical example of such humanitarian sentiment is undoubtedly the long struggle of abolition (Hochschild 2005; Haskell 1995). Although the significance of the antislavery movement

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remains the subject of heated historical debate (for example, Bender 1992), for our purposes we might simply recognize both a connection to transformations in the wider political economy, and to shifting sensibilities about pain and suffering. The eventual abandonment of plantation slavery occurs amid the rise of industrial capital, new forms of labor, a wider wave of gradual reforms altering the practice of punishment and the treatment of animals, as well as the decline of blood sports as a form of entertainment (Foucault 2000; Elias 1978). The abolition movement is as much an ancestor to contemporary human rights discourse and political advocacy movements as to humanitarianism. Choosing this historical movement as a foundation therefore might blur as much as it distinguishes. Nonetheless, it does suggest the emergence and spread of a normative moral sentiment about the human amid the violence of market exchange, emphasizing bodily integrity as well as liberty.

We could also consider another broad historical pattern: the adoption of welfare provisions amid colonial rule, particularly the spread of missionary forms of medicine and the development of systematized famine response. Beyond attempting to extract resources from colonies, European empires also fitfully fostered civilizing projects to remake and reform their colonial subjects and landscapes. By the middle of the nineteenth century, medicine became a popular component of missionary work in Africa, and what medical infrastructure emerged on that continent grew largely out of religious activity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Vaughn 1991). The figure of the saintly health worker, exemplified by Albert Schweitzer, would continue to play a significant role in the later colonial period. Conversely, state action and planning became a central focus in curbing famine in Asia and a matter of political dispute in British India (Davis 2001; Sharma 2001). Benevolent governance, meanwhile, emerged as a core principle of British colonial administrative policy in Africa (Lugard 1965; Gott 2002). By the twentieth century relieving hunger had become an administrative responsibility and starving masses elsewhere a moral concern (De Waal 1997; Vernon 2007). Whether condoning or condemning the motives and actors involved, this antecedent activity offers an obvious potential parallel for contemporary forms of international humanitarianism, one recalled by references to development and aid workers as the “new missionaries” (for example, Bornstein 2005; Manjhi and O’Coill 2002) and by media portrayals of hunger.

Whichever of these lineages we might favor and foreground, they all converge in the sensibility that perceives suffering as a preventable tragedy,

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Table 1.1
Governmental Humanitarian Aid 2006 (Officially Designated)¹

Donor	US\$ million	Percentage
European Community & EU States (combined)	4327	50
US	3022	35
Norway	380	5
Canada	278	3
Japan	199	2
Australia	198	2
Switzerland	196	2
New Zealand	26	0.3

Recipient	US\$ million	Percentage
Sudan	1201	18
Palestine	701	10
Indonesia	367	5
Lebanon	346	5
Ethiopia	314	5
Afghanistan	296	4
Somalia	275	4
Uganda	214	3
Kenya	202	3
Iraq	151	2
Burundi	136	2
179 Others	1956	29

1. Although this project does not focus on the political economy of aid, and some of the phenomena we mention here escape formal accounting, these tables offer a fiscal snapshot from one given year. Not all organizations report their budgets in identical terms or currencies, necessitating translation and conversion. The figures in Table 1.1 derive from the Development Initiatives report *Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2007–08*, p. 11. <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/analyses-and-reports/gha-reports/gha-2007>. This report estimates officially designated humanitarian aid from donors to have been in the order of US\$9.2 billion in 2006 (about 9 percent of all aid), with an unofficial total of humanitarian assistance from all sources at 14.2 billion. To put this in perspective, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimated military spending in 2006 at 1204 billion dollars. <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2007/2008>.

demanding a direct response. Humanitarianism in this sense is several things at once: a structure of feeling, a cluster of moral principles, a basis for ethical claims and political strategies, and a call for action. Although the contemporary form is certainly worldly, and often posed as a secular good, it evokes religious categories and legacies of the sacred. Moreover, in both nominal and operational terms it defines itself around the collective

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Table 1.2
Selected Intergovernmental Agencies¹

Agency	Year Established	Affiliation	2006 Budget Expenditure (US\$ millions)
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)	1946	UN	2343
World Health Organization (WHO)	1948	UN	3313
United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR)	1950	UN	1145
World Food Program (WFP)	1961	UN	2900
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)	1991	UN	128.5
European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO)	1992	EU	1156

1. The figures in Table 1.2 derive from agency annual reports, as well as the Global Humanitarian Assistance report cited above; also see MSF (2007) and Aall, Miltenberger, and Weiss (2000). Our list is far from comprehensive; we provide it only to give a rough comparative sense of size and capacity between different organizations, state and nonstate, religious and secular. When more than one figure is available we have opted for the expenditure in the fiscal year noted. The number for the WHO is that of their 2006-07 budget cycle.

figure of the human, measured through basic needs and dignity. However stabilized in conceptual and rhetorical terms, this figure proves less stable in practice.

The institutional apparatus that composes the contemporary aid industry largely emerged over the second half of the twentieth century (see Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). Although forerunners like the ICRC and Save the Children have longer histories, the founding of the United Nations in the aftermath of the Second World War (as well as other entities of international governance like the World Bank) marks a clear watershed for humanitarianism as well as development and human rights discourse. Not only did the UN itself gradually burgeon into an ensemble of agencies, but internationally focused relief agencies also expanded as colonization receded, part of an exponential wave of NGOs that gave the acronym currency. Often founded in response to a particular crisis or concern, they expanded their ambitions over time. Despite this remarkable growth, and

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Table 1.3
Selected Proto-NGOs and NGOs' Annual Expenditures¹

Organization	Year Established	Country of Origin	2006 Budget Expenditure (US\$ millions)
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	1863	Switzerland	771
The Salvation Army (US branch)	1865	Britain	2996
American Red Cross	1881	United States	5628
Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)	1914	United States	224
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)	1917	United States	43
Save the Children International	1919	Britain	863
OXFAM International (originally Oxford Famine Relief Committee)	1942	Britain	638
International Rescue Committee (IRC)	1942	United States	211
Catholic Relief Services	1943	United States	561
Lutheran World Relief	1945	United States	34
CARE (originally Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe)	1945	United States	645
World Vision	1950	United States	2104
World Council of Churches	1948	International/ Switzerland	38
African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF)	1957	International/US	44
Concern Worldwide	1968	Ireland	160
Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF)	1971	France	703
Action Contre La Faim /Action Against Hunger (ACF)	1979	France	125
Médecins du Monde/Doctors of the World (MDM)	1980	France	180
International Medical Corps (IMC)	1984	United States	116
Islamic Relief Worldwide	1984	Britain	77
American Jewish World Service	1985	United States	25
Partners in Health	1987	United States	30

1. The figures in Table 1.3 derive from the annual reports of organizations; also see MSF (2007) and Aall, Miltenberger, and Weiss (2000) and note for Table 1.1 above for qualifications. The organizations in this list also sponsor a range of diverse activities, and some, for example, the Salvation Army and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), maintain a strong religious focus (the JDC lists only 2.5 percent of their expenditure as nonsectarian). In addition we must reiterate that while these figures fluctuate annually, they generally trend upward, sometimes dramatically in response to major events like the South Asian tsunami. For a more quantitative perspective see Focus Report 2009—Public Support for Humanitarian Crises through NGOs (also posted at <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/reports>), which estimates that in 2006 NGOs collectively contributed some 40 percent of humanitarian aid, and that more than half of their share derived from public donations.

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the economic gravity of Europe and North America within it, describing the new aid formation literally as a colonial substitute overstates its capacity. Although varying significantly in size and capacity (a few approach or even surpass UN agencies in financial terms), no international NGO can match the reach of a powerful state. Even as the humanitarian collective remains dwarfed by conventional military expenditure, its loose assemblage of affiliations and associations also lacks the centralized coordination of a modern fighting force, let alone a state or empire.

The postwar humanitarian turn was not just a question of institutional apparatus and material capacity. The period also saw the emergence of key conceptual elements of the aid world. As Paul Rabinow (1999:103) notes, by the founding of the UN, “dignity” had come to designate an essential component of human existence, rather than an attribute of reason or character. Dignity would continue to play a central role in documents and claims related to human rights and ethics and would serve as the primary supplement to physical well-being in humanitarian discourse.¹¹ Similarly, the new legal category of “genocide” and the historical referent of the Holocaust suggested that human populations and their potential suffering had intrinsic moral standing (see, for example, Hinton 2002). The full adoption of genocide as a lodestone for the international moral compass may have only occurred a generation later (Rabinow 2003:22; Ignatieff 1999:315). Nonetheless, the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) effectively assigned ordinary human lives equal value and inscribed them as a secular good within the emerging norms of international governance.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND HUMANITARIANISM

As Didier Fassin notes (this volume) humanitarianism is an uncomfortably intimate topic for anthropology. Not only does the discipline’s intellectual coherence demand a fundamental recognition of humanity in some general form, but its institutional lineage also includes ties to the abolition movement and nineteenth-century philanthropy (Hiatt 1996). Compassion and empathy remain key values claimed by anthropologists in their representation of other humans across cultural difference. Moreover, anthropologists frequently make ethical and political claims in relation to human suffering and (knowingly or not) draw on humanitarian tropes when doing so. Within the world of secular value assumed by much anthropological writing, moral urgency often stems from threats to life and health. The prominence of the physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer as an exemplary figure attests to the allure of medical care beyond specific religious

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influences (Farmer 2003; Kidder 2003). Even moments of extreme professional dispute and vitriol can yield a remarkable convergence on the need to protect the well-being of specified others, for example the Yanomami controversy (Borofsky 2005). At the same time, most anthropologists remain intellectually and methodologically committed to the particularity of human experience and uncomfortable with universal claims of humanity. In addition, anthropologists are often of two minds when it comes to “doing good” (Fisher 1997) and more comfortable with the stance of critique than that of endorsement. The pronouncements and actions of international agencies and organizations seeking to pursue humanitarian goals on a global scale, therefore, provoke anxiety and mixed reactions that parallel the discipline’s vexed relations with development and human rights (Ferguson 1997; Riles 2006).

In 1985 the Royal Anthropological Institute published an inaugural issue of a revamped newsletter entitled *Anthropology Today*. Attuned to the Live Aid era of Ethiopian famine response, it included a brief report surveying work on disasters since the founding of a small concern called the International Disaster Institute in 1979 (D’Souza 1985). Anthropologists not only had a natural interest in famine, the author, Frances D’Souza, suggested, but actually had generated some relevant research on social responses to it. Sadly, however, relief agencies and planners ignored longer term analysis, responding only to the immediacy of media reports of crisis and resulting political pressure. The report’s assumptions about the potential benefits of social and cultural knowledge typify earlier work relating anthropology and humanitarianism: in a better world anthropologists might function as local experts and advisers. Over the ensuing decades, anthropologists would remain interested in disasters such as famine, social rupture, and displacement, and an increasing number worked as aid professionals. Their analytic lens, however, would widen beyond normative studies of affected populations to encompass both media representation and forms of aid response such as refugee camps (for example, Benthall 2010; De Waal 1997; Malkki 1995, 1996). Perceiving a reconfiguration of geopolitics after the Cold War, social science in general focused on more “global” phenomena, and new entities appeared such as the Center for Civil Society Studies at Johns Hopkins University and the International Society for Third Sector Research. Anthropologists were no exception to these trends. As ethnographic research sought to track more mobile and dispersed phenomena associated with globalization, it grew multisited (Marcus 1995; see also Inda and Rosaldo 2001; Rabinow 2003). It also began to include studies of nongovernmental organizations (for example,

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Bornstein 2005; see Markowitz 2001 for review). Combined with accounts by reflective practitioners and other social scientists (for example, Barnett 2002; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Hyndman 2000), such studies helped introduce elements of the world aid system into anthropology's field of vision.

Two other interrelated factors also merit attention. First, anthropology not only developed a large applied sector over the second half of the twentieth century, but concerns for political relevance and ethical responsibility have motivated some academic anthropologists to seek a more "activist" role (for example, Hale 2006). Following the generational wave of attention to colonialism and forms of inequality, signs of political and moral commitment arguably became located in professional topics as well as personal sentiment. Anthropologists are thus now predisposed to engage in human rights struggles and truth and reconciliation commissions at more than one level and in more than one way. Moreover, the effects of both social rupture and humanitarian action have become increasingly unavoidable in many of the contexts within which anthropologists work. Topics such as violence and genocide, as well as recent crises like the Indian Ocean tsunami, appear as reference points in academic literature, alongside heightened unease over professional ethics, including recent debates over the involvement of anthropologists in military engagements and militarized forms of aid (for example, Gusterson 2007).

Several strands of anthropological literature frame discussions of humanitarianism. One returns to the classic interest in the gift outlined above, along with the social analysis of generosity and suffering. Unlike evolutionary accounts of altruism, which puzzle over instances of an individual or a species taking advantage of apparent acts of kindness, such work concerns itself more with the erasure of historical difference in claims of human universality. Given that discourses surrounding international conflicts and disasters regularly appeal to categories of the human, this pluralist legacy remains vital to any contribution anthropology might make on the topic.

A second line of literature focuses on exceptional states, and the growing ethnographic attention to disaster, conflict, and displacement. Drawing less on the comparative study of catastrophe or risk per se (as with Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002 or even Lakoff 2010) than on the philosophical legacy of figures like Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, such work argues that moments of rupture are central to the contemporary legal-political order and its claims to "humanity." Given US foreign policy in the wake of September 11 and the ensuing emphasis on security and preparedness (see Lakoff 2007), the topic of legal exception has grown newly

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current, and the trend toward militarized forms of aid (Duffield 2001) all the more apparent. Moreover, following a distinction within the category of “life” made by Arendt (1998), and subsequently enlarged by Giorgio Agamben (1998), states of minimal existence increasingly characterize the fate of exceptional categories of people. Without necessarily accepting such theoretical claims in their entirety, anthropologists have found them generative for thinking about humanitarian practice. Thus a response to natural disaster could function as a moment of national political theology in Venezuela (Fassin and Vasquez 2005), even as the aid apparatus could appear to exert a form of “mobile sovereignty” in settings like Kosovo (Pandolfi 2000, 2003, also see this volume). Thus an international NGO with French roots could strive to preserve “life in crisis” worldwide (Redfield 2005, 2006), even as immigrants in France begin to make their claims to amnesty by appealing to humanitarian medical need rather than refugee status (Ticktin 2006b).

Current anthropological interest in the political status of life derives from the broad influence of Michel Foucault’s (2003) concept of “biopower,” from the emergence of new technologies and interventions in the biosciences (Franklin and Lock 2003), and from the discipline’s greater engagement with medical topics. If “life itself” has emerged as a central component of liberal politics (Rose 2007), then we might talk about citizenship in biological terms, particularly in the wake of a catastrophe like Chernobyl when social welfare follows medical diagnosis (Petryna 2002). By extension, in a context where access to AIDS drugs means life, we might speak of “therapeutic citizenship” (Nguyen 2005) at the intersection of aid agencies and global pharmaceutical distribution (Petryna, Lakoff, and Kleinman 2006). Medical anthropology’s concern for conceiving of suffering in social terms (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997) has produced both indictments of “structural violence” produced by the global political economy and calls for social justice (Farmer 2003; Kim et al. 2000), and concern about the figure of the “suffering stranger” that such calls deploy (Butt 2002). Studies of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in key contexts such as Brazil, South Africa, and China (Biehl 2007; Fassin 2007b; Hyde 2007) have reconfigured thinking about health and complex new relations between bodies, states, and the wider field of “nongovernmental” politics (Abélès 2010; Feher, Krikorian, and McKee 2007; Ferguson 2002). At the same time studies of organ transplants have further revealed the degree of fragmentation and circulation now affecting human bodies, as well as the complicated ethical fields evoked around gifts, commodities, and lives (Cohen 1999, 2004b; Lock 2002; Scheper-Hughes 2005). In a parallel manner humanitarian aid has

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performed its own selective transplantation, putting standardized equipment and models for intervention into circulation and deploying them in mission sites worldwide (Hyde and Feldman in this volume; Redfield 2008c). And finally, studies addressing trauma in terms of mental as well as physical well-being have underscored the production, circulation, and consumption of complex forms of subjectivity worldwide (Das et al. 2000, 2001; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; James 2004; Good et al. 2008).

Even as some anthropologists have focused on topics directly related to humanitarianism, through studies of institutions, professionals, and explicit moments of encounter, others have found aspects of humanitarianism in states and expectations of governance surrounding them. In the marginal settings where many anthropologists conduct their research, “the state” is far less of a given than political theory might indicate, and the disciplinary diagnosis of disorders focuses less on the failure of liberal forms to materialize than on the broader, often postcolonial context in which this “failure” occurs (Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 2005). In such “white jeep states” (Sampson 2003), international agencies and NGOs play a significant role in providing what welfare services exist. Between the scars of colonial history and the assumptions of neoliberal policies—not to mention episodic violence and warfare—politics and economics rarely conform to neat divisions between state and civil society, particularly in Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2006; Ferguson 2006; Mbembe 2001; Roitman 2005). War and peace also blur (Nordstrom 2004) while mass violence becomes more thinkable (Mamdani 2001); moments of violence produce multiple reverberations (Hoffman 2005; Theidon 2007; Wagner 2008). In such settings, encounters between elements of international advocacy and local populations result in as much friction as certainty (Englund 2006; Tsing 2005). On such ground neither the politics nor the ethics of “common human feeling” remain simple.

THIS VOLUME AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Humanitarian action has certainly provoked ample commentary, both with regard to specific crises and as a general pattern. Most analysis, however, remains either within the framework of specific policy or abstracted into sweeping theoretical claims (for example, Hardt and Negri 2000).¹² A number of more precise critical summations have emerged to occupy a middle ground, produced either by former aid workers and thoughtful fellow travelers (for example, Terry 2002; Rieff 2002; Kennedy 2004) or scholars with a background in international relations and generalizing social science (for example, Bass 2008; Weiss and Minear 1993; Hoffman

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and Weiss 2006; the introductory essay in Barnett and Weiss 2008 provides an excellent review). As of yet, however, there are relatively few in-depth ethnographic and historical accounts of humanitarian organizations, cosmologies, and encounters. This volume assembles a group of scholars engaged in precisely such studies and joins similar efforts to address the humanitarian action in specific detail (Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Barnett and Weiss 2008; Wilson and Brown 2008). Informed by critique of the larger humanitarian project and related norms of international governance, such work also grapples with the specific elements that constitute and complicate actual practice. Our collective goal is to develop a more situated understanding of humanitarian action, solidifying the ground for its comparative analysis and engagement.

From the perspective of anthropology we confront two related, sometimes opposing tasks. One is to outline and examine the contemporary aid world, including its dominant practices, tensions, and beliefs about humanity. Another, however, is to place that world in comparative and historical relief by providing alternative histories and portraying different practices and beliefs.¹³ The challenge thus becomes to navigate between these tasks with sufficient nuance and clarity to reveal humanitarianism as a particularly charged terrain between politics and ethics and to return to the question of why caring for strangers has become an urgent contemporary preoccupation.

This volume emerged from an intensive workshop held in March 2008 at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. For scholars working on specific topics for an extended period of time (and at times in seeming isolation), it was an ecstatic experience to engage in extended conversation with people who shared common interests in such a serene and caring setting, and we remain extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to have our work benefit from such dialogue.¹⁴ In accordance with the tried and tested formula for the Advanced Seminar program, our deliberations included four days of discussions around precirculated papers, as well as a final session focused on the volume as a whole. We engaged in an intense discussion ranging across the topics addressed in the volume, exploring the politics of intervention alongside religious diversity. Although the chapters that follow cluster thematically, the boundaries between them remain open, and we hope readers will approach them in the same spirit. Many topics overlap and complement or disrupt each other. Some chapters offer meta-level analyses (Benthall, Englund, Fassin, Pandolfi, Redfield) while others contribute detailed case studies (Bornstein, Feldman, Hyde, Ticktin). Some emphasize an ethical critique (Bornstein, Englund, Fassin, Pandolfi),

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others a political one (Benthall, Feldman, Redfield, Ticktin). As much as the lines between development, human rights, and humanitarianism are often porous, so are the boundaries between ethics and politics in these essays. In organizing the seminar we grouped papers according to initial intersections that we saw or anticipated might arise in discussion, pairing each author with another participant who led an analysis of it as a work in progress. The array and content of final submissions altered somewhat over time, but much of the original seminar architecture translated into the organization of this volume. In other words, the themes for the four substantive working-discussion days roughly correspond to the four thematic parts of this book: Moral and Empirical Engagements, Cosmologies of Humanitarianism, Humanitarian Bodies, and Political Limits and Stakes.

To help readers navigate the book—recognizing that not everyone may approach its chapters in consecutive order—we offer short part introductions. Readers who do follow a more linear path will no doubt realize that the organization of this book could have proceeded along a number of alternate paths, since individual chapters overlap in ways that supersede the structure of our volume. In the part introductions we seek both to make the organizational logic of connections explicit and to gesture beyond, imagining the chapters as moments in a much larger and dynamic conversation, with readers as participants. Further, we intend our collective contribution to be more generative than conclusive. Anthropology's gift to the intersection of scholarship and practice lies in its ability to engage ambiguity, to recognize concrete events and forms of action that fall between conceptual divides. By embracing a wider world and a deeper history, it can question and unsettle even as it suggests and describes. To this end the authors in this volume accept the awkwardness of working in a gray zone between analytic registers, one initiated by the ambiguous, ambitious, and varied roles that ethnographers have with human practice: as participant observers, expert witnesses, moral spectators, consultants, activists, critics, historians, outsiders, engaged sympathizers, and active members.

In closing we will make a generational observation. At universities where we have taught we have encountered a growing cohort of undergraduate students who want to get involved with NGOs broadly but do not know where to start and graduate students who enter anthropology with NGO experience and expect to continue their engagement, albeit with critical sensibilities. This generation of students—largely in their twenties in the early 2000s—brings a youthful urgency to their fascination with international development, human rights, and humanitarianism. At the same time global consumption practices—whether through Bono's "Red"

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campaign to fight AIDS in Africa or the “One Campaign” that mixes poverty reduction, AIDS relief, and humanitarianism—create possibilities to give to the world at every click of the computer mouse. Every opportunity for consumption presents a miniscule “choice” that seems to encompass the stakes at hand: a fair-trade cup of coffee, environmentalism through The Body Shop, an iPod that fights AIDS. If “the world” appears in need of urgent care, the fact that a field of intervention stands already conceptualized and marketed as such distinguishes our particular moment in history.

That youth of wealthy countries want to “do something” also appears as a significant shift from the apathy that followed the 1960s, or at least a resurgence and elaboration of the Live Aid moment of the 1980s. Certainly some crises (particularly the perception of genocide in Darfur) have evoked considerable emotional investment and organizational response (see Flint and De Waal 2005; Fadlalla 2008). For “doing something” at present primarily often means joining an NGO or forming a new one. Even more radical activists struggle with the critical dilemmas of funding amid the “nonprofit industrial complex” (for example, INCITE! 2007). The focus is on action and ethical engagement, regardless of religious heritage. Secondary students now fill their future résumés with community service, and student travel abroad increasingly includes aid endeavors along with traditional forms of study. And for every individual who realizes such a trajectory there are more who contemplate it and for whom it remains a nebulous dream. We make this observation not to dismiss the sincerity of the contemporary moment, but to rather emphasize the particularities of its formation and the central place of humanitarian sentiment within it. Clearly a desire to appear—and to be—a moral person remains strong.

One goal for research on humanitarianism, then, is to engage such dreams with the actual places they unfold and the larger histories they draw upon. As such this is a critical endeavor. But we claim no position of certainty beyond the phenomenon itself. When inflated to political abstraction the desire to aid demands a critical response; as MSF-France’s former president, Rony Brauman (1996:28, 76), once acidly observed, Auschwitz today might be treated as a “humanitarian crisis,” against which the fervent hand-wringing of television would provide little protection (see also Rieff 2002:75, 86, 166).¹⁵ Nonetheless, we recognize that humanitarianism, like “Enlightenment,” is not easy to oppose in general terms. (Who, after all, would be against clean drinking water?) Rather than sweeping denunciation, therefore, we suggest something more of an aporia, a puzzle viewed from within rather than from a distant mountaintop (Fassin 2007a, this

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volume). Perhaps one place to begin would be to suggest that we remember the narrative tradition of tragedy alongside that of romance, particularly when surveying political landscapes resulting from colonial history (Scott 2004). On a more modest scale, we might emphasize anthropological particularity, fragmenting grander human narratives with the concrete diversity of action. And finally we might also recognize the limits of our collective effort to expand a field vision: the geographic patchwork of these particular studies and the absence of other perspectives, including more elusive voices of varied aid recipients beyond the common filter of their need. This last absence underscores just how deeply perspectives on the topic remain mediated by relations of inequality and location, however cast on a global stage.

Notes

1. For an account that emphasizes the historical relations between humanitarianism and human rights see Wilson and Brown 2008.
2. Judaism provides two core concepts that address suffering: *tikkun olam* (heal the world) and *tzedakah* (the religious obligation to give to charity based on ideas of justice). Theological studies of Jewish humanitarianism emphasize how charitable works build communal Jewish identity (see Neusner 1990 on *tzedakah*; Shatz, Waxman, and Diamant 1997 on *tikkun olam* in Jewish orthodoxy). Jewish philanthropy, even in its secularized form, has been considered by some to be a form of “civil religion” (see Steinberg 2002; Frisch 1924 for historical overview; also Meyerhoff’s [1978] classic ethnography). Social scientific studies of Jewish humanitarian institutions echo the themes of identity and community. Historical accounts demonstrate that Jews cared for their poor in medieval Europe because the church and the guild—venues of charity available to gentiles—were not available to Jews (Penslar 1998; Frisch 1924).
3. Humanitarian analyses and controversies largely overlook Jewish charitable and humanitarian groups, which likewise long sought to help fellow Jews rather than generic others in need. Steinberg’s (2002) comparative analysis of appeals by two Jewish organizations, (1) the Joint Jewish Distribution Committee’s United Jewish Appeal founded in 1938 in response to Kristallnacht and focused on crisis resolution, and (2) the New Israel Fund founded 1979 and focused on social justice and peace in the Middle East, argues that humanitarian representations construct a global Jewish identity. Kavanaugh’s (2008) study of ORT, a Russian-Jewish vocational training and relief organization whose acronym translates as The Society for Trades and Agricultural Labour, documents how Jewish organizations were active in post-Holocaust Jewish refugee relief. It is worth noting that while some Jewish humanitarian

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organizations predate the Holocaust (ORT was founded in 1880, the JDC in 1914), their missions altered over time. ORT operated trade schools for European Jewish refugees in ghettos and continued its rehabilitation work with Holocaust survivors in displaced persons camps. The JDC expanded its domain beyond its central focus on assisting co-religionists to include some nonsectarian relief and development worldwide.

4. <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/08/22/hugging.guru>, accessed June 10, 2010.

5. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7130151.stm>, accessed June 10, 2010. While the work of Amma is a fairly recent intervention into the spiritual, guru-driven institutional model of devotee-structured humanitarianism in India (Amma was born in 1953), there are also much older examples, such as the Ramakrishna Mission.

6. It has delivered relief to disaster victims all over the world including China, Bangladesh, South Africa, Guinea-Bissau, Nepal, Rwanda, Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Outer Mongolia, Ethiopia, northern Thailand, and Cambodia. Like any self-respecting NGO, the foundation also maintains a website (<http://www.tzuchi.org>). It explains that the goal of international relief work is to “solidify and practice the spirit of Buddha—great love” and that volunteer devotees of Tzu Chi follow the five principles of “directness, priority, respect, timeliness, conservation” in their relief work and follow three “no’s” that include “no politics, no propaganda, and no religion, especially in mainland China.”

7. This is of concern to some governments such as the government of India, which is currently attempting to regulate and control the millions of dollars in undocumented funds that are donated to religious and charitable organizations (see Bornstein 2009; Sidel 2004; Sidel and Zaman 2004).

8. The arguments of Las Casas infamously served as one justification for the substitution of enslaved Africans for Amerindians, a development he came to regret (Blackburn 1997:135–136).

9. Activities of the ICRC not only predate the emergence of the term “non-governmental organization,” but the organization’s mandated role in international law vis-à-vis the Geneva Conventions places it in a unique position as private guarantor with official status.

10. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term is defined as an explicitly secular concept: “One who affirms the humanity (but denies the divinity) of Christ” or “One who professes the ‘Religion of Humanity.’” Although much contemporary humanitarianism defines itself as secular, its philosophical background has long intertwined with specifically religious conceptions of giving as suggested above. Humanitarianism involves implicit conceptions of “humanity” and what it means to be “human.” These

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are not strictly secular concepts—as they often intersect with religious cosmologies of the sacred and of spiritual purification—but have taken on secular valence in international moral discourse (see, for example, Asad 2003). When applied to human welfare the term first carried the pejorative connotation of an idealistic do-gooder before stabilizing as a technical category of action. Laqueur (1987) connects the increasing compassion evoked by the fate of individual bodies with the rise of detailed accounts of them in narrative forms such as the novel. Such particularistic compassion—never certain nor proportional—extended to both the living and the dead (Laqueur 2009).

11. Determining more precise relations between secular and religious understandings of dignity, as well as their historical influence on the aid world, remains a point for further research. For historical analysis of the religious and secular background to the “French Doctor” movement, see Taithe 2004 and Lachenal and Taithe 2009.

12. For policy discussions of humanitarian issues see the Humanitarian Practice Network at <http://www.odihpn.org/>, accessed June 10, 2010. Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* offers another potential point of reference on the theoretical front.

13. Although we do not address them here, efforts by corporations to present an ethical profile through gestures of “citizenship” and “social responsibility” also abut the terrain of contemporary humanitarianism and lie tangled in its history (see, for example, Ecks 2008; Hopgood 2008).

14. Two participants in the seminar, Lawrence Cohen and Liisa Malkki, were unfortunately not able to contribute chapters to the volume. Lawrence attended the seminar in Santa Fe and contributed extensively to both the discussions and the shaping of this book. Liisa was not able to attend the seminar, although she did submit a working paper in advance, which we discussed via telephone in Santa Fe. The influence of the work of both is visible in this book, through the papers that cite them, but extends much deeper. In addition to providing generous commentary throughout, Lawrence suggested the title for the volume at the tail end of our intense seminar week.

15. Some of this is translated and printed in “From Philanthropy to Humanitarianism: Remarks and an Interview,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 397–417. There the comment is on page 411. At a later point in the longer French interview he notes that it is absurd to think that TV images will save us.