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# Religious vs. Secular Human Rights Organizations: Discourse, Framing and Action

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**Abstract**

The study of human rights is dominated by secular voices; however, increasingly the study of international relations recognizes the tension and interplay between the religious and the secular, and the impetus for human rights work has often come from a religious or moral foundation. Although understudied, religious NGOs and religious beliefs and universal ethics have long shaped discourses on human rights in the United Nations. This paper explores the ways in which religious and secular human rights organizations frame, discuss, legitimize and operationalize human rights issues and priorities. Through document analysis and interviews with members of international human rights organizations, the authors trace the similarities and differences between the organizations, their missions and focus, their conceptions of human rights, and their rationale for engaging in the field for the purpose of better assessing the opportunities and challenges for cooperation between these groups.

The pursuit of international human rights has been important within the international community since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The field of human rights has largely been studied in terms of international law and Enlightenment-based concern with individual rights. However, human rights are not solely understood in secular terms. Religious actors played a “widely acknowledged role...in the development of the idea of human rights and in the articulation of the Universal Declaration itself,” (Hogan 2015: 2) and although scholars have also documented the (evolving) contestations over human rights within and between faith-based groups from the time of the creation of the UDHR, political science scholarship has tended to emphasize secular over religious perspectives on human rights (see, for example Loeffler 2015; Hogan 2015; Hoover 2013). In fact, some authors have pointed out that the dominant narrative concerning human rights is not just one that favors the secular, but one that necessarily excludes religion because it suggests that religion actually opposes human rights (Banchoff and Wuthnow 2011; Kayaoglu 2014). In this narrative, “traditional religious authority” is “opposed to the secular Enlightenment ideal of rational, autonomous individuals as bearers of universal rights” (Banchoff and Wuthnow 2011: 4). Kayaoglu (2014) argues that while there may be increased participation by religious groups at the United Nations, these voices are not treated equally to secular ones and that “secular gatekeepers have effectively imposed the parameters of liberal discourse on issues, including religious issues” (64). However, at the same time, religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at the UN have a long history, and due to the lack of characterization of NGOs affiliated with ECOSOC as “religious” or “secular”, the role of religion is not always visible (Carrette and Miall 2017). To further complicate the matter, the line between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ organizations is not clean-cut in many parts of the world (Hershey 2016). In addition, some

faith-based NGOs have been secularized as they have moved from a mission of church diplomacy towards more general civil society activism (Lehmann 2016).

In the past two decades, religion has been increasingly visible on the world political stage (Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011; Carrette and Miall 2017), although this “resurgence” has generally been studied in regard to their political aims and not in regards to religion per se (Lehmann 2016, p. 2). Consequently, scholars including Hefferan (2007), Lehmann (2016) and Carrette and Miall (2017) have noted that the literature tends to look at religion as simply a variable--often unquestioned and imprecisely defined--in political or development outcomes rather than as a system of beliefs or ethical values that affects processes. Religious NGOs are incredibly diverse in their orientation and actions, and vary in the extent to which they are affiliated explicitly with religious bodies and the extent to which they use religious symbols and belief systems in their work . This trend is also true for religious or faith-based NGOs that work on issues regarding human rights. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether an NGO is religiously-based or not, particularly in the case of some organizations that express a general spiritual orientation or to those whose members are predominantly of a particular faith background (Lehmann 2016). Further, in some countries and contexts, faith based NGOs may downplay their religious credentials in order to secure donor funding and to alleviate potential concerns of proselytizing from client populations, while secular organizations may emphasize religious teachings or morals as a way of legitimizing their work (Flanigan 2007; Hershey 2016). While growing body of research has examined faith based or religious NGOs and their work in development and other service related activities on the global stage (see for example, Rashiduzzaman 1997; Benedetti 2006; Flanigan 2007; Hefferan 2007; Johnsen 2014; Frame 2017; Lehmann 2016), less has been done to compare within and across religious and secular human

rights organizations and their approach to human rights. Existing research (Lehmann 2016) indicates the substantial diversity within the category of religious NGOs, but the various ways in which that manifests remains understudied (Hershey 2016; Carrette and Miall 2017). This paper seeks to explore the extent to which religiously-oriented human rights groups differ from their secular kin and to identify the key areas of overlap and divergence along the spectrum of religiosity. In so doing, this project helps lay the groundwork for better understanding the differences across and within a diverse array of religious human rights groups in order to better capitalize on their varied strengths in addressing the world's many human rights challenges.

While some scholars may see religion and human rights as incompatible with one another, others point to the religious traditions evident within contemporary human rights advocacy (Witte and Green 2012). Allen Hertzke (2006) has charted the rise of faith-based groups within the broader international human rights movement, arguing that this new human rights movement, one that includes a wide variety of religious groups, has played a strong role in shaping international politics, and particularly American foreign policy. More importantly, he argues that the influence of these groups is much greater now than it was in the past, and represents an important trend in US foreign policy. However, approaches to human rights vary considerably depending on whether human rights are conceptualized as divine, moral, or legal in nature. This variation, if empirically observable among religious and secular human rights organizations, is significant since the presumed origin of human rights influences whether such rights are deemed potentially revocable (Isakovic 2001; Berger 2003). Further, scholars might expect that secular organizations are more likely to view human rights as universal in nature and that religious organizations, while they may see human rights as universal, may have a modified view of what those rights are based

on particular religious or cultural traditions. For example, the 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam affirms “fundamental rights and universal freedoms” but also qualifies these within the context of Shari’a law (Cairo Declaration 1990). Similarly, “the compatibility of Confucianism and human rights” has been the subject of much debate (Hogan 2015; Kim 2015: 149). However, given the universalism of some religious traditions, and the cultural biases of some secular ones, this assumption should not be taken for granted. Additionally, some religious organizations with a development focus have been shown to downplay their religious views to appeal to a broader audience or to not vary dramatically from secular groups (Hershey 2016) ; however, some studies show that religion does influence the ways in which faith-based development groups engage in development differently than secular groups (Hefferan 2007). While there may be a difference between a service-delivery development organization and a human rights organization more involved in advocacy and education, the literature suggests that there is quite a range of ways religion influences NGO practices and activities (Berger 2003; Carrette & Miall 2017). Given the general findings in the literature on faith-based NGOs, we might also find that religious human rights NGOs downplay or avoid areas that may be contentious in order to attract donor funding; likewise, some secular NGOs may emphasize religious teaching and beliefs in their work as a way of legitimizing themselves in contexts that may view human rights as a foreign or Westernizing concept.

This paper asks, to what extent do religious human rights NGOs offer a distinct framing, discussion and operationalization of human rights? To what extent do secular and religious human rights groups differ in their approach to human rights advocacy and what are the potential implications of these differences for the broader human rights agenda? What do religious approaches to human rights advocacy offer for countering groups like Daesh or the Lord’s Resistance Army, which use religion in their

justification of violence against civilians? Ultimately, our study contributes to a greater understanding of the diverse ways religion manifests itself in the work of human rights organizations, and the ways in which they overlap and diverge from secular human rights endeavors.

### ***Religious versus Secular Groups: A Comparison***

Before exploring the similarities and differences between religious and secular groups we need to define the boundaries of these classifications. Clarke and Jennings (2008) discuss faith-based organizations as “any organization that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within the faith” (Clarke and Jennings 2008: 6). Similarly, Berger defines “religious NGOs” as “formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teaching of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operate on a nonprofit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level” (Berger 2003: 16). We agree with these conceptions of religious and faith-based groups, and use these terms interchangeably within this paper.

Secular organizations, in contrast, are those whose identity and mission are not spiritual or religious in nature, although in practice this can be difficult to ascertain in terms of organizations. Much of the literature comparing faith-based and secular organizations does not actually provide explicit definitions for secular organizations; instead authors either identify secular groups as those that are not religious, or use self-identification for classifying secular groups (for example, see Berger 2003, Ebaugh et. al. 2003, Ferris 2005, Twombly 2002). Furthermore, the literature on secularism does not really provide a single definition, emphasizing that the concept is locally negotiated, and thus has different

meanings in different contexts (see, for example, Freeman 2004 and Hallward 2008). For example, as one self-identified secular organization that we interviewed noted, some individuals and groups within their country view “secular” as synonymous with “atheism,” but that this is not how they themselves identify. As such, ideas of what it means to be “secular” may not be consistent across space and time. Further, some organizations may be comprised of individuals of a particular faith background but not use a faith-based justification for their work. Consequently, in line with Berger (2003) and Ebaugh et. al. (2003), we classify groups as ‘secular’ based on cues during interviews and from their own self-identifications on their websites. Although this dichotomy sidelines the nuanced variations in degree of religiosity or secularity of organizations, it provides a useful starting point for identifying the unique features of religious human rights organizations.

Why might we expect religious and secular NGOs to differ in their approach to human rights? As Koschmann notes, “Religious faith influences how people make and justify decisions, how they resolve conflict, how they make sense of their circumstances, and how they interact with multiple stakeholders” (Koschmann 2013: 129). As such, it is not unreasonable that religious NGOs would use different processes within their organizations than secular NGOs might. On the one hand, religious groups may have some general commonalities that set them apart from secular groups. On the other hand, individual religions may have elements that set their human rights work apart from other groups, including other religious groups. For example, Salih (2002) suggests that “Islamic NGOs distinguish themselves from other NGOs by the fact that voluntarism is a religious duty in Islam, and those NGOs which profess an Islamic identity claim also to be advancing a Muslim way of life and expanding the Islamic umma (community) world-wide” (Salih 2002: 2).



Other scholars have considered the distinctive contributions of religious groups to development. For example, Dicklitch and Rice (2004: 660) attribute the success of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to its “philosophical and programmatic approach, which focuses squarely on accountability [and] a holistic approach to basic human rights.” Melissa Caldwell (2012: 262) observed that in comparison to their secular counterparts, religiously affiliated groups appeared to be more successful “at doing the kind of work that mattered... in terms of providing client-centered services that were humane, compassionate, and emphasized the dignity of clients” (Caldwell). In Caldwell’s study, secular groups perceived that religiously oriented groups were not as constrained and restricted by bureaucracy as they themselves often were.

In her foundational work on religious NGOs (RNGOs), Berger (2003) documents the increasing number of groups that refer to themselves as religious, spiritual, or faith-based groups. Berger suggests that while NGOs, overall, have long been moral entities that have challenged what is “Wrong” in the world in favor of what is “Right” (Berger 2003: 4), RNGOs and secular NGOs identify different origins for the values that they support. In contrast to secular-oriented groups, RNGOs articulate a religious rather than a more “purely ‘reasoned’ origin of these values” (Berger 2003: 4). Of particular relevance to our research on human rights groups, Berger states that, “In contrast with the rights-based approach of many secular NGOs, the starting point for RNGOs is the duty-oriented language of religion characterized by obligations toward the divine and toward others, by a belief in transformation capacities, and a concern for justice and reconciliation” (Berger 2003: 4).

However, as noted by Berger, there is great diversity among religious groups, including the organization’s religious orientation (i.e. what specific religious identification) and religious

pervasiveness, or the extent to which the religious identity defines the structural and strategic dimensions of the organization (Berger 2003: 10). In relation to organizational elements, Berger finds that donor patterns and financing may be an area where secular and religious groups differ. She finds that most RNGOs, in order to maintain their organizational independence, are largely privately funded through the donations of their members (Berger 2003: 12). However, she also notes that some RNGOs, such as Catholic Charities, do receive a substantial amount of money from government sources, but overall, many of these organizations appear to avoid acquiring money from state governments. Considerable variation exists in the degree that mission statements of RNGOs emphasize the religious or spiritual origin or foundation of the organization's actions (Berger 2003: 13). Further, while some RNGO processes, such as network building, advocacy, monitoring, and providing information, are utilized by all types of NGOs, others, such as seeking spiritual guidance, prayer, and the use of dialogue to facilitate among disparate views are more unique to RNGOs. For example, the Friends World Committee for Consultation (Quakers) is well-known for their mediation at the UN and for their conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts. While there are potential differences in how RNGOs and secular organizations approach their work, there is no research specifically connecting these differences to human rights advocacy or a consideration of how these differences might impact the ability of these groups to find mutual ground.

#### *Inter-religious differences*

Based on a review of the literature, we would expect to see differences between religious human rights organizations from different faith backgrounds. Some authors have considered the potential friction between different types of religious NGOs, or between western organizations (including Christian NGOs) and Islamic groups. For example, Benthall discusses the tensions between the Red Cross and the Red

Crescent Movement, over a variety of issues, including the organization's emblems and differences regarding the rights of non-believers (Benthall 1997: 170). Benedetti (2006) finds that strongly religious Christian and Islamic NGOs were more likely to have negative perceptions of one another than those that had a lower level of religiosity (Benedetti 2006). Similarly, in their discussion and comparison of Muslim and Western relief aid organizations, Barakat and Strand suggest that Muslim organizations "have at times been greeted with suspicion by long-established western organizations who are concerned about their possible religious and political intentions" while many Muslim agencies also "appear to have an ingrained prejudice that one of the key aims of western NGOs is to spread Christianity and promote Western governments' political interests" (Barakat and Strand 1999: 30). In contrast, Petersen (2010) suggests that there are many examples of cooperation and partnerships between NGOs from different religious groups and even between religious and secular groups, but that there tends to be less cooperation between religious NGOs from the same religious group. Further, Petersen finds that the primary religious NGO divide seems to be between "progressive" and "conservative" organizations, particularly in regard to issues such as women's and homosexuals' rights.

#### *Religious vs. Secular Differences*

Past research indicates several key differences between religious and secular organizations. Religious groups often view human rights as something divinely proffered, and as such, may be linked to other concepts in a holistic way, such as peace and development (Dicklitch and Rice 2004; Hallward 2013; Johnston 2014; Klager 2014). In their analysis of 237 human rights groups, Butcher and Hallward (2017) find that faith-based groups were more likely to mention peace and were more likely to connect human rights and peace on their websites. Other authors argue that a "development perspective" is

particularly useful for understanding the link between human rights and religion (Petersen 2015). Similarly, religious groups also tend to place a greater emphasis on positive rights, those that relate to social and economic rights versus secular groups (Berger 2003; Johnston 2014). On the other hand, secular human rights groups often focus on political and civil rights, which emphasize “neutrality” and “impartiality” (Johnston 2014: 907). Such political and civil rights are often encompassed within a broader legal tradition – providing legal protections for the political and civil rights of individuals. Others have noted that religious groups have often been involved in truth recovery practices during transitional justice phases, but less involved with punitive justice (Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011). Based on this past literature literature, we would expect secular and faith-based human rights organizations to use different language in defining and operationalizing human rights advocacy. Specifically, we expect secular groups to use rights-based language, including legal forms of justice and to focus more heavily on first generation human rights, which include civil and political rights, as well as physical and security rights. On the other hand, we would expect faith-based groups to use of duty-oriented language, including perceived obligation toward others as part of religious practice including an emphasis on social justice and reconciliation. Further, we would expect religious organizations to be more likely to promote second-generation human rights, including economic and social rights, and third generation human rights, which include solidarity rights for groups of people, as well broader rights, such as the right to peace, right development, and right to a clean environment.

The literature is divided regarding potential and actual cooperation between religious and secular human rights organizations. Koschmann (2013) suggests that although research has considered structural and organizational aspects of religious human rights organizations, it has failed to fully consider

collaboration between secular and religious organizations within human rights specifically. He argues that as religious organizations and other NGOs begin to work together, along with government agencies and other stakeholders, such collaboration requires “the negotiation and transformation of identities” (Koschmann 2013: 108). Not all of the partners in collaboration will share the religious views of faith-based groups, and some may even work for organizations that specifically restrict religious influence within their work. The literature also suggests that at times organizations will be prohibited from engaging with religious principles due to donor requirements, in which case differences between religious and secular organizations may be a non-issue.

Negron-Gonzales (2012) suggests that the human rights movement provides space for secular and religious factions within the country to reconcile some of their differences. More specifically, she argues that a human rights master frame emphasizing the common fate that a diverse group of individuals share as citizens within the state helps bridge the gap between secular and religious groups. Thus, while there may be some increased challenges present with religious and secular groups attempting to collaborate in a field where their conceptions of the issue may differ, a “human rights frame” might also allow groups to find common ground. Perceived challenges with communication and cooperation between secular and religious groups lead us to expect that human rights NGOs might be inclined to seek out others with similar backgrounds, reducing the overall level of collaboration across the religious-secular boundary. The literature suggests that given the variety within both secular and religious organizations, we might expect those that fall on the more “moderate” part of the spectrum to be more likely to cooperate across divides than those that are more “militant” (Benedetti 2006).

Based on the above review, some additional expectations come to the fore. First, religious organizations that are also involved in some degree of humanitarian work, in addition to their human rights advocacy, are more likely to take money from governments than religious organizations that are more strictly organized around religious principles or affiliated with church bodies, since government funds come with restrictions, highly religious groups may have funding from religious bodies and may not wish to comply with donor restrictions. Further, some secular groups may see themselves as government watchdogs and thus may wish to maintain their autonomy and/or work on issues that state governments are unwilling to fund. In addition, we expect both religious and secular groups, particularly those with membership bases, to rely on donations from members and individuals to help sustain their work. Second, we expect religious and secular groups to utilize some similar strategies to achieve their mission, but that religious groups will have some unique strategies such as prayer and spiritual guidance, or facilitating dialogue among leaders, groups, or other stakeholders.

Third, while there is little literature specifically discussing the ways that religious and secular NGOs might approach the issue of women's rights, we believe that there are likely to be differences in this regard. However, we have mixed expectations. On the one hand, women's rights has become a "hot" topic in the human rights world, so many NGOs, particularly large, secular groups, may be likely to be discussing this issue. Since smaller NGOs may not have the resources for specialization, they may be less likely to address women's issues specifically. This is true also for religious groups of all types. The Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), for example, created a 2008 Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (Blitt 2017). Further, given how much gender has been "mainstreamed" into the UN agenda, we might expect all human rights-oriented NGOs to address gender issues in some way. For

example, religious and secular women's rights groups in Iran frame their demands within the CEDAW framework (Tohidi 2016). As demonstrated with religious and secular organizations working in development contexts in religious countries, de Faria Slenes (2014) suggests that even secular human rights organizations will need to engage in some way with religious values and teachings when working on women's rights issues in religious countries or communities, and that they will need to modify their views and approaches to accommodate local norms.

In addition, religious organizations and entities demonstrate an increased concern for women's issues and rights in the past decades. For example, The Declaration of Human Rights by World Religions, the most recent iteration of which was signed at the 3rd Conference on World Religions After September 11 on September 15, 2016, specifically declared that women have full equality with men and also dealt with issues of violence against women, marriage rights, and motherhood (Declaration of Human Rights by World Religions, 2016). It should be noted that the first iteration of this declaration (signed in 2003) did not specifically include language about equality between men and women (though general equality was discussed) and did not specifically address issues of violence against women (Declaration of Human Rights by World Religions, 2003). However, in 2016, these issues are very clearly outlined within the document. This declaration demonstrates that religious groups are increasingly concerned with women's rights issues. However, it is also true that women and women's rights are not viewed the same by all religions and that individual religions are not monolithic in their views of women's rights, so we expect variation regarding the extent to which gender is incorporated into RNGOs' human rights agenda, as well as some variation between how secular and religious NGOs approach women's rights. The OIC, for instance, specifies that women's rights should be based also on the "*distinctive consideration of*

women...guided by the lofty teachings of Islam” (Blitt 2017 p. 796 italics in original), which indicates accommodation based on a particular interpretation of religious tenets. However, given the increased importance of gender issues within the UN framework, we do expect most organizations, both secular and religious, to have some focus on gender.

### ***Methodology***

To best capture how various human rights organizations frame, discuss, legitimize and operationalize human rights issues, we utilized two methods of data collection and analysis. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a variety of human rights groups working to affect international human rights policy. We began by contacting a variety of groups that were in attendance at the 28<sup>th</sup> or 29<sup>th</sup> Sessions of the Human Rights Council (see UNHCR 2014 and UNHCR 2015).<sup>1</sup> Groups attending these sessions directly demonstrate not only their commitment to international human rights, but also their will to influence international human rights policy and this policy agenda. We attempted to choose a wide variety of groups from these lists, with an eye to geographical representation and area of human rights work. Our goal was to interview a representative sample of organizations from the list. Unfortunately, we were met with some limitations in our interviews. First, contact information was not easily accessible for all groups. This was particularly true of some of the groups from the Global South. Second, many groups that were contacted did not reply to our request for interviews. Consequently, we also included a snowball method of sampling to acquire additional interviews, relying on recommendations from the groups that we had already interviewed and from human rights researchers. While these groups were not always part of the initial list of groups attending session of the Human Rights Council, we believe that the groups are still part of the larger international human rights movement



since they were specifically identified as such by other groups within that movement or by scholars researching and working on international human rights. Second, to add greater diversity and to make sure we captured both small and large NGOs, we scanned the websites and collected various documents highlighting the work of following major human rights groups: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, Plan International, and World Vision. We then conducted content analysis of these written documents and websites to assess how these groups frame and discuss human rights in their work. In addition, we also supplemented our interviews, when possible, with information from the websites of these various organizations. Overall, we interviewed individuals from thirty NGOs and completed additional content analysis of five NGOs, for a total of thirty-five organizations.

<Insert Table 1 Here>

Table 1 shows the secular/faith-based distribution of the groups in our sample, as well as information on whether these groups might be considered part of the “Global South” or “Global North.” For the purposes of our paper, we define the Global South as developing countries located primarily in Central and South America (including Mexico), Africa, the Middle East, and South/Southeast Asia. Global North countries are developed countries, primarily European countries, the United States, Canada, Russia, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. A few groups were coded as part of the “Global South” and the “Global North”. This happened when an organization was headquartered in the Global North, but had units around the globe that provided substantive input into policy and decisions, when an organization was so highly decentralized that it was not easily distinguishable between North or South, or in cases of associations of various human rights groups that contain members from both the North and South.

***Organizational Mission: Motivational Source***

As we expected, one of the major differences between religious and secular human rights organizations stemmed from how they articulated their work and their organizational mission. Whereas secular organizations emphasized advocacy around certain sets of rights, whether through awareness raising, research, or engaging political elites, religious organizations emphasized their religious principles and grounding as the source for their organizational efforts promoting human rights. Further, whereas secular organizations tended to emphasize “human rights,” a number of the religious organizations focused on “human dignity” stemming from the fact that all humans are made in the image of the Divine. Peter Prove, the Director of the World Council of Churches (WCC), for instance, noted that “we have to proceed from a reference to the fundamental faith principle being respect for human dignity as a God given value rather than the human rights framework itself being the ultimate good... human rights law is nothing more, but nothing less, than a set of tools and procedures for promoting and protecting God given human dignity” (Personal interview with Peter Prove, February 24, 2016). World Vision states that “We're Christian - as in we follow Jesus' example to show unconditional love to the poor and oppressed. Serving every child we can - of any faith or none.” (World Vision, About Us 2017).

In contrast with some expectations from the literature, our research found that this emphasis on a Divine mandate was held across a variety of faith based organizations. Danny Hall, the Director of Peace and Community Relations, West Territory, for Soka Gokkai, a Buddhist organization, noted that the organization’s approach to human rights emphasizes that “human rights is not just an abstract concept or legal framework, but something that is based on a profound philosophy of life” (Personal interview with Danny Hall, February 24, 2016). Similarly, Rabbis for Human Rights and T’ruah, both rabbinical

associations, emphasize the fact that humans are made “in the image of God” (Rabbis for Human Rights 2016; T’ruah 2017). Muslim NGOs also demonstrate this idea of human dignity. For example, Islamic Relief Worldwide suggests that “In Islam the root of human rights lies within theology and begins with faith in God, who bestowed dignity on humankind (Qur’an 17:70) and who makes it unacceptable for anyone to violate human rights and take away a person’s dignity.” (Islamic Relief 2014: 6).

Consistent with our expectations, we found that religious organizations tended to emphasize duty and obligation (as opposed to rights) more than secular organizations. For example, Aaron Chassy, the Director of the Technical Integration Unit of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) emphasized how their work elevated the voices of “those with the least voice, the most marginalized, the most vulnerable” (Personal interview with Aaron Chassy, March 2, 2016). Similarly, Ralston Deffenbaugh, the assistant General Secretary for International Affairs and Human Rights for the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) spoke of the importance of “diaconic” service where they “looks beyond ourselves and try to address the needs of others” (Personal interview with Ralston Deffenbaugh, March 7, 2016). Islamic Relief Worldwide notes that “the belief that God is the source of human rights leads to the conceptualization of the rights of others as obligations on all believers” (Islamic Relief 2014: 7). F. Michael Deeb, O.P., Permanent Delegate of the Dominican Order to the United Nations and Director of the Dominicans for Justice and Peace, pointed to the model of Jesus as the foundation for working “where...people are suffering, or oppressed, or afflicted or in need of mercy” (Personal interview with F. Michael Deeb, May 21, 2014). World Vision’s priority on serving the needs of children, arguably a significantly marginalized population, can also be understood in this framework.

While a number of the secular organizations studied also serve marginalized populations, their discussion of and motivation for this work differed. Instead of speaking of the duty of care and a religious obligation to serve the oppressed, the secular organizations interviewed spoke of their work with marginalized populations using the language of “rights” and underscored their use of research, monitoring, and legal programs—using international legal frameworks-- to help these populations. For example, Human Rights Watch mentions on their website that it “is known for its accurate fact-finding” (Human Rights Watch, About Us 2017), the Helsinki Foundation monitors and documents human rights abuses, and the International Association for Jewish Lawyers and Jurists (IAJLJ) also focuses on a legal approach to human rights (Personal interview with Irit Kohn, President, IAJLJ, March 31, 2016; Personal interview with Maciej Nowicki, Festival Director, Helsinki Foundation, March 3, 2016).

### *Conception of Justice*

Our findings were mixed regarding whether religious and secular human rights orientations demonstrate different orientations to “justice”. Consistent with our expectations, we did find a consistent emphasis on social justice and reconciliation as opposed to legal justice in the RNGOs we interviewed; 10 out of 12 (83%) of the RNGOs in our sample emphasized social justice. However, more than half of the secular groups in the sample also emphasized social justice, 14 out of 22 (64%) secular organizations.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate this point, religious organizations often spoke of their work not just in terms of human rights, but of social justice, seeking to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice. The Franciscans pointed to the strong anti-poverty message of Pope Francis and the Dominicans also emphasized their history working to combat poverty and promote the right to development and the rights of indigenous people (Personal interview with F. Michael Deeb, O.P., May 21, 2014; Personal interviews

with Markus Heinze ofm, Director of Franciscans International and Francesca Restifo of Franciscans International, May 20, 2014). World Vision works for the “Promotion of justice that seeks to change unjust structures affecting the poor among whom we work (World Vision, Missions & Values 2017). The Baha’i also underscored the importance “the eradication of extremes of wealth and poverty, and social justice for everyone,” and Soka Gokkai shared that one can “attain enlightenment only after having first saved others from suffering” and also noted the need to combat “passive violence” (Personal interview with Diane Ala’i, Baha’i International Community United Nations Office, Geneva, May 21, 2014; Personal interview with Danny Hall, February 21, 2016). Similarly, Islamic Relief emphasized the importance of social justice, and asserts that “human rights are a means to achieving justice and preserving human dignity (Islamic Relief Worldwide 2014: 6). In all of these examples, there is a “spiritual foundation for a culture of human rights” (Personal interview with Danny Hall, February 21, 2016).

Consistent with our expectations, many of the secular groups interviewed emphasized justice in terms of international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, something that was far less common for faith-based groups. In our sample, 13 of the 23 secular organizations (57%) focus on legal justice, compared to only 4 of the 12 religious organizations (33%). In their framing of issues, the secular groups tended to use more of the “rights” oriented language, focusing on issues of accountability, ending impunity, and promoting democracy (For example, Personal interview with Nicolas Agostini, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), May 23, 2014; Personal interview with Maciej Nowicki, March 2, 2016). Secular groups spoke of juridical frameworks, legal advocacy, and the focus on a rights-based approach, in stark contrast to the portrayal of one religious group (WCC) that claimed

“human rights law is nothing more, but nothing less, than a set of tools and procedures for promoting and protecting God given human dignity” (Personal interview with Peter Prove, February 24, 2016).

However, a number of secular organizations also emphasized the importance of human dignity in the pursuit of human rights in a way reminiscent of the religious groups’ framing. For example, Ian Hamilton, the Executive Director of Equitas noted that “ultimately... we’re looking at a state where rights are being respected. People are living in dignity and that is also... a much more peaceful world” (Personal interview with Ian Hamilton, February 26, 2016). He went on to give the example that they, a secular organization, were working to promote religious harmony in Sri Lanka to address the legacies of their civil war and enduring human rights violations. Another secular group, the International Organization for the Right to Education and Freedom of Education (OIDEF), implicitly referenced the need for social justice when discussing the need for cultural rights and cultural education in terms of the situation of minorities in France who feel that they are not part of French society and thus engage in bombing attacks (Personal interview with Ignasi Grau, February 16, 2016).

### ***Which Rights?***

Our research confirmed our expectation that the secular groups were more likely to focus on political and civil rights, whereas the religious groups were more likely to focus socio-economic and solidarity rights (see Table 2). The Helsinki Foundation, for instance, primarily focuses on first generation (political and civil) rights (Personal interview with Maciej Nowicki, March 3, 2016). Large human rights advocacy groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch emphasized questions of censorship and free speech, death penalty, prisoners, and international justice as core areas of focus, although Amnesty International also now includes poverty as a focal area (Amnesty International n.d.).

Human Rights Watch noted explicitly, however, that although they “and most other international human rights organizations have historically focused on civil and political rights, we have increasingly taken on social, cultural, and economic rights in our research and reporting. We have given particular attention to health, education, and housing” (HRW, Frequently Asked Questions, 2017). World Vision, a large Christian organization privileged economic and social rights to an even greater extent, underscoring the importance community-based development. They “partner with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice” (World Vision, About Us 2017). Religious organizations stressed the importance of their faith as the basis for their organizational mission promoting economic and social rights. Franciscans International, for instance, noted the “Church has a key role in...promoting a better use of business in sharing resources equitably and the Baha’i International Community noted not only a strong focus on non-discrimination but also the importance of social and economic issues (Personal interviews with Markus Heinze and Francesca Restifo, May 20, 2014; Personal interview with Diane Ala’i, May 21, 2014). The Dominicans noted that their focus on human rights extends out of the need to “ascribe to the full dignity and equal dignity of every individual...at every level of life” which includes dealing with issues of poverty and development (Personal interview with F. Michael Deeb, O.P., May 21, 2014).

<Insert Table 2 Here>

However, this is not to say that secular organizations were all narrow in their focus on promoting human rights. Equitas and the International Organization for the Right to Education and Freedom of Education (OIDEL) both focused on human rights education, and Ian Hamilton, the Executive Director of Equitas specifically spoke of promoting “human rights values” in terms of how individuals engage with

others and their communities “in terms of respect for diversity, equality, inclusion” through human rights education (Personal interview with Ian Hamilton, February 26, 2016). Further, several of the secular groups specifically mentioned their work on economic rights. Madeline Reese, the Secretary General of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), for instance, spoke of the importance of investing in social and economic welfare instead of the military and the International Peace Bureau’s focus on “disarmament for development” explicitly engages with second and third generation rights (Personal interview with Madeline Reese, May 20, 2014; Personal interview with Colin Archer, Secretary General, International Peace Bureau, May 22, 2014).

#### *Facilitation and Grassroots Connections*

Although we expected religious organizations to engage in more facilitation and work with stakeholder groups, across the religious-secular divide we found organizations that emphasized the local grounding of their work and the importance of their organizations in bridging the local and the global, amplifying the needs of the oppressed or marginalized to UN organizations in Geneva or to state governments and treaty bodies. Religious organizations like the WCC, CRS, LWF, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, as well as the Baha’i, spoke of their rooting in the grassroots and the needs of their communities around the world. As a representative from the Franciscans noted, “we give them a voice at the United Nations...we don’t just talk from our own knowledge or studies, but we bring their voice and experiences directly here to be heard” (Personal interviews with Markus Heinze ofm and Francesca Restifo, May 20, 2014). Lutheran World Federation noted that because of their 145 member churches, they were “local rooted, globally present” (Personal interview with Ralston Deffenbaugh, March 7, 2016). In addition, several religious groups, like CRS, noted that Catholic social teaching “sees rights as only



one side of the same coin” with “the flip side being responsibility” (Personal interview with Aaron Chassy, March 3, 2016). For CRS, this means local involvement and hard work in contributing to local governance and getting engaged in civic responsibility.

Secular organizations also spoke of their strong connections with local communities worldwide. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) pointed to their 178 member groups in over 100 countries, many of whom they bring regularly to Geneva to interface with the UN bodies and training them to use the UN mechanisms to advance their causes (Personal interview with Nicolas Agostini, May 23, 2014). Similarly, a representative from the Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC) in Nepal spoke of how the organization was more of a facilitator, working with local civil society organizations and rural populations within Nepal (Personal interview with Subodh Pyakurel, April 7, 2016). This local grounding shapes the priorities and programs of these organizations, as organizations with strong local ties around the world spoke of their role in responding to and amplifying the concerns of their local partners. These concerns range from political discrimination to physical insecurity due to armed conflict to poverty and underdevelopment. Thus, despite our expectations, religious and secular groups in our sample did not appear to differ significantly in regard to this method of action.

Our research did not generate clear findings regarding how religious and secular organizations differ in terms of how organizations decide which rights and activities to support, nor were we able to determine the extent of “religious pervasiveness” in the organizations (Berger 2003). Although several of the interviews intimated that spiritual beliefs informed their efforts, for example, that faith principles informed the approach of CRS in Latin America in the 1990s, and the LWF --the service arm of the Lutheran church--is integrated into the headquarters of the Christian world communion, very few

interviewees mentioned prayer or religious practices as a decision-making tool (Personal interview with Aaron Chassy, March 3, 2016; Personal interview with Ralston Deffenbaugh, March 7, 2016). Instead, across the religious-secular divide, organizations referred to their mission statements and other guiding documents as providing the guidance for their activities. Given that in the case of religious organizations these statements are often based in religious precepts and values, and that some of the religious organizations we interviewed emphasized that their activities stem in part from requests by co-religionists in other parts of the world, we cannot dismiss the possibility that religious practices inform decision-making processes. However, this remains a topic for further research.

### ***Questions of Funding, Impartiality and Independence***

We found that funding sources varied across the range of organizations we studied, with a similar diversity within both secular and religious organizations (see Table 3). As expected, some religious groups that are more closely identified with a religious institution, like Soka Gokkai and Baha'i International, receive all of their funds from members of their faith communities (Personal interview with Danny Hall, February 24, 2016; Personal interview with Diane Ala'i, May 21, 2014). Similarly, organizations that act in part as watchdog organizations and wish to remain independence, like the International Association for Jewish Lawyers and Jurists (IAJLJ), a secular organization, received most of its funding from members and individual donors, as did Mazlumder, a Muslim group based in Turkey (Personal interview with Irit Kohn, March 31, 2016; Personal interview with Halil Yeniguin, Mazlumder, March 24, 2016). Atallah Fitzgibbon, the Head of Policy & Strategy for Islamic Relief Worldwide, reported that the organization receives a substantial amount of money through Muslims donating their *Zakat* (donating money to the poor) to the organization to help with relief efforts (Personal interview with

Atallah Fitzgibbon, March 11, 2016). T’ruah reported that their funding is roughly two-thirds donations and one-third grants, with most of those grants coming from Jewish organizations, although the Rabbi interviewed noted that this was because “we have a harder time as allies convincing the non-Jewish funders to invest in us” (Personal interview with Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster, Director of Programs, T’ruah, March 24, 2016). This finding is consistent with Berger’s (2003) analysis of RNGOs’ tendency to receive funding from members rather than states. In contrast to Berger’s analysis, and more in keeping with studies that indicate that UN agencies and certain states delegate to and partner with religious NGOs for service-delivery and humanitarian relief efforts due to characteristics including their independence, flexibility and organizational capacity in developing countries, we found that several religious groups received funding from governments and the UN (Beitinger-Lee 2017; Flanigan 2007; Hershey 2016). We found through our interviews that although the World Council of Churches, LWF, CRS, and Islamic Relief all receive funds from member churches and religious bodies, they also receive funds from church related humanitarian and development organizations, bilateral government donors, and multilateral donors within the world system. World Vision, one of the largest aid agencies globally, receives funds from many major government aid agencies, such as UKaid, Australian AID and USAID, as well as foundations such as the Gates Foundation and corporate donors as well (World Vision, Good Partners and Best Practice 2017). Similarly Islamic Relief has received funding from the United Nations (including from the UNHCR and the World Food Programme), as well as from various governments, including Britain, Sweden, and Canada (Personal interview with Atallah Fitzgibbon, March 11, 2016).

<Insert Table 3 Here>

Similar to religious groups, we found many secular groups also received church-based funding, notably BADIL, and several secular groups, such as the British Humanist organization and Graduate Women International, reported receiving funds primarily from members and supporters, which was consistent with our expectations (Personal interview with Lubnah Shomli, Administrative and Financial Affairs Unit Manager, BADIL, February 23, 2016; Personal interview with Richy Thompson, Campaigns Manager, British Humanist Association, March 1, 2016; Personal interview with Amy Paunila, Communications and Advocacy Officer, Graduate Women International, March 31, 2016). Groups like Equitas and OIDEL receive primarily project-based funding, from a variety of foundations, but in the case of Equitas also from the Canadian government and the EU (Personal interview with Ian Hamilton, February 26, 2016; Personal interview with Ignasi Grau, February 16, 2016). Other secular groups, such as the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, receive most of their funding from states, particularly Western governments (Personal interview with Heather Collister, Programme Manager, ISHR, May 22, 2014; Personal interview with Paul Dziatkowicz, Project Manager for Mediation Support and Policy Programme, Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, May 19, 2014). WILPF, the International Peace Bureau (IPB), and FIDH receive funds from foundations, some northern European governments and agencies, as well as private donations (Personal interview with Madeline Reese, May 20, 2014; Personal interview with Colin Archer, May 22, 2014; Personal interview with Nicolas Agostini, May 23, 2014). INSEC received most of its funding from various foundations and agencies in Europe (Personal interview with Subodh Pyakurel, April 7, 2016). While there are some section fees and donations by members, the vast majority of the funding for these groups comes from

elsewhere. As Colin Archer, Secretary General of the IPB noted, “our members are poor” (Personal interview with Colin Archer, May 22, 2014).

The large and well-known secular human rights groups all limit their funding sources to those that, as Transparency International states, “does not compromise our ability to address issues freely, thoroughly and objectively” (Transparency International 2016). Amnesty international, one of the largest and best known human rights organizations, highlights that their funding comes from international supporters and foundations, with no funds from governments or corporations, in order to maintain the independence of their work. Human Rights Watch also refuses government money, either directly or indirectly, and receives most of its funding from private individuals or foundations. This finding differs from our expectation, in that we expected religious groups to be less likely to take or receive money from government sources. However, apart from religious communities like the Baha’i and Soka Gokkai, which did not receive money from any source other than their members, the religious organizations did take money from governments—whether direct or indirect. Further, in contrast to the large secular organizations, the largest religious organization (World Vision) receives substantial funds from a wide range of government agencies. One possible explanation for this difference is that while Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Transparency International engage in political advocacy campaigns focused primarily on first generation rights, World Vision’s advocacy is more humanitarian and developmental in its approach to rights, with a less overtly political mission.

### ***Women’s Rights***

Consistent with our expectation, the treatment of gender, and specifically women’s issues, varied across our sample, although the variance dealt more with *how* women’s issues were addressed—i.e. as a

stand-alone focus area or as a “cross-cutting” theme – than whether the organization was secular or religious. Some groups, religious and secular alike, emphasized gender equality and gender perspectives across all of their programs. The World Council of Churches, Catholic Relief Services, the Franciscans, BADIL, and INSEC, for instance, followed this model; although they did not have gender-specific program areas, they emphasize it in their work. The representative from INSEC (a secular group) specifically said that the issue of gender “is a cross-cutting issue and a primary issue” (Personal interview with Subodh Pyakurel, April 7, 2016). Interestingly, the Franciscans, a Catholic organization, also mentioned working with women on accessing the documents needed to receive education (Personal interviews with Markus Heinze ofm and Francesca Restifo, May 20, 2014).

Some organizations, including the religious Lutheran World Federation and the large secular organizations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have stand-alone programmatic areas focusing on women. Human Rights Watch’s section on women’s rights includes projects such as campaigning for paid family leave in the US and working for girls in Saudi Arabia to have access to school sports. Lutheran World Federation (LWF) underscored how gender justice is a very big part of their work. Since 1984 LWF has had at least 40% men and 40% women in all levels of governance. LWF also reflected the religious origin of their commitment to gender equality stating, “if you think in terms of St. Paul’s image of the body of Christ I think that this in fact is one of the real gifts that the LWF is giving the global body of Christ is that realization of the blessings to be had from the full participation of women” (Personal interview with Ralston Deffenbaugh, March 7, 2016).

Other organizations included women’s rights and issues as cross-cutting issues and had specific programming devoted to women’s rights. Islamic Relief Worldwide has a specific program focused on

gender justice, with programs focusing on issues such as gender-based violence, women's rights over their bodies, gender and development, women's right to education, inheritance rights for women, and combating female genital mutilation (Personal interview with Atallah Fitzgibbon, March 11, 2016). However, they also include issues of gender throughout their various programs. World Vision's president recently promised to specifically commit \$3 billion to maternal and child health over the next five years, and the organization includes women's issues throughout their various agendas. Equitas (a secular organization) provided examples of the grassroots-driven gender activities they have done in refugee camps in Haiti as well as in Senegal, where they have taken the lead for program work from the different concerns and dangers faced by women in the different contexts (i.e. sexual violence in Haiti and lack of documents to access education in Senegal), and include both specific women's programs as well as incorporate women's issues across a variety of programs (Personal interview with Ian Hamilton, February 26, 2016).

In our sample, religious organizations more consistently emphasized the importance of integrating women and maintained a commitment to women's equality than secular ones. Further, the religious organizations tended to emphasize that women's equality or attention to women's justice was a faith-based commitment. In addition to the work of LWF and Islamic Relief, discussed above, the Baha'i noted, for instance, the importance of "recognizing that the human soul has no sex. And so, therefore there shouldn't be any difference between man and women" (Personal interview with Diane Ala'i, May 21, 2014). Further, Soka Gokkai spoke of the vital role of women and referenced their leader's call for the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be the "Century of Women" (Personal interview with Danny Hall, February 24, 2016). In contrast, secular organizations tended to articulate their gender programming in needs-based terms, such

as the majority of poor being women or the marginalization of women in political processes. This difference parallels our finding regarding rights-language used by religious and secular groups more generally, i.e. that religious organizations emphasize *duty* while secular organizations emphasize *rights*, or sometimes, as in the case with gender, *needs*.

<Insert Table 4 Here>

In a few instances, religious organizations noted the challenges of working on women's rights in the context of their work. The Dominicans for Justice and Peace noted that there were "big [and sensitive] theological questions" related to the status of women and stated that "we have to develop a sensitivity towards these different cultures and see how we can engage with those cultures to, to look at those issues." However, the Dominicans noted that although it was delicate, it was important to work with women in these contexts "to be empowered and express themselves" and to help "remove...the ideological blocks that prevent it" (Personal interview with F. Michael Deeb, O.P., May 21, 2014). Thus, even while identifying and recognizing the religious challenges to gender equality, the Dominicans stressed the need to address these challenges face on at the source. Mazlumder, a Muslim organization, noted that precisely because women might receive undue pressure from conservative team members and the conservative elements of their constituency, the women's committee, comprised entirely of women, is autonomous and situated directly under the chair of the general headquarters rather than integrated into local branches (Personal interview with Halil Yenigun, March 24, 2016). This "mode of operation" provided the space for Mazlumder's women's committee to put together one of the few studies of the human rights abuses experienced by female refugees of the Syrian war. In this case, cultural norms rather than religion was the impetus for challenges as well as the justification for adjusting operational norms.



Contrary to our expectations, several of the secular groups interviewed noted that they did not have much of a focus on gender, although many do recognize the need for women-specific programming. The International Peace Bureau (IPB), which does have some discussion of women on their website, in an interview stated that their topic was “not a topic that lends itself very easily to the gender approach” (Personal interview with Colin Archer, May 22, 2014) and the Helsinki Foundation similarly stated that they do not really focus on women’s rights they felt that these issues were being covered well by more specialized groups and that their organization couldn’t cover all issues (Personal interview with Maciej Nowicki, March 3, 2016). Transparency International also lacks a specific gender focus, and noted that women are often not involved in anti-corruption activities even though women are significantly harmed by corruption. Consequently, several of their chapters have engaged in studies to explore this issue (Transparency International 2013). Although they do not have gender-specific units, groups like the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and INSEC emphasized that sometimes they need to create special programs or adapt culturally specific strategies to enable women’s full participation. The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, for example, holds an annual high level retreat for up and coming women actors where they help them network and connect with other experts (Personal interview with Paul Dziaukowicz, May 19, 2014). Similarly, INSEC noted that women are often one of the most vulnerable populations and that it is important to increase women’s participation (Personal interview with Subodh Pyakurel, April 7, 2016). Another secular group we interviewed suggested that they include women activists in their yearly events, often as award recipients for their activism on behalf of women (Personal interview, Anonymous NGO-A, May 2014). The lack of specific attention to gender and women’s issues by many of the secular organizations raises the question of whether secular groups presume gender equality and thus do not

address it explicitly or whether they are implicitly gender blind. Future research should delve more deeply into how various human rights NGOs approach women's rights and women's issues.

## **Conclusion**

Our research confirms several assumptions in the literature on religious and secular organizations and also raises questions needing further study. First, the findings here confirm what has been found in the study of religious organizations in development and service-delivery fields: that there is nothing barring religious and secular organizations from working together, and that although some RNGOs justify their work based on their religious precepts, many of the operational and programmatic dimensions of their work are similar to secular organizations. At times, secular and religious groups expressed their work and the goals of their work in very parallel language. For example, a representative from Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), a secular organization, noted that the goal of increased political participation for women requires a long-term process. She asked, "what can we achieve?" when international organizations fund projects only for one or two years (Personal interview with Laxmi Neupani, April 15, 2016). CRS, a religious organization, echoed this sentiment, noting that in contexts where "generations have been subjected to structural violence....[violent conflict] may just not be fully resolved in a two-year project cycle" (Personal interview with Aaron Chassy, March 3, 2016). Instead, the organization works "to chip away at" the conflict "to address root causes" (Personal interview with Aaron Chassy, March 3, 2016). Such statements also reflect that religious and secular organizations alike are constrained by donor funding requirements, although religious organizations that have their own institutionally- and member-based funding may have more flexibility than secular organizations who rely more strictly on donors.

Particularly significant in an era when violence justified in the name of religion is in the news headlines, we found that the religious motivation of NGOs can provide a bridge between different faith-based organizations, despite claims to the contrary in some of the literature. In keeping with the findings of Benedetti (2006), this may particularly true for more “moderate” religious organizations, although more research is required to fully place each institution within this framework. For example, the representative from Islamic Relief Worldwide said that some of their best partnerships are with Christian faith-based organizations. They specifically discussed their partnerships with ACT Alliance, Christian Aid, Lutheran World Federation, and CAFOD, the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales and part of Caritas International. In fact, the organization’s representative discussed a summit in Jordan, led by the LWF, of Christian and Muslim faith-based NGOs where the large Muslim agencies present “shared with them our faith perspectives, our faith teaching on the humanitarianism” (Personal interview with Atallah Fitzgibbon, March 11, 2016). This example demonstrates how organizations from different religious backgrounds are not only working together, but are seeking out and organizing opportunities for cross-faith dialogue. This contradicts Benedetti’s suggestion that cross-faith cooperation was unlikely to be conducted at the strategic level, and instead primarily tactical and field-based. These cross-faith connections are, however, also apparent in the field; Lutheran World Federation noted that “even when we are working say with Muslims, and more than half the refugees with whom we work are Muslim, that oftentimes we have a stronger credibility or reputation because we are also a faith based organization” (Personal interview with Ralston Deffenbaugh, March 7, 2016). Further, this same interviewee noted that “we have been told as LWF even by Muslim Somali women in the refugee camps that they really appreciated the way that LSW staff treats them with dignity as fellow human beings. And

that sense of seeing the other person as also created in the image of God is very important” (Personal interview with Ralston Deffenbagh, March 7, 2016). As these quotes suggest, local populations often trust and understand the religious organizations more than the secular ones because they recognize why they are engaged in the work they are doing. They are less worried about any ulterior political or social motivation. While the organizations interviewed here also spoke favorably of rights-based approaches and supported human rights more generally, as a complement to spiritual approaches, several noted the real problem of a rising antagonism in some parts of the world against human rights by some religious leaders (Personal interview with Peter Prove, February 24, 2016). This is one area requiring further study, particularly the interaction of culture, religion, and context in exploring where and why certain religious leaders speak out against rights.

We also found preliminary support for the idea by Caldwell (2012) that religious groups were sometimes less constrained than their secular counterparts. For example, CRS invested about \$4 million of their own money in Southern Sudan “when nobody was doing anything, really, to advance their non-violent democratic transition. And, we were there throughout that time and even earlier” (Personal interview with Aaron Chassy, March 3, 2016). The World Council of Churches has been able to keep lines of communication open between churches in North and South Korea despite the extremely difficult regional context, and is “launching a new process to generate actionable recommendations, for the enhanced protection and security of religious minority communities in Northern Iraq and Syria” despite the fact that “the UN system is unable currently to address that issue given the absence of an appropriate Security Council mandate” (Personal interview with Peter Prove, February 24, 2016). Similarly, Mazlumder, a Muslim organization in Turkey, reported that despite the government’s refusal to allow

monitoring teams into Kurdish towns that have experienced violent conflict, they have sent teams in immediately after the curfew is lifted to document and report on human rights violations and demand an investigation despite the unpopularity of this position in Turkish society (Personal interview with Halil Yenigun, March 24, 2016). At the same time, however, some religious groups noted that they at times have experienced push back from co-religionists due to their stances on particular issues; in these cases religious representative or membership bodies may more constrained in terms of the positions they can take on some more contentious rights issues than those religious organizations that are independent of a religious institution.

The findings generally supported our expectations regarding the funding of the organizations. First of all, while religious organizations were often privately funded, consistent with Berger's (2003) observation that religious networks are a major channel for communication and resources, we also found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the same was true of several of the secular organizations, who were funded by members and member groups. Further, it was more common in our sample to have secular organizations with strict policies against receiving government funding, while a number of the religious organizations receive government funds from a variety of government sources. In keeping with what we found in the literature, religious organizations may utilize more government funding due to the humanitarian focus of some of their work, which put them in a position to take development and humanitarian aid, such as Food for Peace aid in the case of CRS. The political advocacy of large organizations like Amnesty International makes their financial independence and objectivity much more critical in terms of their status and stature. Overall, this question of funding sources and organizational background is worthy of more study, particularly when considered in combination with the degree of

religiosity of organizations and the type of human rights work they are engaging in. Further, the ability of religious NGOs to self-sustain independently due to support from religious bodies warrants further attention, particularly in regards to the point mentioned earlier regarding religious NGOs ability to engage with contentious human rights issues that states and donors may not have the capacity or political will to address.

We did find that women's rights was considered less frequently by secular NGOs than we had expected. We also noted that many religious organizations showed a particularly strong commitment to women's issues. This may be a function of the selection of groups in that religious groups who openly identify as human rights groups are perhaps more likely to support women's rights. This reflects one of the challenges noted often in the literature regarding how to define religious organizations; for example, Catholics for Choice might not be accepted by the Catholic church but the group self-identifies as Catholic (Bush 2017, p. 41). That said, all of the women's organizations we interviewed or reviewed (including groups like Plan International, FEDO, and WILPF) were secular, and engage in human rights work explicitly through a gender analysis framework. Future work should more closely analyze the various mechanisms that might account for the less specific gender focus found in some secular organizations and whether this is due to practical reasons such as funding constraints and human resource limitations, or whether it stems from socio-cultural differences of opinions or organizational divides on such issues. Further research should explore the relationship between religious NGOs and affiliated religious institutions to investigate if degree and/or type of religious NGO impacts the way in which women's rights are articulated and pursued, since research shows that diversity within the category of "religious" NGOs is important. This may be particularly important in areas where women's rights

activists use alternative interpretations of religious teachings to counter claims made by traditional religious authorities (Sharify-Funk 2008).

While there were clear differences in how secular and religious groups approached human rights, there were also some similarities and areas for potential collaboration. As mentioned previously, there are already connections between religious groups from different faith backgrounds, evidenced, for example, in the Memo of Understanding between LWF and Islamic Relief (Personal interview with Ralston Deffenbaugh, March 7, 2016 and Personal interview with Atallah Fitzgibbon, March 11, 2016), the cooperative partnership between CRS, World Vision, and Islamic Relief in the Central African Republic; and the partnerships between Islamic Relief and ACT Alliance, Christian Aid and CAFOD (Personal interview with Aaron Chassy, March 2, 2016). Further, organizations across the spectrum emphasized the importance of their local connections and responding to the needs of local communities whenever possible. These grassroots efforts, we would argue, are a key area where secular and religious groups might find common ground, as well as efforts to change the short-term project-based cycle that secular and religious groups alike noted was contrary to the type of long term socio-political change needed to substantively improve the human rights situation in many parts of the world.

Several questions remain going forward. One is the extent to which religious groups vary across the faith backgrounds as well as based on their degree of religiosity and the size of their budget and constituency. One might assume or speculate that larger organizations that receive greater donor funds are more likely to be supportive of rights generally accepted by those governments and foundations and may differ in orientation to human rights from those organizations that do not receive funds from governments or international donors. We were not able to capture the difference in degrees of religious pervasiveness

in this study, nor did any of our informants speak of prayer and religious dialogue as central to their work or discernment, although the representative of Sokka Gokkei did refer to the importance of the Buddhist practice of chanting particular mantras in his discussion of the group's work (Personal interview with Danny Hall, February 24, 2016). Thus, future research should explore these dynamics more explicitly; it may be, perhaps, that any difference in methods used lies in part on the constituency being served or the cause being promoted and less on the religious orientation of the organization. Another area needing further study is the extent to which religious and secular organizations espouse programmatic and/or philosophical differences in their orientation to development and social justice projects, and/or whether any such differences are the result of religion per se, or other characteristics such as whether the group is located in the Global North or Global South and which generation of rights they tend to emphasize.





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**Table 1: Distribution of Organizations in Sample**

	<b>Number of Organizations in the Sample</b>
<b>Secular</b>	23
<b>Faith-Based</b>	12
<b>Global South</b>	15
<b>Global North</b>	27



**Table 2: Types of Rights**

	<b>Religious Organizations</b>	<b>Secular Organizations</b>
<b>Political and Civil Rights</b>	6 of 12 (50%)	21 of 23 (91%)
<b>Socio-Economic Rights</b>	10 of 12 (83%)	14 of 22 (64%)
<b>Solidarity Rights</b>	9 of 12 (75%)	10 of 22 (45%)

**Table 3: Sources of Funding**

<b>Type of Funding</b>	<b>Religious Organizations</b>	<b>Secular Organizations</b>
<b>Individual Governments or EU</b>	5 of 11 (45%)	12 of 22 (55%)
<b>UN Funding</b>	3 of 11 (27%)	5 of 22 (22%)
<b>Member Support/Individual Donations</b>	12 of 12 (100%)	18 of 22 (81%)
<b>Non-Governmental Grants (NGOs, Churches, Businesses, etc.)</b>	10 of 11 (91%)	17 of 19 (89%)

**Table 4: Women’s Rights and Issues**

	<b>Religious Organizations</b>	<b>Secular Organizations</b>
<b>Women Specific Section</b>	8 of 12 (67%)	13 of 23 (57%)
<b>Women as Cross-Cutting Issue</b>	9 of 12 (75%)	12 of 23 (52%)
<b>Women Specific Section AND Women as Cross-Cutting Issue</b>	5 of 12 (42%)	6 of 23 (26%)
<b>No Focus on Women</b>	0 of 12 (0%)	4 of 23 (17%)

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<sup>1</sup> This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Kennesaw State University as Study 14-403. All interviewees signed consent forms to participate in the study. Interviewees that are specifically named gave consent for their names and organizations to be mentioned in the study and to be associated with their interview answers.

<sup>2</sup> Not all reported statistics will equal 35 organizations, as we occasionally have “missing data” for variables when we felt that we didn’t have enough information to make an informed coding decision. In addition, in most instances, categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, some NGOs focused on both social and legal justice. Six of the secular organizations we looked at and two of the religious organizations focused on both legal and social justice. Similar overlap can be found for most factors discussed in the study.