
Fidelity and Variation: Discerning the Development and Evolution of the Humanitarian Idea

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In the autumn of 1842, in the small village of Littlemore outside Oxford, an Anglican priest was wrestling with a deeply troubling question, the answer to which would decide how he spent the rest of his life. The particular “difficulty” with which his mind was now wholly absorbed was the problem of how an original idea might move through history, take on new forms of expression, inspire new forms of action, give rise to new understandings and shape new organizations while still remaining essentially the same idea. The particular idea which concerned John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman was, of course, the idea of Christianity, or more properly, the Christian faith. He needed to convince himself one way or the other as to whether the extensive and elaborate doctrines, rituals and organization of the Roman Catholic Church were new but genuine manifestations of the essential Christian faith or whether they were, as his Protestant detractors adamantly espoused, illegitimate “additions” to and “corruptions” of a simpler, purer faith. Depending on his conclusions, Newman would either stay an Anglican or become a Roman Catholic.

In 1845, Newman emerged from Littlemore as a Roman Catholic and with his answer to his difficulty eloquently expressed in his seminal work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, made the case that in the due process of

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time, and as a result of its interaction with changing human circumstances, Christianity, like any other “living idea,” was bound to “develop” new insights, new forms of action and new rituals while still remaining true—indeed precisely because it remains true—to its original revelation and its subsequent faith.¹ With this theory of the development of ideas, Newman sought to show how the “variations” in Christianity which had occurred in its first 1800 years in fact “proceed on a law, and with a harmony and definite drift” which elaborate the integrity of the original idea rather than corrupt it.² He noted that: “this process, whether it be longer or shorter in point of time, by which the aspects of an idea are brought into consistency and form, I call its development, being the germination and maturation of some truth.”³ He then went on to identify and illustrate his seven famous tests or “notes” which could be used to discern whether a variation was a genuine development or corruption of an original idea.

In the same year that Newman withdrew to Littlemore and began writing his essay, but in a different part of England, a young naturalist was pouring over his notebooks and sketches from a recent five-year voyage around the world and spending long hours observing a particular type of hermaphrodite barnacle. In 1844 he, too, produced an essay which was the first “sketch” of his own new theory. During his voyage on HMS Beagle, Charles Darwin had been confronted by a question in the natural world akin to Newman’s difficulty in the world of ideas. In his early essay, and then fifteen years later in his seminal work *The Origin of Species* of 1859, Darwin put forward his own theory to account for the origin and variation over time and place of all species of life. Darwin’s theory of evolution held to an idea of change resulting from circumstance and environment and driven by what he called “natural selection” in the hard “struggle for existence.” Alongside natural selection, Darwin also saw a number of key “laws of variation.” These determined the variation, evolution and survival of any species by virtue of how it interacted with their environment.

While both Newman and Darwin saw development or evolution as coming about from encounter and interaction with changing circumstances, environments and competing forces, Darwin’s theory of natural selection and evolution was not guided by some “grand design” or divine “author” along moral lines. Instead, he perceived the variations in and between species so evident in the natural world as driven by a notion of “improvement” related to self-advantage alone in “the great battle for life.”⁴ In short, if Newman’s teleology was distinctly moral, Darwin’s was inherently amoral. But common to both Newman and Darwin’s theories is the process of conflict and interaction, the results of which shape the eventual species or develop the essential idea. Typified by what Darwin calls the “struggle for existence” and what Newman calls the “warfare of ideas,” a state of turbulence and conflict is integral to determining a new variety of species or the new expression of an idea.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the current *fin de siècle* debate about the changing nature of humanitarianism, which has in many ways been characterized by, on the one hand, those arguing for a back-to-basics humanitarianism and, on the other, those proposing a more expansive and politically partial variant.⁵ In the best traditions of conflict resolution theory, my personal instincts in this debate are to avoid positions and to try and uncover the needs and interests of the humanitarian idea in today's world. Like Newman, I believe that all good ideas will take new forms and develop variations. The best way to serve the humanitarian idea therefore is to test these developments for their fidelity and integrity to the original idea. Instead of creating new and possibly competing humanitarian orthodoxies, it might be wise to examine and judge each new trend and not be afraid if there is a pluralism in the way the humanitarian idea is made manifest in the world, so long as that idea remains the same.

From the relatively early days of its modern history, when new organizations like Save the Children took on the humanitarian idea alongside other ideas of universal rights and poverty alleviation, humanitarianism has always embodied two traditions. A distinction has often been made between "classical" Red Cross humanitarianism and more "political humanitarianism" represented by NGOs or governments, or between a "priestly" and "prophetic" manifestation of the same idea.⁶ Both these traditions change and develop in the face of new ideas, new political structures and new realities in war. By borrowing some notions about change from the nineteenth century, this paper will offer some practical guidance to contemporary humanitarians as to how to judge current and emerging changes in humanitarianism. I hope to show that some of the changes in the current manifestations of the humanitarian idea are morally guided by development of the original humanitarian idea, while other changes are more evolutionary and amoral in nature, inspired by the struggle for organizational survival.

THE HUMANITARIAN IDEA

In June 1859, fourteen years after the publication of Newman's essay and exactly six months before the publication of *The Origin of Species*, a Swiss businessman named Henri Dunant found himself attending to the wounded at the Battle of Solferino in northern Italy. Dunant's concern for the victims of war tapped into an idea about the importance of restraint and compassion in war which had existed since time immemorial. Although this idea was gaining momentum in other parts of Europe at the time, Dunant's emphasis was original both conceptually and practically.⁷

As Paul Grossrieder has pointed out, Dunant's real contribution was to realize that "the victims, all the victims are neutral" (my translation) and that respect was due to them, regardless of their status as enemies or allies, because of their

essential humanity.⁸ From this, the essential humanitarian idea emerges as the ethic of restraint in war implemented as impartial assistance and protection for all those non-combatants who are in danger of or affected by it. Or, as Geoffrey Best succinctly put it: “the idea that, if there are to be wars, and so long as wars go on, it is certainly better for the warring parties, and probably for mankind at large, that the persons fighting should observe some prohibitions and restraints on how they do it; the idea, to put it at its briefest, of humanity in warfare.”⁹ What was distinctly practical about Dunant’s insight was his idea of how such compassion and restraint should and could be organized and legislated for internationally in modern times. Dunant’s idea thus came to embody the modern ideal of humanitarianism in war. It was given life in the Red Cross movement and its conventions. Although there are broad universal and transcultural values of restraint, modern institutionalized humanitarianism is an essentially European phenomenon, given form and force in essentially European organizations and legal frameworks. Humanitarianism has been developing for over 130 years and its species of organization has been evolving for the same period. It is now manifest in hundreds of varieties, the latest of which might be NATO.

Despite being founded on the broad base of a very big idea – the recognition of the fundamental dignity and value of an essential humanity common to all people—the humanitarian idea is in fact a rather small idea. Indeed, it may be best described as a niche idea in the much grander and fuller ideological landscape of human aspirations. The humanitarian ethic is really only an interim ethic that seeks to preserve the value of essential human dignity within the very specific, extreme and, thankfully, usually extraordinary situation of war and armed conflict. The humanitarian idea is therefore related specifically to one particular human activity, albeit one of its most atrocious. Unlike much larger ideas of human rights, democracy, socialism, peace and social justice, it is not an idea which embodies an ultimate ethic about the fulfillment of human happiness. It is instead an idea which uses the foundational idea of essential human dignity (foundational also to most of the big ideas) to generate an interim ethic of restraint to mitigate one of the most troubling and devastating of human tendencies. The humanitarian idea is not an elaborate political philosophy with an accompanying design to address all aspects of human need and aspiration.

If the humanitarian idea is a small idea, it is a small idea with a potentially big comment on its bigger ideological neighbors and this comment is regularly, if quietly, made by most classical, particularly Red Cross, humanitarians. Paradoxically, the very isolation of its niche from the mainstream of political ideas gives it a special perspective from which it has tended to derive a meta-ethic which serves to caution against the hubris and inevitable incompleteness of ideas themselves as they are applied in politics. In this way, and from its perpetual association with the victims of ideas rather than their champions, the humanitarian

idea does have a wider moral role than simply restraining the horrors of war. Almost subliminally, it serves to urge restraint in the excessive pursuit of ideas and ideology per se—knowing how such ideological excess so often leads to violence and war. So alongside its interim ethic of restraint in war, the humanitarian idea is also an idea which implicitly cautions against excess in political ideas. It is from this meta-ethic—and not simply the practical operational requirement of access to all parties in a conflict—that classical humanitarianism draws its apoliticalness. It comes as much from a mild despair of politics and its miscarriage of ideas as it does from operational necessity.

EXPANSION AND SPREAD OF THE HUMANITARIAN IDEA

After Dunant and the Red Cross, other modern variations of the modern humanitarian idea and resulting new species of humanitarian organization emerged which often allied themselves to Red Cross humanitarianism and operated in similar environments and similar fashion. In Britain, Eglantyne Jebb's Save the Children Fund started in 1919 and Oxfam began in 1942. In the United States, the American Relief Administration took shape under Herbert Hoover during WWI, while International Rescue Committee (IRC) and CARE evolved into humanitarian organizations out of the turmoil of WWII. More recently, Europe has also seen the emergence of the *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) movement (culminating in its recent Nobel Peace Prize) developing from its origins in France and the events of the Nigerian Civil War in the 1960s and its challenge to Red Cross humanitarianism. At an inter-governmental level, certain UN ideals and organizations also emerged with a distinctly humanitarian intent. All these new organizations brought new concerns to the humanitarian idea. New emphasis and practice developed around children, women, refugees, food security and health care. In the wake of the Holocaust, civilian internment and aerial bombardment of WWII, humanitarian law moved tragically too late but resoundingly forward, from the Red Cross' original emphasis on the treatment of military personnel to embrace a concern for civilians in war. It is this development which has been the great challenge for mid and late 20th Century humanitarianism, a challenge which has been met in law by the IV Geneva Convention of 1949 and the Additional Protocols of 1977, yet frequently remains daunting or impossible in practice.

During its history, the humanitarian idea has had to engage with different types of armed conflict, new types of weapons and several types of political power. It has sought to apply itself in inter-state war, civil war, wars of decolonization, self-determination and liberation, and the new forms of conflict witnessed in the 1990s.¹⁰ Similarly, it has worked hard to challenge a range of weaponry from the dum dum bullet to weapons of mass destruction to

indiscriminate anti-personnel mines and the emerging array of non-lethal weapons. Alongside such weapons development, recent history has also seen a developing array of social, economic and military tactics in war. Changing political structures have also thrown up new formations of political power with which the humanitarian idea has been required to engage. From its origins in the frock-coated, state-centric and imperial world of the late nineteenth century, armed conflict of the last 130 years has required humanitarians to confront democratic, totalitarian and genocidal states, dictators, liberation movements, terrorist organizations, grassroots movements, warlords and, in the jargon of the day, other “non-state actors.” Most of these encounters with different wars, different weapons, different tactics and different polities have forced a development of the humanitarian idea made manifest in new laws, new forms of field practice, new doctrines and principles and new alliances.

MIXING WITH BIGGER IDEAS

If the humanitarian idea grew organically to encompass these new but still essentially humanitarian concerns around the victims of war, it also encountered some rather different big ideas in the world around it in the decades after World War II, many of which took root in the organizations that had originated as solely humanitarian.

Critical among these ideological encounters was the idea of third world development taken up by so many humanitarian agencies. This idea certainly embraced an ultimate rather than an interim ethic by holding to a vision of the eradication of poverty and the establishment of a just international order. While people like Eglantyne Jebb in Save the Children and Clara Barton of the American Red Cross were already actively concerned with going “beyond relief” in the inter-war period, the post-colonial rush (or near colonial) for “Development” engaged humanitarian NGOs like Oxfam and others in earnest from the 1960s.¹¹ But development itself was a contested concept and continued to evolve as such. It meant different things to different people and so it too tended to attract different big ideas and blend with them. Marxism had a strong influence in several recipes of development (secular and Christian) such that the ideology of liberation became central to development in many minds and in many agencies. Closely akin to the idea of liberation from oppression and poverty was also the powerful idea of self-determination of peoples, so that many struggles for self-determination became synonymous with development struggles.

For others, development remained a primarily scientific exercise towards technological and economic progress in the tradition of western colonial administration and focused on improving the technology of different sectors such as health, education and agriculture. For many the ideas of social justice and peace became

central ideas in development and for others the environment became the starting point for an ideology of sustainable development. And common to almost all these ideas of development is the idea of advocacy, which is an essentially political strategy to influence power via information, policy recommendation and public pressure. In recent years it has become a central idea to the means of development. As these large emerging woodlands and forests of development ideology took root and spread south, east, west and north across the world, the humanitarian idea went with them in many of the same organizations or separately along the same routes.

Alongside these ideologies of development, the big idea of universal human rights also emerged as an equally important agenda after the second world war – catalyzed by the elaboration of extensive UN human rights law and the creation of independent human rights organizations like Amnesty International in 1961. In the last decade human rights and development advocates have increasingly joined forces so that predominant development ideology today is described as “rights-based” with the emergence of a synthetic “right to development” in UN law and a recognition that the political pursuit of the universal enjoyment of human rights is at once a means and an end to development.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the big political and economic ideas to emerge as the victors of the Cold War—neo-liberalism and Third Way politics—have taken center stage as ideas determining ideologies of development. Able to accommodate all the above big ideas to varying degrees, they stir them with determined free market capitalism, limited and regulatory government, strong civil society, multi-party liberal democracy and a commitment (albeit uncertain in practice) to military force – all promoted in the context of a belief in a globalizing world. Holders of these ideas now shape and finance most development and humanitarian activity. This project brings with it a very definite political prescription for the treatment of war and political violence. This prescription includes cures such as multi-party liberal democracy, a political contract based around human rights which is held to the creation of a thriving civil society, free press and an accountable state and financed by a liberal free market economy. This policy for war-torn societies is pursued by the dominant OECD donors in a “one-size-fits-all” manner. Aid funding is devised in the terms of this project and the humanitarian idea has become increasingly identified with it while humanitarian organizations are inevitably pulled towards it for financing.¹²

Notable within this new agenda, and brought about by the new possibilities for international military interventionism in civil wars in the 1990s, the idea of the use of force has also come head to head with the humanitarian idea. Humanitarianism has been associated with force to an unprecedented degree in recent years as proponents of military force have used the humanitarian idea alongside ideas of human rights, self-determination and international order as good cause for the use of international or regional force to intervene in civil wars.

Finally and unambiguously competing with the humanitarian idea has been the rise of anti-humanitarian ideas. While these ideas have always existed and produced constant resistance to the humanitarian idea in war, they are asserted by the pen and the gun to a large degree at present. Many governments and armed “non-state actors” outrightly reject the humanitarian idea as an obstacle to or irrelevance to their project of political violence. If they do tolerate humanitarianism it is usually only to manipulate it. They certainly do not embrace it as an ethic in itself. Similarly, many commentators and politicians have also abandoned the humanitarian idea, proclaiming its death, like David Rieff, or lamenting its unintentional impact and condemning it as a net contributor to violence and unable to meet its idea in practice on the ground.¹³

As a result of this history of ideological encounters, the vast majority of agencies engaged in humanitarian work are not simply humanitarian agencies but are much more besides. The average international (western) NGO embodies many ideas and most of them are much bigger than the humanitarian idea. When forced to choose, they may not even prioritize the humanitarian idea as that most important to them. In a recent study of 15 British-based international NGOs, it was obvious that only one of them was simply a humanitarian organization. The majority of them seek simultaneously to hold and work towards a number of values well beyond restraint and impartiality in war.¹⁴ These might include peace, social and economic equity, human rights, environmental sustainability, solidarity with the poor and gender justice and democracy. Together with these positive values, the presence of anti-humanitarian ideas – or at least skepticism – also co-exists in many agencies. All these values obviously make for ideological tensions within organizations. And the proximity of all these ideas alongside the humanitarian idea in single institutions is bound to influence and challenge the development of the humanitarian idea – influencing the way it operates in its niche or simply filling in the niche with these other values which they feel engage with war as well as or better than the humanitarian idea.

Throughout its 130 years, therefore, in the wider world of politics and in every modern humanitarian agency, Dunant’s idea has remained very much a “living idea” and has a significant history of inter-action with the world of power and ideas. As one would expect from Newman and Darwin’s theories, a key aspect of the development of the humanitarian idea and the evolution of its organizations and their practice has been this “cutting across” (as per Newman) and “inter-crossing” and “struggle” (as per Darwin) with other ideas, other species of organization and other environments. From these encounters, it should not be surprising that the humanitarian idea is developing and that it will continue to change so that it can remain the same, be subsumed into some greater new idea, revert to some previous stage of its development or disappear entirely.

DISCERNING THE DRIFT OF THE HUMANITARIAN IDEA

It might be useful to list each of Newman's seven tests in order to discern "healthy developments" of the humanitarian idea from the its "decay." As humanitarianism encounters bigger ideas of peace, development, universal human rights, militarism and neo-liberal politics, Newman's tests help clarify the outcome of those interactions. Newman's seven tests can be summarized as follows:

1) Preservation of type – that the idea should remain essentially the same, that it might very well become larger but that it would not become totally different. To use his example, a small bird would become a larger bird but not a fish.

2) Continuity of principles – that any new developments should be consistent with the principles underlying any idea and cannot alter them.

3) Power of assimilation – that the idea can absorb and thrive on any development it makes and so be shown to have an "antecedent affinity" with it.

4) Logical sequence – that there is a logical precision and harmony of proportion in the change.

5) Anticipation of its future – that there are "early or recurring intimations" of what later comes to be an explicit development. In other words, that any change is not entirely surprising.

6) Conservative action upon its past – that the new development essentially preserves and corroborates the emphasis of the past rather than sets out to correct or obscure it.

7) Chronic Vigor – that any new development should be distinguished by its tenacity and duration, that it takes root and thrives.

There is obvious overlap among Newman's seven tests which often seem to interrogate the same question from a different angle. As a form of inquiry, they therefore function more akin to triangulation than as seven wholly separate lines of questioning. And, of course, Newman's tests do not judge the value of an idea – whether it is a good one or a bad one – but only its development. They are tests which would be as useful for assessing the progression of fascism as for assessing humanitarianism. Thus, this paper is assuming that the humanitarian idea described above is a good one and that any development of it should serve to help it function more fully in the world.

Looking at humanitarianism as it has emerged in the 1990s, it is still possible to see the original idea in play – the desire to restrain and prescribe war and to protect non-combatants. To this degree it is still possible to see a preservation of type in the idea today. In Newman's terms one can still recognize a humanitarian bird in the wars of the 1990s rather than a fish. But that bird has not just become larger, it has become fiercer and, if not yet actually a fish, it is showing signs of swimming as well as flying. More akin to a seagull, the more political tradition of the humanitarian idea now attacks (though largely by droppings from the air!) and

calls out more loudly, advocating right and wrong, urging action and apportioning blame. And when this bird lands, it frequently does much more than restrain war. It seeks to reconstruct society in a neo-liberal mould and to build peace – its longer, hooked beak of a seabird able to delve deeply into the soft shorelines of a war-torn society. This is a fine seabird but it is no dove. In contrast, classical humanitarianism – as manifest in the ICRC – is still clearly recognizable as the bird it was. It is bigger with more laws which are being applied in new courts and tribunals and is becoming more gregarious in making new alliances but ICRC remains resolutely a bird whose sole concern remains the restraint of war and any engagement it has with neo-liberal ideas of civil society or peace-building focus solely on this task by disseminating the ethic of restraint in war.

Examining the continuity of principles in these changes reveals a massive concern to continue with the foundational principles of essential humanity and impartiality in the application of assistance and protection within the political tradition of humanitarianism. Much of the literature, codes and standards within the NGO, UN and Red Cross world of recent years have been an attempt to reaffirm these. But at the same time there has been a greater commitment by humanitarian agencies to embark upon serious political engagement as a means to restrain and resolve war. This has taken place largely through the rise of advocacy as an explicit strategy in humanitarian action. The determination to make the restraint of war a political priority is not at odds with the humanitarian idea—indeed it could be said to be its overall aim. Thus there is nothing intrinsically ideologically corrupting to the humanitarian idea of politicizing its cause and winning support for it locally and internationally. But a misdevelopment may occur when such political engagement renders humanitarian action incapable of impartiality thus seriously compromising a basic principle of the idea.

In describing the power of assimilation, Newman rejoices in the mixing of ideas as an essential source of vitality and growth in any particular idea: “doctrines and views which relate to man are not placed in a void but in the crowded world, and make way for themselves by interpenetration, and develop by absorption... a new element of order and composition has come among them; and its life is proved by its capacity of expansion, without disarrangement and dissolution.”¹⁵ Of all the ideas that have engaged humanitarianism in recent years, the ideas of human rights and peace seem to have been most palatable. Despite the fact that in the middle of this century human rights law and international humanitarian law were being developed in earnest at the same time and sometimes by the same lawyers, they remained distinct as two very separate types of law – the one based on rights and the other based on legal injunctions and prohibitions. For many years they kept their distance from one another, but in the 1990s the need for humanitarianism to develop a more active protection practice based on international humanitarian law and the idea of human rights is being actively pursued

by agencies and academics.¹⁶ Increasingly, humanitarians are content to imbue the protection issue with an equal human rights focus. Thus, the two bodies of law have now come to sit more comfortably—even determinedly—together.¹⁷ International Humanitarian Law and human rights law are therefore being treated together as the common framework for humanitarian protection and, like development, humanitarianism is now increasingly understood by many as rights-based. This particular assimilation seems to add great strength to the humanitarian idea and in Newman's terms, it seems clear that the humanitarian idea certainly had an "antecedent affinity" with human rights law to justify such a development.

Not so obvious is the antecedent affinity that the humanitarian idea may have had with the idea of peace. Indeed, an "antecedent ambiguity" is perhaps a more accurate description of humanitarianism's relations with the big idea of peace. Certainly, modern humanitarianism has never been pacifist. Neither Red Cross nor NGO humanitarianism has ever wholeheartedly pursued the pacifist approach to peace. Instead, the humanitarian idea has always been primarily about setting limits to war rather than objecting to it *per se*. Its whole approach has been to legitimate a particular practice of war rather than to render war taboo. Yet the humanitarian idea is by no means at odds with peace and many Red Cross and NGO statements value peace, in its fullest sense of a positive, socially and economically just peace, as that most fitting state for human dignity.¹⁸ Conceptually, therefore, there seems little reason why the humanitarian idea should not develop to become more peace promoting. But, once again, difficulties lie more in practice where pursuing a particular form of peace between factions, rather than simply extolling and embodying the value of peace, could endanger the primary intent of the humanitarian idea. The potential for a humanitarian agency's peace work going wrong or being misconstrued and a consequent loss of perceived impartiality could place too great a risk on the primary function of the humanitarian idea which is to assist and protect victims of war and not to resolve their conflicts.

Where healthy absorption is less clear is around the use of military force. Can the humanitarian idea – which may be said to be paradoxical enough already in its relationship to war – allow war to become a means to its own ends? This is perhaps the real crux of the debate about the development of the humanitarian idea and requires a thorough interrogation by Newman's seven tests not possible in this paper. Does it conserve or corrupt the humanitarian idea to pursue war which abides by the humanitarian idea to restrain war that does not? (This assumes, of course, such intervening force can be confident of confining force within the parameters of humanitarian law.) If anti-humanitarian ideas are so powerful in the minds of those perpetrating inhumanity as to refuse humanitarians access, then is it better that they appear by force than not at all? In his

discussion of the assimilation of ideas, Newman uses the example of some animals who eat their prey whole “lying torpid for a time under the contest between the foreign substance and the assimilating power” – their digestion hanging in the balance and waiting to see whether or not they can keep it down.¹⁹ So, it seems, lies the humanitarian idea at present, wondering whether it can digest and develop from the absorption of military force. Certainly, as yet, this assimilation shows no signs of Newman’s seventh test of “chronic vigor” whereby the new development is distinguished by its tenacity and easily takes root and thrives. Assimilation of this idea to date has been selective by virtue of political bias, or even racism, and faltering rather than tenacious in its application. This development more than any other, may make a fish out of the humanitarian bird.

OBSERVING THE EVOLUTION OF HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

So much for how the humanitarian idea might develop as a result of the battle of ideas. What about how the humanitarian idea might be changed in the battle for organizational survival?

As has been seen, organizations usually represent the embodiment of an idea or of several ideas. But they are also more than this. Organizations, as institutions, develop a life of their own despite their essential idea. In such a process, organizational survival per se rather than the preservation of an institution’s original idea can, in reality, be its driver. Human organizations, like human beings, can therefore function teleologically and ateleologically at once – pulling in different directions. In other words, humanitarian organizations can operate either morally in accordance with their essential ethic as their driving force or amorally with their own organizational survival driving their organizational behavior and adaptation. Most senior managers of humanitarian organizations usually spend the bulk of their time trying to finesse these two demands.

Because of this, humanitarian organizations can be considered to be as much like organisms as they are the embodiment of a moral idea and may be analyzed in the essentially survivalist, non-teleological and amoral terms of Darwin’s evolutionary theory. Anyone who has been at a meeting of program staff, fundraising staff and media staff at a crucial point in an emergency will probably recognize this paradox and the tension between the preservation of a moral idea and the survival of an organization. If we can, therefore, accept this analogy between organism and organization, then Darwin’s theory of natural selection may well have some useful things to say (albeit still only by analogy) to humanitarian organizations as they respond to their new environment. In particular, it may illustrate how humanitarian organizations can exhibit a tendency to develop and vary at odds with their essential idea simply to survive as organizations. This makes clear that we should not simply expect intellectual and ethical judgements

about the coherence of the humanitarian idea to be the only force contesting and shaping contemporary humanitarianism. Beyond the idea of humanitarianism lies the marketplace of aid. And every idea has its price.

In Chapter IV of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin notes a number of circumstances favorable to the process of natural selection in any species, including: largeness of number and area; inter-crossing and isolation. Certainly, the proliferation of humanitarian agencies and their consequent large numbers in recent years would seem to create conditions which might well enhance natural selection and improvement of the humanitarian species because, to borrow Darwin's words about species, the large number of individual agencies "[gives] a better chance for the appearance in any given period of profitable variations."²⁰ In other words, with large numbers of agencies, one agency is more likely to strike upon a healthy development of humanitarianism in relation to peace, neo-liberal development, human rights or the use of force which could then be rigorously selected by other agencies. Such a theory could confound those rallying against humanitarian proliferation and arguing for fewer "super agencies." It may also dent the value of the humanitarian community's rush towards common standards and uniformity which could be said to eradicate the variation essential to natural selection. Although, of course, it is possible to argue the opposite, that standardization is in fact the organizational equivalent of natural selection and is the process by which the wider community seizes upon a useful variation and development and rigorously takes it up to ensure future quality.

The process of intercrossing is also noted by Darwin as important in natural selection. This is the process of wider cross-fertilization within the species so that creatures from different areas but within the same species mix the gene pool more widely to allow for the likelihood of more variations or a wider distribution of existing ones. The humanitarian community is often characterized as "incestuous" in the way that certain individuals cross between one agency and another. In fact, such behavior is probably quite the opposite and is better and more accurately looked upon as healthy "inter-crossing"—professional promiscuity of the best sort! By the metaphorical, (but also frequently literal!), cross-fertilization among staff in humanitarian, development, peace, human rights and military agencies, humanitarian variations may travel and develop giving more chance for the organizational equivalent of natural selection in developing the humanitarian idea and its improved practice.

Another of Darwin's special conditions is that of isolation. If a species is isolated (for example, on a Pacific island) then it stands a better chance of having the time and space to adapt and evolve itself to its surroundings without threat from other better placed species. However, if it is not isolated it may well suffer severe competition from others who overrun it before it has time to adapt. Humanitarian organizations did exist in a relatively isolated political niche during

the Cold War and evolved accordingly, and probably imperfectly, with an overly developed aid giving tendency which retarded the development of their protective and mid-war capacity. Recently, however, their environment has changed and is no longer isolated. It is as if some tectonic upheaval has raised a continent on which their island is now but a small, high part. New species of organization and their ideas now compete over this newly formed land mass. Peace organizations, human rights groups and armed forces (friendly and unfriendly) now share the same area. It remains to be seen whether these competing species and their ideas are better adapted to the new surroundings than humanitarians and whether humanitarians can adapt to maintain or expand their niche, selecting some characteristics and variations to accommodate or challenge the newcomers.

In such a struggle, maintaining and capitalizing on differences seem essential. Darwin points out that the most likely cause of extinction is similarity between species. It is in being similar and "most closely-allied" and by having "the same structure, constitution and habits" that species generally "enter into the fiercest competition with each other" so that one eventually exterminates the other.²¹ Here, perhaps, evolutionary theory offers a sobering lesson for humanitarians. If commercial companies like Brown & Root or military companies such as The Royal Engineers are designing, constructing and managing refugee camps or food distribution programs, humanitarian organizations may be facing just such competition from an increasingly powerful new species in its environment. While, in theory at least, an international NGO might not mind (indeed even espouse) the idea of being rendered extinct by a local NGO with shared values, it should be concerned about being driven off by commercial or military competitors if it is not obvious that they share the same humanitarian values and appropriate skills. In such a context, humanitarian agencies must show themselves to be different and make such difference count.

In addition to these particular circumstances which favor natural selection—largeness of number, inter-crossing, isolation and similarity—Darwin also identified a number of "laws of variation" which were related to other "conditions of life" such as climate, habit, use and disuse.²² Once again, by analogy, it might be interesting to use these ideas as a means of looking at pressures on contemporary humanitarian organizations. In particular, it might be useful to see how a climate of donor policy which is prioritizing the resolution of violent conflict through an aid policy which pushes war-torn societies towards a transition to neo-liberalism can act to create a variation in humanitarianism. Mark Duffield has usefully characterized this predominant western aid policy with its emphasis on social and state repair via notions of civil society, developmental relief and the transformation of inter-group relationships.²³ Such a determined policy climate has certainly combined with the recent inter-mingling of conflict resolution agencies and humanitarian agencies to posit a real challenge to the organizational

survival of humanitarian organizations. They are now frequently put under a certain amount of climatic pressure to engage either in “peace-building” or, at the least, to ensure that their humanitarian interventions “do no harm” and do not escalate violence.

This new policy climate rains money to encourage such adaptation. As Tanya Spencer has pointed out, there is an idea that “in this climate, humanitarian agencies can and should add peace-building to their ‘to do’ checklist.”²⁴ As has been seen above, the move towards peace work is not wholly driven by the political climate of western aid policy. It also stems from the humanitarian idea’s natural curiosity in, and possible affinity with, peace. Nevertheless, as Tanya Spencer’s study implies, Darwinian imperatives of organizational survival may at present be driving humanitarianism’s peace-building variation more than a coherent, justification of the compatibility of the two ideas of humanitarianism and peace. That this is the case is suggested by Spencer’s observation that out of 15 programs she reviewed, only one was working to an obvious and clearly stated definition of peace!²⁵ The evolution of peace characteristics within humanitarian organizations may then be as much a result of natural selection in favor of the self-advantage and survival of humanitarian agencies as organizations as it is an integral development of genuine advantage to the humanitarian idea.

Factors of use and disuse also determine the evolution of species in Darwin’s theory as “use strengthens and enlarges certain parts, and disuse diminishes them.”²⁶ For humanitarian organizations as for animals, this means that the shape of agencies and their humanitarian practice can develop and change according to what they do most and what they do least. The resulting organizational shape then influences the predominant understanding (or misunderstanding) of the humanitarian idea. If, as was the case during the Cold War, most humanitarian organizations delivered masses of food aid and emergency health care, their organizational “bodies” and “brains” developed strongly in this area. Looking at humanitarian organizations during this period, it was common to deduce that the humanitarian idea was about physical survival, logistics, nutrition and healthcare; it was about giving people things they needed. If form follows function, then so, too, does ideology. The relative disuse of humanitarianism’s protective and legal organs during this period meant that humanitarianism became a rather different creature, determined more by its environment than its idea.

The last few years have seen humanitarian organizations working hard to recover use of some vestigial organs (a greater sense of humanitarian values), struggling to develop new ones (a knowledge of international humanitarian law, human right and refugee law) and also deploying ones previously reserved for their development work (rights-based advocacy) in order to serve their protective function and so assert themselves in more appropriate physical proportions in their new environment and in relation to the developing humanitarian idea. But the risk now of

over-using a form of practice geared to fulfilling the neo-liberal development agenda around conflict resolution, civil-society building and democratization may mean that the “humanitarian” organization that emerges into the 21st century may look more like a repairer of states than a restrainer and protector in war. If that is the case, will it still have sufficient limbs, knowledge and credibility to apply the original humanitarian idea. Or will some other creature have crept into that niche?

CONCLUSION

The two theories used in this paper about the processes by which a living idea and a living organism might survive and thrive may well help to shed some light on the current debates about humanitarianism. Newman’s theory, and its seven tests in particular, might be of some use to humanitarianism as it seeks to make sense of its own variations in recent years. And if some of Newman’s seven tests might be useful for discerning the development of the humanitarian idea, then Darwin’s principle of natural selection and his laws of variation might be useful in assessing the less ideological factors which drive the adaptation, survival or extinction of humanitarian organizations. However, it is important to note that these theories of evolution and the development of ideas are not the only models for how things change. Indeed, they are both nineteenth century ideas. But as analogies, Newman’s test of fidelity to an idea and Darwin’s explanations of survivalist adaptation to changing environments may offer some insights into contemporary humanitarian thinking.

These are not the only theories of change and can be challenged by what might be called the meteorite syndrome or the revelation principle. As Stephen J. Gould and others are keen to point out when confronting “Darwinian fundamentalists,” the large meteorite which rendered the dinosaurs extinct is as much responsible for the evolution of life today as the “selfish gene.” And as theologians have always been keen to point out, one should always remain braced for a new revelation. Maybe we have already been hit by the political meteorite to transform the humanitarian idea but still cannot see the result through the clouds of dust it has thrown up. Or via a new religious or political philosophy, we may suddenly receive 10 new commandments. Instances of such radical discontinuity may have already happened or lie just around the corner for contemporary humanitarianism, ready to render the tradition of humanitarian ideas and humanitarian organizations extinct. Newman also had a notion that some ideas are essentially “flawed” and will deteriorate in time rather than develop. This may also be true of the modern humanitarian idea, but its tenacity remains impressive and seems to demand that we continue to try to get the idea right rather than let it die.

To this end, it may be useful to recall an essay by Isaiah Berlin in which he charts “the odd career of one of Kant’s noblest and most humane doctrines in the

turbulent nineteenth century – a career that would have horrified Kant himself.” Tracing Kant’s idea of freedom into subsequent centuries, Berlin shows the unexpected and unintended influence which this idea had on the development of extreme forms of European nationalism. Concluding the essay, he observes “thus do ideas turn into their opposites.”²⁷ Hopefully, by keeping a close eye on the career of the humanitarian idea, by testing its developments against criteria such as Newman’s and being alive to the pressures of natural selection and variation as they affect humanitarian organizations, humanitarians can ensure a more consistent trajectory for this small but very important idea.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to John Hammock, Angela Raven-Roberts and Sue Lautze at the Feinstein International Famine Center at Tufts University for giving me the freedom to prepare a paper on a subject of my choice and for their responses to it. I would also like to thank the members of Oxfam International Emergency Group—most notably Stewart Wallace and Erik Todz—for their important reactions and contributions to a brief presentation of this paper in Oxford in July 1999. ■

NOTES

¹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, (University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1989).

² *Ibid.*, Preface to the 1878 edition.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species of 1859*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996), 106. For discussion of Darwin’s ambivalence about the notion of improvement and a wider design and teleology, see Gillian Beer’s introduction to the *World Classics* edition.

⁵ For important contributions to this debate, see Joanna Macrae, “The Death of Humanitarianism? An Anatomy of the Attack;” Nick Leader, “Proliferating Principles: Or How to Sup with the Devil Without Getting Eaten,” both in *Disasters*, Vol. 22, No 4, 1998; Stephen Jackson and Peter Walker, “Depolarizing the ‘Broadened’ and ‘Back-to-Basics’ Relief Models,” *Disasters*, Vol. 23, No 2, 1999; and Thomas G. Weiss, “Principles, Politics and Humanitarian Action,” *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol.13, 1999.

⁶ See for example Hugo Slim, “Sharing a Universal Ethic: The Principle of Humanity in War,” *International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 2, No 4, 1998; as well as Weiss, *op cit*.

⁷ Geoffrey Best, *War and Law Since 1945*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994), Chapter 2; Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant’s Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross*, (Harper Collins, London) chapter 2.

⁸ Paul Grossrieder, “Un Avenir pour le Droit International Humanitaire et ses Principes?” *Review Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 81, No 833, Mars 1999,12.

⁹ Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts*, (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1980), 1.

¹⁰ Grossrieder and Best.

¹¹ For an account of Jebb’s vision of development see “The White Flame: The History of Save the Children Fund,” see Morehead, p.91 for Clara Barton’s “developmental” ideas after war and natural disaster in Europe and USA; and see Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Time*, (1992), for an account of Oxfam’s move into development in the 1960s, chapter 4.

¹² Mark Duffield, “Post-Modern Conflict, Aid Policy and Humanitarian Conditionality,” *A Discussion Paper for DFID*, London, July 1997.

¹³ David Rieff, “The Death of A Good Idea,” *Newsweek*, May 10th 1999.

¹⁴ Hugo Slim and Isobel McConnan, "A Swiss Prince, A Glass Slipper and the Feet of 15 British Aid Agencies: A Study of DEC Agency Positions on Humanitarian Principles," DEC, London, 1998.

¹⁵ Newman, 186.

¹⁶ See, for example, reports on the series of Workshops on Protection convened by ICRC, most recently, ed. Carlo von Flue and Jaques de Maio, *Workshop on Protection for Human Rights and Humanitarian Organizations*, 1999; and Larry Minear, "Partnerships in Protection: An Overview of Emerging Issues and Work in Progress," Independent Background Paper for UNHCR, March 1999.

¹⁷ Tom Hadden and Colin Harvey, *The Law of Internal Crisis and Conflict*, International Review of the Red Cross, Vol. 81, No 833, March 1999.

¹⁸ Jean Pictet, "The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Peace," International Review of the Red Cross, Geneva, March-April, 1984.

¹⁹ Newman, 186.

²⁰ Darwin, 84.

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ibid., 108.

²³ See Duffield.

²⁴ Tanya Spencer, "A Synthesis of Evaluations of Peacebuilding Activities Undertaken by Humanitarian Agencies and Conflict Resolution Organizations," ALNAP, ODI, London, 1998, p.3.

²⁵ Ibid., 36.

²⁶ Darwin, 110.

²⁷ Isaiah Berlin, Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism, in *Studies in Ideas and their History*, ed. Henry Hardy, (Pimlico, London, 1997), 234, 248.