

HUMANITARIANISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CONTEXT:

RELIGIOUS, GENDERED, NATIONAL*

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This article surveys the wave of new historical and political-science literature exploring humanitarianism and the ‘pre-history’ of human rights in the long nineteenth century, noting the presentist assumptions underpinning much of this literature. On the one hand, histories of humanitarianism have focused on the origins of present-day humanitarian concerns, paying particular attention to the anti-slavery movement. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of this literature has explored Anglo-American (and usually Protestant) humanitarianism to the exclusion of the humanitarian campaigns and ideologies of other nations and faith traditions. A more properly historical approach is required, which would pay greater attention to the fusion of religious and secular traditions of activism, to the particular role of women in constituting these traditions, and to the different national contexts in which they bore fruit. Such an approach would also expand our understanding of ‘humanitarian’ activity to incorporate causes with less obvious present-day relevance, such as the temperance movement and Josephine Butler’s campaign against the state regulation of prostitution. It would certainly prompt deeper reflection on the contingency of humanitarianism as a topic of historical inquiry, at least as currently constructed.

If human rights are ‘the last Utopia’, then it is hardly surprising that their history, broadly conceived, now represents such a fashionable area of enquiry.¹ When Kenneth Cmiel sought to assess this nascent field in a landmark article first published in 2004, the focus was firmly on twentieth century developments.² Since then, a new wave of work exploring what one might term the ‘pre-history’ of human rights has emerged. This research has clustered around three key areas: first, the emergence of a humanitarian sensibility in the late eighteenth century and its mobilisation through various forms of internationally-oriented humanitarian activism during the century that followed; second, the diplomatic and military practice of humanitarian intervention in the nineteenth century and its Early Modern antecedents; third, the continuities and discontinuities between the rights-based discourse of the French revolutionary era and the post-1945 ideology of human rights.

While there are obvious connections between these areas of interests and more established fields, such as anti-slavery activism and Evangelical philanthropy, there is no denying the heavily ‘presentist’ orientation of many of the scholars working in this area or the questions they ask. As the political scientist Michael Barnett notes in the introduction to *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism*, he initially set out to examine the evolution of humanitarianism in the 1990s but his focus changed once he grasped the extent to which recent developments reflected deeper historical patterns.³ Even so, Barnett’s approach in what is effectively the first major historical survey of humanitarianism is manifestly informed by the dilemmas and debates that preoccupy contemporary activists. In *Freedom’s Battle: the Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*, Gary Bass, another political scientist, repeatedly asserts his desire to influence contemporary political practice.⁴ Davide Rodogno’s work in the same area is more historically minded. Yet his careful, archivally rooted study *Against Massacre. Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire 1815-1914* includes a lengthy epilogue comparing nineteenth century practice with post-1989 developments.⁵ Covering similar ground from what she terms a ‘cultural history’ perspective in *Smyrna’s Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide and the Birth of the Middle East*, Michele Tuson asserts that ‘[t]he legacy of the Eastern Question gave shape to a humanitarian ethos informed by both the material and geopolitical, which later would influence human rights campaigns into the twenty-first

century.’⁶ Scholars like Brendan Simms and David Trim, who emphasise the complex origins and plural nature of traditions of humanitarian intervention in *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, likewise do so with one eye to future developments.⁷ Even the eighteenth century cultural historian Lynn Hunt appends an account of “Why Human Rights failed, only to succeed in the long run” to her influential volume *Inventing Human Rights*, which explores the contribution of empathy to rights discourse during the Enlightenment and Revolutionary eras.⁸

This tendency to read backwards through the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man, or to interpret the anti-slavery movement as a ‘human rights’ campaign in the modern sense of the word, is perfectly understandable. For scholars like Barnett, Hunt, Bass and Rodogno the parallels across time and space are striking. From the late eighteenth to the early twenty-first century, new media and communications technologies have fostered sympathy across borders, facilitating the mobilisation of large numbers of people through transnational voluntary associations, which lobby for state intervention, raise large sums of money to relieve the suffering of distant others, and organise international relief efforts. From the late eighteenth to the early twenty-first century, such mobilisations and interventions have been framed in terms of two parallel and inter-connected discourses: a discourse of ‘rights’ and a discourse of ‘humanity’. Continued difficulties in relating these professedly universalist claims and discourses to the realities of Western political, cultural and economic hegemony reinforce the sense of connection between then and now. With this in mind, it is easy to see military interventions in the late Ottoman Empire and UN peacekeeping missions in the former Yugoslavia as different points on a single, overarching continuum.

And yet, this preoccupation with the origins of our current world-order is problematic. First, there is a lack of ideological distance. As Samuel Moyn has correctly noted, historians of human rights approach their subject in ‘the way church historians once approached theirs. They regard the basic cause ... as a saving truth, discovered rather than made in history.’⁹ This approach manifests itself in celebratory and teleological accounts of the emergence and progress of human rights, and in the hagiographic depiction of pioneering humanitarian activists.¹⁰ The latter is perhaps most strikingly epitomised by

Adam Hochschild's treatment of Edmund Morel in his best-selling account of the campaign against slave-labour in the Congo.¹¹ Second, this overly presentist approach impedes a properly historical understanding of the emergence of conceptions of 'human-rights' and humanitarian mobilisation over the *longue durée*. The emphasis on parallel discourses, structures and practices is helpful when it comes to making comparisons across time-periods. It is of limited use when it comes to tracing more precisely the continuities and ruptures between the nineteenth century 'origins' and late twentieth century flowering of the ideology of human rights and its attendant international architecture.

Nineteenth century realities were inevitably more complex - and more foreign to our twenty-first century world - than this simplistic reading implies. This article will therefore seek to reassess those realities on their own terms. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship between concepts and practices, to the interplay between transnational humanitarianism and a more overtly political cosmopolitan radicalism, and to the central role of women in shaping traditions of humanitarian activism, as well as to the distinctive religious and national cultures that underpinned this humanitarian activity.

II

At first glance, the connections between humanitarian sensibilities and activism, humanitarian intervention and the evolving idea of 'human rights' in this period appear relatively straightforward. With humanitarianism, the focus is on people: their identification with the suffering of distant others, fostered by new literary forms and media technologies; and the mobilisation of this empathy through philanthropy, associational activity, the public sphere and the emergence of global civil society.¹² With humanitarian intervention, the focus is on states as actors: the place of intervention as an established practice within the international system; the role of humanitarian mobilisation in diplomatic decision making; and the relationship with an older interventionist tradition dating back to the Peace of Westphalia that drew on religious sympathies and deployed a rhetoric of 'tyranny' rather than a language of 'humanity'.¹³ In both

cases, we can see the role of discourses of ‘humanity’ and of the ‘rights of man’ in mobilising individuals and legitimising state action, in ways that resonate with our contemporary notions of ‘human rights’. Closer examination reveals, however, that these resonances can be problematic.

In his controversial book *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Moyn draws a clear distinction between the ‘rights of man’ embraced by revolutionary democrats, which lacked international standing and could therefore only be guaranteed and enforced by states, and our contemporary ‘human rights’, which entail universal claims that can be asserted internationally, transcending the framework of state and nation.¹⁴ Picking up on this distinction, Rodogno suggests that ‘[a]rguably humanitarianism and humanitarian intervention lie alongside the concept of the rights of man’.¹⁵ He proceeds to equate nineteenth century interventions ‘in the cause of humanity’ with the practice of ‘humanitarian intervention’ we know today, but fails to explore further the relationship between these parallel traditions.¹⁶ While this attempt to disentangle discrete strands feeding into the late twentieth century ideas and practices makes some sense in the English-speaking world, which distinguishes semantically between the ‘rights of man’ and ‘human rights’, it has less purchase in countries like France and Germany, where the eighteenth-century terms ‘*droits de l’homme*’ and ‘*Menschenrechte*’ remain current. By seeking to disentangle these strands, moreover, we risk imposing anachronistic categories on nineteenth-century sensibilities and political practice.

Of course, Moyn’s approach is in many ways an attempt to move away from such anachronism, opposing the tendency of scholars to deploy too readily the language of twenty-first century human rights to nineteenth-century humanitarians. But Moyn’s emphasis on the evolution of political ideas rather than modes of action sets him apart from scholars like Barnett, who are more interested in the practice of humanitarianism than the theory of ‘human rights’. Indeed some of the most interesting recent work in the field explores the mechanisms underpinning appeals to the humanitarian conscience, rather than their ideological frames of reference. Introducing their landmark collection of essays *Humanitarianism and Suffering: the Mobilization of Empathy*, the anthropologist Richard Ashby Wilson and the historian Richard D. Brown understand the historical divergence between humanitarianism (the wish to promote

human welfare) and human rights precisely in terms of practice: the humanitarian seeks to assist fellow beings and to alleviate suffering, but does not necessarily act to defend violated rights.¹⁷ This difference of emphasis between humanitarian activism and human-rights campaigning might also mean ‘the difference between immediate action to achieve individual results and unrelenting, generations-long efforts to establish new legal and political arrangements for whole classes of people.’¹⁸

Underpinning this practice-based distinction is a concern not with ideas and their political impact but with emotion and the ways in which phenomena like the rise of the novel promoted both the emergence of a new sensibility and the appeal of Enlightenment and revolutionary rights discourses. This approach, which draws heavily on the work of Lynn Hunt, makes it easier to appreciate what Wilson and Brown term ‘the blurred boundary between humanitarian and human rights’.¹⁹ Yet privileging the emotional at the expense of the political risks a different kind of anachronism. For instance, Thomas Laqueur’s insightful examination of the role of narratives of individual suffering in expanding the field for human sympathy and generating humanitarian activism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries engages primarily with philosophical and sociological approaches to the study of emotions.²⁰ Using the philosopher Richard Rorty’s sentimentalist thesis to explore the democratisation of the ethical subject and the beginnings of ‘human rights culture’, Laqueur assumes a continuity of emotional responses to narratives of suffering from the Enlightenment to the present. This assumption is not really supported by work on the history of emotions - for instance that of William Reddy, who stresses the relatively brief ascendancy of the cult of sentimentality in late eighteenth-century France.²¹ More importantly, perhaps, Laqueur’s emphasis on aesthetics ignores factors that may have been equally significant in colouring responses to victim narratives, most obviously changes in religious beliefs and moral attitudes. It is to these factors that we need to look if we are to understand the ways in which humanitarianism and a more overtly political cosmopolitan liberal radicalism intermingled within the same nineteenth-century milieux, particularly perhaps in Britain. The synergy between these two traditions amounted to more than the coexistence of parallel political strands.

III

This intermingling is brought into relief by some of the recent scholarship on humanitarian intervention, focusing particularly on the 1820s. In an incisive essay on the origins of British liberal interventionism, John Bew argues that once Britain had accepted the logic of military intervention in foreign affairs during the 1820s, ‘she was always likely to be drawn to the “liberal” or “humanitarian” side’. Thus Bew explicitly places the British destruction of the Ottoman fleet at Navarino on a par with British military support for the liberal cause in Portugal, both of which appeared ‘rightful and moral’ to influential elements within the British public.²² Here, the British slide into intervention on behalf of the Greeks is clearly situated within the broader ideological context of Restoration Europe and set alongside the counter-revolutionary interventionism of the Holy Alliance. Humanitarianism and the emotive response to narratives of suffering take a back seat.

Bew’s approach contrasts markedly with that taken by Bass. For Bass emphasises instead the political impact of humanitarian concern for the Greeks triggered in Britain by reports of Ottoman atrocities, most notably the 1822 massacre at Scio (Chios). Yet if we examine his treatment of the issue more closely, we find a constant slippage in his depiction of the motives and rhetoric of the Philhellenes between a ‘humanitarian’ preoccupation with the ghastly suffering of distant others and the more overtly political (in this context ‘liberal’) commitment to the right of national self-determination.²³ This slippage carries over into the book’s title, which assumes that ‘Freedom’s battle’ (Byron’s phrase) and ‘The origins of humanitarian intervention’ (Bass’s subject) must be one and the same thing. On one level, this simply reflects Bass’s political inclinations, which lead him to argue that liberal democracy and a free press are the handmaidens of humanitarian mobilisation and interventions. On another level, it testifies to the powerful combination of liberal politics and humanitarian sympathy that underpinned popular support for the Philhellene cause. But it is only through closer examination of the specific social and political milieux that supported these early ‘humanitarian’ campaigns that we can begin to appreciate how discourses of humanity and of the rights of man cross-fertilised in practical, political ways.

The overlap in personnel between the London Greek Committee and committees formed on behalf of Spanish and Italian political refugees suggests that the Greek agitation can indeed be clearly situated within the political tradition identified with the ‘rights of man’. Yet the overlap in personnel between anti-slavery activists and supporters of the Greek cause, not just the reform-minded Zachary Macaulay but also the profoundly conservative William Wilberforce, points to a very different tradition of religious, social and political activism - one more obviously identified with the cause of moral reform and the practice of humanitarian mobilisation to relieve distant others than with democratic nationalism or the rights of man. More generally, as Bew notes, while Navarino may have been a product of the ideologically-charged opposition between ‘liberal’ and ‘reactionary’ forces in post-revolutionary Europe, contemporaries came to understand this (accidental) intervention in humanitarian terms.²⁴ This fusion between superficially distinct traditions of activism and intervention highlights the problem with Moyn’s attempt to challenge the existence of a nineteenth century pedigree for modern ‘human rights’ exclusively in terms of the revolutionary tradition and its preoccupation with state-based political and civic rights, dismissing phenomena like anti-slavery that loom large in parallel histories of humanitarianism.²⁵

The interplay between these two traditions becomes more apparent once we shift our focus from the Greek to the Italian cause. On the face of it, British support for the Risorgimento fits clearly into the history of democratic nationalism. In an introductory chapter outlining the history of ‘humanity before human rights’, Moyn identifies this history with the rights discourses of the revolutionary era, arguing that ‘[i]f there was a rights of man movement in the nineteenth century, it was liberal nationalism’.²⁶ In this context, Moyn pauses to consider the impact of Mazzini, whom he describes as the ‘most emblematic figure’ within this political tradition. Recent work has confirmed Mazzini’s iconic status throughout the 19th-century, and the contribution of a whole generation of exiled Risorgimento activists to the ‘Liberal International’ in the earlier part of the period.²⁷ Yet it is important to remember that Mazzini himself had an ambivalent relationship with the ‘rights of man’ tradition - preferring to talk of ‘duties’, as Gandhi later did. Recognising the Declaration of the Rights of Man as ‘the supreme and ultimate formula of the French Revolution’, Mazzini nonetheless saw that revolution as marking the end of one epoch in human progress

and the beginning of another.²⁸ This new age was to be characterised not by ‘rights’ but by ‘principles’. Interestingly, for our purposes, he pronounced ‘the Word of the new Epoch’ to be ‘Humanity’; more interestingly still, he identified ‘humanity’ with ‘the religious idea’, and placed ‘regeneration’ and ‘moral personal amelioration’ at the heart of his vision of politics.²⁹ Nor was this religious and moral vision tangential to his impact. Rather, Christopher Bayly and Eugenio Biagini maintain that this was a period in which ‘the religiosity of a political vision was a condition for its popular success’, and that precisely this spiritual dimension enabled Mazzini’s ideas to resonate in different political traditions and contexts.³⁰ This was certainly the case in Britain, where Mazzini’s moral vision created a bridge between the revolutionary tradition of the rights of man and the more religiously inflected humanitarianism of the reform complex that underpinned the flagship anti-slavery campaign.

An important body of work produced by Anne Summers explores these issues in ways that illuminate ‘lineages of female activism’ in Britain, although the family contexts and social networks of the women in question suggest a wider applicability. In a recent article on British women and cultures of internationalism, for instance, Summers shows how women like Emilie Ashurst Venturi and her three sisters moved seamlessly from anti-slavery into Mazzinianism, and thence into the campaign against the state-regulation of prostitution led by Josephine Butler. Such women embraced Mazzini and his teachings, Summers argues, because these resonated with ideas they had already developed and because their involvement in anti-slavery had ‘confirmed their conviction that moral purpose justified and indeed demanded political activity’.³¹ Thus ‘the nature of female support for Italian unification throws into sharp relief the religious content of what is often characterised as one of nineteenth-century Britain’s quintessentially liberal enthusiasms.’³² Here, then, we see not merely the fusion between humanitarian and liberal milieux that underpinned the Philhellene movement and, later, the campaign on behalf of Eastern Christians, but also the central role of religious and moral imperatives in shaping nineteenth-century political practices. Such imperatives underpinned the ‘mobilisation of empathy’ and fostered a synergy between humanitarian activism and politically radical internationalism. This synergy applied quite as much to Mazzini, Garibaldi and other Risorgimento exiles - many of whom embraced

‘humanitarian’ causes like anti-slavery, animal rights and Butler’s campaign against state-regulated prostitution - as it did to the non-conformist and Evangelical reformers they encountered.³³ Yet it may have applied especially to women for whom, as Summers has noted, religion served to justify an active role in public life.³⁴

IV

Here, the particular contribution of female activists, concerns and perspectives to humanitarianism and early ‘human rights’ campaigns merits further reflection. It is twenty years since Clare Midgley first drew our attention to the massive engagement of women in the British anti-slavery movement.³⁵ More recently, an important collection edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart has explored the interaction between women’s rights and transatlantic anti-slavery in a variety of national contexts.³⁶ High-profile political causes like Philhellenism, Mazzinianism and anti-slavery were, in fact, by no means the only meeting-points between humanitarian concern, moral reformism and rights discourses at home and abroad, especially among female activists. The pivotal role of Josephine Butler and her International Abolitionist Federation in the history of humanitarian activism is a case in point.³⁷

Viewed from a twenty-first century perspective, Butler’s campaign against the licensing of prostitution and the medical inspection of prostitutes was hardly ‘humanitarian’. It does not sit obviously within the tradition of revolutionary politics associated with the ‘rights of man’. Nor was it necessarily concerned with the exercise of compassion across borders, which Barnett identifies as a critical feature of humanitarianism.³⁸ And yet, as Summers argues, Butler’s activism grew from precisely the kind of fusion of Christian morality and liberal politics that characterised both British support for the Greek and Italian causes and her own family background. For Butler’s father was an anti-slavery activist and a correspondent of Mazzini, her husband an Anglican clergyman with evangelical leanings. Her campaign was rooted in a commitment to civil rights that drew both on a religious belief that each immortal soul had equal value, and on a more political concern to defend individuals from state power. Consequently,

her opposition to the Contagious Diseases Act combined moral outrage at the legalisation of vice with a profound concern for the civil rights of women, and a desire to overturn legislation that in her view violated the protections guaranteed by the English constitution.³⁹

Butler's moral and political concerns demonstrated a traction that reached far beyond Britain as Ian Tyrrell has shown in *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire*. For Butler's 'abolitionism' served to connect the early to mid-nineteenth century worlds of trans-Atlantic anti-slavery and Mazzinian radicalism with the internationalist structures and globally configured humanitarian mobilisations of the late-nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries.⁴⁰ Not only did Butler tap into Quaker and anti-slavery networks to spread her message across Europe, she explicitly conceptualised her campaign in ways that linked the exploitation of women with the exploitation of negro slaves, describing herself and her fellow campaigners as 'The New Abolitionists'. This approach enabled Butler to enlist prominent Americans like William Lloyd Garrison, the Blackwell family of Boston-based reformers, and the Quaker Aaron Powell, a leading temperance and purity campaigner from the 1870s to the 1890s. Powell was critical in establishing a New York Society for the Abolition of Vice, closely affiliated with Butler's International Federation, and in creating linkages with the Temperance movement. Nor was the centrality of Butler's International Federation to this broader nexus of radical, humanitarian, and moral reformist networks incidental.

Female leadership, mobilisation and activism emerge as a leitmotif in several recent accounts of humanitarian politics, although this is rarely addressed explicitly. Tusan's account of the synergy between British humanitarianism and imperialism in the Near East includes a short section on 'Gendering the Eastern Question', and explores the role of missionaries in the relief effort through a chapter on the life and work of Ann Mary Burgess.⁴¹ Lady Strangford and Emily Robinson also emerge as key players, the latter described by Tusan as 'the steady force behind the Armenian Red Cross'.⁴² Tyrrell, likewise, devotes a chapter to the missionary lives and transnational networks of the American sisters Mary and Margaret Leitch, and a further chapter on radical protest focuses principally on the internationalist networks of the African American civil rights campaigner Ida Wells. The book is replete with stories of

female activism, both individual and collective - in the shape of organisations like the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) or the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).⁴³ The WCTU, in particular, is a major actor in Tyrrell's account of the nexus between humanitarianism and 'America's moral empire'. Finally, Michael Barnett accords a pivotal role in his account of the transition from the nineteenth century age of imperial humanitarianism to the post-1945 era to Egglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children. Emphasising both her liberal politics and her mystical Christianity, Barnett demonstrates how Jebb exploited the discourse of children as innocent representatives of humanity to promote the idea of impartial relief as opposed to the partisan relief of allied populations.⁴⁴ Related by marriage as she was to the Buxton clan, which boasted a tradition of male and female humanitarian activism that originated with the anti-slavery movement, Jebb's impact on the evolution of inter-war humanitarianism highlights the long-term significance of the humanitarian milieux forged in the early nineteenth-century in shaping modern human-rights culture.⁴⁵

Much work remains to be done on the formative contribution of women to humanitarian politics and activism, but this is an issue with significant implications for the field as a whole. Hitherto, 'human-rights' history has preferred to address the question of 'women's rights as human-rights' but not the role of women as human-rights activists broadly conceived. For instance, Lynn Hunt notes the failure of the French revolutionaries to include women in their concept of 'equal rights', although she highlights the importance of the revolution in opening the question of women's rights for serious consideration.⁴⁶ Here Hunt draws on the pioneering⁴⁷ Micheline Ishay too focuses above all on issues of equal pay and suffrage in her overview: *The History of Human Rights*.⁴⁸ An 'agenda-setting' volume of essays on the 'human rights revolution' of the post-1945 period edited by Akira Iriye and others takes a similar tack, with articles exploring the recognition of women's rights within the UN human rights framework, and the international movement to end female mutilation.⁴⁹ The first of these articles, by Allida Black, dwells extensively on the role of Eleanor Roosevelt and concludes by stressing that '[w]omen from the UN's inception, have shaped and defined its human rights framework'.⁵⁰ Nothing she cites, however, testifies

to the older tradition of female humanitarian activism in which Eleanor Roosevelt's work was so clearly embedded.

This is a significant absence because the work of both Summers and Tyrrell suggests tantalising connections between the gender of female activists and the way in which their humanitarian agendas intersected with conceptions of rights. In her work on lineages of female action, for instance, Summers notes the egalitarian commitment of women like Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler to 'the fundamental individuality and equality of each immortal soul', as well as a 'specifically female (and ultimately, in Butler's case, overtly feminist), identification with the souls in question'.⁵¹ Chronicling elsewhere the waves of British women's internationalism from anti-slavery, through Mazzinism and Butler's abolitionist movement to the mobilisation on behalf of Eastern Christians and the peace movement, Summers attributes the consistency in British women's campaigns on the one hand to the motivating Christian concept of spiritual freedom, and on the other hand to the ability of British women to identify with the female Other. 'The same activists might condemn state-registered prostitution in Europe, the practice of suttee in India and the customs of the harem in Turkey... They took up these causes because they considered themselves as enjoying – and demanding - rights which should be extended to all.'⁵²

Less explicitly concerned with gender, Tyrrell's work confirms these conclusions. When analysing the origins of American global philanthropic endeavour in the 1890s, he describes the formation of Ramabai Circles to build and support a school for high-caste Hindu child brides in India as a 'prototype for later activities', noting that the mobilisation of 'middle-class evangelical women identifying with the oppressed of other nations anticipated important themes exhibited later.'⁵³ When analysing the quality of American support for Armenian Christians at the turn of the century, he notes that female activists were motivated by 'the way the experience of the Armenians seemed to highlight the clash of their own civilization's progress on the issues of woman's emancipation and the allegedly circumscribed position of women in the non-Western world.'⁵⁴ To be sure, female humanitarian activism drew heavily upon the rhetoric of separate spheres, simultaneously exploiting and subverting contemporary stereotypes of gender. Nevertheless, connections of this kind move beyond the focus on

revolutionary politics and the rights of man that characterises the dominant human rights narrative relayed by historians like Hunt and Ishay, and critiqued by Moyn. Thinking about female motivations and modes of humanitarian action - particularly during the nineteenth century when women were ostensibly excluded from politics - suggests new ways of casting the pre-history of human rights and of conceiving the inter-connections between humanitarian activism and rights discourses.

V

How far is it possible to generalise from these case studies? Recent work on the history of human rights underlines the need to contextualise rights discourses, but historians have not taken similar pains to contextualise humanitarian practices.⁵⁵ While Moyn highlights the existence of competing rights discourses - the rights of man, civil liberties, and international socialism - he fails to consider the extent to which these were related to particular cultures of humanitarian action.⁵⁶ Conversely, more general work on humanitarianism and 'the mobilisation of empathy' takes a relatively undifferentiated approach to the European and North American contexts in which such activism emerged. Implicitly, or explicitly, the ability to empathise with distant others emerges in this literature as a feature of the modern condition. A pioneering article published by Thomas Haskell as early as 1985 related the origins of a humanitarian sensibility to late eighteenth-century capitalism, while Lynn Hunt and her followers have emphasised the impact of new literary forms and media technologies.⁵⁷ Yet it is striking how much work deals in practice either with Britain and the United States or with Protestant Christianity, without reflecting seriously on this bias.⁵⁸ There remains a need to reflect more broadly and comparatively on the relative strengths and particular characteristics of different humanitarian traditions as they evolved in different national, religious and imperial cultures.

First, privileging Anglo-American political traditions and Protestant religious culture distorts our understanding of the emergence and nature of humanitarianism in this period. Hunt and others have signalled the importance of French debates about slavery and free blacks during the revolutionary 1790s,

but the strength of the British ideological investment in anti-slavery following the abolition of the slave trade overshadows subsequent developments.⁵⁹ The Catholic Church was remarkably late in embracing anti-slavery, but the renewed moral authority of the Papacy under Leo XIII prompted no less a figure than the great British campaigning journalist W. T. Stead to wonder whether the Pope might not become ‘the Director-General of the humanitarian forces of the world’.⁶⁰ This striking statement raises important questions about the extent of the identification between liberalism, anti-Catholicism and humanitarianism in British political culture and, by extension, North America, which many historians take as read. It suggests a surprising openness to other traditions and the potential for cross-fertilisation. Given the role of Catholic thinkers like Jacques Maritain in developing ideas about human rights during the mid to late twentieth century, proper investigation of humanitarian sensibilities and modes of action in different nationally and internationally configured Catholic cultures during the nineteenth century is long overdue.⁶¹ Recent work on the role of Jewish activists and concerns in universalising humanitarian concepts and practices during both the mid to late Victorian period and the post-1945 era adds a further element of complexity to the mix.⁶²

Second, despite the growing body of specialist, monographic work on the interplay between religion, empire and humanitarian activism in Britain and the United States, transnational and comparative perspectives are in surprisingly short supply. For instance, Andrew Preston’s monumental *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* does a wonderful job of exploring these issues in a narrowly American context. Yet without reference to parallel developments in Britain and, potentially, the continent, it is impossible to assess the unique qualities of this tradition adequately.⁶³ Recent studies of the British humanitarian tradition are similarly parochial and take surprisingly little account of the parallel endeavours of continental or American reformers.⁶⁴ Tyrrell’s work on the world of American moral reformers goes further in this direction, reflecting interestingly on the distinctive characteristics of this movement as compared with its European counterparts. It was, he argues, transnational rather than international, inevitably Euro-centric in its assumptions, but genuinely global in conception, cross-fertilizing with Asian cultures and traditions, and more revolutionary in

approach, because it promised to intervene in individual lives irrespective of nation.⁶⁵ Illuminating as they are, these remarks fail entirely to engage with the variegated and diverse nature of European religious and political traditions, and the extent to which these provided fertile ground for humanitarian mobilisation.

Interestingly, work that does set the American and European experiences alongside one another has tended to focus on the interface between humanitarianism and women's rights activism. The essays collected in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* are a case in point, and Seymour Drescher's thought-provoking comparison of Britain and France certainly demonstrates the usefulness of a more comparative approach.⁶⁶ A recent special issue of the *Women's History Review*, which explores comparatively the international reach and limitations of Josephine Butler's campaign, is similarly illuminating.⁶⁷ Individual contributions highlight the undertow of international humanitarianism in the radical democratic politics of the Risorgimento during the 1850s and 1860s, and the failure of this to translate into support for Butler; the late arrival of abolitionism in Germany, notwithstanding the strong presence of liberal Protestantism and socialism in German political culture; and the contrast between Butler's Christian motivation with the more free-thinking attitudes of abolitionist leaders in France. The benefits of this approach are twofold. On the one hand, it highlights the cross-currents and competing voices that characterised every humanitarian mobilisation; on the other hand, the focus on humanitarianism rather than more mainstream political issues illuminates the relationship between religion, secularism and politically progressive causes in new ways. Here, Butler's struggle to connect with a sympathetic audience in Germany, notwithstanding the close ties between British and German Protestants, and the emphatically Protestant quality of mainstream National Liberalism is particularly suggestive. The analytical potential of applying a similarly comparative approach to other humanitarian causes, like the Congo Reform agitation, is obvious. Indeed, we cannot really assess the origins and nature of nineteenth century humanitarianism without considering the extent to which it interacted with traditions of political and social activism rooted in a broader range of religious and national cultures.

The recent flurry of interest in humanitarian intervention in the Eastern Question represents a case in point. On the one hand, the emphasis of scholars like Bass, Rodogno and Donald Bloxham, in his study of the Armenian genocide, is very much on the place of the Eastern Question and issues related to the rights of religious and ethnic minorities within the emerging international system.⁶⁸ This approach inevitably broadens the optic to include France and, later, Germany as well as Britain and the United States. On the other hand, there is strikingly little analysis of public pressure on behalf of Eastern Christians beyond the Anglo-American world. France, in particular, emerges as a major player in Rodogno's work, most obviously in the sections dealing with the 1860-1 intervention in Syria following the massacres of local Christians.⁶⁹ Yet Rodogno's bibliography of secondary material has remarkably little material dealing specifically with the domestic context for French interventions - an indictment not of his work, but of the current scholarly literature. With the partial exception of Caesar Farah's work on European intervention in Ottoman Lebanon, these issues have principally been addressed with reference to the Jewish world and the efforts of French Jews to 'civilise' their coreligionists in Muslim lands.⁷⁰ This lack of attention seems extraordinary. For France, was the Catholic country that identified more closely than any other with the revolutionary political tradition - a tradition that lay at the heart of secular conceptions of French culture and the 'civilising mission' embraced by French imperialism.⁷¹ In short, the French experience serves as a natural comparator to the Anglo-American world.

Conversely, the even starker absence of work exploring German humanitarianism in the nineteenth century prompts a different set of questions.⁷² For Protestantism dominated German political culture after unification and Germany was, in any case, well connected to the broader world of transnational Protestantism and global missionary activity - precisely the context in which British and American humanitarianism flourished.⁷³ Prussia, in particular, nurtured a strong revivalist movement in the shape of Pietism. Yet neither the well-established body of work on the extent to which Protestantism coloured National Liberalism nor the growing body of work that seeks to situate the Kaiserreich in transnational context has even begun to address the extent to which humanitarianism formed part of German liberal culture in this period - if it did.⁷⁴ How far this reflects a lack of interest among German

historians in a significant phenomenon, and how far it tells us something about the nature of German imperialism and German liberal culture remains an open question.

Third, the relative absence of literature dealing with nineteenth-century humanitarianism beyond Britain and the United States makes it easier to homogenize and idealize humanitarian traditions. Yet, as Daniel Laqua has shown, the transnational anti-slavery movement entailed a coming together of different political and religious traditions.⁷⁵ Recent work on Britain has begun to overturn the cosy assumptions underpinning, for instance, the well-established tradition of anti-slavery activism. Examining the origins of this phenomenon, Christopher Brown has shown how British defeat in the American Revolution acted as the catalyst in transforming passive opponents of slavery into an active body of opinion.⁷⁶ This, he argues, was the critical difference between developments in Britain and France. Focusing instead on the tail-end of this tradition, Kevin Grant reveals the self-seeking motivations and practical limitations of religious and secular strands within British opposition to the ‘new slaveries’ of the Edwardian era.⁷⁷ His brilliant little book shows how Protestant missionaries like Alice and John Harris initially held back from publicising the atrocities in the Congo Free State for fear of endangering their missionary endeavour; how the opposition of British trade unionists to the use of indentured Chinese labour in South Africa reflected domestic class politics and humanitarian indifference despite having recourse to established anti-slavery rhetoric; and how even the moral credentials of Edmund Morel were compromised by his close relations with William Cadbury during the controversy over Portuguese slave-labour on West African cocoa-growing estates. In demystifying British anti-slavery activism, both scholars demonstrate the existence of competing voices and currents within the ‘British’ humanitarian tradition, exploring their interaction and the decisive role of contingency in determining political actions and outcomes. This critical tone is frankly lacking from more general treatments of humanitarianism, despite the obligatory lip service paid to the gulf between aspirations and reality, or the way in which humanitarian politics reflected the racist assumptions, missionary agendas and imperialist outlook of the age.

The current wave of research into nineteenth century humanitarianism and the pre-history of 'human rights' has unquestionably opened new perspectives and overturned old certainties. Scholars revisiting the history of interventionism in this period have demonstrated convincingly that non-intervention was never a core principle of the Westphalian system, and that by the late nineteenth century such interventions were a well-established international practice. Complementary work on the scale and political importance of humanitarian mobilisations has shown how the new literary forms and communication technologies that promoted the emergence of national 'imagined communities', as Benedict Anderson so famously argued, also promoted transnational activism and the 'mobilisation of empathy' across borders. From this perspective, the nineteenth century was more than an age of nationalism; as Mark Mazower has most recently argued, it saw the birth of internationalism too.⁷⁸ More generally, the great humanitarian campaigns emerge as a meeting point between traditions of political radicalism and the more religiously motivated culture of moral reform, undercutting the opposition between religious and secular political orientations that has been the focus of so much recent scholarship.⁷⁹ Finally, the decisive contribution of female leadership and activism to many humanitarian campaigns may cause us to reassess the role of women in the forging of modern political culture. For the importance of humanitarian mobilisation and conceptions of human rights in our contemporary world inevitably causes us to attach greater weight to their nineteenth century precursors.

And yet, the contours of this emerging historiographical terrain seem surprisingly familiar. Anti-Slavery, liberal internationalism, the world of Protestant missions, the Eastern Question, the rhetoric of civilization: these are hardly new topics for the nineteenth century historian, even if a focus on humanitarianism enables us to address them in new ways. The time has come to move beyond these well-worn themes and to explore lesser known movements and moments that may have played an equally important part in the broader nexus of radical, humanitarian and moral reformist politics. We need to look not just at those movements and discourses that relate obviously to our contemporary world, but at those that do not. For Butler's abolitionism and the temperance movement were as integral, in their way, to

nineteenth century humanitarian sensibilities and practices, as the preoccupation with Eastern Christians that has garnered so much more attention because it chimes so obviously with twenty-first century concerns about Western interventions in the Muslim world. In short a broader, more plural understanding of nineteenth century humanitarian ideas and practices is in order.

Crucially, we need to start asking questions that are less obviously coloured by hindsight. Why have historians of British and American imperialism paid so much more attention to these issues than those working on France, Germany or Italy? How did the traditions of liberal radicalism nurtured on continental Europe feed into this broader dynamic? What was the relationship between humanitarian activism and more locally and nationally rooted social reform agendas? How did the balance between secular and religiously motivated modes of action vary across time and space? In answering these questions, we need to move beyond the ‘transnational turn’ and engage in more concrete ways with a variety of national contexts, religious and political traditions. Contemporary concerns have illuminated aspects of the nineteenth century that were, for too long, hidden from view. If we are to do justice to these issues, a different quality of engagement is required for a properly historical account. Paradoxically, a more properly historical approach may serve to shed new light on the presentist preoccupations that have informed work in this area. Broadening our understanding of the term ‘humanitarian’ to include now unfashionable nineteenth-century preoccupations like temperance, and situating ‘humanitarian’ activity more clearly within a variety of religious traditions - Christian and non-Christian - may serve to demonstrate both the contingency, and the limitations, of the way this field is currently constructed.

Notes

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1. Samuel Moyn, *The last utopia. Human rights in history* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).
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3. Michael Barnett, *Empire of humanity. A history of humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011), 5.
4. Gary J. Bass, *Freedom’s battle. The origins of humanitarian intervention* (New York, 2008);
5. Davide Rodogno, *Against massacre. Humanitarian interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914. The emergence of a European concept and international practice* (Princeton, 2012).
6. Michelle Tusan, *Smyrna’s ashes. Humanitarianism, genocide and the birth of the Middle East* (Berkeley, 2012), 7.
7. Brendan Simms and D. J. B. Trim, eds., *Humanitarian intervention. A history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Fabian Klose, ed., *The emergence of humanitarian intervention: concepts and practices from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries* (Cambridge, forthcoming).
8. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing human rights. A history* (New York, 2007).

9. Moyn, *The last utopia*, 6.
10. Besides Hunt, *Inventing human rights*, see Micheline R. Ishay, *The history of human rights. From ancient times to the globalization era* (Berkeley, 2004).
11. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost. A story of greed, terror and heroism in colonial Africa*, 2nd ed. (London, 2006).
12. See Hunt, *Inventing human rights*, ch. 1 and the contributions to Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and suffering. The mobilization of empathy* (Cambridge, 2009). On global civil society see for instance John Keane, *Global civil society?* (Cambridge, 2003) and David Chandler, *Constructing global civil society. Morality and power in international relations* (Basingstoke, 2004).
13. See above all Simms and Trim, eds., *Humanitarian intervention*.
14. Moyn, *The last utopia*, ch. 1.
15. Rodogno, *Against massacre*, 6.
16. Rodogno, *Against massacre*, 54–62.
17. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, “Introduction,” in Wilson and Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and suffering*, 11.
18. Wilson and Brown, “Introduction,” 11–12.
19. Wilson and Brown, “Introduction,” 12.
20. Thomas W. Laqueur, “Mourning, pity and the work of narrative in the making of ‘humanity’,” in Wilson and Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and suffering*, 31–57.

21. William Reddy, "Sentimentalism and its erasure: the role of emotions in the era of the French revolution," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (March Journal of Modern History): 109–52.

22. John Bew, "'From an umpire to a competitor': Castlereagh, Canning and the issue of international intervention in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars," in Simms and Trim, eds., *Humanitarian intervention*, 137.

23. See for instance Bass, *Freedom's battle*, ch. 5 and 6.

24. Bew, "'From an umpire to a competitor'," 136.

25. Contrast this approach with that taken in Barnett, *Empire of humanity*, ch. 2–3.

26. Moyn, *The last utopia*, 29.

27. See C. A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini, eds., *Giuseppe Mazzini and the globalisation of democratic nationalism 1830–1920* (Oxford, 2008) and Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in exile. Italian émigrés and the liberal international in the post-Napoleonic era* (Oxford, 2009).

28. Joseph Mazzini, "Faith and the Future," in *Autobiographical and political*, vol. III of *Life and writings of Joseph Mazzini* (London, 1891), 99.

29. Mazzini, "Faith and the future," 111, 115.

30. C. A. Bayly and Eugenio Biagini, "Introduction," in Bayly and Biagini, eds., *Giuseppe Mazzini*, 3, and the following articles also published in this collection: Eugenio Biagini, "Mazzini and anticlericalism: the English exile," 145–66; C. A. Bayly, 355–74.

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33. Marjan Schwegman, "Amazons in Italy; Josephine Butler and the transformation of Italian female militancy," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 2 (2008): 173–78.
34. On this see Anne Summers, *Female lives, moral states. Women, religion and public life in Britain 1800–1930* (Newbury, 2000) ch.1.
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38. Barnett, *Empire of humanity*, 20–21.
39. See Anne Summers, *Female lives, moral states*, ch. 3 and 4.
40. Ian Tyrell, *Reforming the world: the creation of America's moral empire* (Princeton, 2010), 21–23.
41. Tusan, *Smyrna's ashes*, 35–9, ch. 4.
42. Tusan, *Smyrna's ashes*, 116 On Lady Strangford's activities see 85–7.
43. Tyrell, *Reforming the world*, ch. 2.
44. Barnett, *Empire of humanity*, 83–86.
45. On the female contribution to Buxton family politics see Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline citizen*, especially ch. 7.

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47. Carole Pateman, *The sexual contract* (London, 1988).
48. Ishay, *History of human rights*, 160–65.
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50. Allida Black, “Are women ‘human’? The UN and the struggle to recognize women’s rights as human rights,” in Iriye, Goedde and Hitchcock, eds., *The Human rights revolution*, 151.
51. Anne Summers, *Female lives, moral states*, 121.
52. Anne Summers, “British women and cultures of internationalism.”
53. Tyrell, *Reforming the world*, 99.
54. Tyrell, *Reforming the world*, 106.
55. See for instance Bonny Ibhawoh, *Imperialism and human rights. Colonial discourses of rights and liberties in African history* (New York, 2007), and the discussion in Cmiel, “Recent history of human rights,” 34–36.
56. Moyn, *The last utopia*, 37–41.
57. See Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the origins of the humanitarian sensibility, Part 1,” *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (1985): 339–61; Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the origins of the humanitarian sensibility, Part 2,” *American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 547–66; Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*; Wilson and Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and suffering*.
58. See for instance the issues covered in Barnett, *Empire of humanity*; Simms and Trim, eds., *Humanitarian intervention*; Wilson and Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and suffering*.

59. Hunt, *French revolution and human rights*, 24–26; Hunt, *Inventing human rights*, 160–67; Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French revolution. The making of modern universalism* (Berkeley, 2005), ch. 8.

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64. Kevin Grant, *A civilised savagery: Britain and the new slaveries in Africa, 1884–1926* (Oxford, 2005) and Tusan, *Smyrna’s ashes* are good examples.

65. Tyrell, *Reforming the world*, 24–25.

66. See Seymour Drescher, “Women’s mobilization in the era of slave-emancipation: Some Anglo-French comparisons,” in Sklar and Stewart, eds., *Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery*, 98–120 and the other essays in this volume.

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68. Bass, *Freedom’s battle*; Rodogno, *Against massacre*; Donald Bloxham, *The great game of genocide. Imperialism, nationalism, and the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford, 2005). See also Part II of Simms and Trim, eds., *Humanitarian intervention*, on the Great Powers and the Ottoman Empire.

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71. On the mission civilisatrice see Alice Conklin, *A mission to civilize: The Republican idea of empire in France and west Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, 1997) and Alice Conklin, “Colonialism and human rights, a contradiction in terms? The case of French west-Africa, 1895–1914,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (April 1998): 419–42. On the complex relationship between Catholicism and secular republicanism in the French empire see J.P. Daughton, *An empire divided. Religion, republicanism, and the making of French colonialism, 1880–1914* (Oxford, 2006).

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