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# Humanitarian Crises, Aid Agencies, The Military

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## Introduction

by Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr

The calls have come from varied places across the years—calls for protection of innocent civilians who are the target of violence. We heard them in Somalia, in Rwanda, in Sarajevo, and currently in Darfur, Sudan. People are being raped and killed, they are being chased from their homes—they need help and protection. The world must do something!

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) began as a response to hunger and need that accompanied war. Throughout its 85 years, MCC has responded to need, has fed and housed refugees and victims of violence. And MCC has spoken out against violence, and tried to provide alternative ideas for dealing with conflicts. But, as a Christian pacifist organization, MCC has struggled with questions of protection and the use of force.

In October, 2005, the MCC Peace Committee considered some of these questions. The committee meeting in Winnipeg was preceded by a public discussion forum hosted by Menno Simons College at the University of Winnipeg, titled “Guns, Food and Medicine: the Role of Aid Agencies and the Military in Humanitarian Crises,” in which four persons representing non-governmental aid agencies and the Canadian military spoke about how the military intersects with humanitarian aid in conflict situations. The committee spent the following two days reflecting on questions of how MCC responds to these issues.

The questions are both philosophical and practical:

- Can we, or how can we, work alongside military intervention forces in responding to need? When aid is given by persons in mili-

tary uniform, or using military vehicles, does that compromise the neutrality of aid agencies? How does being seen as cooperating with military actors endanger MCC workers, or raise local suspicions?

- As pacifist Christians, can we support international military intervention (as different from policing/monitoring operations) for peace-enforcing? Historically we have resisted this, even while responding to calls for assistance to people caught in the middle of war. From what evidence, or on what experience, would we conclude that foreign military forces provide the best chance for assistance in dire situations? How do we respond to the “responsibility to protect” doctrine as recently adopted by the United Nations? How do our advocacy offices speak about this?

- Is it possible that joining calls for humanitarian intervention to protect vulnerable populations in effect furthers a Western colonial agenda (a question that comes to us from David Rieff’s writing, referred to herein by Alain Epp-Weaver and Peter Dula)?

- How do we respond to these questions in a way that reflects our basic conviction that God’s world is created to be peaceful and that using violence in response to violence is not a solution?

This issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter* shares some of the discussion and the summary that came from this meeting. In its reflections, the Peace Committee harked back to a previous discussion of this topic that is summarized in the October 1997 *Peace Office Newsletter* (available on MCC’s web

site: [www.mcc.org/peace/pon/PON\\_1997-02.pdf](http://www.mcc.org/peace/pon/PON_1997-02.pdf)). Additional background to the discussion was the Peace Theology Project that the MCC Peace Office had carried out in 2003–2004. That project asked how we can as pacifists responsibly participate in the ordering work of our societies without supporting violence.

The questions will continue, and MCC will continue to discuss them. The summary of the meeting, included here, is the latest benchmark in this on-going conversation.

*Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr are Co-Directors of MCC International Peace Office*

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

# MCC Peace Committee Meeting

Winnipeg, 13–15 October, 2005

The MCC Peace Committee met in Winnipeg October 13–15, 2005 to consider the way increased reliance on armed intervention, especially international intervention under the rubric of protection for innocent civilians, impacts the program work of MCC.

A public meeting panel discussion on Thursday evening (October 13) hosted by Menno Simons College on the campus of the University of Winnipeg included Ambassador James Oporia Ekwaro (Sudan Focal Point), Tony Parmar (Medécins sans Frontières), Peter Dula, (MCC Iraq Program), and Major Herry Chadwick (Canadian Armed Forces).

On Friday the meeting took place on the campus of the Canadian Mennonite University where the committee heard from MCC workers Peter Dula (Iraq Program) and Alain Epp Weaver (Palestine-Jordan-Iraq Programs), Willie Reimer of MCC's Food, Disaster and Material Resources Office, and his colleagues Jim Cornelius from the Canadian Food Grains Bank, John Derksen, a former aid worker with Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM), John Longhurst, a journalist, and Ambassador James Oporia Ekwaro.

## The Context

1. The committee heard both at Thursday evening's meeting and on Friday about the mandates of different agencies in humanitarian response operations. In response to calls for protection, military forces have assumed wider involvement in humanitarian activities. NGOs have both cooperated with this and also found their space encroached upon. There were varying assessments of the correct roles for these different actors.

2. Peter and Alain framed our discussion within Karl Barth's positioning of philan-

thropy as a component of the sin of sloth in that it abstracts humanity and does not engage the other in concrete relationship. Barth notes that this is the opposite to the way Jesus lived: a life open to others. Similarly, James reflected on the need to see "the people" as actors and subjects, noting that "the people" did not appear in the *Peace Office Newsletter* recommendations from 1997 on the issue of humanitarian intervention. Alain noted that an earlier Mennonite discussion on armed intervention in Somalia focused on whether an intervention should be armed, rather than on the power dynamics of a Western intervention.

3. The context in which these questions confront MCC is one that includes major shifts in understanding the role of states and the role of military forces. In our discussion, reference was made to shifts in the tectonic plates of international community relations, leaving all scrambling to adjust. States have always had a responsibility to protect their citizens as part of a normal definition of national sovereignty, even though there have been major differences in how this responsibility was carried out. Projecting a "responsibility to protect," or the obligation to intervene against national sovereignty to protect vulnerable populations, onto the international community is still a relatively new idea. Bill Janzen reported that since the end of the Cold War Canada has not articulated a comprehensive foreign policy. The "Responsibility to Protect (R2P)," proposed by Canada and adopted recently by the UN General Assembly, September 15, 2005, is seen as providing a new and positive foreign policy framework for Canada. Within MCC's Canadian constituency, R2P has gained some positive support.

Should we be most concerned about "the military," or about "militarizing"? For example, everything important in Uganda is now militarized. Why must it be so? But this culture of militarizing many things is increasingly widespread. Especially since 9/11 (September 11, 2001), political issues are very often submitted to the logic of military solutions, often at the urging of America's President Bush.

—Comment by James Oporia Ekwaro during October 2005 Peace Committee meeting. He is former Ambassador of Uganda to China, and is one of the founding members of Nairobi Peace Initiative Africa.

4. The Committee noted the positive impulse in R2P, but raised questions in light of our discussion on the writing of David Rieff about whether or when R2P may be a new imperial project, clothed in progressive language. The concern is that the good impulses of international order (international law, human rights, etc.) become servants of a force to control and dominate, not unlike some earlier times in history. A practical question posed was whether MCC should use CIDA funds in a country like Afghanistan where Canada is a part of the NATO effort to conduct war.

5. Along with this new space for intervention by the arms of state power and military force comes the potential and tendency to co-opt civil society actors, including humanitarian NGOs, as arms of the intervening powers. Over the last 15 years, and especially the last 5 years, the role of civil society/NGO actors has increased dramatically. NGOs have been described as “force multipliers” (US Secretary of State Colin Powell in a 1999 reference to Afghanistan) or “peace support actors” (Major Chadwick’s comment at the Thursday evening panel discussion). The fear that implementation of R2P may become a new mechanism for outside forces to control and dominate is raised by David Rieff as something that many civil society/NGO actors seem blind to.

### **MCC’s Identity**

This complex of issues confronts MCC at two points: where we interact with military actors in delivering relief aid, and how we speak to the question of protection for vulnerable populations in our advocacy work.

Our discussion of the writings of David Rieff focused on the need for a clear identity. Rieff holds up *Médécins sans Frontières* (MSF) as a model of a humanitarian organization that is very clear about its stance and has not been pulled into the compromises of other humanitarian actors. We asked whether MCC is a humanitarian agency like those Rieff critiques. A clearly articulated identity as a Christian agency based on partnerships could help to guard MCC against being lured into association with this new and developing imperialism.

In struggling with how to be engaged with communities experiencing war and social disruption, MCC’s first concern should be to reflect who MCC is, i.e., a network of diaconal ministries, perhaps a kind of religious order, of the church. MCC works on the basis of partnerships and is present over a long term. For MCC, operational images

such as solidarity-with-people, mutual-partnership, and negotiating-power-disparities take precedence over more abstract images like humanitarian response or human rights. Theological language reflecting identity should be kept close to who we are and reflective of the people MCC is engaged with in program activity.

As an agency of the church, MCC aspires to maintain an open, humble stance, modeled on Jesus. MCC recognizes that it has power as an outside, Western-based organization, but chooses to negotiate power sharing by working in partnership and building long-term relationships with people in situations of need or disaster.

### **Recommendations for MCC**

As a committee, we reflected on the “Principles for Relating to Peacekeepers” which summarized the Peace Committee discussion of this topic in 1997. The summary and guidelines have been useful and we affirm them as important for MCC’s work. However, in light of subsequent experience and this discussion, the committee offers the following amendments and additions to these guidelines. Recorded here are the 1997 guidelines, with our 2005 amendments:

#### **1. (1997) The Language We Use**

We noted the Mennonite churches have changed a great deal in recent decades in the vocabulary we use to address topics of peace: from saying to government that we have “nothing to say about how it runs its war, but only about how we should be excused from participation in it,” to activist participation in advocacy; from describing ourselves as nonresistant or pacifist, to talking about peacemaking and conflict transformation. This change in language reflects the changing nature of our identity and relationships in the wider world.

#### **2. (1997) Silence and Action**

We will not call for humanitarian military intervention. We appreciate that there may be tragic situations where we have no alternative course of action to suggest. This could be either because our understanding is incomplete or because we cannot see a possible nonviolent solution. In situations like these, we may choose to publicly neither oppose nor support an international intervention. We would remain silent, not to disengage or avoid action or to legitimate violence, but in recognition of the tragic and ambiguous nature of the situation.

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As Church, our role is to stretch imaginations.

—Comment by Judy Zimmerman Herr during October 2005 Peace Committee meeting. She is Co-Director of MCC International Peace Office.

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**The fear is that implementation of Responsibility to Protect may become a new mechanism for outside forces to control and dominate.**

Governments, however, seldom have the same option for silence or choosing whether to act or not. They are required to act. Part of our responsibility as such times is to stretch the imaginations of both those who must act and those who can choose whether to act or not. In this light, we will frequently comment on humanitarian military interventions that governments or international bodies decide to take. We acknowledge that interventions can, in some situation, save lives.

**(2005) Amended Comment, Silence and Action:**

The use of the word “silence” was intended to reflect the need for a non-arrogant posture in the face of tragic situations, but it did not communicate well to MCC workers or to constituency. We might rather speak of remaining in solidarity with partners, focusing on commitment to people even when we do not see a clear solution or a path through the struggle at hand. It is suggested that we refer to this as “wise engagement.” We will give wise and careful reflection to the situations we encounter. Our responses to these situations will range from that of bold prophetic voice to gentle advocacy to lament/silence in solidarity. Our stance will be one of listening and learning, speaking and naming, and preserving/prayerful/patient service-oriented engagement in the name of Christ.

**3. (1997) Underlying Theological Issues**

We experience tension between two ways, present both in the Bible and in our tradition, of talking about the relationship between God and the world’s governing structures. Romans 13 suggests that governments have the purpose of restraining evil, including the use of armed force, while Christians, as part of the redeemed community, are not to participate in the use of such force. This implies a different ethic for the church than for governing authorities. In some tension with this is an understanding that sees the Lordship of Christ over both church and world as suggesting that God has one standard for both Christians and governing authorities. We have some differences among us in the weight we assign to these two emphases, but suggest that future Peace Office commentaries take seriously the concerns raised by both of them.

**4. (1997) Police or Military**

Is there a fundamental difference between the function of police and the function of a military force? If so, is this helpful for our discussion? Our practice as pacifists includes reliance on police services in our home com-

munities. We are troubled by what looks like hypocrisy when we rely on such maintenance of order, but critique actions designed to bring order in other, more chaotic situations.

MCC workers and partners frequently find themselves in places where order has broken down. Is action on the part of an international force closer to police work or military work in such a setting? When structures that usually surround the work of police, such as courts and civilian review, are not in place, can an intervention force perform a police function? Would it be helpful to have clearer criteria for understanding the difference between police and military forces?

The Committee did not reach consensus on this issue, and recognizes that it is a real question faced by MCC workers.

**(2005) Amended Comment, Police or Military:**

The guidelines raise the question of whether police or military have different functions and whether we could more easily embrace the former than the latter. Assuming a clear understanding and definition of who MCC is (as noted above), we might rather say that MCC will not call for intervention responses that rely on the use of lethal military force. In MCC’s advocacy work where there may be coalitions to join or petitions/letters to sign onto, we will work for careful and precise language that makes this clear. We can imagine many alternative activities for international participation short of those that require lethal force, such as international monitoring, election supervision, police patrolling and training, and other activities that reflect the normal ordering/security functions of a society. When participating in discussions in these situations, or expressing solidarity via some forms of direct participation, the principle of keeping our interactions with state actors ad hoc, discussed at length in the 1997 meeting, seems most appropriate. Here MCC, via the counsel of friends and partners, will decide on how to be engaged.

**5. (1997) Pacifist Identity**

We agreed that Christian pacifism based on following Christ is a central eschatological commitment shaped by membership in the faith community. If we rely on practical solutions in a tragic world, without this eschatological commitment to following Christ, pacifism will erode. A clear sense of our identity in Christ precedes ethical discernment on all things, but especially complex issues like peace in society. There is a

need for humility in striving to be faithful. We will be challenged and stretched by our involvements with the hurts of the world.

#### 6. (1997) Guidelines for MCC

- “Ad hoc partnering”: We can partner with a wide range of groups, including governments. We need to keep such determinations “ad hoc” or “case by case” without making commitments beyond functional activities, and on the basis of careful discernment.
- Primary partners will continue to consist of faith communities, civil society groups and international nongovernmental organizations. Focusing primarily on these, rather than state structures, is not only a traditional bias but a choice centered on an understanding of where societal change happens most effectively.
- We will maintain a clear sense of identity as pacifist Christians when we join others in coalition. Our goal should be to join those activities where our positions remain intact and do not become diluted or rendered invisible.

- We should recognize that governments organize positive security. Especially in this era of “government-bashing” we may need to focus more on this positive understanding of our participation in society. Organized human society (government) provides many securities that are good, that are needed and that we can support (such as social support systems). Supporting effective security programs is as important as our critique of those we question.
- MCC needs to place people who are well grounded in the Christian faith tradition, who value the Reign of God above all and who are willing to have their imaginations stretched.

We acknowledge our own sinfulness and limitations and desire to maintain a humble posture, but do not want to let this inhibit or restrict engagement in places where Christian compassion is needed.

*Summary by Robert Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr, Co-Directors of MCC International Peace Office.*

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## MCC, Intervention, and “Humanitarianism”

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by Peter Dula and Alain Epp Weaver

That nations individually and the international community generally have a “responsibility to protect” (commonly abbreviated R2P) has, over the past several years, become an increasingly influential doctrine of an ascendant school of international relations.<sup>1</sup> The “responsibility to protect” has multiple dimensions. Nations have a responsibility to prevent conflict. Sometimes, in the cases of “failed states” that cannot provide their citizens with safety or of states that engage in genocidal practices against parts of their populations, other nations have a “responsibility to react,” a responsibility that might range from sanctions to unarmed intervention to military intervention. Finally, they have a “responsibility to rebuild.” The R2P agenda has become increasingly influential at the United Nations, and is becoming the framework of the first coherent Canadian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) representative in Ottawa, for example, increasingly interacts with politicians and government officials for whom R2P is taken as fundamental. As a result, the question of whether or not

MCC, as an organization representing pacifist churches, can ever support armed interventions emerging out of the R2P doctrine, has become difficult to avoid.

Meanwhile, MCC workers involved in programming relief assistance grapple with questions concerning “humanitarianism” and the military. Should MCC or other Mennonite relief workers ever cooperate with military forces? How should MCC respond to the increased blurring of boundaries between military and civilian functions [be they carried out by humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private contractors]? Should Mennonite agencies ever support calls for military intervention in cases where civilian populations are at risk? If not, are Mennonites then guilty of what Ernie Regehr called “culpable nonviolence,” a nonviolence whose desire for purity renders it complicit with atrocities that it will not act to stop?<sup>2</sup> These questions have only become more pressing since versions of them were vigorously debated among Mennonite theologians in the run-up to and following the US invasion of Somalia in 1993.

**How does Mennonite relief, development and peace-building work relate to the discourse and practice of “humanitarianism.”**

**For Barth, sloth consists in a refusal to live into the humanity embodied by Jesus.**

**Barth means by philanthropy “the focusing and concentrating of human will and action on the prosecution of [an] anonymously human cause to a victorious and successful outcome.”**

As important as these questions about the relationship between humanitarians and the military are, however, we do not believe that they can be adequately addressed until more fundamental questions are answered. Specifically, we must first ask how Mennonite relief, development and peace-building work, such as the various projects carried out and supported by MCC worldwide, relates to the discourse and practice of “humanitarianism,” to what some have called the “humanitarian industry.” Therefore, when we were asked by the MCC Peace Committee to provide a theological reflection for its October 2005 meeting on the topic of “Protection: The Dilemma of Humanitarian Assistance,” we decided to approach the questions around R2P and the linkage of humanitarianism and the military by addressing the more basic question of MCC and the ambiguous beast called “humanitarianism.” To assist us in our analysis, we drew on the work of two very different thinkers: the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth, whose reflections on “philanthropy” put the fundamental theological issues involved in this discussion in focus; and David Rieff, journalist and writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, an incisive analyst and critic of the increasing entanglements of humanitarianism with doctrines of intervention.

### **Humanitarianism as Sin**

A recurring theme in the work of David Rieff is what we might call “abstraction” or “anonymity.” Here are two representative examples:

In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack. . . . there was the story of *individuals* who had died in the Twin Towers and then there was another story—a humanitarian story—of undifferentiated victims in Afghanistan. . . . As described, these Afghans remained abstractions.<sup>3</sup>

Or elsewhere, writing of Philip Johnston, former CARE US president who was instrumental in the militarization of humanitarianism in Somalia:

His account of the media’s role in helping make the American public aware of the crisis is largely devoid of historical context, geographical specificity, and even any real personalization. . . . When Johnston speaks approvingly of the media’s ability to turn a faraway crisis into a story of human beings, it is hard not to feel that he means human beings in the generic sense. After all, there are no real individuals in the story-only victims, victimizers, and relief workers. (35)

The question of abstraction is, we argue, of utmost importance. Abstraction is implicit in

the very name of the industry Rieff is writing about—“humanitarian.” It is the kind of abstraction explicit in the Enlightenment project that Rieff claims humanitarianism inherits.

Our concern here is with Barth’s account of sloth.<sup>4</sup> Sloth consists in a refusal to live into the humanity embodied by Jesus. In the course of the section on sloth, Barth identifies four refusals of the proper relationships characteristic of true humanity, that is, characteristic of Jesus. The first is refusal of relationship with God, which Barth labels “stupidity,” the third a refusal of relationship with the created order, or “dissipation,” and the fourth a refusal of relationship with time, or “human care.” We are most interested in the second refusal, the refusal of relationship with others, which Barth calls “inhumanity.” As usual, Barth begins with a Christological claim:

The royal freedom of this one man consisted and consists in the fact that He is wholly the Fellow-man of us His fellows; wholly the Neighbor of us His neighbors; wholly the Brother of us His brothers. . . . In the actualisation which it has found in Him humanity means to be bound and committed to other men. In Him, therefore, man is turned not merely to God but to other men. . . . In this exaltation above all He is also a direction for all; a summons to participate, as thankful recipients of His grace, in the humanity actualised in Him, to share this humanity with a concrete orientation on the fellow-man, the neighbor, the brother. (432–3)

This is freedom, and the failure to live into it is bondage. It is also inhumanity. There are times when Barth will say that we are “sub-human” or even “superhuman” (not a compliment), but here Barth means to say that we are inhuman.

But what exactly does he mean by this claim? How does this work itself out? He gives a brief overview that doesn’t last more than several lines. Sloth’s inhumanity begins with sins of omission and indifference that lead to exploitation and “actual transgression”: stealing and murder and finally war. But then he goes from this to an extended discussion of, of all things, *philanthropy*. It is a bizarre moment. Lying, stealing, murder, and war get rushed over in order to go after the philanthropists. But what is so bad about philanthropists that they should not only be included in the ‘inhuman’ but made the focus of a discussion of inhumanity?

First we need to get clear on what Barth means by philanthropy. He doesn’t just mean the things that Andrew Carnegie did, or that the wives of rich politicians do. It is “the

focusing and concentrating of human will and action on the prosecution of [an] anonymously human cause to a victorious and successful outcome.” (438). The key words here are “anonymously human cause.” “In all this man is always understood in general. He is humanity, or simply man, anonymous man.” (438) Now Barth says that something like this must be a part of genuine humanity. “To be concretely with the other means always to be occupied with some such cause in relation to him.” “This is the critical point. For it is not at all self-evident that when I am actually occupied with a cause of this kind I have concretely in mind the other, the fellow-man, the neighbor, the brother; that I am committed to him rather than free in relation to a purely abstract and anonymous man.” In fact, causes, according to Barth, are usually invented in order to grant one this false freedom. The more urgent the cause, the more easily one can escape the concrete, specific demands of the other. There is nothing like a cause to enable one to think, speak and act “with a complete disregard for [the other’s] questions, needs and expectations.”

So there are two evils at work in philanthropy. The most obvious is the refusal to engage the other. The less obvious, but more basic reason for devoting so much attention to philanthropy, is the deception involved. Philanthropy is so insidious because, unlike stealing or murder, it so cleverly conceals itself. It is inhumanity concealed in its anti-thesis, love itself. (Of course, stealing and murder can find more or less clever ways to conceal themselves too. For a less clever example, take “the war on terror.”) We seldom encounter inhumanity in its “naked form.” Inhumanity will always try, and usually succeed, to clothe itself as “the friend and servant of anonymous man, and therefore the more energetically turning away from concrete, individual man, trampling over him as if he were a corpse, which indeed he is, since the living fellow-man is regarded as non-existent, and is treated accordingly.” (439)

Who exactly are we talking about here? The example that springs most immediately to mind is Mrs. Jellyby from Dickens’ *Bleak House*, but any number of Dickens characters might work. Mrs. Jellyby is notable for two things: how cruel she is to Esther and everyone else around her, and how terribly concerned she is to help the “poor, starving Africans” even as she tramples over the poor of London. Or consider Abbie Hoffman’s mother. Hoffman reports that his mother used to tell him to eat everything on his plate because, “the poor children in China would be glad to have it.” Hoffman says he used to respond, “Ma, name one.”

As should come as no surprise, we propose inserting “humanitarianism” wherever Barth has “philanthropy.” Moreover, we expect this to be uncontroversial, and perhaps most uncontroversial among aid workers, almost all of whom, as Michael Ignatieff points out, “have a bad conscience.”<sup>5</sup> Few good aid workers are not haunted by the worry that humanitarianism is inhuman in precisely this way. One can hardly read Rieff and not think with Barth: “Sometimes, rather perversely, one could almost wish that there were not all these human causes the ceaseless promotion of which only seems to make everything worse, postponing the peace on earth which they all seem to desire, and merely intensifying an internecine warfare.” (440)<sup>6</sup>

Why would Barth suggest that philanthropic causes seem “to make everything worse?” We find a critical clue in the following passage from Rieff:

When one goes to a poor country where the humanitarian role is vital, the colonial atmosphere is unmistakable. Humanitarians live in houses previously occupied by cabinet ministers, or at least by the richest person in the village. Their user-friendly democratic attitudes can do nothing to disguise their power. Whether they are in sandals and old jeans or not, the reality is the same. And the youthquake clothing only makes them masters in mufti. They are there to help; they are not there to share power in any serious sense.<sup>7</sup>

“Helping” as opposed to sharing power: this, we would argue, is *the* crucial issue. Moreover, it is the crucial issue regardless of whether or not humanitarians do or do not call upon military force to help them achieve their ends.

It is not entirely clear that the question of power-sharing is a crucial issue for Rieff. As long as there is “a bed for the night” Rieff is content. Moreover, power-sharing would likely demand the sort of expansion of the humanitarian mandate that Rieff is trying to narrow. But most importantly, Rieff’s texts are clearly the work of someone who is just as much a “master in mufti.” Despite his remarks about abstraction with which we began, it is extraordinary how few individuals are in his books aside from the *Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF) intellectuals he likes to interview. In this crucially important respect, one of Rieff’s central objects of attack, Michael Ignatieff, has made a very telling criticism:

As an exercise in reporting, the book is curious. Although based on Rieff’s firsthand experience in the field, it contains little reportage and hence lacks a sense of conditions on the ground, so that the humanitarianism he is talk-

**Inhumanity will always try to clothe itself as “the friend and servant of anonymous man.”**

**“Helping” as opposed to sharing power is the crucial issue.**

ing about remains strangely disembodied, a phantom of the seminar room rather than a gritty reality. The book leaves one asking: What do aid workers actually do?”<sup>8</sup>

Ignatieff should have been clearer than he was in insisting that the absence of individual humanitarians at work is not the most disturbing absence in Rieff’s otherwise perceptive analysis of the humanitarian industry. The most disturbing absence is the absence of what the industry calls “beneficiaries.”

### **MCC and Humanitarianism**

The claim that beneficiaries are “absent” in Rieff’s work—and in much of the discourse of humanitarianism—needs some explanation. In one sense, aid recipients are of course present: addressing their medical, food, water, and shelter needs, after all, is the *raison d’être* for the industry. In another sense, however, they are absent, the individual humanity of the recipients erased as individuals are turned into “beneficiaries,” into objects to be counted and managed rather than individuals to be engaged. NGOs like MCC—be they engaged in relief, development, or peace-building work—inevitably struggle, if they are honest and self-conscious about their work, with this tendency to erase the individuals whom entire structures are supposed to be designed to serve, to turn them into objects of our philanthropy, to turn away, as Barth would say, from “concrete, individual man” towards “anonymous man.” The question of power—how we share it, how we are accountable to partners, how our partners are accountable to “beneficiaries,” that is, the people with whom they work—is fundamental. Raising the question of power raises the question, we believe, of what type of organization MCC is, or should strive to be. Is MCC a “humanitarian” organization as described by Rieff? Should it be? Determining MCC’s relationship to the discourse and practice of humanitarianism is, we think, a logically prior and more fundamental question to the question of whether or not “humanitarians” should accept, seek out or call for armed protection or armed intervention.

What is, then, “humanitarianism?” By “humanitarian organizations,” Rieff means “relief groups” whose “specific mandates vary, but their basic remit is to bring aid—whether medical aid, food, shelter, sanitation, or psychosocial services—to suffering populations.” Rieff’s discussion of humanitarianism focuses primarily on its Western, northern manifestations, on humanitarianism as a secular religion for Europe and

North America. Humanitarian organizations such as MSF (Médecins sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders), ACF (the French NGO Action Contre le Faim/Action Against Hunger), CARE, and IRC (International Red Cross) (in short, the alphabet soup of the humanitarian world) captivated Rieff’s interest “because they came from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States and seemed, whether willingly or unwillingly, to have become the rich world’s designated consciences in all these landscapes of disaster.”<sup>9</sup> These organizations are staffed, Rieff correctly observes, mostly by young people working on short-term contracts. Rieff is simultaneously attracted to humanitarians, by their desire to provide beds for the night for strangers, and repelled by them, by their naiveté and dangerous utopianism.

How well does MCC fit the humanitarian model as described by Rieff? Should MCC aspire to be a humanitarian organization? At one level, MCC is undeniably part of the humanitarian phenomenon described by Rieff. We are a North American organization, one of whose mandates is to provide aid to people in need. Many of the things we do are also done by other organizations, secular as well as Christian, and we increasingly speak the same results-based management language as the rest of the industry. We would suggest, however, that at its best MCC has been more than a humanitarian organization so conceived. Specifically, at its best MCC has been about dialogical partnership, about sharing ourselves, our resources, and our power with others, about subordinating our particular visions in the service of visions being called forth by the Spirit in various locations, about putting our resources at the service of local communities mobilizing their own human and financial resources, about decreasing so that others might increase. This has happened most effectively when MCC and its workers have been present in particular contexts for the long-term. It is difficult-to-impossible to enter into an open, dialogical relationship, individually or institutionally, when one is only in a setting for the length of a six-month contract: it is difficult enough over three years, let alone ten. Without extended presence, we won’t be as aware of emerging local initiatives to mobilize local resources to address locally-identified problems. Without extended presence, we won’t be in as effective a position to assess the degree to which our partners are accountable to the people whom they are supposed to serve or to encourage such accountability. Without extended presence, in short, it becomes that much easier to instrumentalize our partners, to reduce them to the status of proposal-and-report writers, and to instrumentalize the persons with

**NGOs inevitably struggle, if they are honest and self-conscious about their work, with this tendency to erase the individuals, to turn them into objects of our philanthropy.**

**At its best MCC has been about dialogical partnership, about sharing.**



whom they work, to reduce them to anonymous “beneficiaries,” to turn, in other words, from concrete women and men towards anonymous “humanity.” To put the point somewhat provocatively, at its best MCC has been a cross between a religious order and a professional humanitarian organization, a hybrid of the missionary and NGO worlds. (We should underscore at its best: we should readily acknowledge that organizationally we routinely fall short of this vision.) This hybrid nature is, we think, as it should be. As a Christian organization, we should be looking to participate in the *missio Dei*, in the movement of God’s Spirit in the world, a mission that can’t be captured exclusively by the discourse of humanitarianism.

### Reference Points for MCC

Our brief from the MCC Peace Office is that all the above discussion and analysis would lead to “theological reference points for MCC.” In this regard, we fear that we aren’t going to be terribly original, because for the most part we see little warrant for revisions to the “Principles for Relating to Peacekeepers” that emerged from the Peace Committee meetings in 1996 and 1997 and that were published in the May–October 1997 issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter*. Assuming that we individually and corporately are still committed to non-violent discipleship, it seems to us that not much has changed over the past decade. We should maintain our commitment to non-violence based on our faith in Jesus’ triumph over the powers of sin and death and our membership in the eschatologically-oriented community formed through that victory. We should not call for humanitarian military intervention. If anything, we should be more skeptical, not less, about calls for humanitarian intervention than we were a decade ago. We should be humble about our limitations, recognizing that sometimes no non-violent solutions to the world’s ills will reveal themselves, and in those instances silence might be our best option. Much good reflection happened a decade ago at the Peace Committee meetings, and if there is a point in revisiting these discussions it should be that of reinforcing our conviction that we should not support or participate in calls for armed interventions.

We could end here, but instead we’ll conclude by expanding briefly on the question of humility. One thing that bothers Rieff about contemporary humanitarianism and much human rights discourse is their messianism, their utopianism. “Humanitarianism has come to see itself as a secular religion (much as the United Nations and the human rights movement do),” according to Rieff, a reli-

gion preaching a gospel that will not save.<sup>10</sup> Humanitarianism has come to promise more than a bed for the night, but in the end that is all it can deliver, and it should be content with that. “As utopias go,” Rieff notes, “humanitarianism . . . is a weak prescription for the world’s salvation.”<sup>11</sup>

As Christians, of course, we have a messianic faith, and some of our Anabaptists forerunners were routinely disparaged for their real or perceived millenarianism and utopianism. On the one hand, we have to make what many will view as a fairly arrogant claim, namely, that Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, if we are to be faithful to the Gospel. It is our confidence in this message that empowers us to renounce participation with lethal force and to seek out non-violent avenues for peace-building and reconciliation. On the other hand, however, our confidence in Jesus’ victory should not translate into arrogant claims about the church or about the efficacy of particular techniques. Just as we should be skeptical about grand claims for the benefits of armed humanitarian intervention, so should we be skeptical of any exaggerated confidence that the world will become a more peaceful place if only we equip a sufficient number of people with master’s degrees in conflict transformation or if only we can mobilize a sufficient number of people to stand between those at war.

For Rieff, such skepticism leads him to argue that humanitarians should stay away from advocacy, that they should focus on providing a bed for the night rather than improving the world. “Must humanitarians,” he writes, “whether out of despair, conformity to intellectual and moral fashion, or groundless hope—hope for hope’s sake—insist on trying to be the Archimedean lever for perpetual peace, or even, in Oxfam’s more modest formulation, a fairer world?”<sup>12</sup> For our part, we don’t think that Rieff’s otherwise trenchant analysis of humanitarianism presents convincing reasons why MCC should refrain from all forms of advocacy. In part because we are not sure that he correctly characterizes advocacy. Advocacy, whether by MCC or Human Rights Watch, need have little to do with “perpetual peace” or even “a fairer world.” Advocacy, or better, witness, is an end in itself. There are times when one speaks only because one cannot remain silent, not because of any hope that one’s words will bring about change. When we live, individually and institutionally, with people crushed by the weight of discriminatory systems, when we make ourselves vulnerable to them, when we are ready to share

**MCC has been a cross between a religious order and a professional humanitarian organization.**

**There are times when one speaks/advocates only because one cannot remain silent.**

Indeed, one could have a conversation with the military regarding the effectiveness principle—that the military role does not (often) achieve its intended objectives. That allows you to bridge some of these differences in a conversation: this is not about right or wrong, rather that we don't think it actually works. That's where the space for the military role begins to shrink.

That's where I think that aid agencies that disagree with the military on some things can have the space to have an actual conversation (and those agencies often agree on the ineffectiveness of the military in a humanitarian role).

—Comment by Jim Cornelius during October 2005 Peace Committee meeting. He is President of the Canadian Food Grains Bank (CFGB).

power with them, to engage them as concrete men and women rather than objectify them into “anonymous humanity,” then it will naturally flow that we will tell their stories and the way their stories crisscross with the stories of MCCers to whomever will listen, from congregations to newspaper readers to congresspersons. Such advocacy emerges out of relationships forged over years, even decades, with individuals, organizations, and communities who are mobilizing their own human and financial resources for non-violent struggles, for the difficult work of reconciliation. Our hope as we engage in such advocacy will not, however, come from a naively utopian belief in the power of international law or in confidence in our abilities to craft effective lobbying campaigns; rather, our hope will come from the witness of our partners who, through their non-violent work for justice and reconciliation, live as embodied signs of God's Reign. This hope will be a seemingly fragile, not a triumphalist hope, a hope in keeping with the fragility of the incarnation, a hope, then, in which we might have a humble confidence.

### Notes

1. An earlier longer version of this paper was originally presented at the meeting of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Peace Committee in October 2005 in Winnipeg addressing the topic of the “responsibility to protect,” and has been published in *Mission Focus: Annual Review* (2005). The core document of the R2P movement is *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001).

2. Ernie Regher, “Culpable Nonviolence: The Moral Ambiguity of Pacifism,” *Voices Across Boundaries: A Multifaith Review of Current Affairs* 1/1 (Summer 2003), 38–41.

3. David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 6.

4. *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958). Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations from Barth are from this volume and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

5. *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 5.

6. Barth goes on, however, to say, “Yet of what avail would it be to abandon the causes? It is not the different causes themselves that are evil, nor the philanthropic zeal dedicated to them, but the inhuman element in us which has such an uncanny power of mastering and using them on the pretext of serving humanity.” (Ibid.)

7. David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, 275. He will say something similar about the human rights movement in his later book, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 161. He calls it “a caste of Platonic guardians seeing to the best interests of the population at large, and accountable, in the final analysis, only to itself.”

8. “Mission Possible,” *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 19, 2002).

9. Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 20–21.

10. Ibid., 175.

11. Ibid., 97.

12. Ibid., 333.

*For the past several years, Peter Dula has been MCC Iraq Program Coordinator and Alain Epp Weaver has been MCC co-representative for Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. Peter is also a member of the MCC Peace Committee.*

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## A Dialogue on the Use of Force: One Canadian's Perspective

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by Bill Janzen

**D**o we need more dialogue on the use of force? Some developments in Canada are suggesting that. One relates to the recent return of two Canadian CPTers (Christian Peacemaker Team members), held hostage in Iraq for nearly four months. (A British CPTer also returned. An American was killed.) The question of whether the CPTers were appropriately thankful to the military forces who had rescued them became the subject of public commentary. Underneath, I felt, was the question of whether peace

work, like that done by the CPTers, still allowed for a role for military forces.

Second, in recent months the Canadian media has reported extensively on our military forces in Afghanistan, emphasizing the idealism of our soldiers and their commitment to improving things for the Afghani people. But the reporting has also indicated that our role there is not “traditional-peace-keeping,” where the mere presence of our military helps two sides in a conflict to refrain from fighting. In Afghanistan our

soldiers are fighting people who are presumed to be “insurgents” determined to overthrow the government. Canadian soldiers are taking lives.

A third invitation to dialogue relates to the “responsibility to protect” doctrine. Six years ago Canada’s Foreign Affairs minister, Lloyd Axworthy, commissioned an international study on this topic. The aim was to establish the idea that when a government is unable or unwilling to protect its people against egregious violations of basic rights then the international community has a responsibility to do so even if, as a last resort, that requires the use of military force. Canadian churches are now studying this doctrine (as is the World Council of Churches) and most, though cautious, are not closed to the idea.

How have we in MCC Canada dealt with the use of force? Speaking only for myself, I would say, not particularly well. Recently I participated in drafting an ecumenical letter which, after criticizing the Canadian government for being too negative on the Palestinian Authority, affirmed Israel’s right to security within the 1967 borders. What did we mean by that? Did we mean that Israel has a right to defend those borders militarily and that, if necessary, Canada’s military should assist? The letter did not say. Similarly, I have supported calls to the Canadian government to take substantially stronger action to protect the people in the Darfur region of the Sudan. Did I mean military action? If not, then what? Addressing these questions is hard.

Can we be clearer? I am reminded of one helpful principle articulated by Ernie Regehr. He argued against military action that, instead of seeking justice, is designed to advance our national interests by, for example, ensuring access to resources such as oil, minerals, or land, or by giving us a certain strategic advantage or prestige. This would rule out most wars. Doing so would also have implications for our standard of living. But does this stance mean that other military action, the kind that seeks justice, is legitimate? Can military action ever contribute to justice? And even if it can, might there not be better ways of promoting justice?

On the surface Canada’s military activities in Afghanistan appear to be motivated, at least to a degree, by a concern for justice and human rights. And at this point a number of local people there, as well as some Afghans in Canada, applaud our military forces. But our forces there also represent our contribution to the US-led “war-on-

terror” which is related to US interest to control large portions of the world’s oil. Resistance to this agenda is likely to increase. Also troubling is that by concentrating our forces on Afghanistan, we have backed away, even more, from UN peacekeeping work in places such as Haiti, the Congo, and the Sudan.

It is often said that traditional peacekeeping has become obsolete because of changed global dynamics. But some kinds of peacekeeping are growing. A professor at Canada’s Royal Military College writes that there are now 68,000 UN peacekeepers worldwide but that a mere 60 of these are Canadian; further, that in its military doctrine, Canada has moved away from peacekeeping and bought into the “three block war” idea, meaning that in three city blocks the military could go from war-fighting to peacekeeping to humanitarian work, and that our troops should be trained for each phase. This doctrine has a certain appeal but most humanitarian agencies have condemned it because it abandons the principles of neutrality and impartiality and makes local people suspicious of all humanitarian work.

We can, thus, critique Canada’s more recent military stance but that still leaves the question of whether we can accept other forms of military action, for example, peacekeeping work. In my opinion we should not rule that out. I find it noteworthy that the Old Testament prophets, amid all their criticisms of corrupt judges and rulers, do not say that there should not be judges and rulers, only that they should be fair and honest. In the New Testament, government is also seen as having a role; so too in all the Confessions of Faith that Mennonite groups have formulated since the 1520s. The idea of government implies some use of force. Still, our highest authority is Christ who, when he was crucified, rejected the sword even when it would have served the cause of justice for himself.

Where does this leave things? Perhaps with three points. First, we can, and we must, critique military action when it is largely self-serving, as it often is, despite the language in which it may be cloaked. Second, speaking only for myself, I’m not sure that this rules out all military action as, for example, in Sudan’s Darfur region where basic protection is greatly needed. Third, we must continue to allow the Spirit of Christ on the Cross to inspire us in the continued search for non-violent responses.

*Bill Janzen is Director of the Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCCC) Ottawa Office.*

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## Resources for Further Reading

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The core document of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) movement is *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre (IDRC), 2001.

“Principles for Relating to Peacekeepers” came out of discussions by the MCC Peace Committee in April 1997, and appeared in the May–October 1997 (Vol. 27, No. 2) issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter*. That entire issue, titled “Dealing With Peacekeepers”, is available on the MCC website (<http://www.mcc.org>).

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## Structural Adjustment Programs and Humanitarian Crisis

by James Oporia Ekwaro.

In Africa, the 1980s were characterized by economic conditionalities imposed from outside the continent, often through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP). The 1990s were characterized by external political conditionalities.

Unless one understands the impact of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) on the African state, one cannot understand much about the impact of the humanitarian crisis in Africa. A Structural Adjustment Program is the equivalent of war in the countryside. It undermines most of the survival capability of local people there. That part of life which was manageable by local people now becomes part of the “humanitarian crisis.” Therefore, we must analyze the crisis of the African state in order to analyze the humanitarian aid crisis.

It seems to many in Africa that the goal of SAPs was to undermine the capability of the African state to deliver services. If African governments followed the apparent advice to “privatize everything that works,” that then leaves the state holding the bag with only the dysfunctional remainder.

*James Oporia Ekwaro is former Ambassador of Uganda to China, is one of the founding members of Nairobi Peace Initiative Africa, and has been a friend and resource person to Mennonite Central Committee for many years.*