

# Chapter 164

## Faith Based Organizations and International Responses to Forced Migration

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### 164.1 Introduction

While significant scholarship has demonstrated the ways in which faith and religion can affect refugees and other forced migrants, either as a cause of forced migration, a coping mechanism while living in exile, or as a way to negotiate one's surroundings (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b: 430), studies on faith-based organizations working with refugees are only recently gaining traction as a worthy area of scholarship. Indeed, since 2008, there have been a range of publications, most notably the recent *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2011 "Special Issue: Faith-Based Humanitarianism in Contexts of Forced Displacement." Other recent scholarship has looked more broadly at faith-based humanitarian organizations in the context of development or humanitarian relief work more generally, as scholars like Michael Barnett and Janice Stein demonstrate in their book, *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism* (2012). These trends represent interest from a range of disciplines—from politics to international relations to sociology, human geography and anthropology. This seemingly up-and-coming issue area, however, still holds many unanswered questions. This chapter will focus largely on Christian international faith-based organizations (FBOs)<sup>1</sup> and their role in humanitarian assistance, looking both broadly at humanitarian aid and specifically in relation to forced migration. It will begin with the starting assumption that faith-based organizations are unique and different from secular ones, first outlining how and why this assumption can be taken as true. It will then examine how these differences can work as assets or challenges to humanitarian

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<sup>1</sup>Recognizing that insufficient scholarship exists on other FBOs and calling for more research of non-western, non-Christian FBOs.

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work, looking particularly at the refugee context, and demonstrating the ways in which strengths largely outweigh the challenges. Finally, it will identify important questions and gaps in the research, calling for further scholarship in response to these issues.

## 164.2 Unpacking Faith Based Organizations (FBOs)

### 164.2.1 *Definitions, Concepts and a Brief Introduction to the Literature*

Recent scholarship has provided useful baseline definitions of FBOs, which this chapter will draw upon in order to maintain consistency within the literature. It is worth noting, however, that there is significant variation in how some understand FBOs, and that more of the literature deals with Western, Christian FBOs than other regions and religions. Several possible explanations for this may exist, including the fact that the meager data and reporting that does exist tends to come from larger, western, Christian FBOs. Thus, a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to these organizations simply because information on them is more readily available. This alone presents an enormous gap that needs to be addressed, as will be discussed later. Regarding definitions, however, the recent *JRS* Special Issue, understands an FBO as "...any organization that derives inspiration from and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within a faith" (Clarke and Jennings 2008: 6; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b: 430). In this respect, FBOs are said to derive their "organizational identity and mission from a particular religion or spiritual tradition" (Palmer 2011: 97), but are distinct from the faith community whose ethos guides their work, insofar as their programs and projects are guided to fulfill a particular function, such as responding to humanitarian needs arising from forced migration (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b: 430). Elizabeth Ferris (2005: 312) notes that FBOs are characterized by one or more of the following:

...affiliation with a religious body; a mission statement with explicit reference to religious values; financial support from religious sources; and/or a governance structure where selection of board members or staff is based on religious belief or affiliation and/or decisions-making processes based on religious values.

She admits, however, that the term is problematic, and that it would be better to understand differences of secular and FBOs as a continuum than a dichotomy (Ferris 2011: 622). Ager and Ager (2011), among others like Barnett and Stein (2012), also emphasize that it can be problematic to use secular organizations as the neutral object of study, arguing that functional secularism frames the discourse of contemporary humanitarianism, and unintentionally marginalizes religious language, practice and experience, making it difficult to engage with the dynamics of faith, particularly in relation to displaced populations. While this chapter is focused

more directly on the organizations working internationally (not the individuals experiencing displacement or humanitarian crisis and their psychological state or coping mechanisms), their point is relevant, demonstrating that scholar bias can affect the trajectory of how FBOs are studied and understood.

Despite these attempts to describe FBOs, trying to define FBOs is very difficult. Like secular organizations, FBOs are highly heterogeneous, particularly with respect to forced migration: "...they can be small-scale local-level religious congregations to national inter-denominational coalitions and networks to international humanitarian agencies associated with particular religions; and they have diverse histories, motivations, fund-raising mechanisms and modes of operation" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b; Ferris 2011: 621). Indeed, generalizing FBOs in one way or another would be a mistake, as they are very diverse.<sup>2</sup> Ferris writes:

The growing number of humanitarian organizations or NGOs and their incredible variety makes generalizations impossible. Refugee-serving NGOs include small organizations staffed by volunteers and housed in church basements as well as organizations with annual budgets close to US \$1 billion per year—about the same as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Some NGOs, particularly faith-based organizations, have large constituencies numbering in the hundreds of millions. Others are membership organizations whose members contribute funds and volunteer their time. Like many of their secular counterparts, most faith-based organizations are involved in a wide range of activities, including long-term development and advocacy for justice as well as humanitarian assistance. (2005: 312)

Ferris also highlights that there are differences within the Christian community of FBOs, including those linked directly to churches; those with Christian values, but without formal links to churches; and those that work internationally, versus locally or nationally. FBOs of other religions are likely to be just as diverse, and there is an urgent need for greater attention and scholarship on non-Christian and non-western FBOs. In sum, viewing NGOs or IOs with faith connections may best be understood via a spectrum, rather than binary categories.

Historically, FBOs have always been known as important actors in humanitarian, development and emergency assistance (Parsitau 2011: 493; Ferris 2011: 609). Ferris provides an excellent overview of some historical insight, noting, "Long before international humanitarian law was formalized in treaty law, individuals and faith communities provided assistance to those afflicted by natural disaster, persecution, uprooting and war" (Ferris 2005: 313). She continues to explain that themes

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<sup>2</sup> Broad generalizations are something the author is constantly mindful of, seeking to guard against; one must also be cautious of seeing secular and FBOs as a binary, which would be too simplistic. Clarke (2006: 835) categorizes FBOs using five different categories of functions: faith-based representative organizations; faith-based charitable or development organizations; faith-based socio-political organizations; faith-based missionary organizations; faith-based radical, illegal or terrorist organizations (see Orji 2011: 474). Goldsmith et al. (2006: 3) provide another analysis, dividing U.S. faith-based operations into four levels (local/regional/national ecumenical/interfaith coalitions; incorporated non-profits independent or affiliated with congregations; organizations or projects sponsored by religious organizations; and relief operations by religious congregations) (in Orji 2011: 480). Barnett and Stein also explore the strategic reasons for categorizing and organization as secular or religious (Barnett and Stein 2012: 9).

of justice for the poor, marginalized and the alien are central to Hebrew scriptures, and that there is a long history of persecuted people seeking sanctuary in temples and cities of refuge and, "...in the later medieval period, monasteries were often places of refuge and hospitality for strangers" (Ferris 2005: 313; see also Marfleet 2011). Mission societies focused on evangelism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were key in raising awareness in individual congregations; to that end, they were also involved in lobbying and advocacy, not limiting themselves to charity or relief (Ferris 2005: 314). These acts brought public attention and international awareness for governments to respond, and reflect different historical moments when faith communities have been more or less political (2005: 314).<sup>3</sup> Ferris also notes an important trend in the 1980s, whereby secular and faith-based organizations were encouraged to decrease direct involvement abroad and support the development of indigenous NGOs or local institutions, in the context of different conceptualizations of development and capacity-building (2005: 316). In spite of this, however, some FBOs continue to be major players globally, with larger budgets than some of the government ministries with whom they work (Ferris 2005: 311).

Barnett and Stein (2012) also provide a useful historical perspective on the role of religion in developing concepts of humanitarianism of today. They note that "...religious discourses and organizations helped to establish humanitarianism in the early nineteenth century, and it is only a slight exaggeration to say 'no religion, no humanitarianism'" (2012: 4). Indeed, early roots of humanitarianism shared significant overlap with mission ideas. Barnett and Stein note, however, that there have been shifts back and forth with how "religious" humanitarianism has been during different historical periods:

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, many religious organizations began to downplay their interest in conversion in favor of improving the lives of the local peoples; they became less reliant on the "good book" and more reliant on the public health manual. By the end of the twentieth century, many religious organizations were beginning to work with secular agencies and use secularized international legal principles and international institutions to further their goals. Missionaries, for instance, were quite involved in the campaign to establish international human rights conventions during the interwar years. Then, after World War Two, Western governments became the chief funders of humanitarian action and increasingly favored secular agencies such as CARE. Once-avowedly religious organizations such as World Vision International and Catholic Relief Services downplayed their religious identity. Much like the rest of the world, it seemed as if humanitarianism was succumbing to the pull and power of secularism. (2012: 4)

They go on to write, however, that despite this appearance, religion remained "front and center influencing humanitarianism," and FBOs, especially Christians in the West, continued to expand (2012: 5). They also provide deeper analysis of the concepts of "sacred" and "profane" to understand how religion and humanitarianism have been interlinked.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that faith communities encompass FBOs and individual congregations/churches/worship bodies, even though this chapter is focused largely on FBOs alone.

### **164.2.2 Context**

The broader context in which humanitarian-focused FBOs operate overlaps with the work of many secular organizations, and thus provides some basis for comparison and analysis. Ferris, for example, explains how coordination remains a weak area among secular and FBOs: “The fact is that coordination of NGO work implies a loss of the ‘sovereignty’ which most NGOs are reluctant to give up. In view of the competitive environment for raising funds, it is important for international NGOs to demonstrate their presence in a given emergency—even when it might be more cost-effective to channel funds through an already operational partner” (2005: 322). All NGOs, faith-based or not, feel the pressure of an environment in which they must compete for funds. Similarly she emphasizes the constant struggle of using humanitarian assistance as an instrument of foreign policy, and even the emergence of “for profit” humanitarian players, such as military or private contractors (2005: 323). These developments can affect funding, mandate and project decisions of secular and faith-based organizations. In addition, FBOs have the added burden of distinguishing themselves from other FBOs that may hold very different beliefs and priorities. Obviously FBOs of different faiths are less likely to be conflated, but FBOs of the same religion may easily be lumped into one general category, even if they are quite different. For example, an FBO with Christian roots but focused on humanitarian relief may not want to be identified with a highly evangelical group focused on spreading the Gospel over feeding hungry people or providing clean water (2005: 323). It may be seen as bad public relations, or worse, jeopardize their work with a government, local village, other organizations, or the population they are serving. On some level this effort may occur with all organizations at work, secular or faith-based, but the need to differentiate FBOs within religions is an added challenge for FBOs. Indeed, more broadly speaking, FBOs may operate in a context where they need to justify their motives to a greater extent, given that authorities may be suspicious of their motivations over, say, Doctors without Borders or the International Red Cross/Red Crescent.

### **164.3 A Few Relevant Theoretical Approaches**

Because FBOs have been studied from a range of disciplines, one would imagine that various theoretical lenses have been applied. However, few have drawn on specific theories to describe the nature of FBOs and their role and influence in the places in which they work. While any number of frameworks could be applied, a natural theoretical fit from a political science/international relations perspective may be to employ transnational non-state actor perspectives within neoliberal institutionalist or constructivist approaches. Moving away from focusing on the state as the main actor, transnational literature sheds light on how non-state actors (particularly networks) can have influence across state lines. Risse et al. (1999), for

example, look specifically at the abilities of transnational non-state actors (like international FBOs) to link up with domestic actors and partners, in turn affecting policy or state behavior. They argue that the diffusion of international norms in the human rights area depends on the establishment and the sustainability of networks among domestic and transnational actors who manage to link up with international regimes and alert Western public opinion and Western governments (1999: 4). Case studies look closely at how norms and ideas influence state actions, and explore the conditions under which networks of domestic and transnational actors are able to change domestic structures themselves. Their constructivist approach thus allows a fuller understanding of how non-state actors and transnational actors can shape politics (Betts 2009: 33). This might be a natural theory to apply to the study of FBOs for a better understanding of their influence vis-à-vis the states in which they work.

Keck and Sikkink (1998) have also contributed directly to this line of reasoning, discussing the importance of “transnational advocacy networks” which rally around a “principled issue” for the diffusion of international human rights norms (see also Keohane and Nye 1971). They argue that these networks build links among civil society, states, and IOs, and multiply the channels of access to the international system (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 1). In some areas they bring the international to the domestic by making resources more available:

By thus blurring the boundaries between a state’s relations with its own nationals and the recourse both citizens and states have to the international system, advocacy networks are helping to transform the practice of national sovereignty. (1998: 1–2)

They claim that because the networks are motivated by values more than resources, they can go beyond policy change to even change the nature and terms of the debate by “framing” issues and targeting accordingly (1998: 2). Thus, transnational networks are complex agents who not only participate in politics, but also shape them, and thus “...bridge the increasingly artificial divide between international and national realm” (1998: 4). These networks, then, “...participate in domestic and international politics simultaneously” (1998: 4). Grace Skogstad’s (Ed.) *Policy Paradigms, Transnationalism, and Domestic Politics* (2011) also demonstrates how transnational actors can be sources of norms (2011: 17).

These theories are generally executed within the discipline of political science and international relations, however they shed light on interesting claims about the role and capacities of international organizations. It is even more interesting to see where and how such theories might be applied to international FBOs in particular, as will be considered below via an analysis of the facets of FBOs. Additional studies may also consider employing constructivist approaches that examine the organizational nature of international FBOs, exploring whether they can be prone to the same bureaucratic pathologies as some other international organizations (see Barnett and Finnemore 1999), and how they develop and change over time.

## 164.4 Why FBOs Are Unique to Other Organizations

Cautious that not all FBOs are the same and that they are better viewed on a spectrum than via any generalizations or binary analysis with secular organizations, there are some broader facets that make FBOs unique. Indeed, it is a question that FBOs themselves also wonder (for example, Ferris 2011: 614 quotes a leader of Christian Aid asking, "...is Christian Aid just an Oxfam with hymn books?"). Building on the definitions, concepts, history and theory above, this section will unpack some of the differences that make FBOs, of varying places on the spectrum, unique to secular organizations. Ferris identifies two facets that set FBOs apart from most other organizations:

...they are motivated by their faith and they have a constituency which is broader than humanitarian concerns. For believers, to be a Jew or a Muslim or a Christian implies a duty to respond to the needs of the poor and the marginalized. (Ferris 2005: 316)

These differences also infer a few other important characteristics that make FBOs unique, including their relationship to those they serve and how they are perceived by others (media, for example, or others outside their religion). It may also be the case that they more often consist of transnational networks of other religious affiliates, lending them different political sway than other actors, although this has yet to be fully studied.

### 164.4.1 *Motives*

Stemming from the working definitions above, it is clear that FBOs are more likely to be working from different motives than other organizations. Themes of hospitality, welcoming the stranger, exile, assisting the poor and marginalized and loving one's neighbor are common to most major religions, and especially Christianity, which this chapter looks at more closely. As mentioned above, themes of "sanctuary" and "refuge" resonate throughout Christian history, and one might even consider how moral authority is attached to humanitarian work of faith or secular bases, particularly in light of "humanitarian space" and "responsibility to protect" themes in recent years. Barnett and Stein analyze notions of humanitarianism and religion in light of Durkheim's "sacred" and "profane" (with "sacred" being "superior in dignity and power to profane things," and "profane" being "everyday" things (2012: 15). They write, "Religious orders are often known for their lifelong commitment to the marginalized and vulnerable, believing that by serving the poor they are serving God" (Barnett and Stein 2012: 20). Ferris also writes how "Both Christians and Muslims believe that 'there's a witness of faith through charity that is a way of life and expression of obedience to God'"

(Ferris 2005: 324)<sup>4</sup> and that for many, it is hard to conceive of a humanitarian gesture that is outside the scope of religion, noting Islamic societies, for example, which seek to integrate all aspects of physical life with spiritual life, a theme common to some Christian organizations as well. These motives can also make FBOs incredibly useful:

[People of faith are] usually the people on the front lines of need and human assistance. They go there motivated purely out of love for their human brothers and sisters (...). The faith-based mechanism is a lot of times the easiest mechanism for the government to use to reach those people who are not usually reached, and, therefore, more in need. (Ferris 2005: 324)<sup>5</sup>

Wilson (2011) also depicts these unique motives, writing on the concept of hospitality among FBOs in the politics of asylum in Australia. She considers how they might hold extra leverage, noting that religion helped develop many concepts of hospitality invoked today. She writes, “Hospitality has a long association with asylum and sanctuary practices in various religious and secular traditions and is used with particular reference to strangers and foreigners in the philosophical and political writings of Kant, Levinas (1981) and Derrida (2000); (see also Baker 2009; Bretherton 2010; Gauthier 2007; Marfleet 2011; Pohl 2006, 1999)” (2011: 550).

#### ***164.4.2 Network and Donor Base***

Among the most distinctive qualities of FBOs is their donor base, often the foundation of the transnational network. First and foremost, this relates to finances; FBOs can tap into a different base, one that is often a “built-in” tradition throughout history. Indeed, Abby Stoddard writes that in the U.S.,

[t]he widespread practice among evangelicals of tithing (giving 10 % of income to church-sponsored charity) makes them a potentially much more lucrative source of private relief and development funding than the average US private donor, who directs only roughly 1 % of donations to foreign causes’ (Ferris 2005: 323)<sup>6</sup>

Many Christians in the U.S. context, for example, expect their churches to be involved in international mission, and see that as an extension of their own place in the church. Ferris writes that because of this, FBOs tend to have at least some unrestricted funding, giving them operational freedom unlike organizations that rely completely on government funds for their resources (Ferris 2005: 617).<sup>7</sup> Thus, to

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<sup>4</sup>Citing “International faith-based initiatives: Can they work?” Available at <http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/resources/articles/International-Faith-Based-Initiatives.html> (last visited 6 June 2012).

<sup>5</sup>Citing Linda Shovlain of the Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives of the USAID.

<sup>6</sup>Citing Abby Stoddard, “With Us or Against Us? NGO Neutrality on the Line, Humanitarian Practice Network,” December 2003.

<sup>7</sup>However, many are still in competition with other secular NGOs (and even military or private contractors) for funds as well, and can thus be subject to turf wars like so many other organizations.



some extent—and likely a greater extent than secular organizations—FBOs can count on local church communities to be an automatic place to seek funds. Certainly variation may occur, but it is an automatic donor base to tap. FBOs aligned with a particular denomination (Lutheran World Relief or Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, for example), can also expect funds (though certainly unpredictable and sometimes meager as any other organization might face as well) from their specific denomination and even individual churches. In many cases, mission committees may designate special offerings for such organizations.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond funding, FBOs can also appeal to this “automatic constituency” with information. Indeed, they can spread the word with an already-established database of people throughout the world who can be reached with information about an FBOs cause, work, or a recent crisis worthy of attention. These networks are broad and geographically-spread, and because of them FBOs are more likely to be “...‘well-equipped’ to offer trained and experienced leadership, money and grass-roots participants and they have pre-existing communication channels (from weekly bulletins and address lists to synods) and enterprise tools (from telephones and facilities for printing publicity material to legal advice) which can be drawn upon” (Snyder 2011b: 578). There is also a sense of connection between locals, spanning the globe—for example, a church in California may feel an automatic connection to a church in Nigeria. Indeed, Ferris writes that this built-in vast global network links people to one another besides funding and programming (Ferris 2011: 617). Of course technology makes this even easier—churches now have Facebook pages, leaders of FBOs can “tweet” to church members, and people can spread the message through blogs and email forwards. Thus, “...religion can be tapped to raise emotion for a religious community and national identity” (Keyes 1979 in Horstmann 2011: 516). Though certainly not always successful, FBOs tend to have a useful database of “constituents” who are ready to receive information; this social organization alone is an asset coveted by any communications officer.<sup>9</sup>

### **164.4.3 Reach and Scope**

Finally, closely linked to the preceding section, FBOs are unique in the scope of reach that they have throughout their network. Though certainly larger secular organizations can span the globe, reaching highly remote areas with numerous field offices, FBOs can be connected in a different way. Namely, being able to connect with local churches on the ground can, in some cases, give them an angle in that other international organizations might not have. In other words, if both an FBO and a secular organization are new to a country, the FBO might have an easier time

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<sup>8</sup>This is not to say that funds are easy to come by, particularly when congregations may be underfunded or unwilling to provide funds beyond small local projects.

<sup>9</sup>It is also worth noting that Barnett and Stein (2012) unpack some of the different ways religious labels can be used in strategy.

connecting because they can go to already established churches or congregations to connect locally. In Barnett and Stein’s volume, Taihe (2012: 20) writes,

...missionaries have always played the ‘long game’ and missions, whether by choice or circumstance, have been closer to the people than their modern, secular contemporaries...

Barnett and Stein even argue that religious organizations are more accountable to local populations because they are more firmly embedded in the local community (2012: 21) and are “less likely to have a traveling class of expatriate professionals who move from one ‘emergency’ to another” (2012: 22). Ferris (2005) also notes that FBOs can, in some cases, be the first to respond on the ground if they already have local offices or support. In the case of refugees entering Tanzania, for example, Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (connected to the international Lutheran World Federation) reminds its donors that it was able to mobilize and respond to refugee needs instantly because they were already working in those regions, whereas larger, international organizations took days to get expatriate staff in place. Ferris (2005) reminds readers that these groups seldom receive media attention, but that they may be among the best-situated to respond to some crises. Damaris Seleina Parsitau also demonstrates how faith can be used to help integrate displaced persons into new circumstances—again, something that FBOs might be better situated for (2011: 494).

## **164.5 The Uniqueness of FBOs: Challenge or Asset?**

The preceding section considered ways in which FBOs—along the diverse spectrum in which they may fall and the many ways they can operate as a transnational network within different state environments—are unique to secular organizations, which are also very diverse. It examined three broad categories: motivations, donor base/network, and reach/scope. This section will consider the ways in which these differences represent challenges or assets to their work. It will avoid normative judgments, but will try to provide better context for the debate, outlining where these highlighted differences benefit or challenge their work. Ultimately, it will argue that the differences represent far more strengths than challenges, and that FBOs are well-positioned to respond in ways that secular organizations may fall short. This does not mean that FBOs are “better” than secular organizations—indeed, secular organizations may outperform FBOs in other ways—but that they may be able to fill in gaps of needs that may otherwise go unaddressed.

### ***164.5.1 In Light of Different Motivations***

Working from different motivations is certainly unique, but can be both a challenge and an asset to the work of FBOs, and again, it greatly matters what “type” of FBO one is examining. It is also important to note that a number of FBOs hire workers of

different faiths (or no faith), and even those that do require employees to believe the same principles cannot guarantee the personal motives of every employee. In other words, one cannot be certain or measure whether every World Vision employee, for example, is motivated solely by his or her faith in Jesus Christ. Regardless, as Snyder notes, a voice of a religious viewpoint may carry moral authority that secular organizations may not. In looking at Christian FBOs, churches may use their voice of moral authority to highlight certain issues or even push for social change. In one case, Snyder writes how churches can help to “settle” refugees who have arrived, introducing them to their new community, and “unsettle” an established population’s attitudes and government policies (Snyder 2011a, b: 556). Similarly this moral authority has been used to mobilize and raise awareness among broader populations, as has been seen in the United States with the Sanctuary Movement (Marfleet 2011), or in Australia with churches speaking out against detention (Wilson 2011), to name a few examples.

These different motivations can also be an asset to FBO’s work in helping to reframe and conceptualize humanitarian work. Ferris (2005), Barnett and Stein (2012), and others have indicated that humanitarian and human rights of today have their roots in religion, demonstrating that motivations to respond to an “aching world” and the assumption of a voice of moral authority have brought about positive elements. Even today FBOs help to frame and reframe the terms of humanitarian issues broadly, and relating to the inclusion of forced migrants; from how organizations relate to individuals to the vocabulary used toward them. Wilson, for example, examines how religious conceptions of hospitality undergird discourses of protection relating to asylum seekers and refugees (2011: 551), and notes that religion underlies human rights as well (also see Ager and Ager 2011: 551). Verbs like “accompany” and “serve” evoke a different relationship to individuals with whom they work than some secular discourse. Similarly Ferris (2011) writes that FBOs moved away from the “donor-recipient” vocabulary in favor of “partnership” approaches as they sought to move away from Northern churches overpowering Southern churches (Ferris 2011: 618), noting an odd benefit from a missionary past in the 1960s, where power dynamics were questioned. Likewise such motives may predispose employees of FBOs to “care” and “love” those with whom they work in a different way, that is, if they are drawing upon religious themes in their faith tradition.<sup>10</sup> FBOs such as the Free Burma Rangers working with Karen refugees in Thailand, for example, draw upon a number of themes of exile and displacement in the Bible in comparing the suffering of refugees and internally displaced persons to biblical stories.<sup>11</sup>

Working from different motivations can also pose a challenge to FBOs’ work. Ferris notes that classic humanitarian principles of neutrality and objectivity may clash with FBOs’ motivations of justice and solidarity with the poor (2011: 618).

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<sup>10</sup>That is not to imply, however, that those working for secular organizations cannot also “care” and “love” those they are serving.

<sup>11</sup>There are, of course, additional examples where the invocation of religion can be a method of political or social manipulation (see for example, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011a, b, c; Horstmann 2011).

Likewise, FBOs are subject to rifts in their own faith communities about theological issues—ranging anywhere debates about Israel and Palestine to the use of condoms in Africa. Some FBOs may also receive a lot of money from governments, and may not be as independent as they proclaim (Ferris 2011). More common criticisms may also apply: some FBOs, particularly those on the more extreme end of the spectrum, may view “evangelism” and “salvation” as more important than the provision of medical supplies. Certainly many FBOs would adamantly disagree with such practices, but the diversity among FBOs exemplifies these clashing priorities. Likewise while religious communities have been vehicles of social change in some historical moments, the reality is that they have also stood in the way at other points in history. These challenges are, of course, in addition to the challenges that all NGOs or IOs face, including but not limited to competition for donor funds, turf wars, and difficulties with coordination.

### ***164.5.2 In Light of a Different Donor Base/Network***

Receiving funds and resources from a different donor base, such as church congregations and denominations in the Christian Western tradition, many FBOs have an advantage in that they have a separate place to seek funds—an automatic group that is already well-established. They may also have a significant leg up on secular organizations trying to gain funds from the same faith communities, as faith communities may prefer to give to an organization that shares their beliefs over one that is secular. Church mission committees, for example, will recommend FBOs worthy of support to broader church members; they may even take special offerings or participate in special programs to raise funds. These networks are a unique element to the international community, and remain largely understudied. Indeed, transnational advocacy networks have received significant attention in recent years, but little research has been carried out on the multi-layer, diversified religious-based networks that FBOs can tap into. Horstmann, for example, draws on Castells social network approach (understanding the world as “reconstituting itself around a series of networks strung around the globe based on advanced communication technologies”) (Horstmann 2011: 516). This different donor base can also be an asset for mobilizing political or social campaigns to pressure government decisions, or to carrying out massive grassroots campaigns to assist a population, be it via an “underground railroad” of some sort, as with the Sanctuary Movement, or with simply sharing church building space to teach job training classes, language classes, or community meeting space (Snyder 2011b: 576) Indeed, “...from ‘potluck dinners to job referrals’, being part of a religious community provides avenues for social advancement, leadership, community service and respect, as well as social, cultural and socio-economic roles” (Hirschman 2007: 414 in Snyder 2011b: 576).

However, this alternative donor base/network does have some strings attached. As with any donor base for faith or secular organizations, givers may grow tired of supporting certain projects, or may simply find their budgets tighter depending on

economic conditions or willingness to give. In addition, FBOs may feel beholden to carry out projects in line with donor priorities, again, a similar problem experienced by all organizations. FBOs may also feel like every cause has to be justified according to that faith community's priorities, limiting their scope in some cases (that is, a focus on child poverty or anti-abortion may push an FBO to ignore other needs, such as income-generation activities). They may also have fewer resources to tap into as some church membership decreases, or as some churches trend away from international "mission" and focus on helping people locally. These shifts are not just haphazard; they represent deep theological movements within religious communities, and are a reflection of religious landscape today. Finally, in some cases, FBOs are holding their work to the emotionally charged level of spirituality, righteousness and God, invoking a heftiness to their actions that, in some cases, may leave little room for debate or discussion. Invoking moral authority may, in more extreme cases, omit the possibility of "agreeing to disagree" and cause tension and infighting more often than in other organizations.<sup>12</sup>

### ***164.5.3 Reach and Scope***

As noted above, FBOs can have a different reach than other organizations. In the best of cases, being tied to religion may grant them more access, enabling them the cover to work more freely and to be seen as spiritual rather than political entities. A Christian organization may gain greater trust from a government than a non-Christian one in a predominantly Christian country, or a Muslim organization more trust than a secular one in a Muslim-majority country. Greater access and freedom of operation can be enormous assets in a humanitarian response. FBOs may also reach more people in need by tapping into the larger diaspora of the community of faith. Indeed, Ferris notes that churches can be excellent providers of information (Ferris 2005: 320), and that in some cases many can continue working long after NGOs have withdrawn expatriate staff because they have local connections on the ground (Ferris 2005: 321). Religious or secular global networks, like the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR)<sup>13</sup> can also foster their unique reach and scope. FBOs may also dabble in a range of issue areas, or may even overlap between human rights work and humanitarian work (Ferris 2005: 321). Ferris

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<sup>12</sup>Of course this is not to say that many FBOs do not have healthy debates and approach difficult humanitarian issues with humility—indeed, many are exemplary in how they operate in this manner.

<sup>13</sup>Created in 1972, the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) is an alliance for voluntary action of ACT Alliance, Care International, Caritas Internationalis, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Lutheran World Federation, Oxfam International, Save the Children and World Vision International. See [www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-about-schr](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-about-schr) for more. Accessed 29 July 2012.

writes: “In practice, it is not possible to entirely separate the work of humanitarian and human rights NGOs, as they often overlap. Faith-based organizations, with their commitment to justice, tend to further blur the distinctions” (2005: 321). This can be both an asset and a challenge, and may cause them to be viewed differently. In blurring boundaries of humanitarian work and human rights, some with a greater focus on evangelism may also blur proselytizing and assistance, in a worst case scenario being seen as trying to “sneak in” conversion under the auspices of aid. Though somewhat rare, all it takes are a few horror stories of forced altar calls in return for food to raise concern about the intentions of all FBOs. There are past stories of a small number of FBO selecting beneficiaries based on faith, a practice that violates the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality, in some cases detracting from the work of FBOs (see, for example, Ferris 2011: 617).

## 164.6 Shifts

There are significant shifts occurring among FBOs, some of which will directly affect the challenges and assets mentioned above, and all of which pertain to the unique characteristics of FBOs. Ferris, for example, emphasizes trends of professionalization as one area of change. In particular FBOs are increasingly trying to distance themselves from missionary activity, employing more secular professionals and adhering to high professional standards to be taken seriously by others in the international humanitarian community, including other organizations, donors and governments (Ferris 2011: 614). She notes that the word “professionalism” is highly charged, and has a clear Northern/Western bias (2011: 619), implying in some cases that “faith-based” is the opposite of “professionalism” (2011: 619). Whether this is fair or not, numerous partnerships continue to develop between secular organizations, and it is certainly the case that some large FBOs are more comfortable associating with secular organizations than evangelicals in their own religious traditions. Ferris writes, “A fifty-year tradition of ‘inter-church aid’ is being replaced in many quarters by professional programs to eradicate poverty and respond to emergencies” (2005: 319). FBOs are also increasingly encouraged to depoliticize their views (2011: 615). Similar to secular organizations, Ferris notes that FBOs operate in a context that is increasingly about emergency response and one where governments are more and more willing to contract funds to NGOs than before (2005: 317). She writes, “The impact of increasing governmental resources, the shift toward emergency response, the expanding role of the media in shaping humanitarian response, and the proliferation of NGOs has accentuated competition between NGOs...At the same time, greater media attention to emergencies coupled with growing donor requirements for accountability has stepped up the pressure on international NGOs to implement more professional programs” (2005: 318). Obtaining more government funds and under greater scrutiny, FBOs are having to respond to a greater degree of measurable results and reporting requirements; more stringent standards than they were likely to have faced when only dealing with funds from congregations.

Many church-based organizations have also signed the NGO/Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct for Humanitarian Work (2005: 319), and there is also a greater push to foster more local NGO responses as a way to balance North/South power imbalances (2005: 318).

Similarly, as many scholars point out, the pendulum shifts regarding how religion is perceived and used strategically (Barnett and Stein 2012; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011a, b, c). Though just one example and certainly not generalizable for all FBOs, Horstmann (2011) considers how faith traditions can be invoked via networks to push for a specific cause. He looks specifically at FBOs' alliance with Karen Baptist networks to explore the nexus of being stateless and mobilized by Christian missionary movements, and examines FBOs like the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) (see [www.tbtc.org/](http://www.tbtc.org/)) and Free Burma Rangers (see [www.freeburmarangers.org](http://www.freeburmarangers.org)). He writes of global alliances that fuel their cause, writing, "The Karen and their Christian partner organizations have woven the images of the atrocities perpetrated by the Burmese military into a powerful narrative about social suffering and Christian liberation. In the propaganda material that is shown in videos, magazines, and on websites, the suffering of the Karen people provides the platform for the heroic efforts of Karen Christian relief teams that provide humanitarian aid to the wounded" (2011a, b, c: 515). He notes that they are able to reach places that other humanitarian workers cannot, and that they are able to fund and share their message far more widely because of these alliances. He also writes, however, that this relationship places humanitarian NGOs in an ethical dilemma, as they are supposed to stay neutral, but in this case have been drawn into privileging the Christian Baptist Karen. Thus he argues that FBOs in the camps on the Thai-Burma border understand their support as spiritual engagement in which humanitarian aid and proselytizing are intertwined; this in turn makes these FBOs politically biased, something he fears may fuel more conflict (2011a, b, c: 515). Even training materials from the Free Burma Rangers evoke powerful imagery. One leadership training program available on the Free Burma Rangers website is entitled "Fighting the Serpent," a title meant to evoke images of fighting evil. At the same time, the training focuses on aiding internally displaced persons of any ethnicity or religious persuasion in a humanitarian way, focusing on medicine, food, water and protection.<sup>14</sup>

In a different vein, Barnett and Stein also point out that globalization is changing the way FBOs operate, and that even as some churches lose membership, FBOs continue to operate with strength. For example, they write of a surge in some giving

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<sup>14</sup>A story incorporated in the training material discusses a young woman who protected Jews fleeing Nazis. It reads, "Stefania especially was in a situation very similar to FBR relief teams accompanying IDPs. If you find yourself in a desperate situation when you are on an FBR relief team, do what Stefania did. Do not give in to fear or despair even if there is no human way out. Even if it looks for sure like you and the IDPs with you will die in a matter of hours or in minutes, do not give in to fear and do not give up. Pray together. Ask God for help, and be ready to act on an answer if and when it comes. And if you do die, know that you die for love and that you die in love and that the serpent has not won and will not." Linking these narratives provides a powerful religious undertone of righteousness. Full training literature available from [www.freeburmarangers.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/FightingTheSerpent.pdf](http://www.freeburmarangers.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/FightingTheSerpent.pdf).

to FBOs since the 1990s: “American churches have increased their giving to overseas ministries by almost 50 % over the past decade and, according to recent figures, gave nearly \$3.7 billion...” (2012: 5). They attribute some of this to increased affluence among American Christians, but also emphasize the effects of globalization bringing greater global engagement on issues that were previously foreign (2012: 6). They note that “...just as Christianity is globalizing, so too is Christian-based humanitarianism” (2012: 6).<sup>15</sup> Some Christians may even feel closer and more solidarity with Christians on the other side of the world than they did before. Megachurches may even see “new lands of opportunity for activism and missionary work,” considering how they might work directly in establishing global ministries rather than working through intermediaries (2012: 6). This may require former “middlemen” like the World Council of Churches or Action by Churches Together to reinvent themselves, as churches find themselves doing their own projects directly, rather than going through these organizations.

## 164.7 Gaps and Further Questions

In addition to calls for further research on non-western and non-Christian FBOs, a number of theoretical questions emerge, some of which are listed here:

- If FBOs operate from different motivations and donor bases, do they also, in a sense, play by different rules? Does that make them more or less predictable; more or less useful to work with?
- What differences and similarities emerge between Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and other FBOs—there are so many differences within each one, is it even possible to compare across religions?
- In refugee situations in particular, and humanitarian situations in general, there is often such a conglomeration of organizations (secular NGOs, FBOs, the UN and other “implementing partners”). Is it reasonable to expect quality coordination and cooperation with so many different actors, each with different motives?
- How is “professionalization” changing the humanitarian work of FBOs? Can FBOs get away with positions or behaviors that others cannot (that is, are they held to a different standard, such as that they might not be required to maintain political neutrality in humanitarian assistance)?
- How can greater cooperation between FBOs and secular organizations be attained?
- What other gaps exist, and what might different disciplines have to offer this area of study?
- On a deeper level, how much do motives really matter? Do some human rights or humanitarian secular organizations take on “religious” undertones with human rights rhetoric being the “religion”? For example, Barnett and Stein write, “...all

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<sup>15</sup>They go on to discuss other religions as well.



humanitarian organizations are faith-based—but they are faith-based in different ways” (Barnett and Stein 2012: 23). Is this true?

- Barnett and Stein hold that religious organizations may be more likely to behave consistently with their principles. Is this the case? (Barnett and Stein 2012: 20).

## 164.8 Conclusions

This chapter has examined FBOs in light of their unique differences to secular organizations, noting all the while the problematic notions tied to terms, definitions, generalizations and binaries. It has considered motives, donor bases and networks, and the reach and scope of FBOs, particularly in light of challenges and strengths attributed with each characteristic, ultimately arguing that FBOs may have the potential to fill gaps unaddressed by other organizations, but that further coordination and research is needed. It has looked specifically at refugee examples, and predominantly at Christian FBOs, and has considered international relations theoretical lenses, such as constructivist and neoliberal institutionalist transnational network perspectives. Certainly there is much more work to be done. Indeed, Ferris emphasizes that most of what is known about FBOs comes from within their own assessments, and more scholarly research is needed, particularly to avoid generalizing and “homogenizing” them (Ferris 2011: 621). Barnett and Stein also echo calls for further research more broadly and with respect to religious organizations, writing that “The humanitarian sector is data-poor, frustrating any attempt to talk about trends, patterns and dynamics” (Barnett and Stein 2012: 10). Thus, the field is ripe for further research from various disciplines, including politics and international relations (which may apply transnational network or regime theoretical approaches), sociological or anthropological studies (perhaps examining the organizational or bureaucratic constructs of FBOs and the power and authority they project) or research on intersections with political and civil society, and each other. Indeed, scholarship in these areas is only beginning to unlock doors of potential research. But it can go much further than intellectual interest; understanding the role and capacities of FBOs may help reveal better ways of responding to the needs of those facing humanitarian crises, something that FBOs and secular organizations alike could always improve on.

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