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Salvage and Salvation

Guest Editors' Introduction

WHAT DOES it mean to offer salvation in the midst of disaster? This is the question that animates the articles in this special issue, all of which probe the complex dynamics at play in the intersections of religion and disaster relief in contemporary Asia. Here, we seek to advance inquiry into the conceptual categories of “religion,” “disaster,” “relief,” and “Asia” by drawing on recent theoretical advances across a variety of disciplines.

The recent history of Asia is replete with frequent, massive, and high profile “natural” disasters as well as innumerable smaller-scale events that nevertheless devastate local communities. Though the casualties, economic losses, and graphic images of material damage caused by Asian disasters often receive primetime—albeit short-lived—attention in the global media, disaster impacts are far more wide-ranging than such reporting tends to reveal. Disasters affect all aspects of social life in ways that continue long after a precipitating event, and they frequently operate as decisive points at which new spaces are opened for political, social, and religious change.¹ The cultural dynamism of disasters also emerges from the social processes that arise in response to it, including efforts to “salvage” damaged assets and through actions aimed at delivering “salvation”—a process that is simultaneously material and social. Additionally, in the wake of major disasters in contemporary Asia, relief and reconstruction activities, as well as various forms of gifting and charity, frequently inspire complex global entanglements across spatial and cultural gaps.

We argue that religious mobilizations in the wake of Asian disasters provide compelling opportunities to scrutinize pivotal theoretical concerns within the contemporary social sciences. This special issue is particularly concerned with what analysis of the religion-disaster-relief nexus can do for our understanding of the first of these three key terms: religion. Among the increasingly diverse set of actors that engage in disaster relief today are an array of organizations, movements, congregations,

and even putatively secular communities that affiliate with, or draw upon, diverse religious traditions. Until recently, the relief work of these actors has attracted limited scholarly attention (BARNETT and STEIN 2012; BENTHALL 2015).² This is surprising, because in many cases the work undertaken by religious relief providers is decisive in shaping how disaster relief operations unfold. Certainly, it is a mistake to presume that secular actors (however construed) have ever held a monopoly over disaster relief in Asia. Furthermore, regardless of organizational identity, all humanitarian organizations necessarily engage in complex ways with the religious institutions and dispositions of the communities within which they work.

The refocusing of analysis on religion and disaster relief, as with “religious NGOs” more generally, needs to be approached carefully to avoid simplifying a decidedly heterogeneous field (BARNETT and STEIN 2012; FOUNTAIN 2013). Rather than generic studies or comprehensive surveys, what is most needed is detailed ethnographic research that prioritizes “richness, texture, and detail” (ORTNER 1995). “Religion” should be approached as embedded in the unfolding actions of particular communities (TAVES and BENDER 2012). Through such accounts of religion *in situ* it becomes possible to trace the many different ways that it is imagined, reworked, deployed, rejected, and mobilized in the service of disaster relief and, vice versa, how disaster relief informs and reshapes religious traditions. Ethnographic accounts are more than just thick descriptions: they produce new interpretive and critical possibilities. The articles in this special issue are presented out of the conviction that the conjuncture of religion and disaster relief is a productive and compelling space for theoretical analysis of the concepts, formations, and practices of “religion” in Asia.

AFTER LISBON?

In academic literature on religious responses to disasters, the great Lisbon earthquake of November 1755 looms large. The story of the disaster itself has been repeatedly and intensively commented upon. One of the largest cities in Europe and, in the eighteenth century, a major center of commerce and culture, Lisbon was laid waste by a compound disaster involving earthquake, tsunami, and fire, which resulted in tens of thousands of casualties (NICHOLS 2014, 973–74). Most relevant for our purposes here are the mythologies that have arisen over what this disaster, and what ensuing engagements with it by leading intellectuals, have done subsequently for understandings of religion. In the centuries after the Lisbon earthquake, the disaster has come to be seen as a formative influence on the reconceptualization of religion and its distinctive relationship with disaster.

Striking on All Saints’ Day, the Lisbon earthquake seemed fated to ignite debate on questions of Providence and divine agency. Various prominent theological discourses proposed that divine wrath had instigated the disaster (BASSNETT 2006, 322), but this was an era in which the Enlightenment project of rational critique was expanding and these theodicies were met with alternative interpretations (DYNES 2000). A famous exchange between two of the most prominent

philosophers of the day, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, vigorously advanced such critiques and cemented the Lisbon disaster as a “philosophical cause célèbre” and an enduring intellectual preoccupation (HUET 2012, 40 and 55).

Details of this exchange have been analyzed extensively elsewhere.³ Here, we are concerned with the debate’s legacy on scholarship. Voltaire and Rousseau were both deeply critical of theodicies that painted the disaster as divine punishment for Lisbon’s sins. Both *philosophes* also adopted distinctively modern arguments by drawing on “scientific understanding coupled with a firm dismissal of religious superstitions” (HUET 2012, 53; see also DYNES 2005). Despite his purported defense of religion against Voltaire’s deist-inflected cynicism, Rousseau goes considerably further in his pursuit of Enlightenment rationality than his conversation partner. For Rousseau, housing construction and evacuation procedures were at least as important in the destruction that took place as was the initial earthquake. Rousseau’s advance of “the first truly social science perspective” on disasters (DYNES 2000, 107) is both an immanentization and, as HUET (2012, 53) has perceptively argued, a simultaneous politicization of disasters.

The Lisbon disaster is widely regarded today as a key juncture in shifting understandings of the place of religion in relation to disasters and relief. Today, the dominant “Secularizing Interpretation” (NICHOLS 2014), or what we might also call the “Lisbon myth,” locates the disaster as a decisive moment in the emerging Enlightenment critique, and eventual displacement, of theological responses to disaster in favor of sociological explanations and an appeal to new technologies of bureaucratic management.⁴ Even HUET (2012, 53), who is critical of the overinflated importance Lisbon has assumed posthoc, notes that not long after the Rousseau-Voltaire exchange, “acts of God would be relegated to the vocabulary of insurance companies.” The Lisbon myth thereby imagines this European cataclysm as a turning point after which religion declined in importance as a definitive means of responding to disaster events.

But to what extent do we live—and research—in a post-Lisbon world today? The Lisbon myth has substantially influenced the questions and paradigms with which social scientists investigate calamities in Asia. CHESTER and DUNCAN (2010, 87) have argued that “purely secular interpretations of responses to hazards are deep-seated” within disaster studies more broadly. They shape a context within which “religious language and thought forms have been effectively expunged from many ‘official’ reports found in learned academic journals and publications of government agencies.” This default occlusion is occasionally supplanted by outright hostility.⁵ The expunging of religion fails to facilitate engagement with significant elements of the discourses, practices, and institutions of diverse Asian communities in the aftermath of disasters. But perhaps the most significant impact of the Lisbon myth has been the constraint it has exercised on imaginaries about the kinds of roles that religion plays in responding to disasters. The Voltaire-Rousseau debate critiqued the prominent theologies of the day as inadequate philosophical responses and, in so doing, implicitly engaged with religion as primarily a matter of belief and ideas.

This, of course, drew upon and perpetuated the decidedly modern preoccupation of treating religion as a cognitive and interior concern.⁶ Assumptions of this kind have meant that much research on religious responses to disaster has tended to focus on ideational considerations. Doctrinal and theological discourses about the meanings of a disaster are at times vigorously propounded and debated as communities seek to come to terms with what has taken place. MERLI (2010) and FUJIWARA (2013) have argued that discourses of theodicy are notable reactions in some Asian contexts, though they can appear as aberrations. But theodicy should not be construed as the only, or even necessarily the primary, form of religious response and it would be a mistake to assume its importance *a priori*. During times of disaster, religious traditions can be put to work in a variety of different ways. The authors in this collection seek to expand the range of responses that receive consideration by exploring religious responses to disasters through diasporic connections (Samuels), ludic dramas (Miichi), material and ritual responses and their managed media portrayals (McLaughlin), architectural formations (Bhattacharjee), purification processes (Benthall), practices of encounter (Fountain), and projects of reconstruction (Feener and Daly).

Responses to natural disaster in contemporary Asia draw upon those developed “after Lisbon.” Indeed, one of the lessons that can be learned from the Lisbon earthquake is that disaster events can and do substantially influence ideas, formations, and the broader cultural milieu. Lisbon has exerted an enduring impact, but its influence should not be overstated. As both an analytical framework and empirical reality the Lisbon myth should not be presumed to act as the operating norm. Outside academic and bureaucratic circles, the Lisbon myth has been unevenly disseminated and disparately received across Asia.

In this collection the regional focus on Asia plays a key role, not as a defined and bounded space, but rather as a heuristic that focuses attention on societies and contexts outside a narrowly conceived North Atlantic world. We seek to move beyond a lingering “Western bias” (BARNETT 2011, 15) in contemporary scholarship on humanitarianism, which has resulted in widespread scholarly neglect of what PACITTO and FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH (2013) call “Other” humanitarianisms. Our approach to Asia is not to exclude Western actors or ideologies, as these have clearly been active and influential within the region.⁷ Rather, we seek to expand the frame of analysis and explore how research into processes of salvage and salvation in Asia might open up new theoretical terrain. The following sections begin this process by engaging in critical discussions of the key concepts that frame our discussion: “religion,” “disaster,” and “relief.”

LOCATING RELIGION

The definition of religion has been extensively debated within the social sciences, with various theories proposing contrasting understandings of what the term denotes and how it should be used. Substantivists and functionalists, among others, have vigorously debated which definitions of religion are most appropriate

and analytically valuable. Recently, the very concept of “religion” itself has been critiqued. The work of Talal ASAD (1993; 2003), Tomoko MASUZAWA (2005), Jonathan Z. SMITH (1982; 2004), along with a slew of other critics of “religion,” interrogate the concept by tracing its historicity and cultural specificity, as well as its ideological baggage.⁸ Though they at times pursue divergent lines of argument, these thinkers share a number of key contentions.

The primary targets of critics of “religion” are problems associated with reifying religion into a universal, generic, and clearly demarcated category—a problem which still afflicts academic and popular imaginations alike. Implicit working definitions of religion, such as those that pervade the Lisbon myth, tend to center on concepts of interiorized belief, privatized spirituality, and propositions about gods or supernatural beings and their relation to the natural world. While religion is often taken to be immediately obvious and clearly bounded, in fact the identification of religion, and the kinds of characteristics that are taken to be religious or otherwise, comprise a contested and deeply political process. If religion does not have a transcultural, ahistorical essence, then it can no longer be presumed to form a clear domain distinct from areas marked as “nonreligious” or “secular,” such as economics, governance, and science. At the very least, the nebulous nature of religion opens up ambiguous spaces that confound sharply marked boundaries, such as with ideas of “spirituality,” which are uneasily located between religion and the secular (TAVES and BENDER 2012), or with nationalist rituals and practices, which can be said to constitute a kind of “civic religion” (BELLAH 1967; GORSKI 2011).

In place of reifying essences there is a growing scholarly attention to religion’s historicity. For example, recent research into the biography of religion in modern East Asia helpfully explores the dynamics involved in the invention of religion as a new conceptual and legal framework. Jason Ānanda JOSEPHSON’S (2012) study of religion in Japan examines the contention that arose in nineteenth-century Japanese society when the category of religion, deployed initially in Christian Europe, was applied to a pluralistic Japanese environment.⁹ This diffusion was complicated by ongoing contestations in Europe as to the meanings and uses of the concept. Historically, the umbrella category “religion” only emerged as a discrete and important conceptual framework in East Asia under the coercive pressures of imperialism and because of the rise of modern nation-states. Within these conditions, religion, defined constitutionally and conceived as a component of domestic and international law, was required by polities that sought membership in the emerging international order. After decades of negotiation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the term was translated into Japanese as *shūkyō*. It was subsequently exported via military/economic expansion and missionary endeavor into China and Taiwan (as *zongjiao*) and Korea (as *jonggyo*). In each case the concept continued to carry cultural freight deriving from its European genealogy, and it garnered new meanings as it was translated into new contexts. The concept was renegotiated through contact with Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, and other traditions newly understood as religious, and it was redeployed by governmental and legal offices. The effects of this translation process seeped into state operations and

everyday practices, with new concepts of religion instituting new imperatives to disaggregate the religious from other concerns. Other regions of Asia experienced comparable encounters with imported concepts of religion that continue to be negotiated in local terms (VAN DER VEER 2001; KEANE 2007).

Contemporary Asian actors involved in disaster relief are shaped by the complexities of modern ideas about religion and their interaction with local traditions, institutions, and practices. Indeed, powerful legislative and political forces across Asia seek to inscribe particular roles onto religious actors that constrain their functions and activities. Determining what exactly constitutes religion, and where the boundaries lie separating religion and its opposite, are frequently matters of ongoing debate and negotiation. The articles in this special issue are all attentive to the ways in which religion is a contested and evolving, and politically salient, category. Our approach is to take into account specific contingencies created by the interaction of modern religion frameworks with Asian contexts. Rather than seeking to pin down religion by arriving at a new definition or a prescribed approach, this special issue instead seeks to open new terrains by investigating how religion takes shape within recent Asian disaster responses as a complex and ever-transforming framework. Benthall cuts across assumed religious-secular divides by developing an analytical rubric, purification, that challenges easy distinctions between the religious and the nonreligious. McLaughlin's study of Japanese discourses engages in a historicizing maneuver by tracing the changing contours of public discourse on religion after recent major disaster events. Samuels provides a detailed study of the ways in which ideas and practices of "religious work" associated with Theravāda Buddhist temples founded by Sri Lankans in Malaysia have changed over time, leading up to their remarkable response in the weeks after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as transnational and trans-sectarian centers for channeling donations. The other articles make use of detailed ethnography to focus attention on religion in specific sites, including Japanese folk cultural and performing arts (Miichi), the theologies and practices of a transnational Christian relief organization (Fountain), and the politics of Hindu nationalism that played out after the Gujarat earthquake of 2001 (Bhattacharjee).

CONTESTING DISASTERS

In his study of disasters in the Philippines, Greg BANKOFF (2003) argues that the discourse that situates disasters as "abnormal events" is premised on a particular Western frame. Observing the frequency of natural hazards in the modern history of the Philippines, he proposes that environmental phenomena such as earthquakes, typhoons, and tsunami are, for many Filipinos, neither strange nor irregular. Rather it is the *normalcy* of disasters that is most striking, such that, over time, environmental disruptions have been woven into the fabric of everyday life. His argument draws attention to ways in which definitions of disaster are culturally constituted. Whether a disruption is understood as disastrous or not is contestable. Popular imaginations of disasters—what they are, what they mean, how or why they take place, what moral or political valences are attached—are diverse

and under constant renegotiation, not least as a consequence of the experience of undergoing disasters themselves. Matching this diversity, and again closely paralleling debates around concepts of religion, scholarly definitions of what constitutes a disaster remain contested (QUARANTELLI ed. 1998; PERRY 2007; FUREDI 2007).

Here, we approach disasters as unavoidably cultural phenomena. Rather than simply a matter of hazard events, disasters take place at particular intersections of environmental processes and society. Our approach is to eschew essentialized definitions and instead turn our attention to the different ways that societies imagine and engage with disasters. We draw on OLIVER-SMITH'S (2011, 26) framing of disasters as a dynamic interplay of "event/processes" that involve "natural forces or agents, power structures and social arrangements, and cultural values and belief systems." Accordingly, there are no purely "natural" disasters. Once a hazard phenomenon—flood, drought, tsunami, earthquake, typhoon/hurricane, geothermal activity, or other catastrophe—intersects with human society, any purported naturalness dissolves. All disasters are enmeshed in human worlds involving economic, cultural, political, and religious concerns. Disasters implicate all aspects of human sociality including matters as diverse as relational networks, architectural forms, urban and rural landscapes, ritual practices, bureaucratic processes, and economic distribution.

Moreover, natural and anthropogenic forces are often entangled. Casualties from the disasters of the bloody and protracted civil wars in Sri Lanka or Aceh are not easily separated from the disasters of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and earthquake. These "dual disasters" merged and reshaped each other in complex ways during the periods of reconstruction that followed (HYNDMAN 2011; GRAYMAN 2012). The Great East Japan earthquake in 2011 involved an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in such a way as to blur any rigid distinction. Revelations about mismanagement of the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plants in the years after 2011 have rendered moot the "natural" trigger for this catastrophe (GILL, STEGER, and SLATER eds. 2013; SAMUELS 2013). Stretching further back into history, the famine that devastated China during the Great Leap Forward (1959–1961), arguably the most severe famine of all time with a staggering mortality rate between 15 million to 30 million people, was certainly not purely the result of hailstorms and heavy rains, but also of political delusion and inequitable distribution. This tragic fact is illustrated starkly in that throughout the famine, government granaries remained full, and the state even continued exporting grain (LI 2007, 357–64).¹⁰

Even assuming the naturalness of hazards is problematic, and attribution to nature is a far from universal assumption. This is apparent, for example, in questions about the human impact on the environment in ways that exacerbate disasters.¹¹ A particularly significant concern in this regard is human-influenced global climate change, which is modifying the locations, frequencies, and severity of climate-related disasters such that significant parts of Asia have become increasingly susceptible to large-scale catastrophic events (VAN AALST 2006; COUSINS 2014; BANHOLZER et al. 2014). Even more fundamentally, as analysis of the Lisbon debate discussed

above illustrates, causal ascription to impersonal natural forces is a fairly recent and by no means universal innovation, drawing as it does on concepts and debates arising after Europe's experience with the Enlightenment.

Literature on disasters in Asia includes considerable commentary about the diverse ways in which disaster-affected populations understand disaster events. In her discussion of how the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was perceived in Southern Thailand, Claudia MERLI (2010) argues that her Muslim informants viewed the tsunami simultaneously as an "Act of God," an "Act of Nature," and an "Act of Men and Women." In Aceh the interpretations of the same tsunami event were hotly debated (DALY and RAHMAYATI 2012; FEENER 2013; MILLER 2010; REZA 2010). Some Muslim Acehnese suggested that the disaster had taken place as an act of divine retribution for the sins of the people. Others saw it as a test of faith or an event preordained by God regardless of human action. Yet others proposed that it helped reveal religious wisdom (*hikmah*) in that the disaster generated the necessary moral force to bring about the end of civil conflict in the province (GRAYMAN 2012).

Indeed, some Acehnese came to see the disaster as a "blessing in disguise" which created new possibilities for physical and spiritual recovery to help bring about a better and more pious Acehnese society. The tsunami was a key factor in the rejuvenation of Islamic public religiosity which, over the ensuing years, melded with humanitarian and reconstruction discourses about the need to "build back better" (FEENER 2013).¹² In her studies of the interpretations of earthquakes in Islamic texts, Anna AKASOY (2007; 2009) points to the fact that such interpretive diversity has deep historical roots. She argues that a range of different sources came to add new dimensions into Medieval Muslim religious thought and so stimulated considerable discussion among scholars at the time. Through close textual analysis, Akasoy highlights the vibrancy of the debate as theories of both natural and divine causes were questioned and refined.

The history of interpretations of disaster in China has likewise been characterized by considerable debate. Andrea JANKU (2007; 2009) points to the "moral reading of disasters" in Late Imperial China which located floods and droughts as "heaven-sent disasters" (*tianzai*). This reading informed perceptions of governmental legitimacy, with major disasters potentially leading to a revision of the assumption of the ruler's divine mandate. An increase in disaster events could be taken as a "cosmic portent announcing the current dynasty's loss of this mandate" (JANKU 2009, 233–34). Alongside this reading were interpretations that saw disasters, while still potentially heaven-sent, as either a trial or a warning. In such cases by successfully overcoming challenges a ruler could powerfully re-legitimize his authority. Kathryn EDGERTON-TARPLEY's (2008) rich analysis of literati accounts of the Incredible Famine in North China (1876–1879), which resulted in as many as 13 million fatalities, similarly identifies a common concern to provide a "cosmic and moralistic framework" and a desire to populate accounts of the famine with heroes and villains.¹³

Conceptual hermeneutics of disaster and material practices of relief are often closely interrelated. As FOUNTAIN et al. (2004) have shown in their study of the

1998 Aitape tsunami disaster in Papua New Guinea, differing interpretations of disaster—including ascription of the disaster to the Christian God, bombs detonated by shadowy agents, and underwater earthquakes—played out in intense conflict over the course of the relief activities. It is clear that particular relief practices and also strategies for future mitigation are influenced by understandings of why a disaster took place. And yet an exclusive focus on the causal question “why?” potentially deflects attention from the “what” and the “how,” steering analytical attention away from the wide range of activities undertaken in response to traumatic events. Not all practices of relief emerge out of clearly formulated ideational frameworks. While attending to contrasting epistemologies and ontologies, it is important to maintain a broad analytical framework so as to adequately address the full spectrum of relief initiatives.

GIFTING RELIEF

The global humanitarian industry, which has grown enormously over the past century and now occupies a pivotal place in disaster response in large parts of Asia, draws on a modern default interpretation of disaster as a freak accident of nature. This interpretation facilitates a particular cultural logic of intervention as benevolent short-term assistance. Such a view is also premised on a particular conception of humanity (BARNETT 2011). This sense is captured by the humanitarian imperative, framed most famously by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies: “The desire to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found ... to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being” (IFRC 2014). Such ambitions for global reach and the imperative to preserve life have become sacrosanct within the contemporary geopolitical order. The desire to alleviate suffering, regardless of location, has proven to be a powerful impulse, and belief in humanitarianism has become a potent contemporary creed.

The growing moral authority of humanitarian action has been accompanied by the inexorable processes of institutionalization. Since the 1980s, the humanitarian sector has increasingly been shaped by the forces of professionalization and rationalization that have guided the kinds of relief work that are conducted. According to Michael BARNETT (2005, 723):

NGOs once operated with a relatively slow-moving machinery and were staffed by individuals who were expected to learn on the job. Now, however, most prominent agencies have a system of global positioning and delivery that allows trained professionals to get assistance quickly where it is needed. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), for example, grew from a two-room office in the 1970s into an international network of 19 semi-independent branches, with a combined annual budget of \$500 million, running programs in over 70 countries, with 2,000 international and 15,000 national staff.

In this context of expanding and professionalized humanitarianism, certain core practices have been enshrined as part of the standard NGO repertoire. These core

practices are disciplined through codes of conduct, funding mechanisms, media interactions, legislative frameworks and policy prescriptions, and the rise of particular moral sentiments that are shared across institutional boundaries. Emphasis is placed on efficiency, speed, precision, and technical prowess. Core practices are also

permeated by development discourse, jargon, and rituals: all kinds of coordination meetings, terminology, minimum standards and principles, different project phases, beneficiary categories, the latest fashion of cross-cutting themes, and a continuous “stock trade” of projects, target groups, aid commodities, budgets, contacts, and so on. (KORF et al. 2010)

None of this is inevitable, nor has it gone without critique. Even as it has come to be endowed with a sacral aura, humanitarianism has garnered criticism—from those within its own ranks, as well as from others—who regard humanitarian action as ineffective, if not destructive. As a consequence, humanitarian action today is perpetually “in question” (BARNETT and WEISS eds. 2008) or in a state of “crisis” (RIEFF 2002; REDFIELD 2013).¹⁴

A significant element of the challenge to humanitarian and mainstream disaster relief actors comes from the fact that relief providers wield considerable power. All relief efforts aim at making influential material interventions through such practices as medical procedures, the provision of food supplies, financial transactions, and reconstruction projects.¹⁵ But decision-making regarding distribution and the actual effects of material interventions are often poorly understood and less than transparent. Recent accounts of “states of emergency” have drawn attention to the close connections between military conflicts and disaster relief, with both being seen as “embedded in the same global logic of intervention” (FASSIN and PANDOLFI 2010, 10). The sudden onset of disasters can create opportunities for decidedly political interventions that enact coercive, manipulative, and insidious politics in the name of relief and recovery (ADAMS 2013). In parallel to this, disasters can also create openings for other projects of transformation, including various proselytizing initiatives that can be linked with political objectives (ENSOR 2003; NURDIN 2015).

Relief practices, like other types of charitable and philanthropic assistance, are forms of gifting (STIRRAT and HENKEL 1997; KORF et al. 2010). Viewing relief as gift facilitates attention to the ways that giving involves exchanges and cultural symbolism. Marcel MAUSS’s (1925) seminal analysis of the gift argues that all gifts must be reciprocated by another gift of equal or greater value. The giver is necessarily a receiver, and vice-versa. Receipt of a gift—even, or perhaps especially, one given with no expectation of direct recompense—necessarily engenders obligations among its recipients. While there are possible exceptions, particularly those enabled by religious logics of anonymous and nonreciprocal gifting (BORNSTEIN 2009; 2012), obligations for repayment are often crucial features of gift giving in post-disaster contexts, and there can be thoroughly coercive undertones that inhere within apparently generous actions (REDFIELD and BORNSTEIN 2011). These less-than-voluntary interactions enact sociopolitical relations. KORF and colleagues (2010), in their insightful analysis of tsunami relief gifts in Sri Lanka, pro-

vide a “paradigmatic case of gift” in which reciprocity is indeed obligatory. But here the relations of return are not confined to the global developmental trope of Northern donors and Southern recipients. Instead, relationships are mediated by brokers and translators who work in the interstices between donor and recipient.¹⁶ The entanglements of transactions within the “aid chain” (WALLACE et al. 2006) blend differing gift rationales. Even contemporary technocratic charity is not immune from translation and renegotiation in terms of obligation and recompense. STIRRAT and HENKEL (1997, 79), for example, trace how development and humanitarian gifts start as abstract acts of donation but inevitably and progressively become entwined in local politics. In the course of this transformation the giver receives “the reassurance that, despite the immoral nature of the world within which they live and of which they are a part, they can still transcend that world as moral human beings.” As a result, “the circuit of reciprocity is completed.”

SALVAGE AND SALVATION

The roles of religion within the mainstream humanitarian industry remain ambiguous. For while there are longstanding attempts to demarcate and exclude religion from processes of relief, apparent for example in the Red Cross Code of Conduct (FOUNTAIN 2015), it is also clear that various religious actors are prominent initiators, forebears, and contemporary participants within the formal humanitarian sector. As a consequence, humanitarian claims to a purely secular, nonreligious identity must be critically examined.

Michael BARNETT's (2011) history of humanitarianism is a rare attempt to trace the movement across the *longue durée*. He argues that the impulse to save distant others, an impulse that continues to animate the movement, is grounded in a specifically Christian history. The “big bang” that gave birth to contemporary humanitarianism was the Evangelical revival in Europe beginning in the eighteenth century. During this period of religious experimentation a range of interconnected strands wove together local and transnational charitable activities and social reform movements. These included a moral passion for saving souls, a fervent desire to mold society in heaven-bound directions through new technologies of governance, and a paternalistic concern for the less fortunate. A central feature of the story that Barnett tells is the progressive dissociation of humanitarianism from these Christian roots over the course of the past century, apparent in the gradual replacement of the ethics of religious duty with technocratic prowess. Yet the disconnection is never complete. The salvific impulse which first animated humanitarian concern remains imbued in humanitarian action. Moreover, even among self-consciously secular actors there remain powerful dimensions of “transcendence” and “spirituality.” For Barnett, all humanitarianism remains “faith-based” because some kind of faith is required to imagine an elusive global humanity and to persevere despite disappointments, failures, and fatigue.

A somewhat different yet related argument is Didier FASSIN's (2012) analysis of humanitarian reason. Concerned primarily with French and other Western patterns

of humanitarian government, Fassin traces the contours of this moral economy, one he regards as permeated by ambiguity, tension, and paradox. Fassin pays close attention to the paradoxical interplay of apparently contrasting impulses. Humanitarianism is premised on the logics of compassion, and yet it may legitimate repressive and violent interventions. It intimates toward a global humanity united in solidarity, and yet it also builds upon, and helps perpetuate, inequality. Seeking to understand the logics undergirding humanitarianism, Fassin traces humanitarianism back to its Christian theological heritage. Humanitarianism embodies a “politics of life” and a “politics of suffering,” both of which are indebted to a distinctly Christian theology. Indeed, Fassin argues that humanitarianism is a case of the “religious after religion,” whereby “the ultimate victory of religion lies not in the renewal of religious expression throughout the world, but in its lasting presence at the heart of our democratic secular values” (249). Rather than being devoid of religion, humanitarianism should be understood as a “political theology” (251). Modern humanitarianism is heir to a Christian politics and therefore “prolongs and renews the Christian legacy” (251). As such, even purportedly nonreligious relief interventions can be seen as permeated by moral concerns—for purity of intention, for transforming ways of living, and ways of understanding—that continue to imbue decidedly theological concerns.¹⁷

Though clearly still dominant in terms of visible presence, operational capacity, and financial resources, the humanitarian sector, imbued with these legacies of Western Christianity, is facing increasing competition due to the recent proliferation of new relief actors emerging from a range of different contexts. While local responses of diverse forms have long been a crucial, and severely undervalued, component of disaster relief, significant changes in the organizational cartographies of disaster relief operations are currently underway (SUMNER and MALLETT 2013). Contemporary disaster relief operations in Asia include an extraordinarily diverse range of actors that operate outside of the formal humanitarian sector. These emerging actors do not necessarily adhere to established “global” humanitarian ideals, nor do they necessarily concern themselves with Euro-American professionalized standards. Their heterogeneity resists generalization.¹⁸ They include transnational, national, and local organizations associated with communal and kinship networks and involve varying mixes of professional salaried workers and amateur volunteers. Emerging actors frequently draw on long traditions of charitable concern, including Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, and Christian concepts and practices (YEOPHANTONG 2014) as they develop operational capacity, modalities of fundraising, organizational structures, and practices of distribution. Some have adopted modern forms, as is apparent in the widespread NGO-ization of charitable practices (BROUWER 2010; CHOUDRY and KAPOOR 2013; HUANG 2009). Other actors are “accidental” humanitarians, becoming involved in disaster relief practices only on an ad hoc basis and without prior intent (PU 2015).

Although emerging and established actors can play decisive roles in relief operations, it would be a mistake to assume that religious disaster relief is limited to

formalized organizations. Take, for example, the case of Masjid Rahmatullah, a neighborhood mosque in Aceh, Indonesia. A few days after the December 2004 tsunami, the surviving residents of Gampong Lampuuk could stand in the middle of their township, survey the view before them, and recognize almost nothing. Gampong Lampuuk was directly in the middle of the tsunami's impact zone and the waves had destroyed nearly everything in their path. After the water receded, only one building was left standing: though badly battered, Masjid Rahmatullah remained intact and was the only relief in an otherwise flattened landscape. The mosque had served as a place of refuge. Nearby residents fled to the concrete building in the hope of finding some form of protection, and many of those who survived by sheltering in the mosque thought they had experienced a miracle. Similar narratives about other hardy mosques soon spread throughout Aceh and were subsequently disseminated by Islamic blogs and along other information pathways.¹⁹ As they clung to these material structures of their religious traditions, desperate residents were saved from a watery death. Particular forms of Islamic structures were here synonymous, in a direct and literal sense, with disaster relief.

Another approach to broaden conceptions of relief is suggested in Martin RIESEBRODT's *The Promise of Salvation* (2010). For Riesebrodt, religion is a means for "coping with contingency" in the face of disasters that exceed human control. Comparing East Asian religions (Buddhism, Daoism, and Shintoism) and Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), he argues that all religions are concerned with "averting misfortune, overcoming crises, and providing salvation" and that religion is the primary means of "warding off and overcoming crisis situations." Religion does so not only by proffering explanations for the inexplicable but also by facilitating agentic action in situations when people "run up against their own limits." An implication of this argument is that all religious rituals can be regarded as a kind of disaster relief. In the face of disaster, rituals of worship are among our primary technologies of response. Here, rather than seeing religious rituals as distractions from the real work of food aid, medical care, and reconstruction, religious rituals are relocated as central to helping humans live through disaster events and to rebuild on the other side.

RELIGIONS OF RELIEF AND RECONSTRUCTION

In his work on the Philippines, BANKOFF (2003) probes into the possibility that particular societies, being so influenced by the experience of frequent disaster events, might form what he calls "cultures of disaster." Following Bankoff's lead, we posit here what might be called "religions of disaster": traditions that have been molded to a significant degree by interactions with disaster events and processes. The rupture of disaster opens possibilities of religious transformation, including changes in materiality, rituals, doctrine/theology, institutional hierarchies, logics, visions, and interpersonal relationships. Even when continuities following a disaster event are more apparent than disruptions—see especially Bhattacharjee's article in this collec-

tion—the experience of disaster can nevertheless become insinuated into everyday post-disaster practices and understandings.

Disasters can rework cultural formations, as too can processes of relief and reconstruction. When humanitarian groups, religious or otherwise, engage in disaster relief and reconstruction work, they tend to do so with the explicit intention of intervening in other peoples' lives. But the engagement is never purely one way. Just as disasters can influence the kinds of existential questions that are discussed among affected communities, and the cosmologies proposed in answer, so too can participating in disaster relief practices prove transformative for aid providers. In engaging with affected communities, those undertaking humanitarian activities can experience considerable doctrinal innovation, including self-conscious assessment of whether existing frameworks and practices are adequate or whether other approaches might be more comprehensive or appealing. The process of engaging with state structures is also significant here, as groups become constrained and reworked by legislative and bureaucratic regulations.²⁰

Attempts to undertake large and long-distance relief operations can profoundly rework authority and administrative structures. To secure potentially lucrative cash flows from official international donors, religious actors are frequently required to show how they have adequately separated management of development or humanitarian assistance from their “religious” activities. This demarcation can significantly alter internal relationships by creating new sources of power and authority. To be successful, the newly separated charitable departments frequently rely on administrative prowess rather than other forms of charisma or authority. Moreover, when finances come from external sources, lines of responsibility are often reworked in favor of meeting requests from outside donors rather than internal religious ones. Changing authority structures and financial flows can in turn serve to reshape ritual practices and doctrine beyond those involved directly in relief work.

Disaster relief activities can also shape the religious lives of donors who support them. The opportunity to participate in disaster relief through donating money, time, and other resources, and by engaging directly as a volunteer, can be experienced as deeply transformative. Participating in the consumption and dissemination of rhetorically powerful humanitarian images and stories can also be significant for reshaping ethics and dispositions. But not all disasters receive equal responses from different groups of donors. The roles of religious connection across distance, and the ways these connections shape sentiments of compassion and practices of gifting—and, extending from this, more wide-ranging religious understandings—deserve close attention, as too does the place allotted to compassion and gifting within different religious traditions.

The articles in this collection take a broad vision of “relief,” and the ways in which relief intersects with “religion” and “disasters.” The contributions to this collection open up new and innovative avenues for research. Bhattacharjee addresses an instance of what might be called “insidious aid,” in which relief processes deployed in India by Hindu nationalists have resulted in increasingly sharpened communal identities and the advancement of religiously motivated political

objectives. But Bhattacharjee is also attentive to the compassionate dynamics informing the Hindu nationalist movement, which she argues have been decisive factors in their social, political, and humanitarian success. In his article, Miichi takes a very different approach: instead of religion put forward as fraught and conflicted, he examines the revival of the ludic ritual practices associated with folk performing arts in Japan after the Great East Japan earthquake. Here, religion appears as a kind of comic relief. The contrast between these two articles begs further questions about when and how religious relief is deployed as entertainment or as an instigator of conflict. Drawing on a rich anthropological literature addressing the purity-pollution distinction, Benthall examines the ways in which humanitarian action is subject to “puripetal” forces. McLaughlin looks at the ways in which the public identity of religion in Japan has been determined by organizations that have learned in recent decades to present religious disaster relief as reassuringly scientific, personally relatable, and narrated in ways that distance “religion” from potentially controversial historical affiliations. Samuels and Fountain both study organizations, but of very different types. Focusing on particular Buddhist temples in Malaysia, Samuels explores the important roles of monks in facilitating disaster relief processes, both by redefining religious work in terms of doctrine and by connecting donors and activists through transnational Buddhist networks. Fountain examines how a North American Christian organization translates its distinctive theologies and practices into the context of Aceh, Indonesia. Through ethnographic analysis of the complexities and ambiguities of the “interfaith” humanitarian encounter between Mennonites and Muslims he highlights the dynamic nature of religious identities.

In addition to the articles discussed in this introduction, we are privileged to include in this special issue two short films by Tim Graf and Jakob Montrasio. These vignettes explore the work of religious activists in response to the Great East Japan earthquake of 2011. The first clip traces the development of the Cherry Blossom Festival at Jōnenji, a Pure Land Buddhist temple in the tsunami-stricken city of Kesenuma. The temple functioned as a refuge center for several months in 2011. In 2012, clergy and lay volunteers initiated a new festival at the temple, which has since grown into a major event. The occasion helps commemorate the tragic events of the disaster and also provides an opportunity for communal recreation, celebration, and fun. The film compliments Miichi’s discussion on playful relief. The second clip presents an on-the-ground view of the training of *rinshō shūkyōshi*, “clinical religious specialists” or “interfaith chaplains,” at Tohoku University in Sendai. Since 2012, Tohoku University has led the development of “spiritual care” in Japan by training chaplains in collaboration with scholars, medical doctors, and religious professionals. As this short film illustrates, this program’s distinctive collaboration of religious and nonreligious aid providers has contributed, as McLaughlin’s article in this special issue also points out, to a shifting image of religion in Japan’s public sphere. These two beautifully crafted pieces of visual ethnography build upon their earlier feature-length documentary film *Souls of Zen: Buddhism, Ancestors, and the 2011 Tsunami in Japan*.²¹

This collection brings together articles that probe into new theoretical terrains. It is our hope that this project will stimulate further work in this field. Our approach to each key term framing this special issue—“religion,” “disaster,” “relief,” and also “Asia”—is to eschew essentialization by attending to dynamism and diversity and by grounding analysis in empirical research in particular contexts. Through this approach we argue that these key terms, as well as their intersections, become compelling sites for research, precisely because of their immense potential for opening religious studies, disaster studies, and area studies in new directions. This special issue is premised on the conviction that the relationships between religion and disaster relief—salvage and salvation—are good to think and theorize with as we continue the work toward understanding the complexity and dynamism of religious traditions in Asia.

NOTES

* This special issue began life at a conference on “Salvage and Salvation: Religion, Disaster Relief, and Reconstruction in Asia” hosted by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, in November 2012. We are very grateful for funding from the Asia Research Institute and outstanding support from the administrative staff, especially Valerie Yeo, who so capably managed the conference logistics. We would also like to thank Michael Feener, Robin Bush, Patrick Daly, Jesse Grayman, and Kanchana Ruwanpura for their valuable suggestions on how to improve this introduction.

1. This understanding of disasters is indebted to recent research that describes disasters as “critical junctures” (OLSON and GAWRONSKI 2003; GAWRONSKI and OLSON 2013) or “tipping points” (PELLING and DILL 2010).

2. A number of recent edited volumes have brought attention to various facets of the relationships between religion and disaster relief/humanitarianism, or closely related themes. See BARNETT and STEIN eds. (2012); GAILLARD and TEXIER (2010); FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH ed. (2011); KAWANAMI and SAMUEL eds. (2013); COULDREY and HERSON eds. (2014); LACEY and BENTHALL eds. (2014); and FOUNTAIN, BUSH, and FEENER eds. (2015a). This emerging focus runs parallel to, and feeds off, a recent “surge of interest” (HOVLAND 2008, 171) into the relationships between religion and development, broadly conceived. For a good recent review of literature on religion and development see JONES and PETERSEN (2011), as well as edited volumes by FOUNTAIN, BUSH, and FEENER eds. (2015b) and TOMALIN ed. (2015).

3. For recent analyses of this debate, see BRITTAIN (2011, 13–38), DYNES (2000; 2005), HUET (2012, 39–55), SIMPSON (2014, 201–216), and, especially on Voltaire’s position, also HART (2005, 16–25). The exchange was complicated by the use of quite different genres, with Voltaire deploying his trademark wit via poetry and Rousseau responding through a lengthy personal letter. Voltaire initially composed his poem in 1755, the same year as the disaster, and it was published the following year. For an English translation see VOLTAIRE (1901). Rousseau’s letter of response was sent on 18 August 1756. For an English translation see ROUSSEAU (1997).

4. NICHOLS (2014) draws on a wide range of European publications from the years after the 1755 disaster to argue against the prevailing view that Lisbon precipitated widespread and rapid secularization at the time of the earthquake.

5. For example, in an op-ed published in *The Guardian* immediately after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, British journalist Martin KETTLE (2004) argued that the severity and scale of the disaster demanded a “serious explanation from the forces of religion.” But rather than waiting for an explanation, Kettle goes on to argue that “earthquakes and the belief in the

judgment of God are ... very hard to reconcile.” For further examples of media critiques of “Acts of God” interpretations after the 2004 tsunami, see also ROSENBAUM (2005), KAMENETZ (2005), and HASTINGS, HENNESSY, and RAYMENT (2005). On 13 November 2013 *The New York Times* “Room for Debate” section echoed this script when, following Typhoon Haiyan, a debate was published entitled “Natural Disasters or ‘Acts of God?’.”

6. ASAD’s (1993) critical genealogy of the concept of religion is particularly helpful on this point.

7. See Fountain in this issue.

8. For a related analysis of concepts of religion in relation to both development and politics see FOUNTAIN, BUSH, and FEENER (2015). For further seminal critical studies on religion, see CAVANAUGH (2009); FITZGERALD (2003; 2011); KEANE (2007); MCCUTCHEON (1997); VAN DER VEER (2001); and DE VRIES (2007).

9. On Japan, see also JOSEPHSON (2006; 2012); MAXEY (2014); and ZHONG (2011; 2014). For related studies about the invention of religion in China, see ASHIWA and WANK (2009); CAMPANY (2003); and GOSSAERT and PALMER (2011). See also DUBOIS (2011), who examines both Japanese and Chinese contexts.

10. For further analysis of the political causes of this famine see BRAMALL (2011); HOUSER et al. (2009); Ó GRÁDA (2007; 2008); YANG (2012); and ZHOU (2012). For a seminal account on the politics of famines see also SEN (1999, 160–88).

11. For example, as ADAMS (2013, 22–53) narrates, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans was the direct result of neglect in maintenance of the system of levees, the construction of channels used by shipping which served to funnel storm surges directly into the heart of the city, and the destruction of surrounding wetlands which had previously served as a natural buffer zone. However, far more important than this initial disaster was the “second-order disaster” (6) of stalled and prolonged recovery actively produced by structural politics that privileged market and for-profit mechanisms for reconstruction, mechanisms which were wracked with inefficiencies.

12. For provocative, though very different, discussions of the potential for religion to “benefit” from disasters see SIBLEY and BULBULIA (2012), NICHOLS (2014, 989), and RIES-EBRODT (2010, 116).

13. For further studies that address similar concerns in Asia, see also DOVE (2008; 2010); DONOVAN (2010); FUJIWARA (2013); and MCLAUGHLIN (2013a). CHESTER (2005), CHESTER and DUNCAN (2010), CHESTER et al. (2013), and FUREDI (2007) also address similar concerns within broader geographical horizons.

14. Analogous developments have also taken place around the related concepts of “development” (FERGUSON 1994; ESCOBAR 1995; SACHS 1992) and “human rights” (HOPGOOD 2006; 2013; MOYN 2012).

15. For further discussion of material practices of relief and humanitarianism, see REDFIELD (2013) and FOUNTAIN (2014).

16. On the importance of mediators and translators in development and humanitarian processes, see OLIVIER DE SARDAN (2005); LEWIS and MOSSE (2006); and MOSSE (2005). Samuels (this issue) and PU (2015) both emphasize the importance of Buddhist monks who play similarly pivotal roles in brokering relief.

17. See also BENTHALL’S (2008, 107) argument that secular humanitarian actors display many “parareligious” features such that “though religion may seem to leave by the door, it flies back by the window.”

18. For valuable case studies drawn from diverse traditions, see BENTHALL and BELLION-JOURDAN (2009); BORNSTEIN (2012); HUANG (2009); MCLAUGHLIN (2013a; 2013b); and SIMPSON (2014). For useful analyses of the wider social dynamics see also FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH (2011); FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH and AGER (2013); and SMITH (2011).

19. See the YouTube video clips “Tsunami mosques Miracle of Allah!” (ANON 2009) and various entries on the Islam—World’s Greatest Religion! website (KING-SLAVE OF ALLAH 2008; 2010). See also Merli’s discussion of the creation and circulation of audiovisual texts among Muslim communities in Southern Thailand following the Indian Ocean tsunami (MERLI 2010).

20. ADAMS’s (2013) analysis of “faith-based” actors in the relief and recovery processes following Hurricane Katrina is instructive here. While she regards these church groups as providing the most significant response to the disaster, she also argues that their work flourished within the structural constraints of a neoliberal regime such that, often unwittingly, their voluntary work was folded into market-driven logics and practices. Here, faith-based relief became indexed to neoliberal governmentality.

21. We were delighted to show an early cut of this film as part of the Salvage and Salvation conference at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore in November 2012. Further discussion of these vignettes appears in the research note by Tim Graf in this special issue.

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