Why Humanitarianism Needs a Pacifist Ethos

Abstract

Debates concerning the relationship between humanitarianism and the use of force are by no means a new phenomenon, yet humanitarian rationales for waging war have become more and more commonplace over recent decades. The commitment to humanitarian intervention, in particular, raises deep theoretical and practical questions about the foundational principle of political neutrality espoused by many humanitarian aid organisations. In this paper I will provide an overview of the literature on the relationship between humanitarianism and the use of force before advancing the argument that a genuine humanitarianism must necessarily be premised upon a pacifist ethos. A pacifist ethos, in this context, is presented as a commitment to non-violence and anti-war activism even while recognising the limits of such an aspiration. Such an understanding of pacifism in practice, inspired in part by realist ethics, allows humanitarian actors to take strong, principled, and sustained stands in support of universal values of peace and human well-being without losing sight of the material challenges posed by the very real violence of the arenas in which they operate.

Biographical Note

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Introduction

The fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality, and independence espoused by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are viewed by many as being essential touchstones for the maintenance of a humanitarian agenda. Yet while any organisation that premises its work on humanitarianism must necessarily at least pay lip service to aiding

"humanity" as its object, there remains contention over the importance of the principle of neutrality and the associated expectation of independence both in theoretical and practical domains. This controversial principle, which is aimed at maintaining a gap between the politics of states and the provision of basic human needs to those affected by conflict, has become increasingly strained as states have adopted humanitarian language to support both their decisions to wage war and their conduct within war. The problematic consequences of this conflation of humanitarian action and the human rights movement became the subject of much critical analysis and debate in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as humanitarian rationales for waging war became more and more commonplace, placing a reformist political agenda at the centre of the work of many humanitarian NGOs. Thus, as David Chandler argues, while "humanitarian aid started out as an expression of empathy with common humanity, it has been transformed through the discourse of human rights into a lever for strategic aims drawn up and acted upon by external agencies."[1] In the years that have followed, the use of force for humanitarian purposes has become more and more controversial, particularly due to the disastrous consequences of both action and inaction in cases such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen. It is in this context that this paper aims to renew the call for an abandonment of the temptations of military force on the part of humanitarian NGOs, arguing instead for the commitment to a pacifist ethos to ensure that the good name and value of humanitarian work is not further eroded and to give a sustained anti-war voice to those same organisations.

In approaching this problem, this paper seeks to address two core questions: first, why is the principle of political neutrality important to humanitarian ethics, and how has it been side-

[1] David Chandler, "The Road to Military Humanitarianism: How the Human Rights NGOs Shaped a New Humanitarian Agenda," Human Rights Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2001), p. 700.

lined over recent decades?; and, second, in what ways might a renewed emphasis on a pacifist ethos be of benefit to the future prospects of humanitarianism, in both theory and practice? I will answer each of these questions in turn, starting with an overview of the debates around humanitarian neutrality. I will then look at claims that the loss of neutrality and independence, through the collision of the post-Cold War human rights and humanitarian agendas, has poisoned the well of humanitarianism in practice, pushing away from the normative commitment to universal humanity, handing too much influence to state interests and weakening the trust that might otherwise have accrued to humanitarian NGOs. This section will particularly focus on the ways in which states have manipulated international humanitarian law and humanitarian intervention in order to legitimise and sustain their deployment of force in various places around the globe. The final part will then suggest that the decay of the humanitarian ideal and the challenges this has presented for those pursuing humanitarian goals can be arrested only by continued efforts to adhere to the principle of neutrality, which in turn necessitates the embrace of a pacifist ethos. This, I will argue, is the only way to prevent the universal aspirations of humanitarianism from collapsing into the violently-pursued interests and aspirations of the great powers in international politics.

The Debate over Humanitarianism and Political Neutrality

The most widely recognised principles that guide the provision of humanitarian aid are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. The principles, which were first clearly enunciated by the ICRC in 1965, have since been incorporated into a UN General Assembly Resolution and remain central to the multi-agency Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS), which represents a set of principles to be applied across a range of

humanitarian NGOs.[2] According to the influential commentary written by former head of the ICRC, Jean Pictet, the principles provide a "firm and healthy doctrinal foundation" for the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies that is universal, permanent, and essential to the existence of the organization.[3] Yet while large and influential organisations like the ICRC and *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) continue to adhere to their understanding of political neutrality as strictly as possible, many other groups have contested this principle and have sought to engage politically as a part of their humanitarian action, particularly since the end of the Cold War. It is for this reason that the CHS contains the rider that "[s]ome organisations, while committed to giving impartial assistance and not taking sides in hostilities, do not consider that the principle of neutrality precludes undertaking advocacy on issues related to accountability and justice."[4] There is, therefore, a recognised division between "traditional" or "Dunatist" humanitarian organisations and those that are often referred to in terms of a "new humanitarianism."[5] In order to come to terms with the

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[2] United Nations General Assembly, UNGA Resolution A/RES/46/182 (19 December 1991), available: <https://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/46/a46r182.htm> (accessed 21 August 2018); The Sphere Project, "The Core Humanitarian Standard: Analysis and Comparison," (2015), available: <http://resources.spherehandbook.org/resources/Sphere_Core_Standards_and_CHS.pdf?string=~sh_resources/resources/Sphere_Core_Standards_and_CHS.pdf > (accessed 21 August 2018).

[3] Jean Pictet, "The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary," (1979), available: <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/fundamental-principles-commentary-010179.htm> (accessed 21 August 2018).

[4] The Sphere Project, *op cit*.

[5] Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*, 2nd edition (London: Zed Books, 2014), Chapter 4; Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemmas and Discoveries* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2002), p. 80; Stuart Gordon and Antonio Donini, "Romancing Principles and Human Rights: Are Humanitarian Principles Salvageable?," *International Review of the Red Cross* Vol. 97, No. 897-898 (2015): p. 92.

significance of this divide, it is vital to understand the theoretical (or deontological) and practical (or consequential) reasons underpinning the humanitarian commitment to political neutrality and its relation to the principle of humanity that stands at the heart of humanitarian aid provision.

The principle of humanity necessarily lies at the centre of humanitarian values and is vital to any understanding of the commitment to neutrality, for reasons that are often under-specified or quickly dismissed in the literature on humanitarian aid.[6] In its simplest terms, the commitment to save human lives and the refusal to prioritise the lives of some human beings above others on any grounds stands as the very basis of humanitarianism itself. Thus, from the ICRC perspective, the refusal to discriminate on the grounds of "nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions" is seen as an "imperative element of humanity" reflected in founder Henry Dunant's call to "care for the enemy wounded as friends."[7] This was necessary, as much for Dunant as for subsequent adherents to the humanitarian principles, precisely because the state and its attendant organisations had proved incapable of doing so itself, leaving combatants in war (and, later, civilians affected by war) without adequate basic standards of care. Thus, as Larissa Fast has argued, "humanity, with its associated practices, can and must serve as an orienting principle for humanitarianism" even as we recognise its "interlocking, inherent tensions... rooted in its ideal vision and its imperfect manifestations."[8]

The inherent tension of the concept of humanity that is central to the argument advanced

[6] Larissa Fast, "Unpacking the Principle of Humanity: Tensions and Implications," *International Review of the Red Cross* Vol. 97, No. 897-898 (2015).

[7] Pictet, *ibid*, p. 24.

[8] Fast, *ibid*.

below is that it *cannot* be adequately manifested in a highly politicized, statist form, an issue addressed with devastating clarity in Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*.[9] For Schmitt, the concern was with the use by states of the term 'humanity', which he argued could not correspond to any real political grouping, particularly in the brutally divided context of inter-state war.[10] Humanity, as a universal concept, necessarily transcends the politics of international relations; either that, or it is something other than a logically and morally coherent humanitarianism. The implication of this, and the reason for adherence to the principle of neutrality, is that a genuine humanitarianism can only be pursued if political friends and enemies alike are all treated equally as human beings. This was precisely what Dunant sought to achieve: a humanitarianism that was true to its universalism by refusing to be drawn into taking sides (other than being on the side of "humanity") in violent political conflict. This does not mean a complete detachment from politics. As Pictet recognised, the Red Cross, placed in situations of extreme political crisis, "is in politics up to its neck", but "must reckon with politics without becoming a part of it."[11]There is a viable politics of humanitarianism, as I will argue further below, but it cannot be advanced in alliance with the military power of the state. The pursuit of a truly universal sense of humanity and the associated principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence that lie behind the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies is, therefore, a much more theoretically viable humanitarianism than that offered by the state or in alliance with the state or a particular political ideology. This deontological reasoning for adherence to principles of neutrality and independence remains relevant to contemporary dilemmas of humanitarian action, yet it is generally viewed as being secondary to the practical or consequential reasons for the

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[9] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Tracy Strong, Translated from *Der Begriff des Politischen* [2nd Ed. 1934], (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Pictet, *ibid*, p. 38.

principle.

Debates over the material consequences of adopting and adhering to the principle of neutrality are hotly contested in both the scholarly literature and amongst aid agencies. In response to criticisms of the ICRC's adherence to neutrality, there has been a tendency to stress that "[r]emaining neutral in conflict is not a moral position but simply the most effective basis found to date on which to negotiate access to people in need of humanitarian assistance, wherever they are."[12] From this "traditional" perspective, neutrality is necessary "in order to enjoy the confidence of all" parties to a conflict.[13] As Pictet puts it, "[c]onfidence is vital to the Red Cross; without confidence it would no longer be entrusted with work of public utility and it would receive no more donations." Or, as Fiona Terry argues, "humanitarian action must remain independent and strive for as neutral an image as possible if it is to reach those in need on all sides of a conflict."[14] From this point of view, confidence of the warring parties is essential for the presence of humanitarian aid that can provide relief for the suffering in an impartial, non-discriminatory manner. Terry illustrates the importance of this in her overview of the performance of the ICRC in Afghanistan from 2001 onwards, concluding that humanitarianism should be "about helping those who are hurt by war, whoever they are, and nothing else. But that view can only be promoted if humanitarian

[12] Fiona Terry, "The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan: Reasserting the Neutrality of Humanitarian Action," *International Review of the Red Cross* Vol. 93, No. 881 (2011), p. 187. See also Marion Harroff-Tavel, "Neutrality and Impartiality: The Importance of these Principles for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the Difficulties Involved in Applying Them", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 29, No. 273 (1989), p. 540; Stuart Gordon and Antonio Donini, *op cit*, pp. 93-94.

[13] Pictet, *op cit*, p. 35; Mary B. Anderson, "To Work, or Not to Work, in 'Tainted' Circumstances: Difficult Choices for Humanitarians," *Social Research* Vol. 74, No. 1 (2007).

[14] Terry, "The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan", *op cit,* p. 187.

action is and remains neutral and independent of all extraneous influences."[15] Strong consequential arguments in favour of preserving neutrality can also be found in MSF's International Activity Reports, one of which claims that:

> attempts to push the humanitarian actor to one 'side' abrogate the basic right of people in need to get assistance regardless of their political or other affiliation. Moreover, being identified with a belligerent can have devastating consequences in terms of security and access to victims in volatile contexts.[16]

The challenge of political neutrality has been an ever-present one for humanitarian organisations, including the Red Cross,[17] yet there is a strong perception that the post-Cold War era represented a high point in the politicisation of humanitarian values and that this was ultimately expressed through the normalisation of military humanitarianism and state domination of the humanitarian agenda from the 1990s onward. The primary cause of the emergent state domination of humanitarianism in the 1990s was, according to critics, the collapsing of the proactive, transformative human rights agenda into the more relief-focused humanitarian agenda.[18] No longer was it sufficient to treat the worst symptoms of military conflict, it was now incumbent on the human rights/humanitarian community (comprised of states and NGOs working together) to address "root causes" of conflict, most often through economic development and democratisation but also, where necessary, the application of

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 188.

[16] Medecins Sans Frontieres, "Not So Benign: When Lofty Political Goals Have Bad Humanitarian Consequences: International Activity Report" (2003), available: <http://www.msf.org/en/article/not-so-benign-when-lofty-political-goals-have-bad-humanitarian-consequences> (accessed 13 November 2017) .

[17] Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan, "Is Neutral Humanitarianism Dead? Red Cross Neutrality: Walking the Tightrope of Neutral Humanitarianism," *Human Rights Quarterly* Vol. 31, no. 4 (2009).

[18] David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Chandler, *op cit.*

military force. It was at this stage, David Rieff argues, that "the notion of humanitarianism-against-politics" was abandoned in favour of "the politics of humanitarianism", leading to a situation where "many of the most important mainline agencies, notably Oxfam, turned to what they called advocacy — that is, lobbying governments and the UN for funds, but also for political commitments and, as the decade progressed, military action."[19] Rieff is particularly critical of figures such as Michael Ignatieff, whose "revolution of moral concern" mirrored the post-Cold War theoretical excesses of Fukuyama in failing to recognise or accept the dangers and limitations of this approach.[20] Through this discursive combination, the humanitarian agenda came to be associated more with expansive ideals of justice and accountability, well beyond the tradition of relief of suffering and much more amenable to manipulation for the purpose of advancing state interests. Addressing this transformation, Michael Barnett claims that "whereas at the beginning of the [1990s] aid agencies tried to recruit states for their cause, by the beginning of the next decade they had discovered that states had already co-opted humanitarianism for their interests."[21] This "instrumentalization of aid", as Fiona Terry argues, "tarnished the image of 'humanitarian' assistance and turned it into a weapon of war."[22]

Thus the gravest danger to the traditional humanitarian agenda came from the emergent "new

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[19] Rieff, *ibid*, p. 26.

[20] *Ibid*, 10-12; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

[21] Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, 1 ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p.172.

[22] Terry, "The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan", p. 175.

interventionists"[23] and "new humanitarians"[24] in the post-Cold War era. Through the highs and lows of purportedly humanitarian military interventions in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, alongside the failure to militarily respond to the Rwandan genocide, the refrain "we must do something!" had become common currency by the end of the decade, representing the normalisation of a more militarised humanitarianism. Kofi Annan's oft-quoted question, posed in the wake of NATO's controversial Kosovo intervention, represents an example of this implicit demand for the militarisation of humanitarianism: "if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that affect every precept of our common humanity?"[25]

The most systematic and influential response to this question came in the form of the Responsibility to Protect,[26] which attempts to frame the moral and legal norms around legitimate military intervention for human protection purposes. This re-framing of debates around humanitarian intervention has served only to further the "common sense" of using force for humanitarian purposes, intensifying the potential challenges faced by humanitarian NGOs who find themselves in the middle of crises that give rise to debates over intervention, as well as facing the expectation that they will work to alleviate the suffering caused by the interventions themselves. In the heat of such politically intense situations, it is perhaps unsurprising that the humanitarian insistence on impartiality and neutrality can lead to

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[23] Stephen John Stedman, "The New Interventionists," (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Inc, 1993).

[24] Chandler, *op cit.,* p. 678.

[25] See, for example, International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, "The Responsibility to Protect," (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre for ICISS, 2001), p. 2.

[26] Ibid.

accusations of naïvety, complicity, and moral delinquency.[27]

It was these concerns about the failure of humanitarianism to address the “root causes” of suffering that drove the more policy-oriented, activist versions of humanitarian aid, as harsh lessons were learned about the limits and dilemmas of humanitarianism in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. For Rieff, this trend was most clearly manifested in 1999 with the NATO intervention in Kosovo where, he argued, “the battle for an independent humanitarianism was probably lost.”[28] As Alan Woolfolk summarises it in his insightful review of Rieff’s *A Bed for the Night*:

> In their eagerness for “humanitarian military intervention”, humanitarian activists (let alone the general public) were tone deaf to the conflation of humanitarianism and human rights as well as the confusion of humanitarian and political-military roles. Relief workers simply preferred not to acknowledge that they had become “a moral warrant for warfare”, while NATO appropriated the rhetoric of human rights, especially the critique of state sovereignty employed by Human Rights Watch… Humanitarianism became an instrument of foreign policy, not simply for instrumental reasons but because neither humanitarians nor politicians could distinguish humanitarian ends from political ends.[29]

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[27] For an extended discussion of the dilemmas of humanitarianism see Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid can Support Peace – Or War*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); See also Barry Munslow, "Complex Emergencies: The Institutional Impasse." *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 1 (1999): pp. 207-222; S. Neil MacFarlane and Thomas Weiss, "Political interest and humanitarian action", *Security Studies* Vol. 10, No. 1 (2000), pp. 112-142; Barnett, Michael, and Thomas G. Weiss, eds. *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics.* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[28] Rieff, *op cit*, p. 197.

[29] Alan Woolfolk, “Review Symposium: David Rieff's a Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis an Impossible yet Necessary Ethic of Resistance,” *Journal of Human Rights* Vol. 2, No. 2 (2003), p. 251.

This conflation of humanitarian values and the political ends of the state has also flowed over into the way in which international humanitarian law (IHL) is called upon in the context of war. The traditional purpose of IHL, encapsulated primarily in the Geneva Conventions, was to restrain the conduct of states in war and reduce the suffering of combatants, prisoners, and civilians caught up in violent political conflict. Yet the instrumental use of IHL by states in order to discredit and delegitimise their enemies in war is a further indication of the capture of humanitarianism by states themselves. The invention and increasing use of the term "lawfare" to describe this instrumentalisation of IHL is indicative of the depth of this problem. Legal theorists such as Nathaniel Berman and David Kennedy have written extensively on this issue, tracing the historical instrumentalisation of just war theory and IHL by states.[30] The merger of war and humanitarian law forces us to ask questions, as Kennedy argues, such as: "What does it mean… to find the humanist vocabulary of international law mobilized by the military as a strategic asset? How should we feel when the military 'legally conditions the battlefield' by informing the public that they are entitled to kill civilians, or when our political leadership justifies warfare in the language of human rights?"[31]

The response to the latter question, from the point of view of those wary of the politicisation and militarisation of humanitarianism, is that we should feel very worried about the conflation of warfare, human rights and humanitarianism, not only for the ways in which it may extend and legitimise the use of force, but also for how it is impacting upon humanitarianism in general. This set of concerns sparked a return to the debate over the value

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[30] Nathaniel Berman, "Privileging combat? Contemporary Conflict and the Legal Construction of War", *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law,* Vol. 43, No. 1 (2004); David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); David Kennedy, *Of War and Law* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[31] Kennedy, *Of War and Law*, p. 14.

of neutrality and independence in the post 9/11 period, as US actions in Afghanistan and Iraq led to increasing concern over the emergence of an "integrated system" of states and humanitarian organisations, working together to fight tyranny, provide aid, and ostensibly create democratic, human rights-respecting states in the aftermath of war. In their 2005 International Activity Report, MSF came out strongly against participation in such a system, arguing that "the integration of humanitarian action into a system is tantamount to the disintegration of its very humanitarian values" and that "[i]mpartiality is vital to continue providing medical assistance to vulnerable populations in need."[32] Four years later, MSF president Christoph Fournier reiterated the need for independent humanitarian action in a speech to NATO, arguing that:

> All these other activities [reconstructing the country, promoting democracy, and so on] might be worthy of praise. They may be even exactly the sort of activities that NATO and NATO countries should be promoting in Afghanistan. But they are goals and activities which fall outside of humanitarian ones [and] when humanitarian goals and activities are lumped together with this larger, broader, and more future-oriented agenda, the direct result is confusion and even contradiction. The indirect result is that civilians in conflict do not receive the assistance to which they have a right.[33]

The concerns of MSF are reflective of a broader sense that the traditions of humanitarian action were/are indeed being eroded through the attachment to the human rights agenda and the military power of states. Thus "humanitarian action", David Chandler argues, "has become transformed from relying on empathy with suffering victims and providing emergency aid to mobilizing misanthropy and legitimizing the politics of international

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[32] Medecins Sans Frontieres, "MSF Principles and Identity: The Challenges Ahead," (2005), available: <http://www.msf.org/en/msfs-principles-and-identity-challenges-ahead> (accessed November 13, 2017).

[33] quoted in Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, *op cit*, p. 211.

condemnation, sanctions, bombing."[34]

The emergence of a group like the White Helmets in Syria is particularly troubling in this context. The group, heavily funded by the US, UK and other Western states, claims to adhere to principles of impartiality and neutrality.[35] Yet there are multiple documented instances of group members participating in executions, celebrating the deaths of Syrian government fighters, and welcoming the victory of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in parts of Syria since 2011.[36] Further, the association of the White Helmets with a campaign to establish a "no-fly zone" over Syria offers a direct example of how the principle of humanitarian neutrality has been distorted in practice through association with the use of military force.[37] Despite these issues, the White Helmets have been lionised in Western media as brave humanitarians working in the face of grave threats posed by the Assad regime, and have received a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize and won an Academy Award for a Netflix-produced

[34] Chandler, *op cit*, p.700.

[35] The White Helmets, "Unarmed and Neutral", available < https://www.whitehelmets.org/en/> (accessed 21 August 2018)

[36] The role played by the White Helmets in Syria remains controversial and intensely contested, but from the available documented evidence, claims made by the organisation of adherence to principles of neutrality and impartiality seem very difficult to sustain. See Tom O'Connor, "Syria's White Helmets, Subject Of Oscar-Winning Film, Caught Dumping Dead Soldiers, Fire Volunteer", Newsweek (2017), available < https://www.newsweek.com/oscar-win-white-helmets-syria-volunteer-dump-bodies-rebels-628407> (accessed 21 August 2018); Rick Sterling, "The 'White Helmets' Controversy", Consortium News (2016), available at <https://consortiumnews.com/2018/07/22/the-white-helmets-controversy/> (accessed 21 August 2018).

[37] The White Helmets, "To the UN Security Council", available <https://www.whitehelmets.org/en/> (accessed 21 August 2018).

documentary on their activities.[38] Even if we set aside the debate over the merits and authenticity of the group, the suggestion that they adhere to principles of impartiality and neutrality is impossible to sustain in any coherent manner and speaks again to the dangers of politicising humanitarian action. The White Helmets, from this perspective, are representative of the dangers of the relentless instrumentalization of humanitarian action in the post-Cold War period.

The overall concern here, borne out by the broader failures in addressing crises in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, amongst others, is that the well of humanitarianism has been poisoned by the excessively ambitious agendas of politically active humanitarian organisations that developed in the "human rights era" of the 1990s. That the temptations of power and promise of final and universal achievement of human rights in concert with liberal states proved to be ultimately destructive for humanitarian ethics should come as no surprise; there were, after all, very good theoretical and practical reasons for espousing humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence as essential principles for humanitarian action. The abandonment or watering down of these principles in pursuit of a more thoroughgoing universal justice and the promotion of human rights and democracy could only lead to the loss, in Rieff's words, of the "specific moral gravity" of humanitarianism, born from its commitment to impartiality and neutrality, in treating the many horrific symptoms of war.[39] As Woolfolk summarises it, "in giving free reign to their spiritual hubris, humanitarians have repeated the sins of others before them: they have denied the modesty of their vocation in the name of the saving idea of the law (i.e. human rights), accepted the allurements of power, and

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[38] See, for example, Yasmeen Serhan, "Who Are the White Helmets?" The Atlantic (2016), available <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/09/syria-white-helmets/502073/> (accessed 21 August 2018).

[39] Rieff, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

intellectualized their engagements with 'the world' to the point that they have given up any claim to the role of spiritual preceptor in our time."[40]

These images of an unmoored and disorientated humanitarianism, now more popularly associated more with the state, international law, and the use of military force than with the provision of aid to the suffering, are easy enough to recognise and critique. But this then leads to the question: what to do about it? It remains a reality that the ways in which humanitarian actors engage in the political realm are complex and contested. Pressures from interventionist states and local military actors in crisis zones and the need to attract and maintain funding from small and large donors all contribute to pressures that make consistent adherence to the humanitarian principles extremely challenging. Yet, as Bruno Pommier puts it in his analysis of the conflation of humanitarian aid and military intervention:

> the main risk for the traditional humanitarian worker is having his or her perception blurred by the confusion of interests, objectives, and mandates of a plurality of actors, putting access or safety in jeopardy… the term "humanitarian" [should be reserved] for a strictly humanitarian action, namely one which is impartial, neutral, and independent.[41]

Yet care needs to be taken in how the reinforcement of the traditional principles is undertaken in order to ensure that any return to the charitable traditions of humanitarianism avoids a recurrent slide back into militarisation. It is here, I will argue, that a carefully constructed pacifist ethos should be explicitly added to humanitarian principles and values to act as a bulwark against usurpation by the state without reducing this to a choice between acting in a political or apolitical manner.

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[40] Woolfolk, *op cit*, p. 249.

[41] Bruno Pommier, "The Use of Force to Protect Civilians and Humanitarian Action: The Case of Libya and Beyond," *International Review of the Red Cross* Vol. 93, No. 884 (2011), p.1074.

Humanitarianism and the Pacifist Ethos

David Rieff, whilst asserting that he himself is not a pacifist, argues that "to imagine that war and humanitarian action go together in wartime is a fantasy" and that "arguing for military intervention on humanitarian grounds… will always be a contradiction in terms. It is a perversion of humanitarianism, which is neutral or it is nothing."[42] Fiona Terry, likewise, concludes her influential book on the paradoxes of humanitarian action with the statement that:

> 'humanitarian war' is an oxymoron: it contradicts the fundamental rationale of humanitarian action to countenance killing in its name. Humanitarian action aims to minimize the harm caused by war; a humanitarian rationale cannot be invoked to justify the killing of one set of people to save another.[43]

If this is indeed the case, on both deontological and consequential grounds, then the possibility presents itself that the only way to protect humanitarian values and the organisations that promote and maintain them is to make a definitive shift toward the embrace of a pacifist ethos. For if humanitarianism and political violence are necessarily at odds, why not draw specific attention to this in the humanitarian principles?

The adoption of a pacifist ethos by humanitarian organisations would hardly be radical, as the desire for a universal peace stood at the very heart of the original aims of the founders of the ICRC, and is reflected in the reference to the promotion of "lasting peace amongst all peoples" in the principle of "Humanity" contained in the Proclamation. As Jean Pictet points out in his classic commentary on the principles, "action for peace flowed quite naturally from

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[42] Rieff, *op cit*, pp. 329-330

[43] Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 242.

the principle of humanity with its command to prevent human suffering."[44] Moreover:

> The founders of the Red Cross, Henry Dunant in particular, considered at the very beginning that the ultimate objective of the work they set in motion and the Convention they inspired was none other than that of universal peace. They understood the fact that the Red Cross, by pressing its ideal to its logical outcome, would be working for its own abolition, that a day would come when, men having finally accepted and put into effect its message of humanity by laying down and destroying their arms and thus making a future war impossible, the Red Cross would no longer have any reason for being. This is the meaning of the motto, *Per humanitatem ad pacem* which stands before the Constitution of the League of Red Cross Societies, along with the traditional slogan, *Inter arma caritas*.[45]

Pictet recognises that "[t]he means available to the Red Cross to eliminate war are limited", but – echoing the tragic sentiment outlined above – goes on to argue that "in the general framework of [the] effort for peace, the Red Cross nonetheless constitutes an important moral element. It is the symbol of peace, present in the midst of combat. Every one of its acts thus becomes a pacifying gesture."[46] More recently, the International Federation of the Red Cross included the promotion of "a culture of non-violence and peace" as a strategic aim in its "Strategy 2020" document, again signalling the place of non-violence in relation to the commitment to the humanitarian principles.[47]

The historical embrace of pacifism by humanitarian organisations must, however, be

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[44] Pictet, *op cit*, p.18.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[47] International Federation of the Red Cross, "Strategy 2020: Saving Lives, Changing Minds", (2010), available: < http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/general/strategy-2020.pdf> (accessed 21 August 2018); For a discussion, see Katrien Beeckman, "From Fundamental Principles to Individual Action: Making the Principles Come Alive to Promote a Culture of Non-Violence and Peace." *International Review of the Red* Cross Vol. 97, no. 897-898 (2015): 263-293.

tempered if they are to avoid the inevitable criticisms for failing to achieve the promised pacifying effects of their actions. The use of the term "ethos" in this context is deliberate, indicating that pacifism is to be understood as a disposition, orientation or principle toward which humanitarian organisations might aspire without any expectation that it can be fully achieved or solved in practice.[48] In other words, an ethos is understood here as an ethical commitment that contains within it an appreciation of the tragic, with the aim of avoiding "the sanctimonious tendency to treat political action as a moral crusade."[49] The intention is, therefore, to identify a principle of consistent non-violent action and opposition to war in general on the part of humanitarian groups without elevating that to a belief that the full and final pacification of the world can be achieved. Thus, the suggestion I want to advance here is that humanitarian organisations can and should resist the urge to practically and discursively support the violent politics of the state, regardless of the way in which that violence is presented and legitimated publicly. In order to achieve this, humanitarian organisations should affirm their commitment to pacifist values through the cultivation of a pacifist ethos that is capable of withstanding accusations of naïve apolitical humanitarianism. This should not be seen as making a choice between politically-engaged, human rights promoting humanitarianism and politically neutral, impartial, non-violent humanitarianism. Rather, a pacifist ethos can stand for a consistent opposition to war (and other violent expressions of political conflict) without sacrificing political engagement; a humanitarianism that is attuned to and engaged with the potential violence of politics whilst permanently disavowing the humanitarian utility of the military power of the state.

Such a pacifist ethos could support the work of humanitarian organisations in a variety of

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[48] Joshua L. Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism: Political Ethics and Ethos in Reinhold Niebuhr's Thought," *Review of Politics* Vol. 78, No. 1 (2016), p. 60.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

ways. First, it would reassert a genuine commitment to the principles of humanity, neutrality, and independence and emphasise the critical link between humanitarianism and non-violence. This would also reinforce the distance between the militarised humanitarianism associated with the concepts of humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect, giving voice to the contradictory nature of humanitarianism and war pointed out by Rieff, Terry and others. Second, on the practical level, it would provide a point of reference against which organisations could assess the extent to which their work may be doing more harm than good in certain situations through contributing to the maintenance of a local war economy. If there are concerns about neutrality in principle leading to complicity in practice, the commitment to a pacifist ethos could offer humanitarian agencies a clear additional line of reasoning for not entering or departing from "tainted" situations in which they are likely to contribute to rather than ameliorate the violence.

A pacifist ethos would *not*, on the other hand, mean that all members of humanitarian societies must themselves be pacifists. A pacifist ethos, from this point of view, orients the action of humanitarian institutions without insisting that every member adopts an absolute commitment to pacifism themselves. Even this, however, runs up against an institutional vision of neutrality as requiring no stance either way on the legitimacy of war in general. Rony Brauman and Pierre Salignon, writing on the humanitarian issues surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq, make it very clear that MSF considered itself to be "neither pro-war nor anti-war" as "for humanitarian actors, such considerations are, or should be, immaterial."[50] I argue that this position is untenable for precisely the reasons outlined above: humanitarianism cannot be reconciled with war on deontological or consequential grounds and must, as such,

[50] Rony Brauman and Pierre Salignon, "Iraq: In Search of a "Humanitarian Crisis"," in *In the Shadow of "Just" Wars: Violence, Politics, and Humanitarian Action*, ed. Fabrice Weissman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 272.

represent an at least implict anti-war position in order to maintain coherence. Whether or not the membership of a particular humanitarian organisation are all pacifists is therefore beside the point; the humanitarian institution must embody a coherent set of values, including pacifism, in order to sustain its own basic principles. Thus, in keeping with Kimberley Hutchings' recent case in favour of a 'dirty' ethico-political pacifism, the pacifist ethos "elevates the pursuit of collective and institutional change over the purity of individual conscience… it is a plea for a return to absolute pacifism, but to absolute pacifism understood, as 'political' rather than 'personal'."[51]

The practical substance of that 'political' pacifism then requires some elaboration, particularly as many people may view a political humanitarianism as being one which must speak out against parties committing atrocity crimes in crisis situations. The ICRC in particular has faced sustained criticism over many decades regarding the refusal to speak out about the concentration camps in Nazi Germany and about the alleged genocide in the Biafran War in the late 1960s.[52] In the case of the concentration camps, some have argued that the Red Cross should have spoken out publicly and that the failure to do so was a dereliction of moral duty.[53] Others have offered more circumspect appraisals acknowledging the limits faced by the organisation at that time.[54] Likewise in the Biafran case, there is the

[51] Kimberley Hutchings, "Pacifism Is Dirty: Towards an Ethico-Political Defence," *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2017), p.187.

[52] Rony Brauman, "Dangerous liaisons: Dearing witness and political propaganda." MSF Crash (2006), available <https://www.msf-crash.org/en/publications/humanitarian-actors-and-practice/dangerous-liaisons-bearing-witness-and-political> (accessed 1 February 2019).

[53] Jean-Claude Favez, John Fletcher and Beryl Fletcher, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1999); Steinmacher, Gerald. *Humanitarians at War: The Red Cross in the Shadow of the Holocaust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2017).

[54] Sébastien Farré, "The ICRC and the Detainees in Nazi Concentration Camps (1942–1945)." International Review of the Red Cross 94, no. 888 (2012). Kellenberger, Jakob. 'Speaking out or

now "mythological" claim that MSF was born out of frustration at the refusal of the Red Cross to speak out against the alleged genocidal activities of the Nigerian military.[55]

How does the adoption of a pacifist ethos as a humanitarian principle alter this question of silence versus public political engagement? The short answer is that it does not and cannot provide an *answer* to this problem. What a pacifist ethos can provide is one more measure for thinking through the complex array of issues and circumstances that define humanitarian action in any emergency situation. A politically engaged pacifism, in other words, does not automatically require that all perpetrators of atrocities should be publicly denounced by humanitarian organisations. The demand of peaceful engagement is in fact more likely to reinforce the case for staying silent in cases where public denunciation might feed into a narrative favouring an interventionist war. Staying silent and continuing to provide aid to victims, in such cases, constitutes real political engagement, even if it doesn't produce an immediate solution to the crisis faced. Silent provision of aid to victims represents a political stance insofar as all such work and the pacifist ethos underpinning it, is "a pacifying gesture."[56] The fact that MSF has itself moved away from overt political advocacy and now associates more closely with the Dunantist position on neutrality and silence favoured by the ICRC simply highlights this point, particularly as it was the growing militarization of humanitarianism in the 1990s and early 2000s that prompted this shift in direction.[57]

This approach, driven by the absolute priority afforded to victims of war and the concomitant

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remaining silent in humanitarian work', in International Review of the Red Cross, Vol. 86, No. 855, pp. 593–609 (2004).

[55] Rony Brauman. "Médecins Sans Frontières and the ICRC: Matters of Principle." International Review of the Red Cross 94, no. 888 (2012): pp. 1524-1526.

[56] Pictet, *op cit*, p. 21.

[57] Brauman, *op cit* note 56, p. 1533.

need to maintain access to the suffering through adherence to the principle of political neutrality, would be reinforced, rather than undermined, by the adoption of a pacifist ethos. The purpose is not, in other words, to condemn specific actors engaging in specific wars, but to orient and guide the action of the organisations as a whole whilst allowing them to undertake their work in fraught political situations. The very existence and work of such humanitarian organisations in itself speaks of a sensibility that rejects the brutal politics of war, so bringing that principle to the fore in the form of a pacifist ethos could serve to reinforce the existing principles rather than contradicting or undermining them.

That this position cannot provide a concrete solution to the tenuous spaces occupied by humanitarian organisations should not be a cause for frustration or for conceding too much to the militarized human rights agenda. A return to the critique advanced by Rieff in *A Bed for the Night* provides an important anchor here, insofar as it identifies themes of tragedy and necessity, most commonly associated with Realist thought in international relations, as being a fundamental element of the humanitarian enterprise. Humanitarianism is, from this perspective, "by definition an emblem of failure, not success",[58] as its very *raison d'etre* is prompted by the persistence of violent crisis.

Rieff goes even further than this, refuting the accusations of naivety and utopianism levelled against traditional humanitarian actors and turning them back against the proponents of humanitarian interventionism. In focusing on the possibility of "solving" the problems of war and suffering once and for all, militarised humanitarianism represents a "brand of utopianism" that:

> consistently portrays the world as any decent person wishes it were — a world increasingly ruled by a humanist consensus and one in which the revolution of moral

[58] Rieff, *op cit*, p. 21.

> concern is increasingly the dominant moral and ideological current — rather than as it is. This is utopianism not as an expression of decency, but as wish-fulfilment…it is this, and not the reservations of humanitarian absolutists who hew to strict neutrality and the ideal at least of preserving an autonomous humanitarian space, that is the real retreat into wishful thinking.[59]

The comment from the former head of the UNHCR, Sadako Ogata, that "there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems"[60] should not, therefore, be taken as a challenge to be overcome or a problem to be solved, but rather as a statement of a tragic reality that genuine humanitarians must live and work with. Acceptance of this tragic condition becomes the necessary foundation for recognising that "[t]here is nothing small or insufficient about what [humanitarian aid workers] do, except, that is, in the tragic human sense that all effort is insufficient, all glory transient, all solutions inadequate to the challenge, all aid insufficient to the need." Thus, as Rieff concludes, "[t]he tragedy of humanitarianism may be that for all its failings and all the limitations of its viewpoint, it represents what is decent in an indecent world."[61]

In assessing this perspective, Woolfolk suggests that "Rieff has begun to articulate a humanitarian ethic of resistance", premised upon "the defense of a humanitarianism that knows and respects the tragic limits of this impossible yet necessary enterprise."[62] The "resistance" of such a position lies in its acknowledgement of the tragic nature of politics *and* its refusal to countenance the use of force as a solution to the recurrence of that violence. A humanitarian pacifist ethos, in this way, steps back from an absolute, theologically-grounded,

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[59] Ibid, pp. 323-324.

[60] Vivian Tan, "Ogata calls for stronger political will to solve refugee crises", UNHCR (2005), available <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2005/5/4297406a2/ogata-calls-stronger-political-solve-refugee-crises.html>, (accessed 21 August 2018).

[61] Rieff, *op cit*, p.334.

[62] Woolfolk, *op cit*, p. 247, 249.

teleological expectation of the final pacification of the world, yet remains committed to resistance to that violence through its very existence and activity. In this sense, it is by no means apolitical or amoral, but it necessarily remains neutral and independent with regard to the violent competition between states or other armed groups. Indeed, this neutrality and the associated commitment to non-violence *constitutes the very substance of its politics*. To again use Woolfolk's summation of Rieff, the integrity of humanitarian action can only be retained if it maintains "a certain spirit of resistance towards the horrible realities of the world, anchored by a characterological discipline that rejects resignation and despair."[63]

Effective humanitarian action requires, from this point of view, the capacity to recognise the political and historical dynamics of conflict and to understand the limits of what humanitarianism can achieve within such situations.[64] The "purist" understanding of humanitarianism, exemplified by the expectation that the full realisation of humanitarianism will ultimately lead to perpetual peace, is necessarily tempered, but not at the expense of collaborating with the violence of the state. This accords with Rieff's "assumption that contemporary humanitarians can only exercise charitable virtues responsibly… by learning how to think and make judgments, first of all, about the politics and history in which they are inextricably enmeshed."[65] Recognition of the politics, history and contingency of violent conflicts points toward a recognition of limits, tempering the expectation of ultimate redemption normally associated with absolute pacifism. This should not by any means lead to a sense of frustration or cynicism, as the persistence of humanitarian efforts geared toward a (perhaps unreachable) pacifist horizon could still represent a powerful force for the reiteration of non-violent politics and an example of another politics that continues to act out of

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[63] *Ibid*, p. 247.

[64] Anderson, "To Work, or Not to Work, in 'Tainted' Circumstances", *op cit*.

[65] Woolfolk, *op cit*, p. 250.

deference to humanity, regardless of political commitments or preferences.

Conclusion

A pacifist sensibility has quite rightly taken its place in the history of humanitarian action, but has largely taken an implicit rather than explicit place in the development of the humanitarian principles over the years since the ICRC was founded. This hesitancy around the embrace of pacifism can perhaps be connected to the brutal, dispiriting, and challenging occurrence of genocide over that period as well as to the recurrent questions regarding the role of the Red Cross in Nazi Germany, but it is also related to the post-Cold War expectations and ambitions of those pushing the human rights agenda, as outlined above. Alongside the conflation of human rights and humanitarianism and the association of state power with humanitarian values came the associated idea that humanitarian impartiality, neutrality, and independence – and the pacifist sentiment that underlies it – is a naïve, utopian, and self-defeating approach to righting the wrongs of the world. Arguments rejecting the charitable traditions of humanitarianism and calling for a systemic approach incorporating development and state power in order to solve the problem of human suffering continue to abound. What I have argued here, in defending and buttressing the traditional or Dunantist principles of humanitarian aid, is that solution-oriented approaches are not only doomed to fail as a consequence of their lack of appreciation of the tragic nature of international politics, but they are also likely to undermine the practical and normative value represented by traditional humanitarianism.

In the words of Philippe Gaillard, a man who was deeply traumatised by his experiences as a Red Cross leader in Rwanda in 1994, humanitarian aid provision has the modest aspiration

"to bring a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist."[66] The "always insufficient" element of this statement needs to be understood not as a cry for something more, but as a recognition of the good that can be done even when a total solution is unavailable. As Rieff's epigrammatic quote from Bertolt Brecht more poetically puts it:

> It won't change the world,
> It won't improve relations among men
> It will not shorten the age of exploitation
> But a few men have a bed for the night
> For a night the wind is kept from them
> The snow meant for them falls on the roadway.[67]

There is nothing particularly "pure", "absolute" or "holier-than-thou" about this approach to humanitarianism. Rather, in rhetorically and performatively working against the symptoms of a militarized world, a humanitarianism founded upon the traditional principles and buttressed by a pacifist ethos can engage in the "dirty" politics of representing and enacting the possibility of a world not riven by the violently divisive politics of the state. As Kimberley Hutchings argues, this version of pacifism may be founded upon "a conviction that what we are ethically and politically is necessarily related to what we do, and what we do needs to be described in terms of the practices, beliefs, intended and unintended actual effects involved in our acts rather than the (purported) ends served."[68] The provision of humanitarian aid in its traditional mode is, from this perspective, ideally suited to the promotion of a pacifist ethos that aims toward achieving a less violent world. To return once more to Pictet's words on this, "[e]very one of its acts… becomes a pacifying gesture."[69]

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[66] Rieff, *op cit*., p. 178.

[67] *Ibid.*, front matter.

[68] Hutchings, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

[69] Pictet, *op cit*, p. 21.

What is first required, then, is a recognition that the influence of liberal human rights activism in conjunction with state power post-Cold War bred a form of humanitarianism that was far too heavily focused on ends, born of a "desire to spread development, democracy, and human rights, and to join a peace-building agenda that aspires to create stable, effective, and legitimate states."[70] Moreover, "as they become increasingly implicated in governance structures, they find themselves in growing collaboration with those whom they once resisted."[71] Thus, the coordination between states and humanitarian NGOs in seeking to fulfil this agenda necessarily pulled those NGOs into providing material and rhetorical support to the "war system." It is only through an absolute rejection of that system and the embrace of a pacifist ethos that humanitarianism can escape those clutches, rebuild its centre of "specific moral gravity", and practically and politically represent an opposition to that war system while continuing to impartially and independently treat its worst symptoms.

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[70] Michael Barnett, "Humanitarianism Transformed," *Perspectives on Politics* Vol. 3, No. 4 (2005), p. 734.

[71] *Ibid.*, p.734.