HUMANITY IN CRISIS
Ethical and Religious Response to Refugees

DAVID HOLLENBACH, SJ
The central traditions of religious communities have long been important sources of the charity and compassion that lead people to come to the aid of those affected by wars and other crises. The Torah in the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament call Jews and Christians to love their neighbor as they love themselves. The scriptures of all the world religions teach versions of the “golden rule” that calls each person to “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.”1 Islam names Allah the all-compassionate, all-merciful one, thus proclaiming that God calls Muslims to compassionate care for those displaced by war. Compassion is also a central duty in Buddhism, indicating that those on the road to Enlightenment should show care for the victims of humanitarian crises. Religious motivations such as these have long been sources of the efforts to assist those who are suffering because of conflict, as discussed in the previous chapter. A consideration of some of the more concrete ways religious belief can shape response to crisis today is the focus here.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH-BASED ACTION

Several of the initiatives that generated the humanitarian movement in its present form rose from explicitly Christian roots, even when they were not formally linked to a specific Christian church. As the previous chapter showed, the humanitarian movement has deep historical roots in religious belief that all men and women are God’s children. In a similar way, the founders of the Red Cross (ICRC) drew on their Christian faith and the ethics this faith supported when they launched the organization that serves as a model of
contemporary humanitarian action. The ICRC, of course, is independent of any religious community and provides assistance independent of the religion of those being served. Its founders, however, had religious motivations of a nondenominational sort. Henri Dunant saw himself as “an instrument in the hands of God.” Jean Pictet understood the ICRC’s principle of humanity as closely associated with the Christian duty to love one’s neighbor. Pictet saw the ICRC’s efforts to end the sufferings of war victims as reflecting the love that is the central norm and virtue in Christian morality.

Despite these religious roots, in the twentieth century a notable secularization of humanitarian action seemed to occur as a number of new relief agencies with no explicit religious connection were created. In part, this was due to the growing institutionalization of the humanitarian effort. Until quite recently, responses to the needs of people facing grave threats to their well-being were rarely as institutionally organized as they have become today. Charity and benevolence were part of the everyday response to those who were suffering, but, as Michael Barnett has put it, there was “no regime of sympathy.” Barnett characterizes the emergence of such an organized regime as “a revolution in moral sentiments” leading to a culture of compassion in which compassionate response to human suffering became “a central part of organized society.”

This regime has been increasingly shaped by governments and by intergovernmental agencies like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and nongovernmental institutions of considerable scope. Because of the non-religious character of these organizations and their institutional reach, the overall scene appeared to become more secular. The conclusion that emergencies were increasingly being addressed by secular agencies was reinforced by the way that faith-based groups found it necessary to collaborate in their work with large, secular organizations. This often led them to stress the humanistic grounds of their activity, placing less explicit emphasis on faith commitment as the framework of their activities. As Alastair Ager and Joey Ager have put it, by the mid-twentieth century, “with non-governmental actors increasingly enmeshed within intergovernmental structures and governmental agendas, the principles and policies of humanitarianism were increasingly articulated in secular terms.”

Nevertheless, it is evident that faith-based organizations continue to play an important role in the overall humanitarian effort today. During the past several decades, the number of faith-based organizations dedicated to responding to humanitarian crises has grown. Particularly notable has been the creation of new Christian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with
an evangelical orientation, such as Samaritan’s Purse and the International Justice Mission, as well as Islamic humanitarian agencies, including Islamic Relief. It is also clear that many of the older religiously inspired agencies continue to play important roles in the overall humanitarian effort.

Estimates of the revenues expended by religious organizations on humanitarian assistance cannot be very precise. In part, this is because numerous parish churches, mosques, and other local and smaller religious communities provide direct assistance to those in need without their work being seen as humanitarian and without their expenditures being recorded as formally devoted to relief or development. Similarly, members of religious communities in one part of the world often assist members of their community in other parts of the world who are facing crisis without recording this as properly humanitarian aid.6

Despite these limits, it is clear from available financial data that agencies linked to churches, mosques, and other religious communities play major roles in the overall response to political emergencies and natural disasters. Expenditures for assistance work by the major religiously affiliated organizations in the United States are similar to the amount spent by secular agencies.7 The overall operating expenditures of some of the largest secular and religious NGOs responding to humanitarian crises, drawn from their annual reports for 2016, are gathered in tables 4.1 and 4.2.

Thus, the evangelically inspired World Vision International’s annual expenditures of about $2,000 million are somewhat larger than Oxfam International’s budget of about $1,200 million, while the US-based Catholic Relief Service’s expenses of $970 million are just slightly less than the $1,173 million spent by Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders). These data support Michael Barnett’s observation that “it is impossible to study humanitarianism without being impressed by the importance of religion.”8

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Annual Expenditures (millions)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Oxfam International</td>
<td>€1,007 (approx. $1,195)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Médecins sans Frontières</td>
<td>€$989 (approx. $1,173)</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Rescue Committee</td>
<td>$772</td>
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<td>Save the Children</td>
<td>$698</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care USA</td>
<td>$610</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercy Corps</td>
<td>$432</td>
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TABLE 4.2 Annual Expenditures of Religious Humanitarian Organizations (2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Annual Expenditures (millions)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World Vision International</td>
<td>$2,153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Relief Services</td>
<td>$970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaritan’s Purse</td>
<td>$583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Relief USA</td>
<td>£115 (approx. $136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Relief Worldwide</td>
<td>$99</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (2011)</td>
<td>$50</td>
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The continuing importance of the role played by faith-based organizations runs counter to the secularization hypothesis that many social theorists have held until quite recently. Through much of the twentieth century, social scientists presumed that history was on a one-way path toward increasing secularization. They concluded that religion was declining, with fewer believers than in earlier days, or that religion was being privatized, with less influence in public domains such as politics or the economy. Due to this decline or privatization, they expected religion to become increasingly “invisible,” with less influence on public life than in earlier epochs. The evidence of the past several decades, however, points in a markedly different direction. It suggests that the secularization hypothesis is not an accurate description of what is happening, at least when applied outside Western Europe.

The role of religion in public life has thus been undergoing significant reassessment over the past several decades. This rethinking is evident in the appearance of serious academic books with provocative titles such as The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World; The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics; and God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics. In most parts of the world, religion is neither declining nor becoming purely a private affair. Indeed, José Casanova argues that “religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.”

The continuing public influence of religion seems particularly notable in international politics. The support of some faith communities for the human rights movement has been increasingly evident. For example, Catholicism has played a particularly important role in the advancement of human rights and democracy since the Second Vatican Council concluded in 1965.
positive role of religious action is also evident in the assistance that religious communities and their agencies continue to provide to displaced people and to others affected by humanitarian crisis. Faith-based organizations remain important players in the humanitarian movement today.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS

The activity of faith communities, of course, has both positive and negative effects in international affairs. Religious communities are major responders to humanitarian crises. Sometimes, however, they are among the causes of the conflicts that lead to these crises. The negative face of religion is evident in the politicized assertions of religious identity and self-defensive fundamentalisms that contribute to several of the world’s conflicts today. The record in the first years of the twenty-first century is distressing. Brian Grim and Roger Finke draw upon data gathered by the US State Department, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and several other sources. They conclude that between 2000 and 2007, 86 percent of the 143 countries with populations of more than 2 million have experienced at least some cases of people being abused or displaced from their homes because of their religion. As noted earlier, the religious beliefs of some Jews and some Muslims have been among the factors driving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over multiple generations. Intra-Muslim conflict is one of the causes of the Syrian civil war, which has displaced huge numbers of people both as refugees and within Syria itself. In India, Muslim reaction to the Hindu nationalist convictions of the Bharatiya Janata Party contributed to the rise of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Muslim group with ties to Pakistan that in 2008 carried out terror attacks in Mumbai, killing many. These Hindu-Muslim tensions also contribute to the dangerous instability between the nuclear-armed powers of India and Pakistan. Buddhist control of the government in Sri Lanka led to resistance by the minority Hindu community that generated a bloody civil war, and Buddhist efforts to exclude Muslim Rohingya people from Myanmar have displaced many thousands of Rohingya to Bangladesh. There are severe cases of religious persecution and conflict in Africa as well. In Sudan, for example, the long civil war between south and north before South Sudan became an independent country in 2011 had religion as one among its several driving forces. Christians and adherents of traditional African religion in the south resisted efforts by the north to Islamize the whole of Sudan. The conflict took over 2 million lives and created over 5 million displaced persons. In central Europe, communal hostilities
between Orthodox, Muslim, and Catholic believers contributed to the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia into separate countries, including Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia.

On the other hand, the previous chapter has shown that the normative values of the major world religions call believers to work for peace and to respond to the needs of persons adversely affected by war and displacement. In their vigorous pursuit of these values, religious leaders like Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have played vigorous roles in the pursuit of human rights and democracy, peace and reconciliation. Gandhi’s nonviolent campaign for the independence of India from British rule was grounded in his Hindu beliefs, interpreted with the help of his reading of the Christian Leo Tolstoy. Gandhi’s nonviolence inspired movements for justice and peace among Christians. These included King and his campaign for racial justice in the United States as well as Tutu, whose participation in the antiapartheid movement enabled South Africa to elect Nelson Mandela president in 1994. John Paul II was deeply involved in Poland’s struggle for freedom from control and domination by the Soviet Union. The pope’s support for the Solidarity movement in Poland contributed in significant ways to movements that led to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and to the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire in 1991. The Dalai Lama has been a powerful Buddhist voice raised on behalf of the people of Tibet in the face of their oppression by the People’s Republic of China. His voice, like that of many other religious people engaged in campaigns for justice, has appealed for significant change through nonviolent means.

One of the most notable developments of recent international affairs has been the significant rise of nonviolent movements for justice and political change, and many of these movements have been religiously inspired. Many of these movements have been notably successful, particularly when they have been pursuing justice internally within states, despite the conviction of political realists that nonviolence is unlikely to be an effective political strategy. The commitment to respect those who are different, including those who are religiously different, has enabled these movements to seek greater justice in public life in vigorous ways while remaining committed to the use of peaceful means. Many of these movements have been faith-based.

In a similar way, humanitarian agencies linked to religious communities have played significant roles in responding to the suffering caused by major crises. These communities and their leaders have contributed to ending some
of the major humanitarian crises and to promoting the reconciliation needed to prevent the return of conflict. Their role in responding to natural disasters has also been significant.

Scott Appleby is surely correct, therefore, when he says that religion plays an “ambivalent” role in relation to the conflicts that so threaten peace and human well-being. Faith communities sometimes contribute to these conflicts and sometimes play important roles in overcoming them. A key question, therefore, is what kind of faith and faith-based tenets motivate religious communities to engage in the activities that have significant consequences for humanitarian crises. If a community’s beliefs lead it to respect the dignity and rights of all persons, including those of other faiths, and to call on governments to guarantee the rights of all, the believing community will make positive contributions to peace and to the protection of people from the effects of war and disaster. As the previous chapter has argued, most of the religious traditions of the world hold normative commitments that call for such positive contributions. Many of those who adhere to these traditions live out these norms in action. In doing so, they make positive contributions to alleviating the suffering caused by conflict, displacement, and other harmful effects of humanitarian crisis.

In recent years, therefore, there has been a notable rise in the recognition of the importance of religious communities and their agencies in the humanitarian response to the crises that cause displacement and threaten human dignity. For example, António Guterres, who in 2012 was serving as UNHCR, convened a meeting of leaders of religiously based humanitarian agencies on faith and protection. This meeting gathered more than four hundred representatives of faith-based organizations, academics, and government officials in Geneva to explore forms of partnership in efforts to improve protection of the displaced. The report on the consultation states that the discussion was a “journey of mutual discovery,” leading to a “deeper appreciation for and understanding of the role religion and spirituality play in the lives of those UNHCR serves.” The conference affirmed the importance of partnerships between the High Commissioner’s office and faith-based agencies for the protection of displaced people. It called for the enhancement of what the report called “faith literacy” among UNHCR staff, implying that appreciation of the role of faith-based efforts could be improved. The consultation led to the writing of a further document titled Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders that drew upon the sacred scriptures of Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. This statement declared, “The call to
'welcome the stranger,' through protection and hospitality, and to honor the stranger or those of other faiths with respect and equality, is deeply rooted in all major religions.” These “affirmations” were formally launched at a signing ceremony at the Religions for Peace 9th World Assembly on November 21, 2013, in Vienna. They were signed by more than 1,700 religious leaders.

It is increasingly clear, therefore, that religious belief remains important in the humanitarian sector. Although secular humanitarian organizations are surely important responders to crises, so are faith-based agencies. Indeed, a recent historical review of response to the needs of displaced people over the past twenty-five years concludes that the contribution of faith might well be “the big new theme in refugee studies.” Because of this growing recognition of the influence of faith in humanitarian efforts, it will be helpful to explore some of the specific ways religious belief and religious communities support efforts to assist displaced people and others facing humanitarian crisis today.

SOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAITH

Religious belief can help sustain those who are suffering the effects of crisis. It energizes the work of those who seek to assist the displaced. The normative values of religious traditions also give faith-based agencies distinctive approaches to their work. Faith traditions and communities contribute by sustaining meaning in the face of the suffering that is a common effect of war and displacement. Faith communities provide communal support that victims of crisis often need in the face of the isolation from their homes brought by displacement. Faith can also provide the hope needed to sustain long-term response to the deeper causes of humanitarian crisis.

Meaning in the Face of Suffering

Wars, earthquakes, and other disasters not only wound, kill, and displace many people; they shatter the personal relationships that provide people with support and help sustain meaning in the ordinary routines of life. Such crises fracture the taken-for-granted worlds in which affected people had been living, causing a kind of intellectual and emotional earthquake. This upheaval calls into question the patterns of meaning that hold life together. Since “secular” means “of or pertaining to the world” (Oxford English Dictionary), when the suffering brought by humanitarian crisis shatters the meaning of one’s world, this splits open the surface of the secular domain itself. As an
earthquake cleaves the crust of the earth, a humanitarian crisis fractures secular explanations of life’s purpose. A humanitarian crisis can thus bring about a kind of seismic upheaval on the spiritual level for those it affects. Both the victims of humanitarian crises and those desiring to help them stand before a rift in the structure of meaning that sustains the relationships and routines of their ordinary activity. These emergencies destroy expectations about how life will normally be lived. They raise the question of whether evil and destruction have gained the upper hand in human existence.

Humanitarian crises, therefore, point to two possibilities. First, those who face these crises can conclude that the rift they open up in this-worldly routine descends into depths where all hope of meaningful life should be abandoned. For example, theologian Jon Sobrino has described several types of religious response to the earthquakes that devastated El Salvador in 2001 that moved in this direction. Some Salvadorans saw the destruction as punishment by God for the sins of the people of the country. This religious interpretation led some to believe that the appropriate response was for people to repent from their sinful ways or even simply to accept the destruction they faced. Others saw the earthquakes as God’s will, in some mysterious way. This interpretation led them to believe they should simply accept God’s inscrutable will and give thanks for the continuing life of those who survived. A third approach was to doubt the goodness of God, asking, “What’s wrong with God” if God allows this sort of harm to come to so many innocent people? A further response is less explicitly religious. It sees a disaster such as the Salvadoran earthquake as having destroyed all meaning and hope, whether religious or secular, by throwing its victims into an abyss of absurdity. When a crisis is experienced this way, the outcome can be despair. In all of these interpretations, even when the outcome is not total despair, efforts to respond can seem largely pointless. The result will be passive acceptance. Crises like the earthquake are just the way things are. Little can be done to protect people from their harmful effects.

Yet, in an alternative approach to crisis, people may come to perceive, however dimly, a source of hope that goes deeper than the fractured world. Sobrino proposes an understanding of Christian faith that sees God as radically engaged in the suffering of humanity and in crises such as the Salvadoran earthquake. There is a way of understanding Christianity—a theology—that sees the death of Jesus on the cross as an invitation to trust that the ultimate mystery surrounding our lives—God—lovingly embraces those who struggle right in the midst of their suffering. Should death come,
God will be in solidarity with them even in death. For the believer, the cross of Jesus reveals that the mystery at the heart of the world is not meaningless absurdity but a loving God who has utter compassion for all who suffer and die. The cross is a revelation of divine solidarity with every human who undergoes the distress and loss caused by war, displacement, earthquake, or injustice.

Such a Christian vision invites the victims of crisis to trust that the redeeming love of God is present in their struggles and to hope that God’s love is stronger than the threats they face, enabling them to carry on and actively work to rebuild their lives for a better future. It also invites other believers to undertake compassionate efforts to alleviate the suffering caused by crises and to act to prevent this suffering. This is a form of Christian faith that leads to both hope and action in the face of wars or other disasters. When the routines of ordinary life have been fractured, secular patterns of meaning can themselves be shattered. If this happens, secular meaning may no longer be able to provide the hope needed to sustain active engagement. Thus, when one faces the great losses that wars or displacement can bring, transcendent meaning may become a precondition of hope and of the action that hope sustains. Both the victims of such crises and those who seek to aid them may eventually need a source of meaning and hope that is deeper than that provided by their daily routines. Religious experience and faith can provide this kind of meaning and hope. For Christians, such meaning and hope can rise from their belief that the cross of Jesus points to how God’s love is present even amid human suffering. For Buddhists, it could rise from a conviction that the compassion exemplified by the Buddha offers meaning that goes deeper than the routine expectations fractured by crisis. Such faith can help sustain people who are facing disaster. Faith can also motivate and energize humanitarian workers when they face diminished hopes as they confront the sufferings of the victims of war, displacement, or other crises. The power of faith to provide such meaning and hope is surely at the heart of religion’s continuing engagement in the humanitarian effort.

This theological argument is reinforced by some recent empirical literature on the importance of faith and spirituality in the humanitarian effort. Several studies have shown that faith helps people cope with humanitarian crises by sustaining their hope and by providing them with meaning in the midst of loss. These studies also point out that faith can be a source of support for humanitarian workers themselves, who sometimes face questions about whether their work makes sense when setbacks seem to have the upper
hand. The staying power needed for the long-term effort required to grapple with a crisis may be strengthened by the hope religious faith can support.

Communal Support through Accompaniment

Faith communities also provide communal support that helps strengthen the resilience of people facing emergencies. Data on the way communal support sustains hope and action suggests that the commitment by some faith-based agencies to “accompany” the victims of crisis is on the right path. For example, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) sees being on the ground with those who suffer from crisis as central to its mission. JRS mission has three dimensions: accompaniment, service, and advocacy. For JRS, accompaniment means JRS staff should stay in close and respectful contact with the refugees they seek to assist, listening to their stories and showing them through the personal presence of JRS staffers that they are not forgotten. Many refugees say this has been the most important help they have received from JRS. This response is a key reason why JRS sees accompaniment as a central focus of its work. Being in personal relationship with those driven from their homes affirms the displaced as persons. It helps keep their hope alive and enables them to continue the struggle to overcome their plight.

Accompaniment also has a significant impact for those who are assisting the displaced. Listening to the stories told by refugees both stimulates commitment to action by the JRS staff and shapes their understanding of what kind of action is needed. In this way accompaniment guides service. It also helps form JRS’s advocacy agenda. Without strong roots in the communal interaction that takes place through accompaniment, service and advocacy could easily come to be shaped more by bureaucratic requirements or external agendas than by the real needs of those facing conflict or disaster. Keeping the focus on the actual needs of those who are suffering requires at least some personal relationships with them. This relational presence is itself a form of help, for it lets those being served know that they still count as persons. It helps keep meaning and hope alive. JRS therefore sees accompaniment as truly central to its mission.

For Christians, the provision of such communal support for those suffering the effects of war or disaster will be significantly motivated by the call of Christian love. Action based on love will often lead to personal presence and deepened respect. Christian efforts to assist other Christians in crisis situations will also sometimes include responding to their explicitly religious needs, perhaps by making available worship services or some form of
explicitly religious counseling. Thus, JRS does not hesitate to say that its work includes explicitly pastoral care for those being accompanied. At the same time, JRS accompanies and serves people in need regardless of their race, ethnic origin, or religious beliefs.

In a similar way, Catholic Relief Services states that all of its work is “motivated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ to cherish, preserve and uphold the sacredness and dignity of all human life, foster charity and justice, and embody Catholic social and moral teaching.” At the same time, CRS will “assist people on the basis of need, not creed, race or nationality.” Islamic Relief has greater access to people suffering from emergencies in Muslim countries, so it is particularly able to build bonds of communal trust and support when assisting Muslims. The growth of trust arises at least in part from the shared bond of Muslim faith between Islamic Relief’s staff and those being aided. This bond is evident when the organization assists those it serves in organizing such Muslim practices as prayer and the observation of Ramadan. Islamic Relief International also works to provide humanitarian assistance to those who are not Muslim. Its commitment to interreligious cooperation is clear in its partnership with the Lutheran World Federation in developing a “faith-sensitive” approach to humanitarian response.

This points to the question of whether agencies acting based on Christian or Islamic belief can at the same time serve all persons in need and can do so with full respect for the beliefs of those from other traditions. On one level, Christian and Islamic organizations have much in common with secular humanitarian organizations, chiefly because their understandings of their Christian or Muslim beliefs enable them to affirm the dignity of every person independent of the person’s religion. Respect for this dignity requires not discriminating among people because of their religion when support and services are being provided. In faith-based organizations like CRS and Islamic Relief, however, many staff members have personal knowledge of how faith can be an important source of strength during crisis. They are thus able to talk with those they are serving about the role of faith in sustaining hope. They can also provide some support for religious practices, provided they do not do so in a way that makes assistance dependent on religion or that uses aid as a vehicle for proselytizing. Combining support for faith with nondiscrimination is, of course, a very delicate undertaking. The wrong kind of support would exclude some people from the aid they need because of their faith or lack of it. On the other hand, if nondiscrimination leads to a strictly secular stance, it could lead to an approach that
prevents faith from sustaining the meaning and hope people need in the midst of emergencies.

A possible way to deal with this tension between recognizing the importance of faith and serving in a nondiscriminatory way is for faith-based agencies to adopt a strong commitment to interreligious understanding and collaboration. The criteria for genuine interreligious exchange presented by Catherine Cornille can indicate what this would mean. Interreligious understanding requires *humility*. One needs to be convinced that one can actually learn something by listening to someone with a faith different from one’s own faith. Thus, when a Christian seeks to accompany Muslims driven from their homes by war, listening to a Muslim talk about what her faith means to her can create a form of support that would not be possible if such a conversation were regarded as inappropriate. Second, interreligious understanding requires *commitment*. A person on the staff of a Christian or Muslim agency should not be afraid to speak with those being served about how her faith supports her efforts to assist. Expressing this commitment in a humble way can create bonds between agency staff and those they aid, bonds that will help sustain both in their efforts. Third, interreligious understanding depends on seeing that the different faiths of those struggling together share an *interconnection* in their diverse ways of trying to alleviate and prevent the suffering caused by conflict or disaster. Finally, cooperation across faith traditions requires a concrete, experiential *empathy* for the role of specific beliefs in the life of a person who is a member of another community.  

For example, staff of Christian agencies assisting those displaced from and within Syria are working largely with Muslims, many of whom have been displaced because of intra-Muslim conflict. Christian staff will thus benefit from having at least a rudimentary appreciation of the Muslim beliefs of those they are helping and of some of the tensions among diverse Islamic traditions that are party to the Syrian conflict. When the staff of Christian agencies are able to talk in a humble way with the Muslims they are serving about what the conflict means to Muslims, and about why they as Christians are seeking to help, this will help strengthen the communal support that sustains hope. It will be a component of what JRS calls accompaniment. In addition, some staff members working in Christian agencies aiding those displaced from Syria are themselves Muslim. Interreligious understanding will therefore strengthen staff collaboration. Interreligious understanding will be similarly valuable for the Christians and Buddhists collaborating on the staffs of Christian agencies that are aiding Buddhists displaced from Myanmar.
into Thailand. Intra-staff dialogue about how the Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim faiths address displacement will help staff members respond more effectively and more humanly to those they are seeking to aid. Humble inter-religious exchanges among staff and those they serve, and among the staff of agencies seeking to help, will make it possible to accompany those facing emergencies in a deeper and fuller way than would remaining silent about religion because of a desire to treat all faiths equally. Equal treatment and nondiscrimination call for humility in the face of difference and for respectful listening to those who are different, not efforts to overlook differences and to keep quiet about them.

Long-Term Response—Compassion Becomes Justice

Compassion is a key motivation that leads humanitarian agencies to respond to the needs of people facing emergencies and disasters. This is particularly true for faith-based organizations. Christian love or Buddhist compassion are often referred to in the mission statements of Christian and Buddhist humanitarian NGOs. This love and compassion goes into action when a humanitarian worker helps a person in need with direct assistance. But as admirable as action based on love or compassion surely is, it is nevertheless sometimes regarded as a form of voluntary philanthropy rather than a strict obligation. This can lead to assistance being seen as optional rather than as a requirement to treat displaced persons according to their human dignity. If humanitarian action is seen as beyond the call of duty in this way, there is also a risk that it will slide into a form of paternalism, in which the strong and capable provide aid to the weak and vulnerable. The commitment to accompany those facing crisis seeks to avoid this kind of condescending paternalism by providing assistance in a way that respects the equal dignity and capacity for agency of those being aided. Accompaniment seeks reciprocity and mutuality in the relationship between aid workers and those they assist, rather than condescension and paternalism.

Although compassion can lead to appropriated personalized ways of aiding displaced persons, there is also a danger that compassion might overlook the institutional dimensions of crisis. If this happens, assistance will address only the symptoms rather than the deeper causes of conflict and other emergencies. Thus, a stress on justice and rights is important because of the way that such an emphasis calls for long-term commitment to the dignity of those being assisted and for efforts to overcome the structural causes of crisis. This raises the question of the relation of religiously motivated love and compassion to the
norms of justice and rights. Must one choose between love and justice, between compassion and rights? If so, does one have to choose between a faith-based response rooted in love and a secular response based on justice and rights?

Recent reflection in religious ethics indicates that this is a false choice. In Christian ethics, for example, love can be seen as requiring action for justice, not as an alternative to it. Christian love, of course, has several meanings. It can be seen as a kind of self-sacrifice in which one surrenders oneself in order to support the well-being of another. Action based on love or compassion, understood this way, could be seen as a voluntary act that goes beyond the requirements of strict duty since self-sacrifice is often seen as a supererogatory rather than a strict duty. If love is seen as a standard that motivates actions that go beyond duty, there is a danger that it may lead to forms of paternalism. The desire to base humanitarian response on justice rather than love seeks to avoid this kind of condescension. Love, however, need not lead to a form of condescension. It can take the form of mutuality that exists between good friends or close companions. Accompaniment seeks this kind of reciprocal relationship among equals. Nevertheless, because this kind of mutuality requires a certain degree of immediate presence of one person to another, its institutional implications are indirect.

A third meaning of Christian love has been called love as equal regard. The biblical commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself affirms that self and neighbor should be cared for equally. This commandment also makes no distinction between one neighbor and another. The love commandment, understood this way, calls for recognition of the equality of all one's neighbors and for equal treatment of each neighbor. Equal treatment, of course, does not require treating every person in an identical way. Equal love of one's neighbors is not the same as identical treatment of each neighbor. Special responsibilities toward one's spouse or children surely exist. However, the equality among persons presumed by the call to love all one's neighbors as oneself requires an effort to provide all persons with the minimal resources that are essential to their lives and their welfare simply as persons and to alleviate the unnecessary suffering they face. Thus, the normative principle that one should love one's neighbor as oneself (love as equal regard) has a significant overlap with the idea of egalitarian justice. Understood this way, love requires working to secure the treatment of all persons in ways that respect their equal human dignity. It leads to a commitment to the basic human rights of all persons. In addition, it implies that there are particularly stringent obligations toward persons who have been deprived of the basic requirements of their human
well-being by conflicts they have not initiated or by disasters they have surely not caused. The commandment to love one’s neighbor, therefore, should lead faith-based humanitarian agencies whose identity and mission are based on this commandment to a vigorous pursuit of justice and rights for those suffering the effects of conflict or disaster.

The several dimensions of love and compassion should be related to each other in a dynamic and developing way. An encounter with a person who is suffering, whether that encounter happens directly or through knowledge passed on by others, can awaken compassion that leads to a desire to help. It may lead to a desire to accompany those affected by emergency conditions and to share their struggle for a better situation. Such a compassionate response can in turn reveal that the causes of the suffering are deeply rooted. One can discover that alleviating the suffering is beyond one’s own power as an individual and even beyond the efforts of modestly sized relief groups. This discovery can lead to the recognition that most conflicts have deep institutional or political causes. It can show how the sufferings brought about by many natural disasters are compounded by economic and political institutions that make some people much more vulnerable than others. This awakening to the institutional dimensions of a crisis can in turn lead to a recognition that care or love for those suffering calls for organized response that seeks to change the social institutions that cause suffering for some but not others, or that make some particularly vulnerable in ways that others are not. Equal care for one’s neighbors who are suffering, therefore, can and should lead to efforts to change the institutions that distribute suffering in unjustifiably unequal ways. Love can lead directly to working of justice. In particular, it leads to the pursuit of social justice—that form of justice that governs social institutions so that they protect the equal human dignity of all people, particularly those who are suffering because of the way these institutions are presently functioning.

An appropriate understanding of the relation between love, justice, and social institutions implies that humanitarian action based on justice and human rights is not an alternative or supplement to action-based love but is an expression of love. This has been much stressed by Christian agencies that provide humanitarian protection and assistance, such as Catholic Relief Services. The development of “engaged Buddhism,” with its move from compassion to the pursuit of institutional change, suggests that justice can be an expression of Buddhist compassion as well. When love is understood as equal regard for all one’s neighbors, as the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself suggests it should be, love will be seen as requiring both justice and institutional
change. Faith-based action shaped by such an understanding of love or compassion should be at least as committed as is secular action to shaping institutions in ways that secure justice and human rights. Indeed, it is possible that the depth of commitment arising from faith-inspired love for the displaced may lead some faith-based agencies to become more engaged in efforts for institutional change than are some secular agencies that fear they may violate humanitarian neutrality by coming too close to politics.

Our discussions so far have sketched an overall stance toward humanitarian crises. The following chapters cover more specific ways we ought to address the humanitarian and several ethical issues that can arise for humanitarian actors, governmental and nongovernmental, both secular and faith-based. These chapters will address the challenges we face in a more concrete way.