

Faith and the secular: tensions in realising humanitarian principles

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There is good reason to engage faith-based organisations and local faith communities in humanitarian response but doing so raises challenging issues for the interpretation of humanitarian principles in what some see as a post-secular age.

Faith-based organisations and local faith communities represent a major proportion of civil society capacity in many contexts vulnerable to humanitarian crisis. This makes strengthened engagement with such groups an appropriate element of strategies to enhance local and national capacity for crisis preparedness, mitigation and response. A recent multi-agency review of the role of local faith communities in humanitarian contexts found extensive evidence of contributions with respect to disaster risk reduction, emergency response and facilitating transitional and durable solutions.¹ Many reports covered by

the review identified local faith communities to be well situated to respond within the early days of an emergency when facilities for the provision of shelter, or volunteers to assist distressed and displaced populations, may be crucial. It is also increasingly recognised that through belief and ritual local faith communities may provide a sound base for bolstering community resilience in the immediate aftermath of crisis.

Such evidence is generally interpreted in terms of the instrumental value of faith-based resources to a pre-existing humanitarian

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agenda, which is most typically articulated in specifically secular language. In these terms, it may be that engagement with local faith communities is seen to be warranted for the resources that it makes available to humanitarian efforts but that any activities and values considered to be potentially at odds with humanitarian principles should be kept well away from humanitarian space. For some humanitarians the risks of such engagement continue to far outweigh the potential instrumental benefits.

Recent moves by UNHCR towards more effective engagement with the faith-based sector were thus accompanied by a strong emphasis on a 'code of conduct' for faith-based partners² which proscribed activities – such as proselytism – seen to be incompatible with humanitarian engagement.

Such caution is understandable if a secular approach is seen as the guarantor of protecting humanitarian principles. However, a number of developments now challenge this position. Peter Walker has noted how the current understanding of humanitarian principles will need to evolve to reflect the impact of globalisation.³ The fields of international relations, political science and sociology have all come to abandon the presumption of secularism advancing with development and have begun to address the potential dawning of a 'post-secular age'. There is increasing acceptance that the world of faith cannot be pragmatically or legitimately confined to the private sphere and kept out of the public sphere. Further, the secular frame is increasingly acknowledged as reflecting a Western ideology developed from within a Judaeo-Christian tradition, far from a 'neutral' perspective. The politicisation and militarisation of aid is rightly understood to have been a major driver of the erosion of humanitarian space but a growing



Temporary mosque established at an IDP camp in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

understanding that the secular framing of humanitarianism reflects Western, neoliberal values also contributes to such pressure.

This all signals the complexity of engagement with local faith communities. There is evidence that communities can learn a secular script to facilitate their work with international humanitarian actors. This echoes the way that international faith-based organisations have come to frame their work in a way that is often indistinguishable from the way secular organisations do so. This strategy will remain preferable for some. But sticking to a secular script presents two major challenges to humanitarian actors. First is the recognition that this framing often shapes humanitarian assistance in a manner that is alien to many local faith communities, creating a disconnect with many local resources relevant for their recovery from crisis. Second is the recognition that silence on matters of faith is not a signal of neutrality but reflects a particular ideology.

The 2012 UNHCR Dialogue on Faith and Protection reflected sensitivity to both of these challenges, and encouraging greater religious literacy in humanitarian workers is an important step towards addressing them. Pursuing impartiality, independence

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and neutrality must remain core to the humanitarian agenda. Engaging with issues of faith is not to abandon these principles but to acknowledge that in a context of pluralism we need to learn to operate with an awareness that religious belief and the secular alike are “one human possibility amongst others”.⁴ Negotiating humanitarian action and partnership in this post-secular age will be demanding. However, the “common understanding” claimed by secular and religious actors in the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights offers a significant historical precedent for navigating such discussions.

Our experience of the work of local faith communities in providing humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in Jordan suggests some very practical actions for humanitarian agencies to more effectively partner with religious groups. These include: commit to mapping the breadth and diversity of faith-based engagement in local humanitarian response; model respect for such engagement – and a mature understanding of

the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality – through physical presence with diverse faith actors; recognise the religious and spiritual concerns of these groups as integral to their identity; and treat such groups as partners with precious local knowledge rather than as contractors to deliver a pre-determined intervention.

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For more detail, plus references, see Ager A and Ager J (2015) *Faith, Secularism and Humanitarian Engagement*. Palgrave.
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