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Understanding disasters: managing and accommodating different worldviews in humanitarian response

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Abstract

Over the past decade, humanitarian events affected on average 120 million people annually. Whilst many of these events are human-induced, a large number of the 400 or so complex humanitarian emergencies that require international response each year are natural. Such events result in loss of life, injure and maim survivors, destroy infrastructure and give rise to psycho-social trauma. Aid agencies working alongside affected communities must address all these consequences as part of their responses. What is also required though is an appreciation that worldviews will inform how affected communities both understand the cause of the event, their role in the event and how they will subsequently participate in rebuilding or reconstruction programs. Disasters can be affected by religious beliefs. With more than 85% of the global population self-professing religious belief, these worldviews are often shaped in whole or in part by sacred texts, religious teachings and sectarian practices. In this regard, it is not uncommon for those affected by disasters (particularly natural disasters) to genuinely describe these events as 'acts of God'. Effective responses require the local context to be central in assessing needs and determining capacities. This must include an understanding of and authentic engagement with religious beliefs and how this may affect how the humanitarian event interacts with these beliefs. There is though little evidence as to how professional humanitarian workers accommodate the religious beliefs of local populations in their planning, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian responses. This paper draws on the experiences of humanitarian workers based in the USA and Australia from both faith-based and secular international non-governmental organizations to consider both how these workers themselves accommodate the religious views of affected communities in their responses and also their experience as to how such views affect the effectiveness of responses. This paper will consider why aid agencies must incorporate (and appreciate) different worldviews around disasters in order to more effectively respond to the needs of communities affected by humanitarian events. It will also identify difficulties and opportunities experienced by individual humanitarian practitioners as well as agencies when working in such environments.

Keywords: Disasters, Religion, Worldviews, INGOs

Introduction

Every year, humanitarian workers respond to more than 400 complex humanitarian emergencies that have killed over 100,000 people and directly affected a further 120 million people (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) 2018). These disasters include natural events such as earthquakes, droughts, floods, cyclones and so forth, as well as human-induced

disasters such as civil strife leading to displacement of communities. When affected by such a disaster, people will seek to understand their circumstances and make meaning of what they are experiencing. Bronnimann (2016) demonstrates affected communities may simultaneously find explanation in worldviews that draw on both scientific knowledge as well as religious belief. A worldview refers to both secular and sectarian understandings of one's own existence and the place one has in larger society. However, with 85% of their global population self-professing religious belief, it should not

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be unexpected that worldviews are often shaped in whole or in part by sacred texts, religious teachings and sectarian practices.

Responding to those in need is a religious practice clearly identified in sacred texts and religious teachings across the major faith traditions (see Fountain 2015; Oliphant 2016; Ferris 2005; Krafess 2005; Mansour and Ezzat 2009). Moreover, Barnett (2011) argues that modern humanitarianism was first expressed through the work of European evangelical missionaries from the late eighteenth century, who sort to not only convert but also improve temporal living conditions. Indeed, until just over a half a century ago, it was estimated that some 90% of all humanitarian assistance provided by faith-based aid agencies (Das 2016).

Research though on the nexus between religion and humanitarian response remains rather limited. Humanitarian events gravely impact people's lives. Seeking to understand 'the meaning... gives rise to appraisals which attribute meaning to what is inexplicable' (Grandjean et al. 2008, p. 197). Such meaning is often found in religious beliefs (Fanany and Fanany 2013; Fountain and Kindon 2004; Cox et al. 2018). Religious meaning though is not uniform across religions or within communities sharing the same religious beliefs or between religious leaders and their congregations (Banfield 2018; McDougall et al. 2008; Featherstone 2015; Joakim and White 2015). As such, humanitarian events can be understood as either as an act of blessing by God or an act of vengeance (see Feener 2013).

Whilst limited, this research does indicate that attribution or appraisal of humanitarian events by affected communities often considers understanding other than by a Western scientific perspective. Meaning for affected communities is found in their religious beliefs. Failing to consider how affected communities find meaning in humanitarian events can therefore result in responses by humanitarian actors that is 'blinkered, and indeed, insufficient' (Nuridin 2015, p. 75). Indeed, this is particularly the case in designing responses as the understanding of the event may impact how a community recovers (James and Paton 2015; Fletcher et al. 2013). More research is required to better understand religious appraisal of humanitarian events.

Understanding that religious beliefs impact affected communities understanding and responses to humanitarian events does give rise to how professional humanitarian aid workers navigate this meaning when designing and implementing responses. Within an environment of increasing professional standards and best practice, how do humanitarian professionals manage religious meaning and appraisals of natural or human-induced disasters?

It is humanitarian aid workers at the coal-face that most directly experience the reality of the 85% of the

world's population professing religious belief (Hackett et al. 2017). It is these professionals that work alongside communities as they seek to improve their material well-being, or to recover from the effects of complex humanitarian emergencies. Whilst they are working within an institution with that institution's standards, policies and practices, they often can, as individual professionals, retain a relatively high level of agency in how they discharge their responsibilities in terms of whom they meet and which considerations they take into account when assessing, planning, implementing and evaluating development and humanitarian programs. Understanding therefore their experiences of the impact of religious belief (positive and negative¹) on the communities with which they work, and the discharge of their professional duties, may provide useful insights.² There is little evidence, though, as to how professional humanitarian workers accommodate the religious beliefs of local populations.

This paper draws on the experiences of humanitarian workers based in the USA and Australia from both faith-based and secular international non-governmental organizations to consider both how these workers themselves accommodate the religious views of affected communities in their responses but also their experience as to how such views affect the effectiveness of responses. This paper has five sections. This first section has introduced the paper ahead of the next section which will consider what authentic engagement with religion is within a humanitarian setting. The "Approach and analysis" section then reflects on the personal experiences of a number of interviews with humanitarian professionals on how they accommodate the religious beliefs and practices of communities when responding to complex humanitarian emergencies. The "Conclusion" section then reports how they as professionals have been affected by these religious beliefs and practices in various settings. The final section draws conclusions as to how this evidence can inform greater engagement with religious beliefs by humanitarian professionals responding to future events.

Religion and authentic engagement

The Great Lisbon Earthquake in 1755 marks perhaps the first time in which natural disasters were first

¹Whilst this article emphasizes an appreciative perspective of religion in development and humanitarian work, it is important to note the negative impacts that religious belief and practice can have. This is clearly identified, for example, in Bista's (1991) analysis of the impacts of fatalism in Nepal.

²How aid agencies (both faith-based and secular) formally incorporate religious worldviews of affected communities into humanitarian responses is an area of research that is required (but sits outside the scope of this specific paper).

conceived and understood (or at least debated) as being events where human agency plays a role rather than people merely being passive objects of God's will. The earthquake, followed by a subsequent tsunami and fire, razed Lisbon to the ground, killing an estimated 10,000 to 100,000 people in its immediate aftereffects, with many more tens of thousands subsequently dying from disease and food shortages. Both the cause and consequences of this earthquake were questioned from a secular perspective. Voltaire asked how such an event could be understood as part of God's plan for his flock, whilst Rousseau linked the consequences of the natural event to human activities (primarily overcrowding through poor city planning and construction) (Dynes 2000). Reconceptualising natural disasters from God's will to human-impacted humanitarian events reshaped (in part) how communities prepare for and respond to these events. Rather than being passive recipients of these disasters, this reconceptualization gave communities greater agency in their actions. However, this moment of humanitarian secularization (Nichols 2014) did not manifest itself across the globe (Huet 2012). It remains extremely commonplace for people to understand the world and their place through a religious worldview. Religious beliefs and practices inform how people respond to and plan for events. Perceptions of God's sovereign will that is expressed through the notion of '*acts of God*', submission to the will of God (as in the Muslim expression '*insha'Allah*') or a divinely adjudicated notion of *karma* remain central to how some people of faith position themselves within a context controlled by higher forces. Such religious concepts of fate remain powerful drivers of behaviours. Referencing such external controls increases in times of stress and trauma (see Marks et al. 2009, Tausch et al. 2011, Silva Brown et al. 2010).

The international architecture for responding to significant humanitarian events (defined by people affected, geographic scope of the event and the ability of local responders to address needs) is sophisticated (OCHA 2019). Often, international non-governmental organizations are key stakeholders to large humanitarian responses. Adhering to industry standards and benchmarks (see Sphere 2018), these international aid agencies employ both local and international staff with high levels of training and education (Clarke et al. 2019). Such staff are engaged in planning for and responding to humanitarian events as part of their professional life. They understand the geophysical causes of volcano eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes, cyclones, wildfire and droughts and are able to identify human behaviour resulting in famines or political violence and conflict. As professionals, their responsibility is to work with affected communities to meet immediate needs brought about by the humanitarian event but to also assist communities implement longer-term strategies to mitigate future impact. Close collaboration and partnerships are thus required between

international aid agencies and affected communities for there to be optimal and persistent benefits (see Clarke et al. 2014). However, the possible dissonance between understanding the cause and impact of humanitarian events may limit this connection if the two parties have irreconcilable worldviews.

According to the Sphere Project, 'effective humanitarian response must be based on a comprehensive, contextualized diagnosis (assessment, monitoring and evaluation), in order to analyse people's needs, vulnerabilities and capacities in each context' (2011, p. 11). To be genuine, this must include full consideration of the religious beliefs and practices of affected communities. This can be challenging for professionals who either themselves have no religious beliefs or have been able to reconcile religious beliefs with Western scientific knowledge and thus do not assign natural disasters to purposeful acts of God.

Such an act of God though is a rational explanation for many. Fanany (2010) provides an example of such a worldview following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. A Muslim woman explained that the tsunami was God's response to Christmas carols being broadcast across the Muslim province of Aceh. She described how this television show was the first time that such carols had been publicly sung in this devout Indonesian province and that this signalled the end of Islamic tradition and culture in this region. On seeing this television program, she and her daughters prayed 'God, if this is what our beloved land and its people have become, please bring an end to this world'. Two days later, around 8 am local time, an earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale in the nearby Indian Ocean, lasted for more than ten minutes. The resulting massive tsunami, ranging from between 3 and 12 m in height, directly impacted Aceh and ten other countries. Without warning, this ocean surge quickly travelled inland, flooding local communities. The woman described the rising flood waters and noted the pleasure that God was answering her prayers. But as the flood waters continued to rise and she and her daughter were floating in water with their heads touching the top of ceiling, she feared she would die under these horrific circumstances. Her reaction was to pray again:

'God,' I whispered in the silence preceding death, 'please don't let us die this way. If this is what the end of the world is like, please abort it. We don't want to witness it.' I barely whispered, but my voice sounded clear and eerie in the small space.

By now our heads were touching the ceiling. All of a sudden, we realized the water had stopped rising! We did not know how long we were wedged against the ceiling before we felt the water start to recede. It felt

like a lifetime. At that moment, we felt that our first life was over, and we were beginning a new life. God had answered our prayers in the most spectacular manner. It was nothing short of a miracle. He had brought an end to the world in Aceh, to the world we saw when we were watching the Christmas program two nights before. Equally miraculous, He had spared our lives in the process! (Fanany 2010, pp. 239)

In the immediate aftermath of this tsunami in which 300,000 people were killed, the international community worked alongside locally affected communities to implement the largest relief effort ever undertaken. International aid agencies were overwhelmed by the need to place professional humanitarian workers throughout the affected countries, often relying on non-experienced staff or short-term contractors (see Murray and Clarke 2008). How would such staff, experienced or otherwise, relate to this woman in assessing her need and engaging her in the response when her understanding of this event was so closely mired in her religious belief? Would an explanation of shifting tectonic plates combined with topography and ocean surges aid enhance her engagement or further alienate her from these (most often) non-Achenese, non-Muslim humanitarian professionals? Moreover, how would these humanitarian workers reconcile these stated beliefs with their own worldviews and would this impact on their ability to form working and collaborative partnerships with communities sharing this perspective?

In such fluid, emotionally charged environments which are demanding an immediate response, a level of authentic engagement with personally held religious beliefs can aid building relationships. Within such a situation, authentic engagement means appreciating religion is 'a part' of the humanitarian consideration, not 'apart' from it. It further raises the distinct possibility of religion and religious groups being potent tools for change in social, economic, ideological and political spheres. Within the development and humanitarian sector, such a shift is significant and will be both emotional and intellectual. To be achieved, it will be necessary to increase levels of religious literacy so that humanitarian workers can engage in informed ways with the communities within whom they are working. It will also require those engaging with religious leaders and communities of faith to move beyond a veneer of religious inclusion so that partnerships and collaborations are based on genuine appreciation of strengths and capacity and potential. This includes recognizing the role religious leaders play in communities and understanding the import they can have (both positive and negative). Finally, on a more personal level, humanitarian professionals need to overcome any embarrassment or discomfort around religious expression and practice.

Such authentic engagement however does not mean that humanitarian professionals need to adopt similar religious beliefs or religious worldviews. Nor does it mean that they cannot challenge these beliefs when necessary. It does require humanitarian professionals to accept and appreciate that these views are genuine and that they do matter to how people understand their world and their own place in it. As a result, reconstruction efforts following humanitarian events will be better informed and thus more likely to conform to the Sphere Project's core standards around best practice. This is not easy though and will challenge those working in this sector. Understanding the difficulties of accommodating such views within the tight timeframes and technical responses is important to determine how achieving authentic engagement can be enhanced.

Approach and analysis

This pilot research considers if these different approaches complement or compromise affected communities and humanitarian professionals responding in partnership. Twenty-two humanitarian professionals were interviewed in Australia and the USA. These professionals worked in both faith-based organizations (referred to as FBOs) as well as secular agencies (referred to as NGOs). As professionals undertaking rapid deployment to humanitarian events globally, they are often attached to US and Australian government-funded humanitarian responses. In these roles, they work with directly affected communities as well as government donors. They were selected using a snowballing and referral selection (see Patton 2002). Respondents were interviewed either face to face or via telephone based on their availability and preference. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min and were all undertaken by the first-named author. The survey instrument was a short series of open-ended questions designed (pre-tested and tested) to allow respondents to reflect on their own experiences and to allow flexibility in terms of the numbers of examples given or discussed.

Analysis of the data collected through these 22 interviews provided three primary findings: (1) communities understand humanitarian events through diverse lenses of religious beliefs; (2) FBOs and NGOs institutionally manage to accommodate religious worldviews in their professional responses, but understand that religion (beliefs, practice and leaders) has the potential to either help or hinder responses; and (3) the relationships between affected communities and humanitarian aid workers responding to humanitarian events are not sufficiently well understood at this time.

Religious worldviews are diverse

When humanitarian events occur, multiple ways of understanding why result, especially when aid agencies and communities are working together (Merli 2012). When secular NGOs encounter the religious worldviews of

communities, there is a risk that religious worldviews are viewed as ‘the other’, since the secular worldview is viewed automatically as the default norm. Religious worldviews are therefore often understood as a departure from this assumed norm. Wilson (2017) suggests that religious worldviews in this instance are thus automatically ‘subordinated to secular ontologies’ (p. 1). Such an understanding, that situates religious worldviews as departures from a default secular worldview, potentially weakens the authenticity given to religious engagement by aid agencies working with communities affected by humanitarian events (Clarke 2011) and risks religion and religious worldviews being not properly considered and appreciated (see Mavelli and Petito 2014).

This is important to note because across a variety of humanitarian events (natural as well as human-induced), that our interview subjects described, that affected communities explains their experience of the humanitarian events through the lens of religious belief (see Ager et al. 2015; Hilhorst et al. 2015). This was observed in a range of humanitarian events including cyclones, volcanoes, civil war, displacement of populations, tsunamis, earthquakes, drought and epidemics. Such religious understanding of these events was observed in people self-professing a range of religious beliefs, including Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and traditional religions, such as *Kastom* (in the Pacific). Indeed, all respondents indicated that they had an experience of an affected community member describing the event and their subsequent situation through a religious lens.

Humanitarian professionals in both FBOs and NGOs reported these experiences empathically:

FBO: ‘Humanitarian Responses don’t occur in isolation ... and [the] solidarity of faith communities help them overcome disaster’ (respondent D)

FBO: ‘Grieving people turn to faith to help explain and rationalise what they are going through’ (respondent A)

NGO: ‘[Their faith] helps them find strength and resilience’ (respondent H)

NGO: ‘It is important to acknowledge this is a cry for help’ (respondent G)

It is important to note though that there was variation in how humanitarian events were understood by individual community members. Respondents were able to identify that affected community members understood humanitarian events and the impact of these events on themselves personally and their wider community in both positive and negative ways in terms of religious worldviews. Some respondents, for example, had experiences where outcomes of events were mitigated by perceptions of God’s grace, whereas others shared experiences where affected community members saw these events as acts of God’s wrath. These responses may be understood as poles of a continuum of theistic beliefs, as illustrated in Fig. 1. It

is interesting to note that where the grace of God is understood as active in a disaster, it is often framed in highly selective terms, namely that those who are good or faithful will be granted protection. This finding accords well with the literature on ‘Belief in a Just World’ (BJW) where people believe that the world functions in a just manner: good people are rewarded and bad people are punished (Furnham 2003; Kaplan 2012; Lerner 1980; Lerner and Simmons 1966; Montada and Lerner 1998; Pichon and Saroglou 2009; Stroebe et al. 2015). An important implication of these findings is that people with a strong religious belief, and a strong BJW, may undergo secondary trauma from a disaster. After the initial trauma of the loss and devastation, their entire worldview may crumble if they are forced to face the reality of large-scale underserved suffering. Specialized psycho-spiritual support may therefore be needed in disaster-affected communities characterized by a strong BJW before the disaster.

Describing God as actively protecting or inflicting harm upon believers was observed in those holding various theistic religious beliefs. Respondents were also able to identify other possible drivers including ‘religiosity’ and geographic location of more negative religious worldviews.

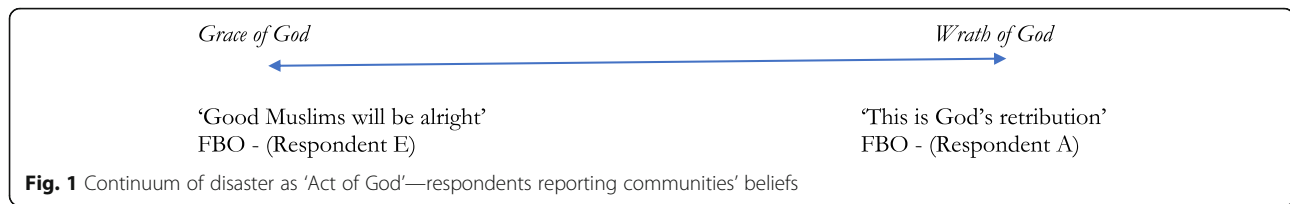
FBO: ‘If religious views are hardline, the more they connect disasters to God’s punishment’ (respondent A)

FBO: ‘The more rural, the more ‘act of God’ (respondent C)

Holding that humanitarian events are acts of God (either displaying wrath or mercy) does not however mean religious worldviews are always fatalistic (Bankoff 2003; Schipper 2015)—though sometimes people do hold deeply fatalistic worldviews (see [Aids agencies accommodating religious worldviews](#) section). There usually, however, remains significant scope for agency for those that hold all but the most fatalistic views. It is this agency that aid agencies can utilize in their responses with affected communities.

Aid agencies accommodating religious worldviews

There is value in accommodating world views of those affected by humanitarian events (see Bankoff et al. 2015; Browne and Olson 2019). Programs that do not properly consider local contexts will be sub-optimal (Patterson et al. 2010). Whether our interviewees were from faith-based or secular humanitarian aid agencies, all respondents affirmed the ability of their agencies to accommodate the religious worldviews of affected communities. Thus, despite very distinct appreciations of the causes of these events, these humanitarian workers could identify how their own agency (faith-based or secular) was able to work alongside alternative worldviews and explanations:



FBO: 'As a Christian Organisation, we understand that faith plays an important role in how people deal with grief and loss' (respondent A)

Such solace may be in religious practice or it may be in the community bonds that they are able to draw upon. Of course, there is also an understanding that religious beliefs, practices and leadership can also diminish humanitarian responses. Respondents were able to identify that religious worldviews did hinder humanitarian responses at various times. They observed a range of ways in which religious teachings, practices and leaders compounded the impacts of humanitarian events and compromised the ability of aid agencies to fulfil their response goals. These conclusions were reached by humanitarian workers in both faith-based and secular aid agencies.

Disability:

FBO: '[People with disabilities were considered] not whole. They had no respect in the community' (respondent E)

Agency:

NGO: 'Religious beliefs can lead to a lack of agency as disasters are the will of God' (respondent H)

FBO: 'People felt abandoned by God and helpless' (respondent E)

NGO: 'The community rejected solutions as they saw this as God's will and so it was punishment they had to suffer' (respondent J)

FBO: 'If God wants this to happen, why should we try to prevent God's will... God will protect us. We won't show our faith by running away' (respondent L)

Human rights:

NGO: 'Difficult though when religious beliefs undermine or clash with human rights' (respondent H)

Small FBOs and missionaries:

NGO: '[The community is] dismissive of religious organisations and smaller FBOs, as they are disorganized and add burden to relief efforts...[They believe] missionaries often have no idea what they are doing. They just get in the way' (respondent R)

Responses from interviewees indicated that there was a difference between how religious worldviews were understood and appreciated between faith-based and secular agencies, but it was clear that both FBOs and secular NGOs were motivated to engage with religious worldviews.

FBO: 'The entry point to communities is religion. You can't get anywhere if you can't talk at a religious level' (respondent D)

NGO: 'We need to communicate with people in a language they understand' (respondent P)

FBO: 'We can train religious leaders how to respond. They can be part of resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction' (respondent A)

NGO: 'Engaging with Imams was very critical in helping people comply with new burial requirements' (respondent S)

Respondents from both faith-based and secular agencies had pragmatic reasons for seeking to accommodate these views as it ensured access, enhanced programming and aided the ability to disseminate information. Accommodation by aid agencies often requires modification of programming and approaches to the delivery of humanitarian resources.

FBO: 'It wasn't truck and chuck. It was truck, pray and chuck' (respondent I)

NGO: 'Cash Transfers are considerate of Islamic Law' (respondent Q)

Such modifications were considered necessary to ensure optimal engagement by affected communities and were not seen as necessarily requiring aid agencies to compromise their own worldviews.

Transcendent or transactional

As a pilot study, the findings of this survey add to a small empirical evidence base (see Curtis 2018; King 2019). It is evident that more work is required to better understand how religious worldviews held by those affected by humanitarian events impact the programming of both secular and faith-based aid agencies. Whilst there has been a growing literature concerned with the intersection between religion and longer-term development (e.g. Deneulin and Bano 2009; Clarke and Tittensor 2014; Fountain and Feener 2015), such empirical and conceptual work in the humanitarian field remains somewhat limited. Humanitarian professionals were able to identify this gap in comparing their professional work with that of colleagues working within the development field.

FBO: 'Religion is part of development, but not so much humanitarian response' (respondent A)

NGO: 'You might consider religion in long-term crisis or development project, but not acute emergencies...

religion is left out of strategy. It could be more of a focus and part of planning and design' (respondent G)

It was also unclear whether there was some sort of natural advantage held by either faith-based agencies or secular agencies when it came to working with communities professing religious belief in preparation for or in response to humanitarian events (Tomalin 2012). Clearly respondents from both types of agencies saw themselves as having some advantages:

FBO: 'They can relate to us...[we] can engage better with communities than secular agencies' (respondent A)

NGO: '[Communities] are negative when FBOs favour religious communities over others' (respondent K)

Indeed, it may be that both types of agencies have different opportunities and constraints that can both advantage and hinder their responses. More work is required to better understand how this occurs.

At a minimum, however, we would argue that greater religious literacy is essential for humanitarian workers, whether from FBOs or secular NGOs. Religious literacy increases the likelihood that staff will be alert to religious sensitivities and that they will understand better the possible deeper psycho-spiritual impacts of a humanitarian event and may be more sensitive to ideas as to how best to help the community recover. For example, the rapid repair of a temple, church or mosque may be a low priority from a secular perspective but may assist enormously with the recovery of a community's sense of psycho-spiritual well-being and cohesion.

Religious literacy is also essential to help anticipate possible secondary negative repercussions from a disaster that may be closely linked to the community's religious worldview. For example, aid from some FBOs may come with a strong message that the disaster was caused because the community was not strict enough in their religious adherence and so may lead to an increase in fundamentalist teaching in the region. Alternatively, a community may seek scapegoats as they try to make meaning of the disaster. Vulnerable individuals or families may be targeted, such as people with physical disabilities who may be viewed as 'cursed'; those suspected of either engaging in witchcraft, such as marginalized women; or being useful for its rituals, such as people with albinism (UNHRC 2018). Finally, as mentioned above, a humanitarian disaster may shatter the religious worldview of a community, particularly one with a strong Belief in a Just World. Such a community may need prolonged assistance to reconstitute their worldview and may be more vulnerable than usual to exploitation during such a difficult time.

In short, culturally aware and religiously informed staff are essential for humanitarian agencies, whatever the agency's own worldview.

It is also necessary to better understand the distinction between religious beliefs and worldviews of individual humanitarian workers and that of institutional identity. The workforce in this sector is highly mobile and those

interviewed often worked for many agencies across their professional careers. Since they often moved between FBOs and NGOs, they at times held the same or different religious beliefs or worldviews to that of the agency for whom they were working. Better understanding the private versus corporate impact of religion would be beneficial. It would also be valuable to understand how aid agencies (both FBOs and NGOs) themselves accommodate different worldviews in their programming in terms of their standards, policies and practices.

Conclusion

Those affected by humanitarian events seek to understand or find meaning in such events. Whilst research remains limited, evidence indicates that such appraisal often draws on religious beliefs and worldviews. These explanations are neither uniform across or within religious faiths and can be held alongside an appreciation of western scientific explanations of natural or human-induced disasters. These appraisals find expression in phrases used by affected communities such as 'act of God', 'God's will', 'God willing' and 'by God's grace'. Within this paucity of research, it is not surprising that there is also very limited evidence on how humanitarian professionals accommodate such religious meaning held by affected communities in their design and response to humanitarian responses. This paper reports the results of a small pilot study only, and the topic clearly warrants further research. Three conclusions emerge however, even from the small sample.

- Firstly, humanitarian workers report that religious beliefs in higher forces such as God or karma are widely cited by those affected by humanitarian events. Religious worldviews are therefore not private views. Rather, they are shared within communities and have common currencies. It is the language used by affected communities to describe what they have experienced and how they understand it.
- Secondly, humanitarian workers report that religion plays a fundamental role in most vulnerable communities, particularly in how they make meaning of their life, perform death rituals, grieve loved ones and process trauma. Religion and religious leaders are seen as playing a fundamental role in the lives of community members before, during and after humanitarian events.
- Thirdly, humanitarian workers report that better understanding the ways in which the religious

worldviews of affected communities and humanitarian workers affect their interpretations of and responses to humanitarian emergencies would enhance their professional response to these events. Whilst there has been a growing literature on the role of religion in development over the last 30 years, discussion and debate in the humanitarian sector has been much more limited and is probably at least 5 to 10 years behind the development sector.

Data from this pilot study indicates that humanitarian workers not only are able to accommodate a range of religious-based explanations but also see this as being appropriate and important aspect of their professional work. Indeed, professionalization of the humanitarian sector may result in greater consideration of alternative worldviews on the causes and responses to humanitarian events. Professional humanitarian workers (Clarke et al. forthcoming) know that their ability to respond effectively to natural and human-induced disasters is enhanced by working closely with local leaders and communities. This work requires not just an appreciation of how they understand these emergencies but a respectful and authentic engagement with these ideas and explanations. Such engagement results in these 'meanings' being embedded in responses. This pilot study makes clear that humanitarian workers see value in such an approach. More evidence though is required to better understand how those affected by and those responding to humanitarian events can manage secular and sectarian appraisals of these events.

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Consent for publication

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