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Philanthropists, humanitarians, colonial officers, missionaries, foreign aid workers and their "professionality": looking at the past to look forward

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In this article, historian Natalie Klein-Kelly delves into the origins of humanitarianism. Through a fascinating and at times surprising journey into the past, she provides the keys to a better understanding of humanitarian work today.

Substantial work has been carried out, particularly in the past 15 years, to link humanitarianism to its own past, depicting the threads that run back through two centuries between the abolition of slavery, religious reform, sustainable development and human rights advocacy.[1] This has helped identify "the remarkable persisting patterns that still continue to inform action on behalf of distant strangers".[2] Although this may not be obvious, or even particularly comfortable, for current humanitarians, missionaries and colonial officers, this can justifiably be regarded as the "origin" or "archaeology" of their own professions today.[3]

This article explores what those who have ventured – over the past two centuries and up to recent times – outside their own societies to help strangers in foreign lands may have in common. It focuses on those going abroad physically, and living there for a certain time: i.e. individuals engaging in "field work"outside their own country, rather than those making only short-term, periodic visits, working in "headquarters" locations or undertaking humanitarian work in their own home countries. It purposely looks for commonalities rather than differences in the rich tapestry of humanitarian work abroad, with the hypothesis of identifying a certain continuity that reaches even into today's world. Looking at who went and what they did, the paper will touch on 19th century philanthropists – specifically "philhellenists"[4] – and missionaries, early 20th century colonial officers and relief "agents", thereby making links to late 20th century aid workers, notably from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF). In view of recent trends towards specialisation, the paper asks whether humanitarian work really has, only now, become more of a profession and career than a vocation, and what this profession – if it is one – is ultimately about.[5]

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[1] Silvia Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism, 1755-1989: In the Name of Others*, Manchester University Press, 2019.
[2] Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empires, and Advocacy*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 10.
[3] Silke Roth, *The Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate Professionals*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 61–62.
[4] Natalie Klein, *L'humanité, le christianisme, et la liberté: Die internationale philhellenische Vereinsbewegung der 1820er Jahre*, Philipp von Zabern, 2000.
[5] Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, "Humanitarianism: A Brief History of the Present", *in* Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss (eds.), *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 12 and 31.

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More about character and general skills, less about specific capabilities

Looking at pre-deployment professions, there are striking commonalities with the past. Lawyers, doctors, religious people and "generalists" apparently fill the "world of professional humanitarianism" today, as they did a hundred years ago.[6] In the 1820s, doctors, ex-soldiers and – famously – a poet were amongst those sent to Greece to manage the use of (donor) funds.[7] After large-scale wars, such as those of the Napoleonic era and the World Wars, ex-military profiles predominated, for example in colonial services, which, in turn, also impacted the first generation of Oxfam field directors in the 1960s.[8] Ex-military profiles continue to be found in humanitarian organisations' field offices today.[9] It is the humanitarian sector's openness to a wide pre-deployment background that seems characteristic across two centuries, as also seen in the explicit drive to include "the layman", as well as artisans and skilled workers, in certain missionary societies in 19th century.[10] The contemporary rise of specialised university degrees in humanitarian studies is, maybe accordingly, characterised by their multidisciplinary character.[11]

The "desire to be a moral person" undoubtedly plays a strong role in the humanitarian sector, in the present and the past.[12] To be precise, travelling elsewhere, outside one's kin, culture and country, cannot be motivated by "biological altruism", which may motivate a local actor, but instead must point to combinations of "behavioural altruism" or "psychological altruism".[13] How altruistic motivations are articulated has changed over the centuries, with a moral framing that is less acceptable in today's world than in the past, but these motivations remain strong even today.[14] Throughout, altruistic values appear to intertwine with self-realisation, a wish to be "authentic" and a sense of "adventure".[15] How a colonial officer articulated his motivation in the 1950s, in his memoires, probably still resonates today: "working with, and gaining an understanding of, people of a different culture from myself; a job […] geared to assisting people's development; opportunity for outdoor adventure and exploration; of being part of a service. Somewhere running through this […] (perhaps subconsciously) is a wish to be a bit different".[16]

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[6] Stephen Hopgood, "For a fleeting moment: The short, happy life of modern humanism", *in* Michael Barnett (ed.), *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A World of Differences?*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 99 ; Cédric Cotter, *(S')Aider pour survivre. Action humanitaire et neutralité suisse pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Georg Editeur, 2017, pp. 73, 136, 227.
[7] Amongst others: Dr Samuel Howe, Dr Bailly, Colonel Stanhope, General von Heideck, and Lord Byron, see Natalie Klein, *L'humanité, le christianisme, et la liberté…, op. cit.*
[8] Chris Jeppesen, "'Sanders of the river, still the best job for a British boy': Recruitment to the colonial administrative service at the end of the empire" in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2016, p. 485 ; Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam – The First Fifty Years*, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 76, 126, 192.
[9] Mojtaba Salem, Nils Van Quaquebeke, Maria Besiou, "Aid worker adaptability in humanitarian operations: Interplay of prosocial motivation and authoritarian leadership" in *Production and Operations Management*, vol. 31, no. 11, June 2022, p. 3996.
[10] Roberto Catalano, "Missionary societies in
the evangelical churches: Origins and characteristics" in *Annales Missiologici Posnanienses,* vol. 19, 2014, p. 117.
[11] Valérie Gorin, "Humanitarian studies: a field still in the making" in *Humanitarian Alternatives*, vol. 25, March 2024, p. 102.
[12] Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield, "An introduction to the anthropology of humanitarianism", *in* Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield (eds.), *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism between Ethics and Politics*, The School for Advanced Research, 2011, p. 27.
[13] Gilles Carbonnier, "Reason, emotion, compassion: can altruism survive professionalisation in the humanitarian sector?" in *Disasters*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2015, pp. 191–196.
[14] Daniel Warner, "Henry Dunant's imagined community: Humanitarianism and the Tragic" in *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2013, pp. 16-17 ; Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield, "An introduction to the anthropology…", art. cit., p. 27.
[15] Silke Roth, *The Paradoxes of Aid Work…, op. cit.*, p. 52.
[16] Chris Jeppesen, "Sanders of the river…", art. cit., p. 506.

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Accordingly, in recruitment criteria, technical or professional backgrounds and skills appear to take second place to reputation and character across the two centuries. Characteristically, those going abroad were not recruited to work in their professions: in the 1820s Colonel Stanhope did not fight in Greece; the teacher Francesca Wilson managed aid in the First World War; Marcel Junod, a medical doctor, served as an ICRC negotiator in the Second World War.[17] For 19th century missionaries, next to dedication and willingness to deploy, a "friendly, humble, patient, never boastful, rude or selfish" character was sought.[18] In the first half of the 20th century the British Colonial Office recruited from the professional middle classes. "Innate qualities of character" were desired: "a good man" with imagination, sympathy and human understanding; a "good bush officer" with manners, discipline, a sense of humour, wanting a "worthwhile" career.[19] The ICRC, as recently as the 1970s, required a "venturesome wanderer", "healthy, good appearance, university education or professional training plus experience, language skills, proven moral character", with personal recommendations, able to conform to the culture and norms of their "mission" destination.[20] For the 'French doctors' – i.e. MSF and *Médecins du Monde* – in the 1990s, the impression was that idealism, adventurousness, courage and resilience were valued more than (medical) skill sets.[21] As recently as the last decade, statements can be found that a display of integrity, maturity and deep motivation for humanitarian action must count in recruitment.[22]

The main activities of humanitarians in the field

Once deployed, two specific types of activities predominate, neither one obviously linked to a skill set that a specific (pre-deployment) profession would ensure. First, from advocacy movements that developed from the late 18th century onwards, there is the need for trusted "first-hand information" and "testimonies", for validity as well as for accountability.[23] Relaying first-hand accounts back to constituencies in their home countries was also key for missionaries.[24] Reporting back to headquarters and donors occupied aid workers, from 19th century ICRC delegates to 20th century Oxfam field directors, and will resonate with contemporary aid workers.[25] The – perceived or real – need for a representative abroad, precisely to build trust and an understanding of the needs and to minimise the risks of misuse of donor funds, is recognised as a barrier in the contemporary drive towards localisation of humanitarian aid.[26]

Managerial aspects come next: organising, rather than personally providing, health, education and other (relief) services. As an example from the 1820s, the London Greek Committee envoy busied

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[17] For Francesca Wilson, see Silvia Salvatici, *Silvia Salvatici, A History of Humanitarianism…, op. cit., pp. 80–83*; Marcel Junod, *Le troisième combattant*, Europa Verlag, 1947; For Colonel Stanhope, see Natalie Klein, *L'humanité, le christianisme, et la liberté…*, *op. cit.*
[18] Roberto Catalano, "Missionary Societies…", art. cit., p. 109.
[19] Chris Jeppesen, "Sanders of the river…", art. cit., pp. 484–485, 493, 497, 500.
[20] Brigitte Troyon and Daniel Palmieri, "The ICRC delegate: an exceptional humanitarian player?" in *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 89, no. 865, March 2007, pp. 100–101, 108.
[21] See Renée C. Fox, "Medical humanitarianism and human rights: Reflections on Doctors without Borders and Doctors of the World", *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 41, no. 12, 1995, p. 1613.
[22] Gilles Carbonnier, "Reason, emotion, compassion…", art. cit, p. 200.
[23] Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 157.
[24] Silvia Salvatici, *History of Humanitarianism…*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
[25] Brigitte Troyon and Daniel Palmieri, "The ICRC delegate….", art. cit., p. 101 ; Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times…*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
[26] Patrick F. Gibbons and Cyril Otieku-Boadu, "The question is not 'If to localise?' but rather 'How to localise?': Perspectives from Irish Humanitarian INGOs" in *Frontiers in Political Science*, vol. 3, 2021, pp. 3–4.

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himself supervising the establishment of newspapers, an ammunition factory and schools in Greece, albeit with little success.[27] Missionaries' work included organising "higher quality of earthly living conditions": running schools, developing and printing teaching materials, advocating for "social change", building roads, and hygiene campaigns, all with a focus on "rationality" and "scientific progress" to parallel European advancements.[28] It could include managing large construction projects and governance structures.[29] All of this is not so different to the daily business of colonial officers in the mid-20th century, summarised as "delivery of good governance" and "human improvement".[30] "Agents" were required on site to supervise relief distribution, from the early 19th century onwards, but gained in importance in the first half of the 20th century for organisations such as the Save the Children Fund.[31] In the history of MSF, a pharmacist by training managed the general logistics across a multitude of camps in Cambodia in the late 1970s, a "*faiseur de miracles*".[32]

In the distant and recent past, tellingly humanitarian professionals have been called "jacks-of-all-trades".[33] This term may sit uncomfortably in the era of increasing specialisation that the humanitarian sector has entered in the past two decades, but even in this context, when deployed abroad, adaptability and agility of the humanitarian field worker is perceived as central.[34]

Maybe in recognition of general, rather than specific, professional skills, pre-deployment training has tended to focus on pre-departure briefings, typically increasing in formality and length over time. Missionary societies introduced pre-departure training courses in the 19th century, reaching a couple of years in length.[35] The British Colonial Office introduced a training curriculum in 1924 and expected university training after 1945.[36] The ICRC started its formal training as late as 1971, over a century after sending its first delegates to the field.[37] The growth in more specialised training for future humanitarians in recent decades, increasingly at university level, seems to follow this general pattern of increased professionalisation.[38] However, there remains a lack of consensus on which competences and skills should be taught in such courses, what is "useable" in field realities, and how to balance imparting technical knowledge and cultivating ethical consciousness.[39]

[27] Natalie Klein, *L'humanité, le christianisme, et la liberté…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 66.
[28] Silvia Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism…, op. cit.*, pp. 40, 41.
[29] Roberto Catalano, "Missionary Societies in the…", art. cit., pp. 118, 121, 124.
[30] Chris Jeppesen, "Sanders of the river…", art. cit., p. 501.
[31] Natalie Klein, *L'humanité, le christianisme, et la liberté…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 113 ; Missionaries and ICRC delegates supervised Save the Children Fund distributions as their "agents"; Patricia Sellick, *Responding to children affected by armed conflict: A case study of Save the Children Fund, (1919-1999)*, submitted for Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Bradford, 2001, pp. 48–50. https://bradscholars.brad.ac.uk/handle/10454/2813
[32] Anne Vallaeys, *Médecins Sans Frontières : la biographie*, Fayard, 2004, p. 489.
[33] Oxfam field staff, 1960s, Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times…*, *op. cit.*, p. 135; contemporarily, Dinah Rajak and Jock Stirrat, "Parochial Cosmopolitanism and the Power of Nostalgia", *in* David Mosse (ed.), *Adventures in Aidland: The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*, Berghahn, 2011, p. 163.
[34] Mojtabe Salem, Nils Van Quaquebeke and Maria Besiou, "Air worker adaptability in…", art. cit., pp. 3982–3984.
[35] Roberto Catalano, "Missionary Societies in the…", art. cit., p. 126.
[36] Chris Jeppesen, "Sanders of the river…", art. cit., p. 483.
[37] Brigitte Troyon and Daniel Palmieri, "The ICRC delegate…", art. cit., p. 101 ; Cédric Cotter, *(S')Aider pour survivre…*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.
[38] Monika Krause, *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason,* University of Chicago Press, 2014, p. 135.
[39] Valérie Gorin, "Humanitarian Studies …", art. cit., pp. 107–109; Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster*, Hurst & Company, 2015, p. 247.

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Becoming a professional through representing what is best to others

Having a profession confers professional autonomy in service provision.[40] What appears to provide this in the humanitarian sector is field experience: i.e., deployment counts, not a pre-deployment professional background or training. To give a simple linguistic example, one may train *to be* a missionary, but one *is* a missionary only after one has gone abroad and *has been* a missionary. This resonates with observations of the fragility of this "professional field", in which expert knowledge is acceptable if "from the field".[41] Accordingly, initial entry into today's humanitarian sector is regarded as being the greatest hurdle for aspiring humanitarian workers in order to join it.[42] The current popularity of humanitarian studies courses may link to a desire to increase chances of entering the sector, while not guaranteeing the same success that a professional degree may promise.[43]

This leads to the final question of what this profession of going abroad to help distant strangers – if, of course, it should be called a profession – is ultimately about, given that people with diverse backgrounds, strong vocational motivations and limited pre-deployment training, can all join it through undertaking it, with similar characteristics uniting past and present forms of this work.

Looking across the centuries, the humanitarian profession could provocatively be described as being a conveyor of the universal values that are, at any one time, considered – rightly or wrongly – to be in the best interests of "distant others" to learn from. For contemporary humanitarians, it may be their use of supposedly universal and "best" methodologies, such as tools derived from business practice, that makes them bearers of a kind of "universal rationality".[44] The image of being a bearer of "rationality" would have resonated with 19th century philanthropists, albeit using the terminology of "civilisation".[45] Through their presence, missionaries were to communicate the "cultural and human richness of western society, a blessing to be shared", with their wives explicitly encouraged to join overseas missions as representatives of "the mode of Christian life together with Western society's values".[46] A child of its time, *Médecins Sans Frontières* is said to have enjoyed the "image of medical hippies" in the early 1970s – also a value of sorts.[47] The ICRC using the term "delegate" for its overseas staff, even today, could be interpreted as, first and foremost, expecting staff to represent the norms and values that it stands for. Helping distant strangers by venturing abroad may thus be regarded as a profession of values, each of their times, regardless of whether it is also being undertaken by a professional.

The views expressed here are those of the author and may not represent organisations or institutions that the author is professionally associated with.

[40] Monika Krause, *The Good Project…, op. cit.*, pp. 135–136.
[41] David Mosse, "Introduction: The Anthropology of Expertise and Professionals in International Development", *in* David Mosse (ed.), *Adventures in Aidland…, op. cit.*, pp. 10–18.
[42] Silvia Roth, *Paradoxes of Aid Work…*, *op. cit*., pp. 77–79.
[43] Valérie Gorin, "Humanitarian Studies …", art. cit., p. 107.
[44] Dinah Rajak and Jock Stirrat, "Parochial Cosmopolitanism …", art. cit., p. 166.
[45] Natalie Klein, *L'humanité, le christianisme, et la liberté…, op. cit.*, p. 296.
[46] Roberto Catalano, "Missionary Societies…", art. cit., p. 111; Silvia Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism*…, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 43–45.
[47] Peter Redfield, *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors without Borders*, University of California Press, 2013, p. 57.

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Biography

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