



Centre for

**Global
Cooperation
Research**

The Humanitarian Question: Religion, Emotions and Humanitarianism in the Modern Age

Convenors: Frank Adloff, Alexandra Przyrembel

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Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (Duisburg) and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (Essen) will host the interdisciplinary Conference *The Humanitarian Question. Religion, Emotions and Humanitarianism in the Modern Age*.

Humanitarianism has become a major feature of global social life. In fact the necessity of humanitarian thought and actions seems to be the ineluctable starting point of any debate about how to treat those in need in our neighbourhoods and across the globe. However, humanitarianism is highly controversial, both as a concept and as a phenomenon: Its emergence is deeply entangled in colonialism and Eurocentric concepts of a “civilizing mission”. At present, humanitarianism is seen by many as distracting from and thus perpetuating the deeper causes of inequality and misery. Also, invocations of humanitarian motivation for action are almost always faced with the charge of either inadequate sentimentality or hypocrisy.

Against this background the conference wants to tackle the humanitarian question, by analyzing the motivations of humanitarianism in the Modern Age, devoting attention both to conceptual precision and the adequate account of concrete historical developments. In order to do so, the conference will focus on five sets of questions, concerning religion, emotion, visual representation, locality and universality:



First, the emphasis on sentiment in the flourishing literature on humanitarianism might have detracted attention from the role that religion plays not only for the foundation, but also for the present practices of humanitarianism. Possibly, the importance of religion is as persistent (and underestimated) in the context of humanitarianism as with regard to other political and social phenomena, where doubts about Weber's paradigm of secularization have now become commonplace. So we need to understand the entanglement of religious and non-religious motivations to provide aid in the Modern Age. What conceptions of humanity and humanitarianism emerged within different religious traditions? Do humanitarian practices reflect secular and/or sacralized concepts of humanity?

Second, emotions have been described as bodily anchored modes of orientation and motivation. We want to address the evolving emotional regimes (including such capacities as empathy or emotions like compassion, guilt or anger) that might have motivated humanitarian actions since the end of the 18th century. How do new emotional constructions of the self and otherness shape universal concepts of humanitarian aid?

Third, the concept and practice of humanitarianism is shaped by its narratives and representations that are communicated through different media (photos, films, eyewitness testimonies etc.). How can we understand the impact of images of suffering and of providing aid on practices of humanitarianism? Is there a way to distinguish between techniques to open our eyes to the misery of our fellow human beings and the abuse of images for manipulation, commercialization and propaganda?

Fourth, which role does the locality of humanitarianism play? How does the global dimension of human suffering and humanitarian sensitivity relate to the poverty and misery of people in the industrialized world? How can we make sense of the similarities of humanitarian languages and practices employed both in Europe or the US and the sites of humanitarian action in the Global South?

Fifth, humanitarian thought and action is ultimately based on the belief in the universal validity of values. How can this foundation in universality be reconciled with insights into the historical genealogy of values? In this regard, the parallelism and differences between the universal ideas of a "civilizing mission" held by agents of colonialism and humanitarianism in the 19th century and recent concepts of "humanitarian intervention" deserve our attention.



We invite researchers at all levels, especially PhD students and postdocs, with a background in history, sociology, political science, ethnology and other disciplines to contribute to the discussion. Papers focusing on case studies are especially welcome.

Presentations should last no longer than 30 minutes. Submissions are due via e-mail to Unrau@gcr21.uni-due.de by 1st November 2013. They should include an abstract of the paper (1-3 pages) and a CV, both contained in one pdf-file.

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