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Doctrine

Approaches to humanitarian action are often referred to as doctrines, such as “the doctrine of humanitarian intervention.” A doctrine is “a belief or set of beliefs, especially political or religious ones, that are taught and accepted by a particular group” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019). As with legal and military doctrines, a humanitarian doctrine is more general than a policy, but more issue-specific than a political ideology or scientific paradigm.

In a religious context, doctrines instruct the interpretation of foundational dogmas. This has three functions: (1) instructing the faithful in interpreting their sacred scriptures as guidance for thought and behavior; (2) preserving a religious tradition; and (3) defending the faith against misinterpretation and opposing views (Outler 2012). These functions resemble the roles of humanitarian “isms”—with the Dunantist doctrine of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defined by Jean Pictet and colleagues in the 1960s as the current humanitarian orthodoxy (ICRC 2015). Interpreting the “teachings” of Henri Dunant through the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality, the ICRC (1) provides guidance for how individuals should understand and realize their humanitarian calling; (2) preserves the tradition of humanitarianism (as a “church”); and (3) defends this tradition against alternative accounts of humanitarianism and their shared anti-humanitarian adversaries.

The congregation of humanitarian doctrine(s) is not limited to the members of humanitarian organizations. Adopted by politicians, lawyers, military generals, and individual citizens as a general framework for categorizing and

reacting to world problems, humanitarian doctrines have merged with political, legal, military, and religious doctrines (De Lauri 2016; Fassin 2011).

There is a diversity of religious and secular humanitarian doctrines globally, as there has been throughout history (Barnett 2011). Each major humanitarian organization has developed its own variations of, or alternatives to, the Dunantist orthodoxy as a way of defining its role and justifying its existence. There are also a set of more issue-specific doctrines cutting across these organizations, such as the recent doctrine of the “protection of civilians” defined by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in its “Aide Memoire” (OCHA 2016).

Essentially, these doctrines rarely stem from an isolated focus on humanitarian action, but reflect broader cultural and political outlooks. The Dunantist orthodoxy, for instance, was developed against the backdrop of Christian religion and political liberalism. Abstract formulations of humanitarian principles serve to disentangle the doctrine from these background conditions. The emergence of “new humanitarians” based on non-Western traditions nonetheless make the reliance on underlying cultural and political conditions more evident (Dennis and Zeynep 2015).

One may speak of more or less doctrinal approaches to humanitarian action. Humanitarian practices are usually not about the specific realization of doctrinal objectives, but rather are pragmatic responses in highly diverse settings outside the control of humanitarian actors. Likewise, international humanitarian law is pragmatically balancing on an edge of power and self-interest rather than enforcing a moral doctrine. Under these circumstances, strict doctrinal approaches may get in the way of efficiency, while more flexible doctrines may be needed in order to maintain legitimacy in the face of ethical dilemmas and political compromises. Strict doctrinal readings of humanitarian practices should therefore also be avoided, as too much emphasis easily can be put on the disagreements between different doctrines rather than on the actual reasons why different actors and institutions diverge in their behavior (Givoni 2011).

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Documents

The word “document” originates from the Latin *documentum*, which means example, proof and lesson. In Medieval Latin, the word derives additional meaning from the verb *docere*, to show, teach, cause to know, and refers to an official written instrument or an authoritative paper. Historian Ben Kafka traces the modern age of paperwork to the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which guaranteed citizens the right to request a full accounting of the government. An explosion of paper followed, documents becoming privileged vehicles to ensure the circulation of information and the stability of newly established state institutions (Kafka 2012). In addition to foundational documents, which define humanitarian organizations’ statutes and principles, corporate documents such as leaflets, reports, funding proposals, forms, and guidelines have come to occupy a ubiquitous presence in contemporary humanitarianism. As “paradigmatic artefacts of modern knowledge practices” (Riles 2006), documents embody the bureaucratization and institutionalization of aid in the liberal humanitarian age that, according to Michael Barnett (2011), started in the 1990s. Together with the blurring of the boundaries between military and humanitarian intervention that has followed the Cold War, this new age of humanitarianism is equally marked by the changing character of relief, as humanitarian organizations increasingly collaborate