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Can We Be Better (Christian) Humanitarians?

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Over a long weekend this past January, I traveled with my family to Chiang Mai, a city in the mountainous northern region of Thailand near the border of Burma. We planned the trip to coincide with a visit to the Eubank family who founded, and currently lead, Free Burma Rangers (FBR), a humanitarian organization that works in conflict zones in Burma, Iraq, Sudan and Syria. The primary work of FBR is to step into the gap behind the front lines of conflict where more established humanitarian agencies are not able to operate, but where civilians are often stranded with no ready escape. Small, highly trained and nimble teams of dedicated volunteers from a variety of backgrounds (many with former combat experience) deliver medical help, emergency supplies and other services; document and report on the conflicts; and share the message of the love of Christ.

Two days spent with this amazing family (the three children accompany their parents on these missions) and some of the other team members left me inspired, humbled and internally disrupted—in a good way. Prior to coming to Chiang Mai, I had finished reading Heather Curtis's excellent new book [*Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid*](#), which had left me pondering the dynamics of American Christian global engagement, both historically and today. Observing how this particular organization serves its vulnerable neighbors challenged me to think more deeply about how Christians might better connect their faith with their service to others in a complex global environment, while avoiding some of the controversies and pitfalls of Christian humanitarianism that Curtis raises in her book.

Curtis explores the rise of American Christian humanitarianism and philanthropy through the fascinating history of the *Christian Herald*, one of the most influential religious newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century. The editors of the *Christian Herald*, Thomas De Witt Talmage and

Louis Klopsch, used their paper and their influence to galvanize thousands of Christian evangelicals to give generously towards alleviating the suffering and poverty of those who had fallen victim to domestic and international crises and disasters, both natural and otherwise.

Concurrently, the American Red Cross (ARC) was also growing, and its leader Clara Barton was working to establish the ARC as the formal, government-sanctioned and supported means through which the United States delivered aid globally and domestically. Curtis's book traces the collaboration and conflict that characterized the relationship between these two entities and their ambitious leaders, each of whom sought to partner with U.S. government and diplomatic officials to accomplish their respective missions. For Talmage and Klopsch, the mission was explicitly, unabashedly Christian, which they framed as, Curtis writes, "promoting international peace through Christian philanthropy," where "Christian charity [is] the driving force of American foreign policy."

Talmage and Klopsch were zealous proponents of the idea of American exceptionalism as they delivered their impassioned and dramatic pleas to their subscribers to give generously towards the various humanitarian causes they took up. They argued, Curtis says, that "the United States was uniquely qualified" to respond to these crises "because of the nation's long-standing commitments to democracy, religious liberty, equality and progress":

'America is to be the world's civilizer and evangelizer,' Talmage wrote. 'Free from the national religions of Europe on one side, and from the superstitions of Asia on the other side, it will have facilities for the work that no other continent can possibly possess. As near as I can tell by the laying on of the hands of the Lord Almighty, this continent has been ordained for that work... Hear it! America is to take this world for God.'

To that end, Talmage and Klopsch cultivated close connections with officials at the highest levels of government, both within Washington as well as at embassies abroad. They often wired the donated funds they had raised directly to the U.S. ambassador or consul general in the country where a crisis was happening, who then disbursed the funds where needed. The U.S. diplomatic missions were the primary means for delivering humanitarian aid in the variety of its forms, whether money, shipments of food or supplies of clothing and blankets. Talmage and Klopsch also developed close relationships with local missionaries and indigenous leaders, who they believed had better access and agility for responding to crises as they arose.

The outsized influence of the *Christian Herald* eventually waned in the early twentieth century as the American Red Cross emerged as the organization "that had embraced and benefited from the federalization of foreign aid, the professionalization of relief work and the corporatization of philanthropy," Curtis describes. As well, the establishment of philanthropic foundations by industry titans such as Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford opened up other options for people to give towards charitable endeavors without a particular faith-shaped identity. Along with this, larger questions and controversies emerged within the Christian community as the rifts among evangelicals increased in the early twentieth century among modernists, fundamentalists and Pentecostals. These rifts made

maintaining harmony through humanitarianism more challenging “as proponents of divergent theological positions advanced opposing agendas.... evangelicals struggled to hold together the long-standing synthesis between caring for bodies and converting souls.”

Evangelicals today certainly have deep differences over how evangelism and humanitarian relief intersect. Much of this stems from diverging perceptions of hierarchies of need and how the Great Commission fits with, or supersedes, the clear biblical commands to attend to the vulnerable and oppressed in material ways. Regardless, Curtis argues that “the kind of popular evangelical charity Klopsch and his colleagues promoted through the *Christian Herald* remains a powerful force in contemporary American society.”

Curtis spends the bulk of her book describing the work of the *Christian Herald* and its leaders, but she also discusses some of the larger questions that surrounded their work and that of the American Red Cross. These questions remain today as Americans (Christians and otherwise) grapple with what it means to engage in global charity:

Does charity create dependency? Who should philanthropists help? Is it better to meet the immediate needs of the hungry and homeless or to invest in efforts to ameliorate the root causes of poverty?... How can charitable agencies encourage empathy for the afflicted without reinforcing racial, social, economic, and national hierarchies?”

While Curtis poses these questions in her Epilogue, she does not explore them at much length beyond a brief discussion there, and the questions, in my view, remain largely unanswered. But perhaps this is a less a fault of the author (and likely beyond the scope of her book), and more because no particularly satisfactory answers exist as the questions remain nearly identical today to what they were over one hundred years ago.

Certainly, the contours of our current discussions have largely shifted, rightly so, away from assuming ourselves to be the great savior, both spiritual and material, of the oppressed heathen masses on a distant shore. But the deeper complexities of how we respond to our vulnerable neighbors, both domestically and internationally, remain places of debate and concern, particularly as world events rearrange global needs. And when these humanitarian efforts overlap or intersect, as they inevitably do, with competing political agendas and currents, then the debate becomes even more fractious. Curtis points out the following:

The critics of the ‘compassion industry’... have consistently called attention to the mixed motivations that drive philanthropic endeavors, to the ways relief efforts can obscure or exacerbate deeper structural injustices, and to the many instances in which even the most altruistic actions have produced distressingly harmful consequences, however inadvertent.

Curtis argues that “assumptions about the nation’s responsibility to help distant strangers [continue] to influence American foreign policy...premised on belief in the country’s special obligations and singular ability to aid the afflicted and advance the right of humanity.” This view of American exceptionalism undoubtedly influences our giving and our global engagement today. But is that all bad?

I would say, “It depends.” To be sure, there is much to criticize in our compassion industry and our many political missteps around the world committed in the name of humanitarian intervention, faith-based or otherwise. But I also see much to be commended along the way, on both a large and small scale, and the role of faith in driving and sustaining many of these humanitarian efforts is vital. As Curtis describes it:

The World Giving Index has consistently reported that Americans have the highest rate of charitable contributions as a percentage of gross domestic product. Through their monetary gifts and active participation in humanitarian relief efforts, Americans... have saved millions of disaster victims from starvation, disease, and death; rescued hundreds of thousands of war orphans and refugees; and provided medical care and education in the world’s poorest communities. These benevolent enterprises have offered people of all faiths and no faith opportunities to live out their moral and ethical convictions about the duty to help suffering strangers.

The United States is one of the richest, most stable and most powerful nations today. It has not always been that way, and if history teaches us anything, we should be aware that it will not remain so either. Humility is key here, and an open posture to ask the hard questions of how we Americans respond rightly from our place of undoubted privilege. We will never arrive at the perfect balance of Christian “charity” anywhere. Our divergent faith traditions and political ideologies will inevitably lead us to divergent humanitarian relief endeavors and outcomes, but I take heart in Curtis’s observation:

Many have been eager to consider how they and their organizations can extend compassion in ways that avoid the dangers that detractors of the humanitarian aid industry have identified. What would it take, they ask, to disentangle their efforts to love both neighbors and strangers from social forces, political agendas, and cultural prejudices that do not reflect the grace of Christ? Are there better strategies for acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God?

This emerging self-awareness, particularly within the evangelical Christian community, has benefited tremendously from seminal works such as Steven Corbett and Brian Fikkert’s [*When Helping Hurts*](#) or popular blog posts like Rachel Pieh Jones’s [“13 Things I Want American Christians To Know about the Stuff You Give Poor Kids”](#)—which showed up dozens of times on my social media feed a few years ago and sparked many vigorous virtual and in-person discussions.

My perspective on this comes both from a missions context (my parents have served as missionaries in the Middle East since 1974 where I was born and raised) and now a more political context (I am the spouse of a U.S. diplomat currently assigned to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia). As a young adult, I assumed I would follow my parents into the “family business.” Instead, I found myself nearly a decade after graduating from college embarking on an international life of an entirely different flavor.

As I have struggled to synthesize my seemingly disparate life experiences, the work of the Center for Public Justice has been profoundly instructive. CPJ’s singular vision for upholding public justice and the need for *all* institutions—government, non-profit organizations, businesses, churches, neighborhood communities and families—to work towards this high task has transformed how I view what it means to heed Christ’s call to love and serve my neighbor. This vision for the differentiated roles of institutions, which vary in structure and purpose, provides good guidance for the questions that Curtis raises in her book and for our understanding of how our faith might best connect with the world’s needs. Let’s return to the example of Free Burma Rangers, where I began.

Our relationship with the Eubank family actually started through my husband’s work in the International Religious Freedom Office of the U.S. Department of State several years ago. His portfolio at the time focused on Burma at the height of the Rohingya crisis. In his pursuit of the most accurate information on the situation to help inform our government policy there and advocate for freedom of religious expression (something that government is uniquely positioned to do), he contacted Free Burma Rangers, an organization he knew about from our former church’s support of it back in the early 2000s when it was first founded. He visited Dave Eubank in Chiang Mai during a work trip to the region and invited him to conversations with officials in the Department back in Washington, D.C. The faith-based, on-the-ground, humanitarian work of FBR, which government could not do, offered important and timely insight on a crisis in which government had a different and specific role, holding those in positions of leadership and power to account—something which FBR could not do.

This multifaceted engagement of church, non-profit organizations (supported by the generous giving of individuals and foundations), government and the individual efforts of the volunteers themselves provides a rich example of a worthy and effective path to responding to a particular global or domestic need. When a single entity attempts to resolve the entirety of a crisis, or claim ultimate authority over an injustice or commandeer or limit the rightful roles of other institutions, the results are inevitably uneven and potentially harmful. However, when we can articulate and pursue a way of healing and restoration that recognizes that diverse needs require diverse responses from diverse institutions, when all of God’s divinely ordained institutions work in concert rather than in conflict, then public justice for all can be secured.

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