

# Secular-Religious Dynamics and their Effect on Humanitarian Norms Compliance

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## Abstract

We propose a more nuanced examination of the powerful forces that play a role in shaping the view shared by many international humanitarians that religions have a predominantly negative influence. First, we examine the role of secularist underpinnings of humanitarian discourse in shaping secular-religious dynamics in the humanitarian sphere, and the intersection of this with other forces of power. We argue that analyses of secular-religious dynamics are essential to understanding the roles of and attitudes towards faith actors in humanitarian norms compliance as well as the actions and reactions of faith and humanitarian actors. Theoretically, we ground the article in an analysis of secular perspectives towards impartiality and neutrality, the observation of which is meant to secure humanitarian space. Interrogating secular perspectives on humanitarian action helps demonstrate how impartiality and neutrality can be used as reasons to avoid engagement with faith actors. A secular approach to humanitarian action tolerates religion with boundary-creation around what is permitted from faith actors, applying a reductive ‘good’/‘bad’ binary. We then examine the experiences of local faith actors (LFAs) in South Sudan in interaction with international humanitarians with respect to humanitarian principles. These examples demonstrate how LFAs comply with humanitarian principles and view this as part and parcel of their commitment to the values of their faith tradition. They also show how LFAs create space for humanitarian norms compliance of other actors through their peacebuilding work and have been relied upon to access parts of the country that are inaccessible to international humanitarians due to safety concerns.

**Keywords:** faith actor; humanitarian; humanitarian norms compliance; humanitarian principles; religious; secular

## 1. Introduction

In 2010, a news story hit the headlines in the UK about the brutal execution of a British doctor and health team in Afghanistan (Davies 2010). As details of the story emerged, some of the debate centred around the thread that an evangelizing Christian faith-based organization had enraged local Taliban members in the area and that the killings were an act of retaliation. The exact circumstances may never be established, but this depiction of events captured media imagination. While other interpretations of the attack included Taliban activity to target Westerners in general, religion played a part in the analysis and storytelling afterwards. It is these kinds of stories that establish some of the fears and distancing around

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religions in humanitarian response, and which shape as well as reflect dominant humanitarian discourses about the roles, influence and engagement of faith actors with respect to humanitarian norms compliance in armed conflict. Faith-based organizations, such as the one in the news report, are viewed as evangelizers who will bring trouble by disregarding local beliefs and asserting colonizing tropes of conversion, while local faith-actors<sup>1</sup> (typified by the Taliban in this case) are something to be feared as politicized and violent forces. The Taliban's actions suggest a clear example of humanitarian norms non-compliance by religiously motivated actors in that the attack was on health workers with a humanitarian mission. However, on the part of the Taliban fighters, another reading of the event is that an evangelizing mission (if this was truly the main reason behind the attack) sufficiently contravenes their bounds of acceptability that it warrants such an attack. With the current situation in Afghanistan as it is, analysis of this situation is as pertinent as ever.

While the above example is drawing attention to some of the most troubling aspects of religious influence—conversion-focused Christianity and extremist Islam—humanitarian norms that ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian space/access are in fact aligned with many religious values (Salek 2015; Bartles-Smith 2022). This suggests that in theory there should be a relatively high level of agreement on the principles and practices that lead to humanitarian norms compliance between faith and secular actors. In practice, however, a lack of knowledge, misunderstandings, and miscommunication are widespread and, as this article demonstrates, it is frequently the international humanitarian actors who create barriers to engagement with faith actors that ultimately stifle opportunities for increasing norms compliance. In this study, we encourage a more nuanced examination of the powerful forces that play a role in shaping the view shared by many international humanitarians that religions are a predominantly negative influence. The endeavour involves addressing the role that the secularist underpinning of the humanitarian discourse plays in shaping secular-religious dynamics in the humanitarian sphere—a topic that has been under explored in humanitarian studies (Ferris 2011). It also requires an examination of the intersection of these secularist elements with other forces of power, such as neo-colonizing control and North-South divides, which are often strongly at play in humanitarian encounters. We argue that analyses of secular-religious dynamics are essential to understanding the roles of and attitudes towards faith actors in humanitarian norms compliance as well as the actions and reactions of faith and humanitarian actors with respect to this topic.

We begin by outlining the theoretical grounding of the article, which is oriented around an examination of secular-religious dynamics in the humanitarian sphere. We explore the impact of the tropes of 'good' and 'bad' religion (Shakman Hurd 2015 employs this in reference to a 'religious freedom' agenda and we re-apply it to humanitarian action) in the secular humanitarian discourse about the role, influence and engagement of faith actors in humanitarian norms compliance, with a particular focus on the application of humanitarian principles. While from a secular humanitarian perspective, the presence of 'bad' faith actors necessitates the creation and protection of humanitarian space through reiterating and reinforcing the need for the principles of neutrality and impartiality (Markandya 2010), compliance with these is used as an excuse to avoid faith actors and perspectives more widely (El Nakib and Ager 2015; El Taraboulsi-McCarthy and Cimatti 2018). Nonetheless, although fears about 'bad' religion tends to dominate humanitarian discourse, international humanitarian organizations increasingly partner with faith actors, reflecting the 'turn to religion' also seen within development cooperation over the past couple of

1 We use the term 'faith actor' (i.e. individuals and organizations whose actions are motivated or inspired by religious faith) as a broad umbrella term that includes the category of 'faith-based organization' (FBO), which we take to refer to formal organizations that resemble secular NGOs, alongside other types of 'faith actor', including individual religious leaders, places of worship and socio-political religious groups such as the Taliban (see Tomalin 2023).

decades (Tomalin 2012). However, these ‘good’ faith actors are equally a construction of a secular humanitarian sphere, where they strategically secularize their public facing activities to avoid the shortcomings of ‘bad’ religion and to be viewed as legitimate humanitarian partners (Tomalin 2018; Wilkinson 2023). We suggest that a secular approach to humanitarian action tolerates religion with boundary-creation and maintenance around what is permitted from faith actors (Wilkinson 2017). Yet, this reliance on the construction of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ faith actors fails to account for the actual experiences and actions of faith actors in the humanitarian sphere in ways that can frustrate achieving greater compliance with humanitarian norms.

This theoretical discussion is followed by the presentation of empirical evidence arising from two research projects carried out in South Sudan (Wilkinson, de Wolf, and Alier 2019; Wilkinson et al. 2020; 2022), which examine experiences of local faith actors (LFAs) in interaction with international humanitarians with respect to their roles, impact and engagement with human rights norms compliance and development. These examples demonstrate the ways in which the LFAs who participated in the research not only comply with humanitarian principles and view this as part and parcel of their commitment to the values of their faith tradition, but also how they create the space for humanitarian norms compliance of other actors through their peacebuilding work and how they have been relied upon to access parts of the country that are inaccessible to international humanitarians due to safety concerns. In this context local faith actors are therefore constructed as ‘good’ faith actors in relation to their peacebuilding work, which challenges the dominant perception of faith actors as prone to violent factionalism and communalism (see Appleby 2000). However, and importantly, this depiction shifts when it comes to establishing formal partnerships with international humanitarians for humanitarian and development work that involves donor funding. LFA respondents from both research projects indicated that here the familiar assumptions about threats to neutrality and impartiality again bubble to the surface and fears about ‘bad’ faith actors once again dominate the discourse.

Our analysis of secular-religious dynamics in the humanitarian sphere highlights the boundaries of acceptability for many international humanitarians about the role and place of faith actors in humanitarian action (Wilkinson 2017). The evidence from South Sudan points to the stereotypes and limitations humanitarians have constructed that hinder greater engagement with faith actors, which compromises norms compliance efforts. We argue that there is a need for greater self-reflection within the humanitarian sphere that should be informed by empirical studies, such as the ones we discuss, about the significant biases about and barriers towards engagement with faith actors that are embedded within the humanitarian system.

## 2. Theoretical insights on secular-religious dynamics in the humanitarian sphere

To unpack the secular-religious dynamics of the humanitarian sphere, we need to examine aspects of the fear of faith actors and the distancing from religions that occur in the humanitarian subconscious. The view that religion is politicized, violent and extremist is widespread. This is established in the concept described by Shakman Hurd (2015) as the two faces of religions in international relations: religion is separated into a binary of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion.

‘Bad’ religion is often associated with actors categorized as extremists, such as the Taliban, and it is seen as oppressive, non-compliant with human rights, particularly women’s rights, and, especially for humanitarians, non-compliant with international humanitarian law (IHL). Concepts such as humanitarian space—understood as the tangible and intangible spaces constructed by the physical and normative presence of humanitarians and asserted by IHL to save lives and alleviate suffering—need to be constructed and protected,

in part, because of the nefarious intent of actors espousing ‘bad’ religion. ‘Bad’ faith actors aim to impinge on humanitarian space, to cause harm to humanitarians and those they aim to protect. It follows, then, that to maintain humanitarian space, humanitarian principles such as neutrality (humanitarians do not take sides in a conflict) and impartiality (humanitarians give without discrimination and based on need alone) are asserted to demonstrate why humanitarians must not only stay away from ‘bad’ faith actors, but also why humanitarians are justified in their fear of faith actors more widely. It is not uncommon to hear an international humanitarian assert that religion is ‘an overall negative in the world’. During a conference attended by one of the authors of this article, a humanitarian researcher intervened to ask a question on religions and humanitarianism, and prefaced it by asserting their assumption and belief that all religions are inherently bad. This demonstrates that many humanitarians seem to have missed the explanation, now over 20 years old, of the ‘ambivalence of religion’ (Appleby 2000), which aimed to remove the good/bad divisions in the analysis of religions in international affairs.

However, when a ‘good’ faith actor is allowed to arrive in this scenario to apparently challenge perceptions about the ubiquity of ‘bad’ faith actors, this also has to be seen in terms of the influence of secular dynamics. Such faith actors are more progressive, at ease with international humanitarian law and human rights language and norms, and generally compliant with a full range of demands posed by the humanitarian sector, including donors. These include the norms established by IHL, to much less abstract, but sometimes equally taxing, compliance needs in the international humanitarian system, such as financial reporting and monitoring and evaluation processes. They are often so assimilated into the system that, in fact, they are not obviously ‘religious’ to the uninitiated, or perhaps religious in name only. Applying the actor-oriented approach of development sociologist Norman Long (2001) to understand how faith actors adapt to the international humanitarian system, Tomalin (2020) demonstrates how many strategically ‘shift register’. They portray a secular public-facing identity to maintain their credentials as legitimate humanitarian actors, and shift to a ‘faith register’ where, for instance, a religious identity continues to play a key role in terms of the private motivation to engage in humanitarian work for many employees and volunteers (Tomalin 2018).

Such an analysis highlights how the fear of ‘bad’ faith actors creates a humanitarian public sphere that necessitates ‘good’ faith actors to secularize their public facing activities, if they want to participate in the humanitarian system. That is to say, they silo the religious aspects of their humanitarian work into the private sphere, where prayer or collective worship, for instance, continues to play an important role in the daily activities of many international faith-based humanitarian organizations (Tomalin 2023). In doing so, they also diminish the outwardly presented influence of religious institutions on their activities, and pursue forms of bureaucratization and professionalization that are devoid of religious symbolism and connotations in an effort to achieve humanitarian acceptability. It is for these reasons that some argue that the humanitarian system is ‘functionally secular’—although ‘secularism is in principle “neutral” to religion, in practice the secular framing of the humanitarian regime marginalizes religious practice and experience in the conceptualization of humanitarian action at both global and local levels’ (Ager and Ager 2011: 457; Wilkinson 2019). Thus, functional secularity leads to concomitant processes or outcomes that partially or wholly side line religious beliefs and practices. First, the privatization of religion occurs, where religion is effectively pushed out of the public humanitarian sphere. Second, the marginalization of religion, results in the devaluation of the place of religion in humanitarian discourse; where humanitarian discourse and action do engage with religion, they tend to do this instrumentally where it is co-opted to meet secular material goals (Wilkinson 2019: 195; Ager and Ager 2015: 12).

This functional secularity manifests itself in an interpretation of the core principles of the humanitarian system, the principles of neutrality and impartiality, as barriers to religious

engagement. While faith actors are assumed to be prone to taking sides in a conflict thereby compromising the humanitarian principle of neutrality, particularly since religion is often a fault line in conflict situations, such as with the Taliban in the opening example, there are also many instances where faith actors have been important brokers of peace, as the case of South Sudan discussed below demonstrates.<sup>2</sup> Humanitarian discourse is also wary of faith engagement with respect to the humanitarian principle of impartiality, where faith actors are assumed to show a preference for providing support to members of their own faith tradition rather than acting with respect to need alone, or otherwise pressurizing beneficiaries to convert. Although both sometimes happen, the assumption that they are universal, and that faith engagement should therefore be avoided is not well supported (Wilkinson 2017). As we demonstrate below, our research with local faith actors in South Sudan indicates a keen awareness of the importance of impartiality and evidence of engagement with beneficiaries beyond those that share their faith tradition, as well a strong rejection of proselytization.

Another manifestation of functional secularity relates to the way in which religions are often mentioned once, and only once, in publications produced by humanitarian organizations where they are listed in the range of identities which should not be used as a basis for discrimination with respect to the provision of assistance (alongside gender, age, ethnicity or political orientation). The effect of this inclusion in the definition of impartiality, but the exclusion of religious analysis in almost all other humanitarian studies, as well as in humanitarian policy and practice, leads to 'a curious distortion of this laudable goal [of ensuring neutrality and impartiality:] [T]hat local agendas and forms of thinking are displaced to the margins, while Western, secular constructions of religion (i.e., good/bad religion) enjoy relatively unchallenged power' (Ager and Ager 2015: 64). In spite of forms of the humanitarian principles being historically pioneered by religious people such as Red Cross founder Henri Dunant, religions have become a variable to avoid in order to protect current interpretations of the humanitarian principles and the humanitarian space.

The above quotation identifies the Western origins of this construction of secularity and the active avoidance of religions it promotes, reflecting the argument of many modern scholars of secularity, who note that it is a construct of, and heir to, Protestant Christian and secularizing Eurocentric dynamics (Hurd 2008; Casanova 2009; Mahmood 2015: 8). It is not a neutral construct (that is, simply the absence of religion) but an authoritative and organizing construct of power and control (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2015) that allows those in power to decide what is acceptable and unacceptable in the public sphere. Secular(ist) humanitarianism has a boundary-making power and imposes a preference of values that may be asserted in public, just as religious boundaries and values may be asserted in ways that the humanitarian consensus depicts as invariably problematic. This is the effect of secularity in the humanitarian public sphere: boundary-making and control over the acceptability or non-acceptability of forms of religious expression, belief and practice from religious actors (Wilkinson 2017).

While the discussion so far has focused on the binaries between 'good' and 'bad' religions, and religious and secular divides, the field is pushing beyond such binaries in exploring the secular-religious dynamics of humanitarianism. More recent studies look at the intersections of these concepts with other analyses of power. For instance, Tomalin and Haustein (2020) examines the implications of the rise of populism for the intersections between religion and the construction of the humanitarian/development space in India, where religion is co-opted by the Hindu nationalist BJP government to establish development and humanitarian policies that marginalize non-Hindu religious minorities. Also interested in the dynamics of power in the construction of humanitarian space, Wilkinson and Eggert (2021) investigates how religious minorities are left out of humanitarian

2 See also Parisi and Ibarra in this special issue.

definitions of inclusivity if secular-religious dynamics are only mentioned in terms of majority beliefs. Empirical studies continue to demonstrate that an ignorance of religions is present in humanitarian actions and that this results in disagreement and misunderstandings with humanitarian beneficiaries (Mim 2020). The picture of the ‘functional secularism’ of the humanitarian system is further complicated by studies that examine the ways in which humanitarian staff use their own religious beliefs and practices to support their coping mechanisms in stressful workplaces and contexts (Ozcan et al. 2021). As our knowledge of secular-religious dynamics in humanitarian action grows, we are seeing how much they are related to other ‘privileging forces’ (Arcaro 2021) in the humanitarian system that create and re-create humanitarian norms but also humanitarian biases.

### 3. Empirical findings from South Sudan: experiences of local faith actors with humanitarians

The article now turns to examples from two research projects carried out in South Sudan on LFAs’ impressions and experiences of, and with, the humanitarian system (Wilkinson, de Wolf, and Alier 2019; Wilkinson et al. 2020; 2022). The LFAs speak of the complexities of secular-religious dynamics as they intersect with other privileging forces, making LFAs re-form their identities and operations in order to become acceptable in the international humanitarian system and to learn humanitarian principles, while constantly questioning these aspects of control and seeking more equitable representation at the humanitarian table. The first project was completed with a consortium (with Tearfund Belgium, Tearfund UK, Tearfund South Sudan, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Islamic Relief in South Sudan, and RedR UK) as part of a humanitarian project on localization. Researchers were embedded in this project as ethnographers to understand more about training for local faith actors and international humanitarians to help encourage localization. This research project involved interviews with 84 local and international faith and non-faith actors, carried out between the end of 2018 and the end of 2019, about interactions between LFAs and international humanitarians. The second research project was completed for DanChurchAid (Wilkinson, de Wolf, and Alier 2019) on the relationship between local faith actors and the concept of the Triple Nexus (that is, humanitarian, development, and peace sectors working together). It involved 21 interviews with local faith and non-faith actors, conducted in March 2019. Both research projects involved semi-structured interviews with local and international faith and non-faith actors and were carried out with researchers based in South Sudan in local languages as well as in English. The researchers in South Sudan were not part of the groups or organizations interviewed. Ethical review was undertaken with the University of Leeds and informed consent was provided by participants and their anonymity assured. Where possible interviews were recorded, translated/transcribed and then thematically analysed using the computer software package Dedoose. In cases where the interviewee preferred not to be recorded, detailed notes were taken and the notes analysed alongside the transcripts.

South Sudan is the world’s newest state, formed in 2011 after a referendum which granted it independence following decades of civil war between the majority Muslim-led government in the North and the Christian minority in the South. It ranks 185 out of 189 in the UN’s Human Development Index (UNDP 2022) and fourth out of 179 states in the Fund for Peace’s Fragile States Index (Fund for Peace 2018). By the end of 2013, a new civil war had begun in South Sudan itself, led by rival political groups rather than religious factions (Kindersley and Rolandsen 2017; Johnson 2019) causing the deaths of almost 400,000 people between 2013 and 2018 (Checchi et al. 2018). Additionally, out of a total population of around 11.19 million in 2020 (World Bank 2022), as of January 2022, there were an estimated 2,229,657 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (IOM 2022). While the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan was signed in Khartoum in September 2018, and formally led to the cessation of the conflict, pockets of



violence remain, and a severe humanitarian crisis prevails (Ryan 2019; UNOCHA 2019). By the middle of 2021, the country, which is one of the most dangerous in the world for aid workers (according to the Aidworker Security Database), was reported to be in the midst of its worst food crisis since independence, with 7.2 million people experiencing severe hunger due to a combination of ongoing conflict, economic instability exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, severe flooding, and the failure of international humanitarians to successfully reach those in most need (Francis and Kleinfeld 2021).

Given the high levels of religious adherence that exist in South Sudan—with the Pew Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2016) indicating that 60.5 per cent of the population are Christian, 32.9 per cent Traditional, 6.2 per cent Muslim, and the remaining 0.4 per cent other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism—it is not surprising that LFAs have played a leading role in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities. These include local faith leaders and their places of worship, faith networks, such as the South Sudan Council of Churches, and distinct faith-based organizations that have been set up to focus on providing much needed support to affected communities. These LFAs exist within a broader terrain of international humanitarian and development organizations, some of which are faith based, that have been present in the region for decades. However, LFA participants in both research projects indicated that their activities are mostly carried out in parallel to those of international actors, particularly regarding humanitarianism and development. This is because they are assumed to not have the capacity to be legitimate partners due to the perception that they lack knowledge of, and compliance with international humanitarian norms due to their faith identity (Wilkinson et al. 2019; 2022). In fact, some organizations attested that they had selected or changed their names to conceal their religious links in order to increase their chances of securing donor funding for their activities.

A key element of the first research project we discuss here was a focus on LFAs' experiences of participating in a humanitarian skills training programme that included, among other things, workshop activities about humanitarian principles. The research project involved interviews with 84 local and international faith and non-faith actors, carried out in 2018 and 2019, about interactions between LFAs and international humanitarians. Specifically, the research was focused upon studying a larger humanitarian project that aimed to provide two-way dialogue and capacity building between the local faith and international humanitarian spheres in South Sudan (Wilkinson et al. 2020; 2022). One of the areas discussed with LFA participants was their engagement with humanitarian principles and the perception of international humanitarian actors that they were prone to non-compliance. They strongly rejected the suggestion that their faith identity meant that they were less likely to be able to follow all four of the humanitarian principles—humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence—with assumptions about impartiality presenting a particular challenge to their endeavours to establish themselves as legitimate humanitarian partners, where humanitarian aid is expected to be administered based on needs alone. Many stressed that the humanitarian principles were identical to their religious teachings and that this meant that it was easy for them to put humanitarian principles at the centre of their work:

I think the humanitarian principles are really in line with our norms as the Church, so they are like reinforcing our norms. As a faith-based organization, we are also being guided by the Ten Commandments, so we found it relating very well with our commandments, that we have to really look at people as human beings, how you treat them. So these are like reinforcing what [we] already thought, so that's why we find it so easy to also accommodate them within our organization (LFA staff member, South Sudan 2019).

And according to a Muslim participant:

Most of these Humanitarian Standards ... are picked from the Quran writings as a standard on humanitarian [action]. This standard is in the Quran. When you talk of neutrality, it is in the Quran. So when we are doing our humanitarian work and lean ourselves on the Quran, we are much better. I feel like we are well set to go, because unless you don't follow the Quran and you don't follow the standards, then you'll get lost in the middle. But if you have gone through and checked all the meanings of what the Quran is talking on humanity, on serving the poor, and serving the sick, then there is no difference (LFA staff member, South Sudan 2019).

Others explicitly rejected proselytization alongside humanitarian action. As one Christian interviewee put it:

But we don't also use development as a way of converting people to religion. When we come to humanitarian activities, we just offer them the need they want and the activities they want, but we don't use it as a way of converting them through our activities. If there are those who want to become religious, it is their choice (LFA staff member, South Sudan 2019).

While evidence from this project cannot be taken to prove that LFAs always comply with humanitarian principles, neither can it be said to prove that secular actors do. Interviewees were critical of the double standards that they perceived were imposed, whereby LFAs are having to work harder to prove their credibility, when compared to local secular actors. What we can see here is the influence of secular-religious dynamics in the humanitarian sphere that constructs 'bad' faith actors as a problem to be confronted as the dominant paradigm, and with whom engagement should be undertaken with extreme caution. We suggest that the barriers that exist within the humanitarian space to engage with faith actors means that partnerships with such individuals and organizations that value and implement humanitarian principles already, or that would be receptive to their importance following capacity building opportunities, are less likely to be formed, therefore missing out on valuable opportunities to increase norms compliance overall.

Such resistance to engage with LFAs was further underscored by the findings from the aforementioned first research project, where these actors were found to engage more strongly in the two-way dialogue and capacity building than international humanitarians (Wilkinson et al. 2022). While the LFAs were keen to learn about humanitarian principles so that they could be better connected to the international humanitarian system, international humanitarians were harder to convince about the need for them to better understand LFAs (Wilkinson et al. 2020). Reflecting on the earlier discussion of functional secularism, we can see here the enforcement of already constructed boundaries in the humanitarian system that are not sufficiently analysed. Rather than seeking out faith actors to understand more about their negotiation of humanitarian space, for example, international humanitarians in this project were hesitant about the need for further learning about religions and faith actors in the South Sudanese context. This was not the case for all staff as there were notably some who saw a real need for greater religious engagement given broader calls for the localization of the humanitarian system. Nevertheless, the researchers encountered a general lack of understanding and sense of importance about religious engagement. This demonstrates that we must not only debate norms compliance as an internationally asserted top-down construct, but also with respect to the contextualization needed to make norms compliance useful and relevant to religious actors, with the understanding that they are often already keen to know more.

The first research project demonstrates how LFAs in South Sudan are more likely to be constructed as 'bad' faith actors when it comes to their role in humanitarianism and development and that they struggle to establish themselves as legitimate humanitarian partners.



This is despite their longstanding track record in these domains and evidence that many value humanitarian principles. Interestingly, findings from both research projects show how LFAs are typically constructed as ‘good’ faith actors in relation to their peacebuilding activities. One likely explanation for this is that, in the case of peacebuilding, as we demonstrate below, LFAs are often crucial to creating the conditions for humanitarian norms compliance through their role as trusted peacemakers, and therefore they play an essential part that is beyond the grasp of international humanitarians. Moreover, while formal humanitarian partnerships between faith actors and international humanitarians that involve donor funding are subject to high levels of scrutiny and accountability, peacebuilding work is often carried out informally. It is part of the day-to-day activities of faith actors and international humanitarians would not consider it to be part of their purview, even if they, nonetheless, benefit from it. As such peacebuilding activity occurs outside the framework of secular humanitarian influence, it is likely to include approaches and activities that would, at other times, not be considered as a mark of ‘good’ religious practice, involving the public expression of faith identity rather than the preferred secularized register. This further underscores the problematic nature of this binary, which not only constructs faith actors as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but that designation shifts contextually to suit secular humanitarian framings and priorities.

The second research project comprises a study undertaken with DanChurchAid through 21 interviews with local and international faith and non-faith actors in South Sudan. It dealt with the implementation of what has come to be called the Triple Nexus Approach, that is the linking between humanitarian, development, and peace operations, popularized as the ‘new way of working’ following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (Wilkinson et al. 2019; UNOCHA 2017). Many of the LFAs interviewed for the research expressed how they had already adopted an integrated approach to helping their communities and that they did not feel strictly bound by humanitarian-development-peace silos. As one local actor explained, their activities ‘are already structured to address immediate needs while addressing the root causes of the conflict’ (LFA staff member in South Sudan, 2019). However, those who had developed partnerships with international humanitarian actors found that by default they ended up having to silo their work more thoroughly and to work exclusively on humanitarian projects as that was required by funding partners.

Likewise, they identified that international humanitarians often looked to them to address the peacebuilding part of the Triple Nexus, as that is the part that contains the ‘wicked problems’ of the root causes of conflict and fragility. This is contrary to the dominant humanitarian discourse that depicts faith actors as likely to be a barrier to the humanitarian principle of neutrality. In this context, the ability to address the root causes of conflict and fragility are dimensions that LFAs are perceived to have particular strengths in even when religion is not a direct cause. In the case of South Sudan, LFAs have taken on a peacebuilding role, facilitated by their position as trusted individuals who are able to transcend different sides of a conflict. They helped broker peace agreements and keep leaders accountable, for example, through the South Sudan Council of Churches Action Plan for Peace developed in 2015 (South Sudan Council of Churches n.d.). As one interviewee noted,

they contribute so much to the peace process and the Church unites the communities, the people also trust them and hence can be utilized as a big platform for peace, reconciliation and conflict resolutions, which they can do at national and grassroot level (local non-faith actor staff member in South Sudan, 2019) (Wilkinson, de Wolf, and Alier 2019: 19).

In many ways, in this example, faith actors confirm the ‘good religions’ assumptions among international humanitarians, specifically in that they are working in the ‘correct’ way to end conflict and to enhance humanitarian norms compliance. One staff member from an LFA explained:

The Church is an ethical and moral beacon, seeking to speak as a voice for the voiceless, articulating their common concerns. Its ability to facilitate confessional spaces where no-one is judged or condemned helps people perceive it as working with all parties, acting in a nonpartisan way, while upholding the dignity of the people. Hence, by working at all levels—local, national, regional, and international—the Church seeks to encourage voices to be heard and dialogue to build the new nation peacefully (LFA staff member in South Sudan, 2019) (Wilkinson, de Wolf, and Alier 2019: 17).

In this case, the respondent emphasizes the way in which the faith actor is the non-partisan, that is an impartial actor, who facilitates neutrality and impartiality against the backdrop of a dominant humanitarian discourse that is more likely to assert the opposite. LFA interviewees from the first research project also followed this line of thought. For instance, staff from one Episcopal Diocese, that also has a relief and development branch of operations, explained how their bishop had negotiated humanitarian access for his staff, where other international humanitarian organizations could not access a conflict-affected area:

even though the political situation makes it very difficult for humanitarian agencies to access the area, the Bishop as a neutral person, is able to provide access for field staff to access the area. So, if there is support to implement projects there, we will at least be able to reach the vulnerable on the ground (Diocese staff member South Sudan, 2018) (Wilkinson et al. 2022: 8).

This meant that the bishop and his staff were sometimes the only ones able to provide assistance in the area, negotiating the necessary humanitarian space for them to reach communities as well as other humanitarians. This demonstrates that although humanitarian norms compliance was not happening as necessitated by IHL to allow humanitarian access, LFAs in this context had sufficiently instituted relationships of trust and access that they were able to offer humanitarian assistance where others could not. Other LFAs staff also explained the motivations for their actions to negotiate humanitarian access:

When our people are displaced, the government could not allow access to the rebel-controlled areas. But people had lived without food, and we were the only ones who had the courage to give food. Where no other organisation had the courage and if we were to sit until the other organisations had to come our people could not have been rescued (LFA staff member in South Sudan, 2019) (Wilkinson et al. 2022: 8).

One LFA staff member even explained this as a failure of international humanitarians and a place where faith-based and other local and national actors had to step in. They told us that:

these are the people that are related to the community, people trust them and also these are the people that can go further than the international NGOs ... because of far distance, because of security situation ... Again, these international NGOs sometimes, when there is a disaster or anything like instability, like the war, always they used to evacuate but local, national NGOs ... they've always been there, so I think this is something that donors and national and international NGOs want to look into (LFA staff member in South Sudan, 2019) (Wilkinson et al. 2022: 8).

From this perspective, local actors, including LFAs prominently in South Sudan, are the ones to continue delivering assistance when a lack of humanitarian norms compliance has led to the evacuations of international humanitarians, such as the large-scale evacuation

that happened after attacks on Juba in July 2016 (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2016). Overall, South Sudan presents a context in which faith actors are generally not parties to the conflict, playing instead a peacebuilding role.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article, we problematize, on theoretical and empirical grounds, the construction of faith actors as something that should, on the whole, be avoided due to their likely non-compliance with humanitarian principles and/or norms. We argue that a secular bias is one of the privileging forces affecting Western-led approaches to humanitarianism, and that one way it operates is through the construction of faith actors as either 'bad' or 'good'. The good/bad binary has similarly been used with the application of the right to Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) (Shakman Hurd 2015). Within human rights practice, FoRB has both been co-opted by religiously-inclined political actors to push their agenda and been avoided by secular human rights actors (see Petersen and Marshall 2019, 19, for a more detailed explanation of various positions related to FoRB). Lessons from a human rights approach to FoRB demonstrate that we need to be able to encourage complexity: 'There is a need for "right-sizing" the role of FoRB in the human rights landscape. FoRB is neither more, nor less, important than other human rights and it is intricately related to both the whole and its different parts', as Petersen and Marshall (2019, 71) put it. In the case of the international humanitarian system discussed in this article, the threat of 'bad' religious actors seems to necessitate the strict application of humanitarian principles by secular humanitarians as well as by those carefully managed faith actors deemed as 'good', who in their public facing work adopt a secular identity. Yet, using empirical evidence from two research projects in South Sudan, we show how this is an overly simplistic interpretation of the roles, influence and engagement of faith actors with humanitarian principles and norms, which ultimately stifles opportunities for increasing compliance. Instead, and taking from the human rights approach to FoRB, we need to 'right-size' the secular-religious dynamic at play in the humanitarian system. Neither hiding from religion nor promoting it is the answer. We see that the local faith actors exist in complex positions that they navigate within the norms of the humanitarian system, but that secular dominance can misunderstand and dismiss this complexity.

Empirical evidence from South Sudan demonstrates that the commitment of LFAs to core humanitarian principles is often doubted by international humanitarians and can serve as a barrier to their inclusion within the humanitarian system. In particular, their ability to act impartially and the assumption that they are likely to show a preference for helping people that follow their faith tradition, or otherwise to engage in proselytization, is widespread, yet strongly rejected by LFAs themselves. Instead, the LFAs who participated in our research argued that the values of their faith tradition lead them naturally to comply with humanitarian norms and that they feel frustrated at the higher standards to which they are held due to the secular bias in the system. However, our research has also demonstrated that in contrast to this depiction of them as potentially 'bad' faith actors with respect to their humanitarian endeavours, they are much more widely recognized and accepted for their peacebuilding activities by local and international actors alike, be they faith and non-faith in nature. In this setting, LFAs are trusted peacebuilders, creating access for humanitarians and indeed acting as humanitarians themselves. It is precisely their faith identity and the way that this can be leveraged in conflict situations, by reaching out to each side and bringing about a resolution, that makes their contribution distinctive (and invaluable) compared to the that of secular actors. In this example, the strict binary between good and bad faith actors breaks down, since in their recognized role as peacebuilders the LFAs are not adhering to the expectation that in order to be accepted as 'good' faith actors they must bracket their faith identity. In similarity again to the FoRB debates and of relevance to human rights

practice, pigeon-holing faith actors into 'faith' roles and a good/bad binary only serves to reduce opportunities for better understanding, collaboration, and relationship building between actors that will lead to norms compliance.

Our theoretical and empirical analysis of the secular-religious dynamics at play in the humanitarian sphere highlights the need not only to build awareness of humanitarian norms with faith actors, but equally to work with secular actors on the biases that hold them back from engagement with religious actors. Both research projects demonstrate that faith may actually be an advantage in enhancing humanitarian norms compliance rather than a threat, and we suggest that greater inclusion of LFAs in the humanitarian sphere will lead to an overall increase in compliance. In fact, our research showed a willingness from LFAs to engage with humanitarian principles and norms and that many were doing so already. However, it is also likely that through their example, and the ability to demonstrate that humanitarian norms are already values supported by their tradition, they can influence some other LFAs to change their practices where they are not yet compliant. While a secular bias is part of a broader mix of neo-colonial biases that can plague the humanitarian system and make norms compliance feel like an externally asserted/top-down construct, we suggest that engagement with LFAs is important for increasing compliance overall. Self-reflection within the humanitarian system about biases and barriers that are embedded within the system are a significant, but often under-appreciated part of humanitarian engagement and norms compliance efforts.

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## Conflict of interest declaration

There is no conflict of interest.

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