Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 October 2017

Beyond 'Faith-Based Organisations': Religion and NGOs in Comparative Perspective

Podcast with **Erica Bornstein** (16 October 2017).

Interviewed by **Giuseppe Bolotta** and **Catherine Scheer**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/beyond-fath-based-organisations-religion-and-ngos-in-comparative-perspective/

Catherine Scheer (**CS**): *Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. We are Catherine Scheer*

Giuseppe Bolotta (**GB**): *And Giuseppe Bolotta*

CS: *And this is the second instalment of our series on religion and NGOS. A few words on this series: Since the turn of the twenty-first century there has been a remarkable surge of interest among both policy makers and academics into the effect that religion has on international aid and development. Within this broad field, the work of religious NGOS or so-called faith-based organisations has garnered considerable attention. This series of podcasts for the Religious Studies Project seeks to explore how the discourses, practices and institutional forms – both of religious actors and purportedly secular NGOs – intersect, and how theses engagements result in changes in our understanding of both religion and development.*

GB: *Religious NGOs play significant roles in service delivery, community organisation, advocacy and mediating flows of information and resources across the globe. Their religious inflections can both enhance the effective reach of particular projects and complicate the already flawed policy environment in which NGOs operate. While policy frameworks influence the kinds of activities that religious NGOs are able to undertake, they rarely dictate practice. In this interview we talk with Professor Erica Bornstein about her studies of religious giving and social activism in South Asia and Africa,and about what the results of her research contribute to our understanding of the complex*

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configurations of faith-based organisations across diverse religious contexts. So, before formally introducing our guest for today's interview, we would like to thank the Arias Foundation for supporting our research into this topic and the production of this series. Now, speaking with us today about religion and NGOs is Professor Erica Bornstein. She's an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research critically examines non-profits, non-government organisations and groups working in the voluntary sector. She has written several books on humanitarianism, philanthropy and economic development, including the monograph The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGOS, Morality and Economics in Zimbabwe*, first published by Routledge in 2003 and later reprinted by Stanford University Press in 2005; and more recently* Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi*, published by Stanford University Press in 2012. She's one of the major experts on intersections between religion, economy and politics in humanitarian fields and we are greatly looking forward to speaking with her today. Thank you very much for being here with us at the Religious Studies Project, Erica.*

Erica Bornstein (**EB**): My pleasure.

GB: *So, Catherine will start with our first questions.*

CS: *Sure, thank you. Your book,* The Spirit of Development *was a groundbreaking ethnography exploring the intersections between religion and development in Zimbabwe. You have since gone on to author* Disquieting Gifts *and also added to a collection of chapters titled* Forces of Compassion*, which includes some rich essays analysing the entanglements between religion and humanitarianism. How did you first become interested in this field?*

EB: I originally wanted to study the relationship between religion and politics and I was looking for an ethnographic site to think through a series of questions. More broadly, I'm interested in what motivates people to make social change, to change someone's religion – as in evangelical organisations – or to change someone's beliefs. In the case of faith-based organisations, like World Vision Zimbabwe, I wanted to understand what motivates people to want to change people's lives economically and spiritually. For religious people, economics can't be disaggregated from cosmological understanding. The distinction between material and spiritual realms doesn't make sense in many parts of the world. I've been fascinated by the conviction it takes to want to change someone's religion. Personally, I never understood it until I conducted my fieldwork in Zimbabwe, and I'd actually been rather afraid of it: the extreme force of the conviction. One finds similar conviction in other realms: humanitarianism

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and social activism. It has this utter urgency.

GB: *At first sight, a religious NGO might look like a strange hybrid between faith and socio-political activism within an apparently secular policy framework. These organisations with religious inflections can both enhance the effective reach of particular projects and complicate the already flawed policy environment in which NGOs operate. Now, if we consider the development scenario in Zimbabwe in the nineties, compared to the very different humanitarian context of contemporary India, how do you see global, national and local policy frameworks shape the form taken up by religious NGOS and the projects they engage in?*

EB: Well, the world was really a different place in the mid 1990s, especially for NGOS. It was a hopeful time and a growth period in both Zimbabwe and India. Zimbabwe achieved its independence much later than India, but both countries were former British colonies, both had periods of socialism that later shifted to rapidly liberalising economies. And NGOS were considered hopeful forces in the liberalisation process. They multiplied in both settings. In Zimbabwe and in India, religious NGOs were involved in development education and healthcare etc. I can't say much about what's happening in contemporary Zimbabwe as I'm not in touch with the NGO community there any more. But in India – and in other parts of the world that have strong states and strong civil society traditions such as Russia, Egypt and Turkey – the state has become very suspicious of the non-profit sector. And the non-profit sector has come to signify an arena of potential dissent. Of course, this varies according to the religious orientation of the state, or if it's secular. There are laws protecting non-profits in each context. So global policy frameworks are less influential these days than national ones, which can restrict funding that crosses borders. And this is a really big change since the 1990s, because NGOS can't survive without donor support. They're donor-dependent.

GB: *Right*

CS*: In your work on Christian NGOs in Zimbabwe, and humanitarianism in India, you shed light on different intersections of religion and development, by examining how different cultures of charitable giving operate within specific policy frameworks, institutional arrangements and socio-economic contexts. Religious NGOS emerge as important brokers of these intersections. How would you describe the nature, of these organisations, their specific position within global humanitarianism and the impact of the intervention in the context in which you conducted your research?*

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EB: Transnational NGOs like World Vision are very powerful because they move across contexts. They're a lot like corporations. And, increasingly, such types of institutions are structured like corporations with international boards and national offices. At times the national office has to be incorporated as a local organisation in each country, thus World Vision Zimbabwe will look and operate very differently than World Vision India. It will have a local board, it will be staffed by local people. It will also abide by national laws. And this isn't any different from non-religious or secular NGOs like Oxfam or MSF.

GB: *Right*.

EB: But what might be different is the way that faith and faith-based activities can be carried out in each national setting. And for anthropologists like me this makes a lot of sense. Because context really matters. It poses specific and careful questions for anthropologists. If one studies a faith-based organisation one must ask what that means in each particular context.

GB: *Thank you so much, Erica. Another question for you. You have problematised the tension between global religious humanitarianism and the business of everyday life. The concepts of a "liberal altruism" and "relational empathy" you introduced in your book, on humanitarianism in India, seem to echo this tension. Do religious NGOs position themselves in a specific way within this tension?*

EB: So, based on my last answer to the question about context, I'm reluctant to make huge generalisations. But if I must try, I'd say that religious organisations operate within a framework within a community of believers, and in this sense they're relational. However, we have to be attentive to minor differences. Some religions, like Christianity, are congregational. Relationality could be in terms of the congregation, and organisations like World Vision raise their money through church congregations for their child sponsorship programmes. Hinduism is not a congregational religion. Nonetheless, I would say that the language of belonging and kinship can be extended to relationships in Hinduism as well – perhaps with deities, for example. Now liberal altruism, the way I've conceived of it, privileges institutions over people, and individual or cause over known relationships. It's more abstract. In this sense, it could be a motivating force for Christian philanthropy as well. So these are empirical questions that have to be explored in context. When we understand patterns of motivation and social action it's easy to see larger social processes at work. So it's an empirical question: what's motivating for people to help others. Liberal altruism might motivate someone to give to a cause or volunteer millions of miles away. I venture to say that more local practices of humanitarianism are

almost always guided by relational empathy.

CS: *Well, this was a fascinating introduction into how you got to your initial book. Now it would be interesting to understand how you moved from this ethnography, this pioneering ethnography of Protestant NGOS in Zimbabwe, to the broader topic of . . . giving in the Indian context. How did that go?*

EB: It's a good question. As a matter of fact, in anthropology it's not very common to change such regional areas of research. So it was, I think, either a brave or a stupid thing for me to do. But I did it because there was some unresolved issue from my first book, *The Spirit of Development*, that I felt I needed to explore. And in my first book, when I was studying child sponsorship, I realised that the gift could mean something very different for the person who's giving the gift and then for the recipient. So for example, in Zimbabwe, when a sponsor gives to a family it might displace power relationships within the family. And I know that World Vision has since changed its practices to try to avoid this, but in the mid 1990s it was a real issue. It was creating jealousies and it was really disrupting all sorts of relationships on the ground, in communities, between children. And that really fascinated me. Also there was some hesitation to start child sponsorship programmes within Zimbabwe because of people's understandings of ancestral relationships. And, " how could one take care of a child if one didn't know the ancestral relationship?" So the whole sense of relationality extended out into the spirit realm as well as the local community, and that really stuck with me. And that was a part of my project, but it wasn't the entire book. So I wanted to study giving, I knew that. And I wanted to go to a place that was radically different, that wasn't Christian – because I 'd thought so much about Christian ideas of giving and charity. But I knew that there were other places where people do this kind of activity and it's very different looking. So, India: not a Christian nation, it's majority Hindu although it has a missionary history as well. It has this British colonial history. But the gift, ideas of giving . . . some of them are radically influenced by Hindu ideas of freedom and liberation from the material realm. So it presented a completely different environment to try to test some of my questions. When I got to India I had a lot to learn. And that was good , as an ethnographer: you have to be humble, and you learn, and you realise how complicated the world can be. But what I was really struck by is how people in New Delhi, Indians – mostly Hindus that I was talking with in religious contexts like temples as well as in secular arenas like orphanages – Indians had really different ideas of what it meant to donate their time and their efforts and even their funds than the volunteers from . . .

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CS: *Coming from abroad?*

EB: Exactly. So that became the comparative relationship. Which is kind of similar to what I was looking at in Zimbabwe, with its sponsors. But because the cultural, historical context was so radically different it really opened my mind up to think about giving differently. And humanitarianism as well.

CS: *Right. Coming up from the ground?*

EB: Coming up from the ground and not the ground, right? From all over the world, landing in aeroplanes, and not knowing how to behave properly in a humanitarian context. People expecting to volunteer and NGOs not really knowing how to integrate volunteers.

CS: *And channel the energies.*

EB: Yes.

CS: *Thank you*

GB: *Do you want, maybe, to tell us – because this is an interesting story – how you positioned yourself as an anthropologist, as a mother, as a wife, within the humanitarian Indian context in its plural manifestations? Because this was a very interesting introductory part of your book on humanitarianism in New Delhi.*

EB: Sure, I mean that was another aspect of the fieldwork for my second book that was just very different than my first one. My first book was my dissertation, and I went all by myself to a place where I had no connections except for some scholar friends who had introduced me to people. And I was viewed by many people as a kind of oddball, right? "What kind of woman comes so far away and leaves all of their relationships to spend a year in this place, trying to understand our world?" And when I went to India I was a lot older, married, had a kid. And my partner is from India, so I had a kind of network of social relationships that I was sort of thrust into and embraced by. And those relationships taught me a lot about what it meant to participate in society as a good human being. And what it meant to give: what the duty of giving meant to family – a kin-based kind of giving which is not humanitarian – and then giving to strangers. And I think that was something that also helped me understand the distinction between the kinship of humanitarianism and more liberal ideas of giving to strangers.

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CS*: And I think in this book, in your concluding notes, you kind-of put into context the Western perception of giving emphasising agency, putting it in a larger context. Could you maybe say a few words on the broad picture . . .?*

EB: Well the broad picture comes out of the tradition of liberal thought. And this is something that I encounter when I teach my classes on humanitarianism and human rights. And I teach the canon of these traditions. And students really understand it and it comes naturally to them. But then, when they're forced to think about giving practices, or humanitarian caring practices, in other cultural contexts, they start to get more confused, right? And that's the comparative relationship that I was trying to explore. I was really struck also, as I wrote this book – and writing ethnographies takes years – so I would go to the field for a year and then come back and write, and then go back and explore and come back and write . . . and teach in my job. And it was teaching students who really, really were desperate to go and volunteer somewhere, and participate in the world, and experience the world through charitable dynamics and charitable engagement that made me think about this liberal altruism as well. And some of my students had actually been on mission trips. So they come to classes on human rights or humanitarianism with their own religious-based experience of doing humanitarianism.

CS: *Wow!*

EB: But they're forced to think critically about it for the first time. And it's very exciting to see their worlds opening up. Because they're beginning to really analyse their own experience and the experience of others.

GB: *Maybe a last question, Erica. You told us before that you are working on a new exciting project, so maybe you can tell us a little bit more about this, and how this project is departing from your previous projects in both Zimbabwe and India? How these projects, if they are, are related somehow?*

EB: Sure, they're definitely related. So, if I could create a narrative arc of my books, the first one was really about NGOs, and I compared two NGOs, and I really looked at what it meant to be a religious NGO. What it meant for the people who worked for the organisation in different office locations, and for people who engaged with the organisation kind-of peripherally – as sponsors or donors - and then, also, as beneficiaries. So the NGO, as a central form, I really wanted to put on the map, with that book, and say this is important. We need to understand what these kind of institutional actors are doing in the world, because they're doing a lot. And they're very powerful. And World Vision at the time was the

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biggest Christian NGO in the world. It was the big fish. So I wanted to look at something that was good at what it did. Then I – to be honest, it's hard to study not for profits. And I just got a little sick of it. And when I was in India I decided for my second book, *Disquieting Gifts*, I wanted to really explode the category of humanitarianism and giving, and not get constrained by the category of the NGO and the institution. So my fieldwork was very different. I didn't sit down in one organisation, I went all over the place. I talked to as many people as possible. I tried to think about humanitarianism in all of its possible incarnations.

GB: *Including your family circles, right?*

EB: Right. Within my family circles. And they honestly were very helpful in introducing me to people who did this kind of work. It was through those networks that I could find people doing the daily practices, the ordinary practices of humanitarianism. And the Indian ideas of *dān* or *sava* – they're not extraordinary, right? They're ordinary. And that's important to think about as well. But then, just like my first project where there was an unresolved question that I had to explore, I found another one for my second project, which has turned into my third one, which is: this incredible pressure by the state and by other NGOs in India, to figure out how to do their work better; how to regulate this crazy unruly dynamic diverse sector called the non-profit sector. How does one . . . ? In the non-profit sector they're not elected, they're not assessed in any coherent way. And that's part of their power in that arena, is that it's so diverse and so dynamic and so responsive to what happens. So I decided I wanted to look at that process itself. And this book I'm writing now is an ethnography of regulation. And it looks at laws. And I've been studying advocacy and research organisations [who are] trying to work with the government, trying to create laws that are helpful to the non-profit sector. I also have been interviewing tax accountants, civil servants and people who really try to help NGOs abide by the laws. And looking at it over time – it's like a kind-of decade long view that I'm exploring – how did these laws change? How does the engagement with the laws affect people doing this kind of work, this kind of non-profit work?

CS: *In the Indian context?*

EB: In the Indian context, yes. I think civil society is changing, as I mentioned, in the world as well. So it's part of a much larger shift that I see taking place of the relationship of non-profits in society. And religious non-profits are part of this. They've always been a big part of it.

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GB: *We are greatly looking forward to this book now!*

EB: Thank you

GB: *So, one could listen to Erica for hours but our time is over. So once again, thank you very much, Professor Bornstein, for joining us at the Religious Studies Project.*

EB: Thanks very much for inviting me.

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