

# Relief agencies and moral standing in war: principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and solidarity<sup>1</sup>

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In Dante's 'Inferno' there is a special place of torment reserved for those who have been neutral in this life. Their sin is so particular that they do not even merit a space in hell. Instead, they are confined to the outer part, or vestibule, of hell and separated from the rest of the damned by the river Acheron. The precise sin of this group of people is that of moral indecision and vacillation. Throughout their lives they never made a stand for something they believed. True to form, Dante inflicts upon them a torment which neatly fits their crime. They are destined to rush forever behind a banner which 'whirls with aimless speed as though it would never take a stand', while at the same time they are chased and stung by swarms of hornets (Dante 1984: Canto 3, lines 53–4).

Many relief workers probably feel that they have already experienced the particular anguish of Dante's punishment. On frequent occasions, the international humanitarian system might be accurately described by Dante's image: a great crowd of international agencies rushing frantically behind the whirling banner of concern brandished by the international community, which seldom takes a definitive moral stand and plants its banner firmly in the ground. Indeed, the urgent and relentless flapping of UN and NGO flags from thousands of fast-moving white vehicles around the world today seems uncannily reminiscent of Dante's vision of the vestibule of hell. And even if relief workers and peacekeepers have not yet experienced such hell, there are those today who might be tempted to think that such a fate should certainly await them when the day of reckoning arrives. The organisation African Rights, in particular, has severely criticised the 'neutralism' of humanitarianism and what it considers to be the absurdity of current relief-agency claims to humanitarian neutrality in political emergencies and war (African Rights 1994:24–8). Yet in

classical humanitarianism, neutrality is prized as one of the four essential operational principles alongside humanity, impartiality, and independence.

So why has neutrality become a dirty word? Is it really a sin? Or do Dante and African Rights understand the word differently from conventional humanitarian practitioners? Is neutrality inevitably unprincipled, or is it in fact the operational means to highly principled ends? Is real humanitarian neutrality really impossible, when any humanitarian action inevitably plays to the advantage of one side or another? A passionate debate now rages about the moral positioning of humanitarian agencies and peacekeeping forces. And as most relief agencies and UN forces alike abandon the idea of neutrality, they are clinging with renewed vigour to the other traditional humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality, or going beyond traditional humanitarian principles by justifying their position in terms of solidarity, or by giving more refined interpretations of impartiality.

The debate surrounding humanitarian neutrality and its fellow humanitarian principles is a debate about the moral stance or position of third parties in other people's wars. Where should an NGO, international agency, or UN force stand in a violent dispute between various groups? The issue of positioning concerns relief organisations not only at a corporate level, but also at an individual level. In order to operate in the midst of war, a relief agency needs to make its organisational position in that conflict known to the combatants. But at a personal level, it is also essential for staff morale that each individual has a strong sense of his or her individual position in relation to the prevailing violence. Playing a third-party role in a context of violence and injustice is personally taxing, and is one of the greatest challenges facing relief workers and UN soldiers in today's emergencies. The ability to do so with a sense of moral conviction and international legality is crucial to the morale of relief and development workers and also to the non-combatant civilians they seek to help.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the moral implications of the operations of relief agencies, acting as third parties in wartime. I begin by identifying the essential problem of moral stance and organisational positioning as one of locating humanitarian values within a context of organised inhumanity. In the main part of the paper I examine current usage of the terms *humanity*, *neutrality*, *impartiality*, and *solidarity* as they are used to define humanitarian positions. I then briefly consider the psychological implications for

relief workers of operating as non-combatant third parties in war, emphasising the importance of clear positioning to counter what I have termed 'bystander anxiety'. Finally, I recognise that a range of different positions is both inevitable and desirable in a given conflict; but conclude by emphasising the responsibility of any third-party organisation (military or civilian) to be transparent in its position and to preserve rather than distort traditional humanitarian principles and language. I end by recommending concerted support for international humanitarian law (IHL) and its possible reform as the best way to focus the current debate about the place of humanitarianism in war.

## **Standing for humanitarian values**

Relief agencies have problems with their identity and position in today's wars, because they are trying to do something which is intrinsically difficult: they invariably find themselves trying to represent the values of humanity and peace within societies that are currently dominated by the values of inhumanity and violence. More often than not, therefore, they are swimming against the current of that society, or certainly of its leadership. They are representatives of values that are often seen as a threat by leaders and peoples committed to violence and war. If humanitarian values are given too much consideration in situations of war or political violence, political and military leaders fear that they might undermine their followers' will to fight, or provide succour to their enemy. Nevertheless, it is part of the paradox of human nature that humanitarian values can be present in war and since time immemorial have usually co-existed with violence to some degree (see Guillermand 1994). Where there is organised violence, there is often mercy too. But the intricacies of the Geneva Conventions which were put together after World War II show how even the most united and victorious military and political leaders prefer humanitarian values to be rigidly controlled to prevent them from becoming an excessive threat to the war effort.

The task of representing humane values to various combatant parties will always place a humanitarian third party in a difficult position. In most cases, the values represented by the humanitarian will be greeted with distinct ambivalence. On the one hand, they may be recognised and even strangely cherished in some quarters of the warring parties and their societies: many humanitarians can recount a story about a gentle warrior whose co-operation was critical to saving many lives. On the other hand, they will also be treated with the

utmost suspicion by crucial sections of any warring party, and perceived as a threat to the violence they are embarked upon. More cynically, but equally routinely, humanitarianism will be seized upon as something which can be abused to bolster the adversaries' own war efforts. The organisation and its individuals who dare to represent the values of humanity in war will thus usually meet a mixed response, with their values being seen simultaneously by different groups as ones to cherish, to attack, or to abuse.

While it has always been difficult to represent and position humanitarian values in war, the proliferation of relief and development agencies working in today's wars now seems to make that positioning even more difficult. One of the main reasons why humanitarian principles have been so difficult to clarify and affirm in the last five years must be that there are now so many different organisations trying to assert themselves as 'humanitarian'. The proliferation of NGOs in particular (which has been an inevitable consequence of Western donor policy in recent years) has led to wide differences in the ethical maturity and political sophistication of various organisations which are all competing to work in the same emergency. Anyone surveying the swarm of NGOs delivering primarily governmental humanitarian assistance in many of today's emergencies would be unwise to accept them all as equally principled and professional. With so many different organisations trying to establish a humanitarian position within today's wars, and with all of them using the same tired humanitarian language to do so, it is hardly surprising that the humanitarian scene has become overcrowded, its messages garbled, and its stance somewhat undignified.

So what concepts *are* relief agencies using today to distinguish their third-party, humanitarian position in war? Many of the more mature have done some hard thinking about the principles of their position and the nature of their stance in today's conflicts. But despite their commitment to such thinking, attempts at a real breakthrough in the development of an overarching principle for their position have achieved very little. To a large degree, this is because different agencies have different views on where they stand. As a result, the new NGO codes and principles still lack the kind of clarity, brevity, and irresistible persuasiveness which might impress militiamen at checkpoints or convince a beleaguered government enduring the attacks of a rebel army.<sup>2</sup> The established humanitarian principles and conventional language which relief agencies have traditionally used to

formulate their humanitarian stance are sounding distinctly hollow, confused, and even hypocritical in the mouths of today's multitude of international civilian and military organisations which operate with a humanitarian mandate. More precise understanding and usage of these terms might make for clearer positions. In the meantime, it is perhaps small wonder that the precise meaning of words like 'impartiality' has evaporated in recent years in a world where, in the same emergency, a Red Cross nurse can use the term to describe her medical programme and a UN commander can use the same word to describe air strikes.

## **Humanity, neutrality, and impartiality**

Relief agencies traditionally assert their humanitarian position with the three key terms of *humanity*, *neutrality*, and *impartiality*. These three guiding principles (which also herald the opening of UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991), which attempted to define humanitarian assistance in the 'new world order' after the Cold War) are of course lifted straight from the top three of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's seven guiding principles as formalised in 1965.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, most humanitarian language which emerges from the mouths of NGOs and UN forces is in fact little more than the rebounding and frequently distorted echo of the language and principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – an echo which, as we have seen, sounds particularly incongruous when it issues from the mouths of stridently political NGOs or heavily armed UN soldiers. Nevertheless, these three ideals are currently being actively reaffirmed in various forms in an effort to make them work again for today's civil wars, and for the new range of international third-party organisations which seek to find a role within these wars. The confusion seems to arise because different agencies are using the same language to describe different positions or no positions.

## **Humanity and its heresies**

The first principle, that of humanity, apparently remains the least controversial, and is the principle most easily asserted by relief agencies, international politicians, and UN forces alike. However, much of the agreement on the principle of humanity seems to cluster around a somewhat heretical understanding of this principle. There are perhaps two particular heresies in play: first, a reductionist one

which commodifies humanitarianism and relates it solely to material help; and second, an aggrandising one which tends towards making humanitarianism non-negotiable in war. The former is a heresy of substance (what), and the latter a heresy of approach (how).

The core of the Red Cross and Red Crescent definition of humanity is the desire '*to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found ... to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being*'. Here is enshrined the classical definition of humanity. Although brief, it embodies a sense of humanity in all its fullness, showing the humanitarian quest to be much more than a purely physical pursuit aimed only at saving life. Rather, the actual meaning of humanity transcends mere physical existence to embrace 'respect for the human being'. This phrase is essential, because it extends the purview of humanitarianism to rights (such as religious freedom and fair trial) that are well beyond the simple right to life, and are clearly spelled out in the Geneva Conventions. As Pictet points out, the humanitarian ideal of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement actually extends to a person's 'life, liberty and happiness – in other words everything which constitutes his [*sic*] existence' (Pictet 1979:26).

The first heresy which is so evident in current usage of the principle of humanity caricatures humanitarianism as an essentially materialistic concern for physical welfare, manifested in the provision of a range of commodities such as food, water, shelter, and medicine. This commodification of humanitarianism and its subsequent reduction to a package of 'humanitarian assistance' is a serious heresy which undermines wider humanitarian values. To interpret humanitarianism as an essentially minimalist endeavour relating to simple human survival is a misreading of its first principle. The Geneva Conventions are full of civil and political rights, as well as rights relating to simple physical survival. Restricting humanitarian concerns to relief commodities precludes many other vital aspects of the Geneva Conventions that relate to Pictet's notions of liberty and happiness. Without recognising humanitarianism's concern for all types of rights, humanitarian reductionists actually minimise the rights of those they seek to help. Recognition of this heresy may well be liberating and serve to free people from a conundrum which is more imagined than real. NGOs in particular seem to have convinced themselves that a humanitarian position and a human-rights position are somehow at odds with each other. This is obviously not the case: a truly humanitarian position on the plight of civilian populations in

war, as articulated in the IV Geneva Convention, is firmly positioned in the full spectrum of human rights. Tragically, much time and ink may have been wasted in recent years, trying to find a way of reconciling human rights and humanitarianism, when in fact they were never divided in the first place.

The second heresy is exemplified in some new language. Instead of the simple principle of humanity, most relief agencies have now adopted the more cumbersome (and perhaps sinister) term 'the humanitarian imperative'.<sup>4</sup> This is presumably in the hope that by giving the principle of humanity an imperative gloss and making it unreservedly a moral absolute, the phrase will present humanitarianism as a non-negotiable, almost genetic and biological force, so always over-riding the position of the warring factions. In addition, the humanitarian imperative usually seems to relate solely to 'humanitarian assistance' – the minimum package of relief *commodities* which donor governments are prepared to allow as emergency aid and which typifies the first heresy.

Very much in the Gallic humanitarian tradition, this second heresy gives humanitarianism a non-negotiable aspect.<sup>5</sup> This is at odds with the spirit of classical humanitarianism, which has always recognised that it must negotiate its place in violence, assuming the right of human beings to wage war, but seeking to limit the effects of that war with the consent of the warring parties. The Geneva Conventions recognise that warring parties have rights as well as obligations in agreeing how humanitarianism should be realised in war.<sup>6</sup> By implying that the rights are all on the side of the relief agencies and the victims of war, current interpretations of 'the humanitarian imperative' may optimistically (and even illegally) imply the automatic presence of relief agencies in war and undermine the very serious negotiation which needs to take place between warring leaders and humanitarians to ensure that humanitarian action is fair.

Perhaps the worst aspect of the non-negotiable heresy is that it is so unrealistic. In reality, unless assistance is delivered by force, humanitarianism will always be negotiable. While it is highly likely that altruism in its most universal form is innate to human nature and even an important aspect in the survival and evolution of all species (Geras 1995; see also Ridley 1996), there is also no doubt that it is usually in fierce competition with human traits which tend towards inhumanity, like fear, oppression, self-determination, enmity, hatred, aggression, and violence. There is, therefore, something rather

simplistic and imperious about the new phrase ‘the humanitarian imperative’. It displays some humanitarians’ exaggerated sense of their own importance within a people’s vision of their own conflict, suggesting that the new wave of humanitarian ideologues have failed to grasp that conflicting societies are usually deadly serious about their *right* to wage war. In contrast, less grandiose humanitarians who have experience of representing humanitarian values in war realise that they are usually pleading for a minority position, and one which has to be nurtured when it cannot be imposed.

Finally, it is also worth noting what might be an inconsistency rather than a heresy in the current use of the principle of humanity and its new imperative. Many relief agencies, like the politicians whom they frequently criticise, tend to be extremely selective about the various humanitarian ‘imperatives’ around the world. In an Orwellian fashion, it seems that all crises that threaten the lives of civilians are imperative, but some are more imperative than others. The more imperative emergencies are of course usually determined by the *Realpolitik* imperatives of relief agencies’ donor governments, and by the financial or promotional imperatives of competing relief agencies. Thus behind the rhetoric there is an element of bluster and even hypocrisy when relief agencies talk about ‘the humanitarian imperative’. Dropping the new term and reverting to the more extensive and more dignified original principle of *humanity* might be wise.

## **The temptation to abandon neutrality**

Of the three classical principles which seek to underpin a humanitarian position, *neutrality* is the one from which most agencies and all military peacekeeping doctrine are in retreat. As suggested above, there is now a majority view that neutrality is either undesirable, because it is equated with being unprincipled, or is simply unachievable in practice, because relief aid is so frequently manipulated. However, the recent pariah status of neutrality in the humanitarian’s lexicon seems to stem from a widespread misunderstanding of the term. As Denise Plattner has pointed out, although it is much talked about, there is no definition of neutral humanitarian assistance, and her 11 criteria go far to determine the parameters of what such a definition might encompass (Plattner 1996).

In its strict sense, humanitarian neutrality is not the neutralism of Dante and African Rights. Truly neutral relief workers and



peacemakers are not indifferent, unprincipled, and vacillating creatures destined for the vestibule of hell. On the contrary, they have a determined commitment to particular ideals. They have already taken a stand, and for them neutrality is ultimately the operational means to achieve their humanitarian ideals within an environment which is essentially hostile to those ideals. For the ICRC and for other relief agencies which choose such a position, neutrality is thus a pragmatic operational posture. Far from being unprincipled or amoral, it allows them to implement their ideals, within the limits prescribed by international humanitarian law.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent definition of neutrality is enshrined in its third fundamental principle:

*In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.*

Within this principle, Pictet has emphasised the important distinction between military neutrality and ideological neutrality (Pictet 1979:54–9). Being neutral means taking no part in military operations and no part in ideological battles. Drawing on the work of scholars who have defined the constituent parts of State neutrality, and on Pictet's commentary on ICRC neutrality, Plattner agrees that the three key ingredients to a neutral position are *abstention*, *prevention*, and *impartiality*. For an organisation, as for a State, 'abstention' means no involvement in military or ideological activity. 'Prevention' obliges the organisation to ensure that neither party is able to use the organisation to its advantage. 'Impartiality' requires the organisation to apply equal terms to the warring parties in its dealings with them (Plattner 1996:164). As such, Plattner concludes that 'neutrality may therefore be understood as a duty to abstain from any act which, in a conflict situation, might be interpreted as furthering the interests of one party to the conflict or jeopardising those of the other' (*ibid.*:165).

While perhaps approving this definition in theory, seasoned relief workers and peacekeepers will of course seize quickly on the word 'interpreted'. As they know only too well, in the extremely contested arena of war and political emergencies, the devil is in the interpretation of actions and events. Perception is everything and varies from faction to faction in conditions where one group's legitimate relief is seen by another group as an obvious contribution to the war effort of the enemy. African Rights is thus correct in condemning the

'tendency to believe that neutrality need only be asserted to be proved' (African Rights 1994:24). In reality it has to be proved by rigorous adherence to the principles of abstention, prevention, and impartiality, and by constant negotiation, thorough appraisal of the conditions of the respective parties, and continual recourse to the precepts of the Geneva Conventions.

Apart from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which still rigorously uphold it, few agencies still draw on the concept of neutrality to stake out their position. One determined exception is UNICEF and its Operation Lifeline in South Sudan (OLS), which has worked hard to draw up and disseminate a set of humanitarian principles. In doing so, they have firmly embraced the principle of neutrality:

*The guiding principle of Operation Lifeline is that of humanitarian neutrality – an independent status for humanitarian work beyond political or military considerations.*

(Levine 1995)

The many NGOs which have rejected the notion of neutrality have done so for two main reasons. First, as Plattner points out, they feel that it often imposes an unacceptable silence upon them in the face of grievous violations of human rights (Plattner 1996:169–70). What Pictet has described as the inevitable 'reserve' required of the neutral (Pictet 1979:53) is considered to be too high a price to pay for NGOs who mandate themselves as advocates of human rights and social justice. Secondly, abiding by neutrality's commitment to prevention and abstention seems increasingly unfeasible in the light of what we now know about the manipulation of relief supplies, and the fact that combatants and civilians are intrinsically mixed in today's civil wars. For example, in the same article in which UNICEF argues for neutrality, the apparent paradox of its position is made clear. Within a matter of a few column inches, it also eloquently makes the case for why such neutrality is not so simple and is perceived by many as impossible to achieve in today's wars:

*The military are not a distinct group, separated from the civilian population, but are fathers, brothers, sons frequently returning to their homes. Clearly, in such circumstances, women and children who have received aid from OLS agencies are not going to refuse to feed their own family members.*

(Levine 1995)

Despite these problems, UNICEF is one of the very few agencies which is trying to observe and apply the principle of neutrality in its work. But while neutrality may be right for some organisations, it is certainly not right for all of them. Some are bound to find it offensive to the mandates they give themselves. Also, as African Rights points out, the majority of organisations will find that they simply do not have the means – in terms of diplomatic and political contacts, finances or professional competence – to negotiate and secure a rigorous position of neutrality in their relief work (African Rights 1994:24). Nevertheless, these factors do not mean that neutrality in itself is not possible, nor that it is an unprincipled means of operating. In the right hands and in pursuit of the right ideals recognised in international humanitarian law, neutrality is an extremely valuable principle. Relief agencies need to decide if they are going to abide by it or not. If they are, they should ensure that they acquire the appropriate skills. If they are not, they should not discredit the principle simply on the grounds that it is at odds with their own mandate and capabilities.

## Embracing impartiality

Because of their difficulties with neutrality, most NGOs have abandoned the concept and embraced its close relation, *impartiality*. In common with most other NGOs, ACORD (a European NGO consortium with extensive and considered experience of working in political emergencies and war in Africa) has determinedly reasserted the principle of impartiality over that of neutrality as the guiding ethic of its operations in war:

*Whereas neutrality dictated that ACORD could take no position of any kind in a conflict, impartiality means upholding accepted human values irrespective of the allegiance of those involved.*

(Jazairy 1994)

While ACORD rejects neutrality, it affirms the notion of impartiality. But it has misunderstood the principle of neutrality. For, as we have seen, neutrality may stop an organisation from taking sides (militarily or ideologically) and protect it from public criticism, but it does not prevent an organisation from having a principled position, based on firm ideals. The classical definition of impartiality, taken from the Red Cross and Red Crescent principles, is that an organisation

*makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.*

As Pictet (1979:37–43) and others have pointed out, the principle of impartiality is therefore built on the twin pillars of non-discrimination of person and proportionality of need. In other words, the similarity of all people but the differences in their needs should at all times determine the judgements of the impartial humanitarian, in the light of the objective precepts of humanitarian law.

The attraction of impartiality over neutrality for most NGOs and UN forces is that the concept permits the impartial person to be judgemental – albeit not gratuitously so, but in line with agreed values. Pictet caricatures the difference between neutrality and impartiality thus: ‘the neutral man [*sic*] refuses to make a judgement, whereas the one who is impartial judges a situation in accordance with pre-established rules’ (1979:53). NGO policy has pounced on the objectivity of impartiality and its potential for being judgemental. For advocacy-driven NGOs and robust peacekeepers alike, impartiality seems to offer the most scope for justifying a strategy of speaking out or shooting out, while also maintaining humanitarian values.

The Médecins Sans Frontières movement (MSF) has sought to emphasise that impartiality need not be passive or condone human-rights violations, by adhering to a more refined expression of the principle: the notion of ‘active impartiality’. The active dimension of MSF’s impartiality refers to the fact that they will speak out and condemn any party in a conflict which they see as breaching human rights or humanitarian law. The development of this harder interpretation of impartiality is, therefore, determinedly not neutral and abstentionist. Public criticism will be made against people or groups on the basis of what they do, but not on the basis of who they are. Impartiality in this context relates to the various factions or parties involved, but rejects the idea of abstention in the face of human-rights abuses. The idea of active impartiality might therefore be summed up as impartiality to persons, but partiality to their actions.

## Leaning towards solidarity

A fourth concept is gaining increasing currency within debates about humanitarian positioning: it is that of ‘solidarity’. This represents the stance of those who wish to abandon both neutrality and impartiality. African Rights and others have suggested that, in many political emergencies and wars, the notion of solidarity might be the most appropriate guiding principle around which relief agencies could align their operational position. In its paper *Humanitarianism*

*Unbound*, African Rights states that ‘It is arguable that solidarity is the most important principle of all’, adding that ‘what solidarity operations have in common is a political goal shared with the people’ (African Rights 1994:26, 27). The writer defines ‘genuine solidarity in relief work’ as including four main components:

- 1) *Human rights objectivity and the pursuit of justice. This means a commitment to pursuing an agenda based on a set of rights.*
- 2) *Consultation with and accountability to the people with whom solidarity is expressed.*
- 3) *Shared risk and suffering with the people.*
- 4) *Concrete action in support of the people and their cause. This may include providing relief and/or political or human rights lobby and advocacy.*

(African Rights 1994:27)

The idea of solidarity obviously involves taking sides. Such a concept may be anathema to many people who give to and work for NGOs, and it is certainly in opposition to classical humanitarian principles. But in both Christian moral theology and development work based on social justice, there is an important tradition of taking sides. Albert Nolan, a Dominican veteran of the South African liberation struggle, is a leading advocate of this position:

*In some conflicts one side is right and the other side is wrong ... In such cases a policy of seeking consensus and not taking sides would be quite wrong. Christians are not supposed to try and reconcile good and evil, justice and injustice; we are supposed to do away with evil, injustice and sin.*

(Nolan 1984)

Such a solidarity-based approach is obviously easier when the sides are clearly drawn, when right and wrong are as distinct as night and day, and when the wronged can be easily distinguished from the wrong. But such clarity is not always the case in today’s internal wars, and the principle of solidarity can seldom be applied with confidence in many conflicts. Solidarity is a principle which was right for those who backed long-established (and often non-violent) resistance movements like the civil-rights movement in the USA or the liberation movements in South Africa and Eastern Europe. It is also one which should always be actively applied in genocide as in Rwanda. But in wars like those in Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, the ‘good’ sides are not so clearly identifiable. At a practical level, the application

of solidarity faces problems too. The tenuous nature of the chain of command in today's wars can compromise the principle of taking sides. Political and military leaders (whether intentionally or not) often have little control over those who carry out atrocities in their name, meaning that solidarity can all too easily become solidarity with excessive and uncoordinated violence.

In an attempt to avoid these pitfalls, a certain element of humanitarian discourse has adapted the notion of solidarity and claimed solidarity not with those who are 'right', but with those who are somehow regarded as 'innocent'. In this analysis (which might be called 'innocence-based solidarity'), the lowest common denominator of innocence is usually drawn along lines of sex and age. So women, children, and the elderly are perceived as 'the innocent' and as 'vulnerable groups' who merit the solidarity of relief agencies. But, as the above quotation from UNICEF makes clear, such a position is often simplistic and ill-informed. This kind of innocence-based solidarity is thus equally precarious as a general principle of humanitarian action. And Levine's lament about current humanitarian action is apt when considering the conflict between classical humanitarianism and its detractors: 'we have not worked out what it means to be neutral in a conflict yet in solidarity with all its victims' (Levine 1996). On the one hand, ICRC would claim that this is something they have worked out years ago, while African Rights would probably claim that such a position is both undesirable and impossible.

## **Moral stance and personal morale**

Beyond the desire to clarify humanitarian principles, there is another reason why a clear sense of the moral positioning of third-party organisations in war is so important: its effect on staff morale. Being a third party to the wanton cruelty and violence in so many of today's civil wars is personally testing for individual relief workers. Even with the clearest sense of purpose, an individual can feel all the recriminations of being a bystander in the face of appalling atrocities. Experiencing the violence and destruction around them in places like Rwanda, Bosnia, and Liberia, it is usual for most relief workers to experience a gamut of emotions which range from pity and compassion through powerlessness, frustration, and fear, to anger and outright hostility to all concerned. It is common for several of these emotions to be experienced simultaneously in an individual. It seems equally common for individuals to swing from one end of the

spectrum to another at different intervals. At the hostile end of the spectrum, it becomes possible to categorise a whole people as somehow deranged and sub-human.

Humanitarians seldom do anything obvious to stop the causes of the violence around them. Their impact is usually only palliative; at best they become some small beacon of alternative humane values in the midst of inhumanity. Because of this frequent inability to stop the violence around them, many humanitarians and peacekeepers have to deal with what might be termed 'bystander anxiety'.<sup>7</sup> It is this anxiety which perhaps underlies the concerns of NGOs in particular to be dissatisfied with classical humanitarianism and move towards notions of active impartiality and solidarity. Although not necessarily the case, public silence is feared as the hallmark of the bystander, and so advocacy becomes all-important to NGOs.<sup>8</sup>

In such a context, it becomes extremely important for relief workers to know where their particular organisation stands and what position it is taking as a third party. Their own personal contribution must make sense as a moral and active one within the violence around them, and such activity must be clearly explained in terms of whichever principle – neutrality, impartiality, or solidarity – their organisation has chosen to pursue. In this way, the individual can interpret his or her role within the violence beyond that of a bystander, consciously countering the invidious feelings of bystander anxiety with a definite vision and understanding of his or her position.

## **Behind the words**

To sum up, the semantic manoeuvring around humanitarian principles which currently preoccupies humanitarian policy makers is symptomatic of the confusion which arises when so many different types of third-party organisation seek to clarify their moral position in political emergencies and war today. Not surprisingly, however, the variety of shifting positions and their mutating vocabulary create confusion, and the humanitarian community still seeks a decisive moral banner under which to go about its business. The result is that the notions of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality, which traditionally underpinned classical humanitarianism, are being stretched or abandoned and so risk being undermined in a process in which they come to mean different things to different people.

Yet behind the wordplay there is a definite determination to preserve the old values of humanitarianism, while applying them

within the byzantine politics (local and international) of today's emergencies. Most of the different attempts to reframe humanitarian principles seem to have three main ideals in common: a commitment to the principle of humanity – albeit it in a minimal form; a desire to speak out (or shoot out) in the face of human-rights abuses; and a guarantee of third-party immunity for humanitarian agencies. The current wordplay of most relief agencies shows them attempting to combine these three ideals into a single position. Relief agencies are eager to assure themselves and others that they subscribe to a morality beyond the sanctity of human life alone. However, as has been argued, such an anxiety is based on an unnecessarily minimalist interpretation of the principle of humanity. In reality, the principle of humanity as respect for the whole human person and as developed in the Geneva Conventions easily embraces the wider moral concerns of NGOs. Instead of agonising over new mission statements and giving added nuance to old principles, many relief agencies should perhaps spend more time reading the Geneva Conventions (particularly the IV Convention) and adopt them as the best possible bulwark of their position in war. It is to their shame that the number of NGOs and their staff who are familiar with the Geneva Conventions, and who refer to them in their work, is pitifully few.

With so many agencies (civilian and military) now operating in and around humanitarian programmes, a range of positions from classical neutrality to solidarity is to be expected and desired in any given emergency. But every agency is responsible for making its position clear for the sake of the credibility of the important principles involved, as well as for morale of the suffering community in question and the individual relief workers working with them. The challenge is to clarify humanitarian terms and the principles to which they refer, so preserving their legitimacy and effectiveness in war. The best way to do this is to work together with the laws and principles we have already – most notably the IV Geneva Convention – and so to concentrate our efforts on thinking how to improve what we have. Gathering round the banner of international humanitarian law in this way should bring a double boon: first, it will provide a united front and common forum for action and thinking on humanity in war; and second, by taking so principled and obvious a stand, we might just avoid the vestibule of hell.



## Notes

- 1 This is a shortened version of a paper which also explored the moral stance of UN Peacekeeping Forces and which was published as a chapter entitled 'Positioning humanitarianism in war' in Gordon and Toase (2001).
- 2 See, for example, the *Code of Conduct for the Red Cross Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*, Geneva 1994; the Providence Principles from Brown University, 1991; and the Mohonk Criteria for Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies, World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1994.
- 3 The seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement were proclaimed by the Twentieth International Conference of the Red Cross in Vienna 1965. They are Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity, and Universality.
- 4 See, for example, the *Code of Conduct*, *op. cit.*
- 5 Gallic debate on humanitarianism has tended to be particularly strident in recent decades, evolving around the notion of '*sans frontièrisme*' and the *droit d'ingérence*. While such robust relief ideology has its place alongside military intervention, it lacks a certain subtlety in situations where forceful intervention is not available or not necessary and where negotiation is inevitable and desirable.
- 6 See for example Article 23, IV Geneva Convention.
- 7 In the extensive literature on the Jewish Holocaust, the word 'bystander' has emerged as one of the most damning. The particularly odious image of a bystander thus seems to make it an appropriate term to express relief workers' fears.
- 8 Effective action is not always to be equated with speaking out. Much can

be achieved in silence. Indeed, discretion and secrecy may be the optimal strategy in many particular situations.

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