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### Analysing cultural proximity: Islamic Relief Worldwide and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

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# Analysing cultural proximity: Islamic Relief Worldwide and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

Victoria Palmer

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*Based on fieldwork carried out on Islamic Relief's relief programme for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, this article contributes to the debate on whether Muslim aid agencies bring added value when working with Muslim beneficiaries in Muslim areas. The author explores the significance of religion in relations between actors in the aid process and argues that a common religion does not necessarily override political, social, and cultural divisions. The article questions whether it is useful to claim that Muslim solidarity exists in the aid process when in practice it is difficult to have any meaningful engagement with religion in the field.*

## **Analyser la proximité culturelle: Islamic Relief Worldwide et réfugiés rohingyas au Bangladesh**

*Sur la base des travaux de terrain effectués sur le programme humanitaire d'Islamic Relief pour les réfugiés Rohingya au Bangladesh, cet article contribue au débat sur la question de savoir si les agences humanitaires musulmanes apportent une valeur ajoutée lorsqu'elles travaillent avec des bénéficiaires musulmans dans des zones musulmanes. L'auteur examine l'importance de la religion dans les relations entre les acteurs dans le processus d'aide et soutient qu'une religion commune n'emporte pas forcément sur les divisions politiques, sociales et culturelles. L'article demande s'il est utile d'affirmer que la solidarité musulmane existe dans le processus d'aide alors même qu'il est difficile, en pratique, de mettre en place une collaboration significative avec les religions sur le terrain.*

## **Analisando a proximidade cultural: a Islamic Relief Worldwide e os refugiados de Rohingya em Bangladesh**

*Baseado em um trabalho de campo realizado pelo programa de ajuda humanitária da Islamic Relief para refugiados de Rohingya em Bangladesh, este artigo contribui para o debate sobre se as agências de ajuda muçulmanas trazem valor agregado quando estão trabalhando com beneficiários muçulmanos em áreas muçulmanas. A autora examina a importância da religião nas relações entre os agentes no processo de ajuda humanitária e argumenta que uma religião comum não necessariamente sobrepõe-se às divisões políticas, sociais e culturais. O artigo questiona se é correto argumentar que a solidariedade muçulmana existe no processo de ajuda humanitária quando na prática é difícil ter um engajamento significativo com a religião na atividade.*

### ***Un análisis de proximidad cultural: Ayuda Islámica Mundial y los refugiados rohingya en Bangladesh***

*Basándose en estudios de los programas de ayuda humanitaria ejecutados por Ayuda Islámica entre los refugiados rohingya en Bangladesh sobre el terreno, este ensayo contribuye al debate de si las agencias de ayuda musulmanas aportan valor agregado cuando trabajan con beneficiarios musulmanes en regiones musulmanas. La autora analiza la importancia de la religión en las relaciones entre actores en los procesos de ayuda humanitaria y sostiene que una religión compartida no elimina necesariamente las divisiones políticas, sociales y culturales. El ensayo pregunta si es útil afirmar que existe solidaridad propiamente musulmana en los procesos de ayuda cuando en la práctica, sobre el terreno, es difícil alcanzar compromisos significativos basándose en la religión.*

KEY WORDS: Aid; Civil society; Gender and diversity; South Asia

## **Introduction**

The humanitarian sector has tended to avoid engaging with religion because of the perceived dangers of proselytising, discrimination, and partiality. However, as humanitarian agencies have become more aware of the significance of religion in the lives of aid beneficiaries, there is a growing awareness that ‘cultural authenticity’ is integral to successful relief operations (Clarke 2008). There has been an increased level of engagement with organisations that derive their identity, mission, and services from a religious or spiritual tradition – otherwise known as faith-based organisations, or FBOs – as well as with key religious figures and faith communities (Thomas 2005).

It is from this basis, and with specific reference to Muslim FBOs, that the ‘cultural proximity’ argument has emerged. According to this line of thought, a common religion creates solidarity among beneficiaries, NGOs, and other actors in the aid process, which in turn brings about added value through ease of access and provision of more culturally appropriate services.

These arguments have emerged from a context in which many Western NGOs experience hostility, security risks, and logistical challenges when attempting to work in complex emergencies in Muslim countries. At a time when the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the negative perception of Western foreign policy are fuelling a polarisation of the Western and Islamic worlds, it is possible to argue that Muslim humanitarian organisations based in the West have much potential to work effectively in these contexts.

This article will analyse the cultural-proximity thesis in relation to the work of the largest UK-based Muslim faith-based organisation, Islamic Relief Worldwide (hereafter referred to as Islamic Relief). Drawing extensively on fieldwork conducted on Islamic Relief’s relief programme for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the article addresses the extent, nature, and added value of religious solidarity between the organisation and its beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup>

## **What is a faith-based organisation?**

It is important to clarify the meaning of the term ‘faith-based organisation’, the central characteristic of which is the derivation of organisational identity and mission from a particular religion or spiritual tradition. Within this overarching definition, FBOs act upon their faith

base to varying extents and for highly differentiated purposes (Clarke 2008). However, this article will follow the definition of Muslim FBOs given by De Cordier as:

[non-governmental organisations that] were founded on the initiative of Muslims, that mobilise most of their support among Muslims, and whose action is, to varying degrees and in various forms, inspired and legitimated by the Islamic religion or at least certain tenets thereof. (2009a: 609)

Of course Muslim FBOs are not a homogeneous whole, and this article will focus on only one organisation among UK-based Muslim FBOs. Muslim FBOs began to evolve in the UK from the mid-1980s as a consequence of increasing numbers of Muslims settling in the country from the 1950s. 1,373 Muslim FBOs are currently registered with the UK Charity Commission, of which Islamic Relief, which had an income of over £58 million (€67 million) in 2007, is the largest (Charity Commission 2007).

Many UK-based Muslim FBOs have grown considerably in size, financial turnover, and professionalism since their establishment and have become increasingly integrated within the wider NGO community by adopting international humanitarian standards, increasing their services from purely seasonal religious programmes to include sustainable development and relief work, and structuring their work on dominant secular models. These organisations distance themselves from the apparent 'darker side' of religion by abiding by principles of neutrality and impartiality, and they are therefore equated with larger and more established FBOs such as Christian Aid or CAFOD (De Cordier 2009a).

## Defining cultural proximity

It is important to note that 'cultural proximity' remains a tentative argument, rather than a fully expanded theory. It derives much of its substance from the concept of the *umma* – a theoretical union of Muslim believers throughout the *dar al-Islam* (dominion of Islam). According to cultural-proximity theory, the symbolic sense of community in the *umma* also exists between Muslim actors in the aid process, specifically between Muslim organisations, national and local governments, local communities, and beneficiaries.

This argument is not necessarily advanced by Muslim FBOs themselves, who acknowledge that all humanitarian organisations working in international contexts aim to be culturally sensitive and respectful. However, organisations such as Islamic Relief readily admit that their identification as a 'Muslim' NGO can often provide easier access to Muslim communities.

The thinking around cultural proximity argues that solidarity in faith can add value to the provision of aid process in the following ways:

- Ensuring easier and safer access to Muslim countries and areas, and providing logistical advantages through religious solidarity with national and local governments and local communities.
- Ensuring that aid is provided effectively and that the services offered are sensitive to religious needs.
- Creating positive relations between (local and expatriate) staff and beneficiaries through shared beliefs and respect for religious values and practices.

These arguments have been explored elsewhere (Benthall 2008; Ghandour 2003; De Cordier 2009a), and researchers and academics highlight the weaknesses of the generalised assumptions underpinning the theory of cultural proximity.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, divisions exist within Islam and therefore religion cannot automatically be assumed to be a basis for unity (Benthall 2008). Moreover, culture consists of much more than religion, a fact which is particularly pertinent in politically

and socially unstable contexts. We must also acknowledge that, due to the varied location and nature of humanitarian emergencies, there can be no overarching conclusions drawn in relation to cultural proximity. Rather we should take cultural proximity as a springboard from which to explore the key issues which the concept raises in relation to individual situations. Such is the aim of this article.

## Background to case study

### *Islamic Relief Worldwide*

Islamic Relief was established in 1984 and currently works in 26 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Inspired by Islamic values, the organisation's mission confirms its commitment to providing assistance to those in need 'regardless of race, colour, political affiliation, gender or belief, and without expecting anything in return'. Islamic Relief is committed to international humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and accountability, as illustrated by its acceptance of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. By adopting these values, employing non-Muslim staff, and working on behalf of non-Muslim as well as Muslim beneficiaries, Islamic Relief sets out its position on contentious issues.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence of Islamic Relief's 'excellent ... practical integration with the mainstream non-Muslim aid and development agencies' (Benthall 2007: 7) can be seen in its status as the only Muslim member of the Disasters and Emergency Committee (DEC), in the fact that it receives funding from various UN agencies, the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), and the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), and through its partnerships with non-Muslim NGOs.

We need to explore to what extent Islamic Relief has been obliged to produce what Bellion-Jourdan terms a 'reformulation' of its faith in order to achieve this integration into the NGO mainstream (2000: 15). Research on this issue has drawn attention to the way in which FBOs are required to reformulate their faith identity in order to attract funding from secular sources and claims that this can lead to a disintegrated, two-minded, confused organisational identity (James 2009). Understanding the pervasiveness and meaning of the organisation's religious identity is essential if we are accurately to assess cultural proximity.

At one level, it is easy to ascertain Islamic Relief's religious orientation from the organisation's unambiguous name and logo – a symbol of a mosque with two minarets encompassing a globe: see Figure 1.<sup>4</sup> But in reality, determining the true extent of an organisation's religiosity



**Figure 1:** Logo of Islamic Relief Worldwide

is a much more complex task, which must take into account staff members' impressions (Berger 2003; Benedetti 2006). By exploring modes of 'self-identification', this research showed that the meaning attributed to Islamic Relief's Muslim orientation varies at three organisational levels: headquarters (HQ), national (country office), and local (field-level), thus showing that determining religiosity is not a straightforward task.

At the HQ level, Islamic Relief's 2007–2009 Strategy Report exhibits the organisation's religious orientation through explicit religious references and quotations, yet upholds that Islamic principles simultaneously inspire and complement its adherence to secular humanitarian norms. The organisation's fundraising and promotional activities targeting UK-based donors draw on Islamic practices of charitable giving (i.e. *zakah* and *sadaqah*) and are centred on key dates in the Islamic calendar, including the holy month of Ramadan. Included within the mainstream list of services provided are activities directly derived from Islamic forms of relief. Islamic Relief's policies attempt to accommodate Western attitudes to development and aid practices, but only where these are compatible with Islamic principles. For example, the organisation's policy on reproductive health confirms that it will provide guidance on family planning and birth spacing (as promoted by certain Islamic scholars) and distribute contraceptives, but only within the context of marriage (apart from in situations where failure to do so will cause harm that exceeds that caused by extra-marital sex). At the time of writing, the organisation was in the process of drafting a gender policy, a key topic for Western Muslim FBOs.

At the national level, religiosity sometimes proves to be a much more contentious issue. Staff at Islamic Relief's Bangladesh country office in Dhaka were overwhelmingly defensive when questioned about the religiosity of the organisation and claimed that Islamic Relief should be considered to be the same as secular NGOs. Considering this standpoint in relation to the political context, we can see that it is influenced by the staff's constant battle to prove the organisation's impartiality and neutrality in a country where there is much suspicion of political Islam and Islamic fundamentalism.

At the field level, staff asserted that organisations cannot be identified or differentiated through religious orientation but only through professionalism, service provision, efficiency, and management skills. The daily challenge of attesting to the organisation's credibility on religious terms that confronts staff in Dhaka was not faced by the field staff to such an extreme degree.

This exploration of self-identity shows that Islamic Relief's religious identity is plural and flexible. Religiosity can be denied, understated, or exaggerated as necessary and as appropriate within the complex structure of an organisation that works in many locations and in politically and religiously volatile contexts.

### *The Rohingya*

The Rohingya are an ethnic group originating from western Burma (Myanmar), but denied Burmese nationality by the military government who views their South Asian ethnicity and Muslim religion as contrary to Burmese cultural identity (Wipperman and Haque 2007).<sup>5</sup> The Rohingya have for several decades been subjected to religious oppression, discrimination, and severe persecution by the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Throughout this time they have been migrating a few kilometres across the Naf River to the south-east corner of Bangladesh in search of refuge and protection. The Bangladeshi authorities have refused to register new arrivals since 1992. Consequently, of the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya currently living in Bangladesh, only 23,393 are registered refugees.<sup>6</sup> These refugees are entitled to live in government-administered camps and receive a full complement of aid

from NGOs and UNHCR, while those who are ‘unregistered’ are forced to live without assistance (MSF 2002, 2008; Wipperman and Haque 2007).

## Leda Camp

In 2004, a group of approximately 10,000 unregistered refugees established the Tal Makeshift Camp near Teknaf, in a narrow stretch of land without proper shelters or facilities. The conditions in Tal Camp were so appalling that the Bangladeshi government agreed to move the refugees to a better location.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of July 2008, the population was moved to a new site five kilometres away. This is not officially a ‘refugee camp’, as the beneficiaries are unregistered; however, the name ‘Leda Camp’ has been adopted and will be used throughout this article.

Before the move, the secular NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which had been providing healthcare services in Tal Camp, handed over to Islamic Relief, who constructed the camp and took on responsibility for water, sanitation, and health services.<sup>8</sup> Handicap International and Muslim Aid provided additional services, and the project was funded by ECHO.

Islamic Relief was responsible for the largest proportion of services and, in the absence of any government representatives on site, was often identified by members of the refugee community as having overall responsibility for the camp. Further misunderstanding was generated by the refugees’ lack of awareness of the distinction between themselves as ‘unregistered’ refugees and the ‘registered’ refugees who were receiving aid in local government-administered camps. While the latter were entitled to receive food packages and education, the Bangladeshi government did not permit these services for the unregistered Rohingya. The residents of Leda Camp often interpreted this as evidence of the inadequacy of Islamic Relief’s assistance.

At the time of this research, Islamic Relief employed 65 staff, all of whom were Bangladeshi nationals, with 51 originating from the local area and 40 practising Muslims. Religious unity existed in this case study at the most basic level, as Islamic Relief and the Rohingya both follow Sunni orthodoxy.

However, while the cultural-proximity thesis claims ‘proximity’ only through religion, this case study also presented a high level of cultural similarity on several additional levels. The Rohingya language is almost identical to the Chittagonian language or dialect of Bangla spoken in the Chittagong area, and the two groups have a similar South Asian appearance (Wipperman and Haque 2007). A long history of movement and integration between the Rohingyas’ region of origin in western Burma and the southern part of Bangladesh accounts for this level of proximity (MSF 2002). It is only because of relatively recent nation-state divisions that the region is divided and the two cultures are regarded as distinct and separate. In reality, ‘fluid, permeable spaces of culture, ethnicity and religion ... characterize the social geography of the region’ (Wipperman and Haque 2007: 27).

## Analysing cultural proximity

### *Security and access*

It has been argued that access and security issues relating to national and religious divisions are creating an increasingly polarised territorial pattern in the provision of aid (Benedetti 2006). Particularly in conflict zones and politically unstable areas, national governments and local groups may be hostile to organisations perceived as ‘Western’, either through their religious affiliation or through expatriate staff indicating associations with government and military

action (De Cordier 2009a). However, although Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, Muslim NGOs do not enjoy privileged status. In fact, secular and non-Muslim faith-based NGOs operate relatively easily in Bangladesh, and the government and people are often more suspicious of Muslim aid agencies.

This is related to Bangladesh's political history. Despite being named part of Pakistan on the basis of a unifying Muslim identity in the split from India in 1947, Islam has never been a source of national cultural cohesion. In its drive for independence, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) asserted its Bengali national identity in order to challenge Islamic solidarity with Pakistan and establish the People's Republic of Bangladesh in 1971. Tensions between political Islamists and secularists are still rife in contemporary politics and everyday life.

Islamic Relief has often found that this type of political environment makes operations on the ground more challenging. In areas where governments are suspicious of Muslim organisations in case they are involved in proselytising and have links with fundamentalist groups, Islamic Relief must not be seen to be pursuing a religious agenda.

### *Quality of service*

The idea that Muslim FBOs will bring added value to the aid process is echoed in the expectations of Muslim beneficiaries. According to a senior member of staff in Islamic Relief's UK headquarters, Muslim beneficiaries will often expect more from Muslim aid agencies:

'They feel that they have a right to funding and assistance because Muslim organisations are funded by the *umma*. When expectations are not met, they are often more critical than they would be of secular organisations since "our" money has been used.' (Interview with the author)

Indeed, refugees in Leda Camp had hoped that the change from MSF to a Muslim organisation would result in the provision of a wider range of relief services.

This research was carried out two weeks after the refugees had moved to Leda Camp. The move had a significant negative impact on livelihood options, and there was a serious food shortage in the camp. There were problems with the water supply and sanitation, protection and security issues, leaks in the new shelters, and an incomplete health-care service.<sup>9</sup>

Many respondents emphasised their concerns about the insufficient level of service, rather than answering questions about the importance of religion. It was largely felt that Islamic Relief's religious orientation was irrelevant in the light of the inadequacy of the services that they were providing. This shows that cultural proximity cannot be used as an excuse for neglecting a basic level of provision (Benthall 2008). Some refugees made comparisons with MSF, highlighting the professionalism and efficacy of the secular organisation. One of the *majhee* (community leaders) implied that the quality of the service provided outweighs religious orientation, saying 'no-one can do as well as MSF . . . they understood the real issues because of their experience'.

It is also worth considering the relationship between Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid in Leda Camp. In line with the cultural-proximity argument, it should follow that these organisations, which are built on the same Islamic values and are both based in the UK, should work together successfully. However, in the light of a serious communication and coordination breakdown between the two organisations in Leda Camp, it seems that this proximity does not guarantee added value. Indeed, it is likely that the fact that they seek funding from the same donor base leads to competition and rivalry, rather than a harmonious partnership.

### *Religious expectations*

Beneficiaries often assume that Muslim FBOs are funded by the *umma* and should therefore provide certain religious services and facilities. Many refugees in Leda Camp presumed that



Islamic Relief would have a greater understanding of, and sympathy for, their religious needs and would provide services in accordance with this. One example is the provision of sacrificed meat at *Eid ul Adha* and food packages for *iftar* (the traditional meal for breaking fast) during the holy month of Ramadan.

Apart from these seasonal programmes, however, religious leaders in Leda Camp explained that their religious needs were not being met by Islamic Relief. The lack of key facilities required for practising Islam, such as graveyards, *madrassas* (religious schools), and mosques, created a significant negative impact on individual and community spiritual well-being.

Refugees repeatedly lamented the lack of a mosque. Several community centres were used as mosques. However, as mosques should be purpose-built and dedicated holy spaces, these centres were seen as inappropriate. The centres were also used for various other activities, and a female employee of a Western secular NGO who entered one of the ‘mosques’ wearing her shoes was the subject of serious concern. Several key design features integral to the building of a mosque were missing from the centres. In one particular centre the following issues were identified: the entrance door was on the south rather than the east side; there was no *minbar* (the pulpit from which the Imam addresses the congregation); and there was no *mihrab* (the niche placed in the wall of every mosque to indicate the direction of Mecca).

The congregational obligation of the *Jum’ah* prayer (congregational prayer), when all male members of the community traditionally gather in the mosque for Friday prayers, was made impossible by the diminutive size of the community centres. Those who did attend were crowded together, with insufficient room for the physical movement of prayer. The community centres were not carpeted, they did not have enough prayer mats, and there was no loud-speaker for the call to prayer. The water facilities near the community centres were not sufficient to perform *wudu* (obligatory washing before prayer). The result of these inadequacies, according to religious leaders in Leda Camp, is that prayers cannot be performed properly.

Practising religion through prayer is, of course, no less significant for female members of the community, who traditionally pray in their homes. But the size of the shelters and lack of water and other facilities made this religious obligation difficult to fulfil, as one woman expressed:

‘... [praying] is not easy for the women, as water is not available or easy to get for making wudu and the house does not have enough space ... Men can go to the mosque for *Jum’ah* prayer ... I don’t even have a *Jainamaz* [prayer mat] ...’ (Interview with the author)

One man aptly captured the importance of religious practice and the disappointment created when a Muslim agency fails to live up to its perceived religious identity:

‘We are worried [about] what will [happen] in Ramadan as it is mandatory to perform [namaz (prayer)] and we can’t even perform *Jum’ah* [(special Friday congregational prayers)]. We want Islamic Relief to establish [a] mosque inside the camp as we think they are Muslim and they should understand our needs. We can live without food but we can’t live without our religion ...’ (Interview with the author)

Religious faith can be a source of emotional support and solidarity for refugees who feel disoriented and are experiencing extreme suffering (Gozdziak 2002). There can be little doubt that Islamic Relief is aware of this, and some staff expressed regret that they had been unable to provide a mosque. The Project Coordinator commented: ‘It is very much a shaming issue for us. We are Muslims, our name is also in the name of Islam, but there is no mosque.’

ECHO prohibited the building of purpose-built mosques in Leda Camp (in line with their policy of not supporting religious institutions) and reluctantly gave permission for the community centres to be used instead. ECHO’s refusal to fund religious institutions reflects a common

policy in the aid sector and is intended to be a safeguard against proselytising, discrimination, and political partiality. Staff at Islamic Relief's headquarters confirmed that the organisation has rarely, if ever, funded the construction of a mosque, for precisely this reason, and because prayer facilities are not the most urgent need in humanitarian emergencies.

Of course, Islamic Relief cannot be held directly responsible for the lack of facilities for religious practices in Leda Camp. Rather we must acknowledge that the humanitarian sector as a whole tends to undervalue the importance of religious values and practices in the lives of beneficiaries. While it may appear rational to prioritise material needs above spiritual well-being, refugee camps are intended to be secure and comforting places for those who have suffered physical and emotional trauma. It is likely that the issues raised by refugees in Leda Camp indicate an important truth about Muslim beneficiaries' experience of the aid process in general.

Another example from Leda Camp concerned the need for women to work outside on the land in order to earn a living. This was seen by the community to contradict the practice of *purdah* (preventing women from being seen by men), which requires women to remain inside the home and assume their traditional gender-assigned roles (i.e. maintaining the home and caring for children). Some women claimed that the physical requirements of working on the land made wearing the *hijab* (headscarf) impossible. Moreover, women maintained that the local Bangladeshi community verbally and physically assaulted the women for committing a sin by not covering their hair, thus further antagonising the relationship between the Rohingyas and the local community.

### 'Muslim' identity: a source of cultural proximity?

The examples discussed above illustrate the confusion and disappointment caused by the perceived lack of correlation between Islamic Relief's faith identity and its secular service delivery. They present a strong counter-argument against cultural proximity. However, this research also required an exploration of relations at the individual level between staff (the organisation's representatives in the camp) and the beneficiaries.

This was complicated by the fact that Islamic Relief employed non-Muslim staff. While the majority of the 65 members of staff were Muslim, there were also seven Hindu, one Christian, and seven Buddhist staff members. The majority of field staff claimed not to work for Islamic Relief out of a sense of religious solidarity. Even most of the Muslim staff members claimed that the religious orientation of the organisation was not for them a motivating factor in their decision to work with Islamic Relief. While most of them had chosen a career in charity work to please Allah, it was felt that blessings and rewards would equally be obtained by working for a non-Muslim organisation. Many of the staff had in fact simply transferred over from MSF and even claimed to miss the high level of professionalism they had experienced in the secular organisation.

The fact that staff may not be truly aligned with the religious orientation of the organisation will obviously complicate the way in which cultural proximity is perceived. For example, one staff member told me that the refugees do not see Islamic Relief as a Muslim organisation, because of the various religious backgrounds of the health-centre staff. This undermines the simplicity with which the cultural-proximity thesis upholds a 'Muslim' identity as a source of solidarity.

### *Rohingya refugees: 'Muslim' beneficiaries*

At the same time, as Wiperman and Haque (2007) have argued, it is not accurate to view the Rohingya situation purely as a humanitarian issue. Reviewing their past experiences reveals that

their religious framework is closely interlinked with their particular experience of suffering as a Muslim minority in a predominantly Buddhist country, as well as with their political aspirations for the future.

With the launch of operation Naga Min (Dragon King) in 1978, which apparently aimed to register citizens and prosecute illegal immigrants, the SPDC put into action a plan of violent persecution to drive the Rohingya out of Burma. This began an ongoing cycle of forced migration to Bangladesh with peaks of 200,000 refugees arriving in 1978 and 250,000 in 1992 (Wipperman and Haque 2007). This persecution continues today. Denied citizenship, the Rohingya are unable to access health services, social care, secondary and further education, or to become involved in politics. They do not have freedom of movement outside their villages and are subjected to arbitrary and exorbitant taxation, as well as forced labour. If they travel without permission or fail to pay taxes, they are often imprisoned. They are not free to practise Islam, their mosques are frequently destroyed, and religious leaders have allegedly been murdered.

Academics and humanitarian professionals in development have tended to ignore the significance of faith as ‘an analytical lens’ through which people understand themselves and their suffering (Clarke 2008: 17). However, recent studies have found evidence that refugees in particular often interpret their experience of migration and refuge in a religious and political framework (Gozdziak 2002).

Individual histories of Leda Camp residents support this theory. One man had already sought refuge in Bangladesh from 1981 to 1994 and returned in 2003. Despite extensive suffering at the hands of the SPDC, this man told me that his faith has become stronger from his experiences. In the future he hopes for religious freedom and Burmese citizenship. With this in mind, he actively supports the National League for Democracy, the democratic opposition in Burma, and maintains contact with political networks in the country.

By acknowledging that an accurate understanding of the Rohingya people will see them not only as refugees with humanitarian needs but also as political agents, and by admitting that Islamic Relief’s position as a ‘Muslim’ organisation is contested and contradictory, we are challenging the extent to which cultural proximity based on religion exists, and how far it can really produce any valuable form of solidarity.

### *Cultural differences*

This conclusion also seems to echo the reality of the refugee camp. While faith can sometimes be a unifying phenomenon among local staff, expatriate staff, and beneficiaries, especially when individuals come together to pray and fast (Benthall 2008), sociological, ideological, and cultural differences frequently cause disparities between aid workers and beneficiaries (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003; De Cordier 2009a).

De Cordier claims to have heard most doubt about the ‘real or perceived’ cultural-proximity theory voiced by employees of Western aid agencies who have Muslim backgrounds. While they acknowledged that a Muslim community may initially identify with a Muslim aid agency through the symbolic power of a common faith, it was thought that this would not cancel out many differences between the two sides. One of De Cordier’s informants claimed:

There are so many different types of Islamic observance and local conditions that a common religious identity between the organisation’s expatriates, the local staff and the beneficiaries is, by itself, insufficient to bring added value. (2009b: 614–5)

Indeed, staff and beneficiaries in Leda Camp both perceived a lack of unity in their relationship. Staff acknowledged that, as citizens and refugees, the two groups have had different

backgrounds and status. It is likely that as local staff originate from a higher and more Westernised social class, different values and ideologies prevail (De Cordier 2009a).

Attitudes towards healthcare provide a good illustration. Some of the refugees in Leda Camp preferred to visit local religious healers instead of using the health services provided by Islamic Relief. However, medical staff who originate from higher social strata support Western medical theories and dispute the value of local religious healing. On the other hand, women in the camp were pleased to receive contraception supplies from Islamic Relief, a practice which the organisation justifies in reference to Islamic teachings and scholarly works.

The fact that refugees were generally less well educated than aid workers and are living in extreme poverty also created cultural differences. For example, some staff argued that, despite many cultural similarities, the Rohingya people are not honest or trustworthy. Others claimed that trust operates in a one-way structure whereby refugees trust staff members but staff members remain aware of refugees' desperation, which they believe can cause them to steal and tell lies. On the other hand, some refugees claimed to feel no such sense of trust towards Islamic Relief's staff. One of the *majhee* (community leaders) claimed that Islamic Relief senior staff, despite being Bangladeshi and Muslim, are proud and arrogant (characteristics prohibited in Islam). Refugees claimed that it is difficult to speak to staff, because the latter have 'the job', and they accused staff of abusing their power by stealing money and being corrupt.

Such accusations and perceptions, whether accurate or not, reveal that cultural proximity does not automatically guarantee positive relationships between aid workers and refugees. Indeed, several refugees claimed that MSF senior expatriate staff, even though they were of a different *jaat* (caste, nationality, or religion), had a more sensitive and amenable attitude than those from Islamic Relief. Several Islamic Relief staff members claimed that refugees think that white people or foreigners are more competent precisely because they come from outside. Thus we arrive at a complete reversal of the cultural-proximity argument.

## Conclusion

This article set out to analyse the cultural-proximity thesis in relation to Islamic Relief's work with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It has been shown here that the theoretical religious solidarity upon which the idea of cultural proximity is based is vulnerable to historical, political, social, cultural, and ideological factors which often create disparities between believers. It is therefore naïve to presume that being 'Muslim' will facilitate easy and effective relations between an organisation and beneficiaries, an organisation and a host country, or between organisations.

In the light of the opposition to cultural proximity presented in this case study, it is only natural to question the very terms upon which 'proximity' is claimed. Reviewing what it means to be 'Muslim' for Islamic Relief and Rohingya refugees respectively has shown that the assumption of cultural proximity denies the true complexity of their identities. The former is an institutionalised global humanitarian organisation working according to international policies and models, the latter an ethnic stateless community with humanitarian needs, yet simultaneously forming part of a larger geopolitical issue.

The background from which the idea of cultural proximity emerges, and the important truths that this research has brought to light, cannot be denied. It is evident that hostility to Western aid agencies in Muslim contexts is a real challenge in the field. It is also evident that the religious needs and values of Muslim beneficiaries are not catered for within current international aid practices. It is therefore argued that approaches to religion in the aid process need to be urgently reviewed. Considering that several major conflict zones and risk areas for natural disasters are

located in the Muslim world (De Cordier 2009b), the relevance of Islam to humanitarian assistance is unlikely to decline in the future.

It therefore seems likely that Western-based Muslim FBOs, who occupy a precarious yet important position between the Western and Islamic worlds, have enormous potential to bridge the divide between these increasingly polarised societies. They represent a unique and much-needed phenomenon in the aid sector. However, with the continued dominance of a rigidly secular aid regime amid fears of religion's 'darker side', the extent to which Muslim aid agencies can really profit from their faith base and provide alternatives appears severely limited. The risk is that, through their integration into the mainstream NGO sector, Muslim FBOs are essentially becoming secularised. Their challenge will be to transform the aid process so that it does not merely pay lip service to 'cultural authenticity' but actively caters for religious needs while safeguarding against the perceived dangers of religion.

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## Notes

1. Fieldwork was carried out in July and August 2008 in Bangladesh, both in Leda Camp and in Islamic Relief's offices. Information from refugees was gathered from focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and informal conversations. Individual interviews were held with 17 of Islamic Relief's field staff. Group interviews were carried out with all departments in Islamic Relief's Dhaka office. Representatives from government agencies, UNHCR, local organisations, and other international NGOs were also interviewed.
2. See Jonathan Benthall's analysis of Islamic Relief Worldwide and Muslim Aid working on post-tsunami reconstruction in Aceh (2008), and De Cordier's analysis of Muslim Hands working in Jammu-Kashmir and Islamic Relief in Afghanistan (2009a).
3. In reality most of Islamic Relief's beneficiaries are Muslim, as a result of the organisation's logistical capacity being largely centred in countries where most of the population is Muslim.
4. These symbols are displayed everywhere, from publications and signs to vehicles and staff clothing.
5. The Rohingyas are descendants of indigenous peoples of western Burma who converted to Islam following interaction with Muslim travellers (Wipperman and Haque 2007). The Burmese military government claims that they are illegal immigrants who migrated from Bangladesh (then India) in the nineteenth century (MSF 2002). The SPDC removed their Burmese nationality through the Emergency Immigration Act in 1974.
6. Estimates of the number of undocumented Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh ranges vastly from 100,000 to 500,000 (Wipperman and Haque 2007; MSF 2008). The government's attitude to these refugees has not been positive in the past. In 1978 the government forcibly repatriated 180,000 refugees, while 10,000 died in camps (Wipperman and Haque 2007).
7. As Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, it is not legally obliged to determine refugee status or to provide assistance. According to the government's local authority and Refugee Repatriation and Relief Committee, the government considers all unregistered refugees to be 'illegal trespassers' or 'economic migrants', although interviews to determine their status are not conducted.
8. MSF withdrew from Bangladesh as its mandate is to work in acute rather than protracted emergencies.

9. Islamic Relief took immediate action in reaction to this crisis. Food packages were distributed and refugees were given paid work. Additional staff members were recruited for the health centre, and shelters and water and sanitation facilities were repaired.

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