



## Mennonite Disaster Relief and the Interfaith Encounter in Aceh, Indonesia

This ethnography examines the disaster relief work of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Aceh, Indonesia, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. MCC's work is informed by the theologies and historical experiences of the North American Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. An intentional focus of MCC's work was a substantive interfaith encounter between MCC workers, all of whom identified as Christian, and Acehnese Muslims. Through an examination of interpersonal relationships, organizational partnerships, and materiality, I trace the ambiguities and transformative potential within these interactions. Encounters are not simply the unfurling of predetermined scripts, but rather dynamic spaces of negotiation. Focusing on encounters counteracts tendencies to reify and essentialize religious disaster relief.

KEYWORDS: disaster relief—humanitarianism—interfaith—Aceh—Islam—Indonesia—Indian Ocean tsunami—Christianity—Mennonite Central Committee

GIVEN TRENCHANT critiques of the category of “religion” as an ahistorical and transcultural object of analysis (ASAD 1993), how should the roles of religion in disaster relief be conceptualized and researched?<sup>1</sup> In this article I argue that ethnography is a vital tool for offering detailed and nuanced insights into the ways in which religion is practiced in disaster relief. It does so by privileging thickness and particularity (ORTNER 1995). Rich and textured accounts of specific instances afford insights into complex cultural dynamics. Particularity here this should not be mistaken for geographical parochialism nor should the object of analysis be conceptualized as a bounded, stable community. Disaster events frequently enlist diverse actors that draw on global organizational, ethical, and financial networks. To examine particularities in such contexts requires methodologies that explore processes of interaction, translation, and transformation. Because disaster relief involves dynamic cultural meetings across difference, the ethnography of humanitarianism is necessarily the study of encounter.

In his study of the “humanitarian encounter,” Jesse GRAYMAN (2012) is critical of Mariella PANDOLFI’s (2003) framing of humanitarianism as a form of “migrant sovereignty” in which local contexts are displaced for a colonizing humanitarian culture. Grayman argues that though humanitarian operations frequently draw on migratory logic and practice, Pandolfi’s framing fails to account for how meaningful engagements can and do reshape humanitarian imaginations and practices. Such encounters—some only fleeting, while others more substantial in nature—are important for understanding how disaster relief works in practice. For GRAYMAN, an encounter “is a two-way, if unequal, interaction with potentially long term effects” (2012, 64). Grayman’s emphasis on *potentiality* is crucial; for while the possibility of profound encounter is latent within disaster relief operations, such possibilities are not always realized. Recent anthropological literature on encounters has emphasized that cultural differences are not pre-given facts but rather negotiated, contested, and constructed during the encounter itself (KEANE 2007; ROTHMAN 2011; VAN DER VEER 2001; TSING 2005). While not denying the ways in which humanitarian encounters are spaces of cultural creativity and innovation in which notions of religious affiliation and distinction are reworked, it is nevertheless also the case that no disaster relief worker enters the field as a *tabula rasa*. Embodied practices, traditional theologies, and schooled preconceptions of

self and other, remain influential. One's habitus is not easily discarded. The question of the potentiality of transformative encounters emerges within the unpredictable working out of this tension between processes of continuity and rupture.<sup>2</sup>

This article presents an ethnography of religion in humanitarian encounters. I focus on the Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC) disaster relief work in Aceh, Indonesia, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.<sup>3</sup> MCC is a North American Christian peace, development, and relief organization in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.<sup>4</sup> Attention to this specific actor enables an examination of how particular theologies and religious identities inform humanitarian encounters. Disaster relief activities throughout Asia frequently draw on global networks that mobilize theologies and identities incubated in very different contexts. But these actors are also part of the political economies and religious ecologies of Asian disaster relief. Attention therefore must also be given to "expatriate" and "foreign" actors as well as myriad "local" formations. At the outset of its disaster relief operations MCC sought to strategically engage in "inter-faith connections" (HARDER 2008, 4) with Acehese Muslims. This emphasis on "bridge building" across religious lines drew on a distinctive Mennonite ethic of engagement whereby the appropriate stance of an "MCCer" vis-à-vis their Muslim neighbors is as a learner, colleague, and guest. However, the "interfaith" framing also implicitly located Muslims as religious others, and perhaps even *the* religious other. The emphasis on making "connections" also presumes prior *disconnections*. "Interfaith" interactions can therefore have the paradoxical effect of accentuating boundaries and also marking out differences. This article explores how MCC navigated these tensions.<sup>5</sup> I begin by tracing the North American Mennonite tradition, focusing on the distinct valence of disasters and relief for Mennonites. I then address how these dynamics play out in the inter-faith encounters of MCCers in Indonesia.

#### MENNONITES, DISASTERS, RELIEF

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is best understood not as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) but as a "peoplehood movement" (FOUNTAIN 2011a, 33–66) intimately connected with the North American Mennonite "ethno-religious tradition" (BUSH 1998, 5). Mennonite theologies and practices permeate MCC's work. To understand MCC's disaster relief initiatives it is necessary to pay attention to the particular valence that both disaster and relief have within its supporting constituency. Mennonites have themselves been constituted through experiences of disaster and relief.

In *Day of Disaster* Katie Funk WIEBE (1976) tells the story of Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), at that time an agency of MCC, and its disaster relief work in North America.<sup>6</sup> Wiebe locates the impetus of MDSers to respond to disasters through practical action and volunteerism as grounded in Mennonite history:

Mennonites are no strangers to disaster in their 450 years of pilgrimage... [having faced] religious persecution, famine, sickness, the aftermath of war and

revolution, drought, prairie fire, wind, hail, and flood.... Yet throughout their history, one can find stories of caring, prompted by love for Christ, which in modern times set the pattern for MDS. (WIEBE 1976, 84)

Wiebe's allusion to "religious persecution" invokes the extensive, systematic oppression the young movement faced during the Reformation when many Mennonites faced imprisonment and martyrdom at the hands of Roman Catholic and Protestant state authorities (MACMASTER 1985, 19–28; REDEKOP 1989, 3–29; URRY 2006, 17–38). By recounting this litany of disasters Wiebe evokes a powerful narrative of a distinct peoplehood formed through common faith and shared suffering. Didier FASSIN (2012) argues that a "politics of suffering" which draws on a Christian genealogy undergirds all Western humanitarianism. Mennonite concern with relief inflects this politics with a particular valence deriving from their own turbulent history. The experience of disaster has been woven into the "fabric of life" for Mennonites such that, as Greg BANKOFF (2003, 179) argues for the Philippines, theirs is a "culture of disaster." Through the memorialization of disaster Mennonites have cultivated a social imaginary that subsumes their many differences in order to conceive of themselves as a distinct group.<sup>7</sup>

In response to severe persecution in Europe during and after the Reformation, Mennonites emigrated to establish new settlements in the Americas and the Ukraine. It was in this context of geographically dispersed communities that MCC was born soon after the end of the First World War. At this time Mennonite colonies in the Ukraine were in the midst of a severe compound disaster. The Great War had been fought in their backyards and the armistice of 1918 left the Germanic Mennonites vulnerable to associations with the recently defeated enemy. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 located their relatively prosperous farming communities on the wrong side of the class struggle and therefore made them targets of the Red Terror. The see-sawing conflict between the Red and White armies was devastating, regardless of which side was winning. On top of this a widespread famine resulted in millions of deaths and left Mennonite communities desperate and in ruins (REIMER and GUENTHER 2011). Russian Mennonites sent a delegation to their American and Canadian co-religionists asking for a relief effort on an unprecedented scale. While Mennonites had long engaged in practices of mutual aid (REDEKOP 1989, 321–22) these required minimal organizational infrastructure. The size of the intervention in the Ukraine would demand more sophisticated administration. It would also require fragmented Mennonite groups to draw together for a common response. Accordingly, American Mennonites formed the Mennonite Central Committee in 1920 to carry out disaster relief work for "the household of faith" (UNRUH 1952, 11). As a peoplehood movement, MCC drew (theologically and geographically) diverse Mennonites together through the practice of relief.<sup>8</sup>

After provisioning an extensive relief effort in Russia, MCC went into hiatus for much of the 1930s. It was reborn during World War Two again in response to disaster and to be of service to Mennonites. With their entry into the war in 1941,

the US government initiated mass conscription which presented a severe threat to Mennonite communities who continued to uphold a strict pacifist ethic. Both state officials and Mennonite leaders wanted to avoid the ugly scenes that had taken place during the First World War in response to the refusal by the pacifist (and rural, geographically separated, German-speaking) Mennonites to participate in America's total war. At the outbreak of the Second World War the American government established a program of alternative service for conscientious objectors (COs), and Mennonites, as one of the historic peace churches, were eligible for participation. COs were required to perform an equivalent period of service as conscripts. Because the state required sponsoring churches to manage these programs, MCC was put to work as the only inter-Mennonite agency that had the requisite capacity and the necessary support from diverse Mennonite groups. Though focused on the (male) COs, the work of supporting the alternative service operations also enrolled entire Mennonite communities into active engagement. Drawing on CO workers and a groundswell of support for a positive peace witness in times of war, MCC actively engaged in European relief and reconstruction projects. This work was not limited to Mennonites, but nevertheless particular attention was given to the desperate plight of Russian Mennonites, culminating in MCC helping arrange for their "exodus" from Europe to Canada and Paraguay (DYCK and DYCK 1991).<sup>9</sup>

With an ongoing flow of ready CO recruits (American conscription only ended in 1972), and with Mennonite farms buoyed by war prices, MCC administrators seized the opportunity to expand the organization's work beyond Europe.<sup>10</sup> While this relief work was in continuity with earlier Mennonite charitable practices it also moved in new directions, particularly in expanding relief aid beyond the Mennonite fold. But even here Mennonite identity was decisive. Earlier markers of distinctiveness, including plain clothing, rural separation, and the use of Plautdietsch (Low German), had been undermined during the course of wartime national mobilization. Mennonites turned to practices of service to buttress their identity as "a separate and identifiable people" (BUSH 1998, 272). New theological articulations also "legitimated an outward missional activism" (TOEWS 1996, 84).<sup>11</sup> MCC became one of the primary institutional carriers of a reformulated vision of what it meant to be Mennonite, with the relief and service work of MCC substantially reshaping Mennonite identities and practices (MARR 2003). The rapid international expansion of Mennonite relief after the Second World War both drew upon and further enhanced a sense of Mennonites as a peculiar peoplehood.

The experience of disaster and the role that relief, especially through MCC, had in proffering worldly salvation for desperate co-religionists elevated relief work as an ethical ideal. Mennonite experiences of disasters and relief have been more than just culturally prominent; they are constitutive of Mennonite tradition. Processes of gifting relief to desperate kin and the salvaging of community in the wake of catastrophe have enabled Mennonites to understand themselves as a distinctive peoplehood. Yet, this drawing together through the experience of disaster and salvific action has always taken place in the face of considerable fragmentation. The

potency of relief is that it anticipates the surmounting of pervasive cleavages which characterize the Mennonite “mosaic” (KAUFFMAN and DRIEDGER 1991).<sup>12</sup>

#### MCC RELIEF AND THE INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI

The expansion of MCC’s work after the Second World War paralleled the rapid expansion of U.S.-led development, moving quickly from the Marshall Plan for European reconstruction to a global ambit (EKBLADH 2010). MCC programs were soon established across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East (DYCK 1980; UNRUH 1952). These efforts were framed as “relief” or “aid” and most were attempts to respond to acute crises. In 1948, during this rapid postwar expansion, MCC entered war-torn and famine-struck Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> The impetus behind MCC’s entry into Indonesia was to provide support for two Mennonite denominations, Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa (GITJ) and Gereja-Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (GKMI). Both were based in the Muria region of Central Java and, to varying degrees, had been connected with Dutch Mennonite missionaries. Dutch Mennonites, crippled by war in Europe, invited MCC to connect with the Indonesian Mennonite churches (YODER 2006, 200). The Muria region was severely affected by Dutch-led “police actions” and the national revolution, as well as years of Japanese military occupation (VICKERS 2005, 85–103).

While at first MCC’s focus on relief continued in Java, including distributing food and carrying out medical work, over the following decades MCC Indonesia disengaged from disaster response and, in effect, ceased to be a humanitarian organization. Disaster events over following decades did not inspire new relief efforts.<sup>14</sup> Differing visions of MCC’s responsibilities have always existed within the organization and, though disaster relief is part of MCC’s programmatic repertoire, activating this into practice is optional rather than obligatory or essential.<sup>15</sup>

After the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004,<sup>16</sup> however, MCC Indonesia rapidly morphed into a thoroughgoing humanitarian actor, at least for part of its operations. The impetus did not, in the first instance, come from staff in Indonesia but rather from North America. A key factor was the extensive media coverage the tsunami received which evoked an extraordinary response from disparate private, corporate, multilateral, and government donors. The result was “the largest humanitarian intervention in modern history” (GRAYMAN 2012, 7). Propelled by the particular valence of disasters and relief among Mennonites, donations to MCC also underwent a rapid surge.<sup>17</sup> Donations earmarked for the tsunami were given to MCC even prior to an official appeal and before a commitment had been made by MCC leadership to establish a disaster response program. In fact, at the time of the disaster, MCC Indonesia’s disaster response plan stated that MCC would only engage in disaster relief work in areas where it was already actively working, which in 2004 effectively limited MCC’s response to Central Java (also the location of its Indonesian head office) and parts of Papua. Accordingly, in the early days after the tsunami MCC Indonesia staff made preparations to channel donations through other relief organizations. However, it soon became clear that this would be

untenable. The scale of donor response convinced MCC administrators of the need to establish its own program. Designated tsunami funds eventually added nearly (US)\$10 million to MCC Indonesia's budget (SHENK 2008), which at that time was only about US\$700,000 per annum. The finances were eventually fixed to a three-year timeframe, after which MCC was to close down its Aceh operations. As with many other relief organizations, MCC's response was a case of supply-driven relief (TELFORD et al. 2006, 93).

The decision was made early on that MCC's disaster response in Indonesia would take place only through local partners. MCC Indonesia had worked collaboratively with Indonesian actors since its earliest days in the country, but the practice of partnership changed considerably over time. With the arrival of new in-country leadership (MCC Representatives or MCC Reps) in the first decade of the twenty-first century, partnerships were made into the primary mechanism for enacting programs. The motivation was ethical: all MCC's work should be carried out through local partners in order to support local initiatives rather than to impose foreign goals. Partnership was not seen as simply utilitarian. Instead, the ideal was to attain warm relational rapport during the course of working together. This logic was infused with Mennonite theologies of peace which emphasize ethics of mutuality and non-coercive interaction.<sup>18</sup>

The early, frenetic months of MCC's relief operation in Aceh focused on getting MCCers on the ground and making arrangements for its "ministry of presence" and partnership-driven relief. Ground staff included North American and Javanese Indonesian volunteers. Core team membership generally included between seven and nine staff. Some had previous development experience but none were specialists in disaster management. Most of the expatriate staff had no previous experience in Indonesia and limited language skills. A high turnover of coordinators, with five different people assuming that task in the first nine months, made it difficult for programs to build continuity and gain traction. Short-term teams of North American volunteers were brought in to undertake particular tasks and four North American service workers were sent to Aceh for three-year assignments to work with the Aceh MCC office or as secondees to local partners. MCC eventually established partnerships with twenty-four different organizations, including Christian NGOs, Indonesian Mennonite churches, and Islamic actors, which together implemented eighty-four separate projects.<sup>19</sup>

Most of MCC's work was focused on the rehabilitation and reconstruction phases rather than emergency response. This emphasis on later phases in the disaster management cycle was not arbitrary. Peter REDFIELD (2013) has discussed how the methods and practices of the crisis-focused humanitarian agency Doctors Without Borders was derived from military strategies first deployed during conflict situations. Clear lines of command, medical "kits," quantitative assessments for triage, the prioritization of efficiency and technical expertise, and a focus on "saving life" (rather than promoting the good for which life is saved), all recall militaristic origins. In contrast, MCC's grounding in the experience of Mennonite peace theology meant it was less inclined toward practices of emergency response. The emphasis

on forming warm relationships, the insistence on involving volunteers rather than professionals, the choice of the partnership model for delivery of services, a relatively weak capacity to implement a speedy response, and the emphasis on reconstruction, all draw upon the peace theology which infused the organization.

The activities that MCC supported in Aceh were remarkably heterogeneous. Initially MCC focused on engaging with organizations working in education, including partnering with a medical school, an agriculture faculty, an Islamic university, and various Christian and state universities in Central Java. While some of these groups had considerable expertise that they could draw upon in disaster relief work, much of their work in Aceh exceeded their professional mandates. MCC pursued educational partnerships because MCC's legal status in Indonesia was, at the time, based on an "in process" (that is, submitted but unsigned) Memorandum of Understanding with the Indonesian Ministry of Education. It was felt that working as much as possible with education actors, though not necessarily in education activities, would help ensure that MCC's (ambiguous) status would not be unduly threatened by its expansion to Aceh. Over time it became clear that MCC would be able to engage more broadly in humanitarian relief and reconstruction activities and it expanded accordingly. Most of its projects were small-scale. The largest portion of MCC's finances (over US\$5 million), however, was dedicated to housing and school construction projects. MCC also facilitated the delivery of material aid amounting to over US \$1.7 million in value (J. T. M. YODER 2008).<sup>20</sup> Though occasionally the target of criticism by MCCers and constituents, the materiality of the gift remains an important feature of MCC's relief practices (BRAUN 2005; FOUNTAIN 2014).

Practices of relationality, partnership, and material gifting facilitated "thick" encounters between MCCers and Acehese Muslims. MCCer religious encounters were not limited to engagements with Muslims, but this encounter was especially prominent in Mennonite narratives of their experiences.<sup>21</sup> On one level, because almost all Acehese identify as Muslim, such an encounter was unavoidable. But within MCC this "interfaith" encounter was also considered a moral imperative. Undergirding this emphasis was a contrarian Mennonite ethic which situated their theology of peaceableness against the backdrop of widespread post-9/11 Islamophobic sentiment in North America. Many MCCers believed that these antagonistic sentiments had helped fuel the then-recent American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. As a pacifist organization explicitly opposed to American military violence MCC sought to enact positive alternatives to the American Imperium. Interfaith boundary-crossing relationships with Muslims perform and model an alternative ethic. As noted in the introduction to this article, however, the possibility of overcoming boundaries is indicative of a prior conception of differences. Indeed, Islam was seen among MCCers as an *other* religion, distinct from their own Christianity. This said, Islam's exact status remained fluid, open to interpretation. An American MCCer told me that Islam was a "cousin" faith to Christianity; they were related through shared history and commonalities in their theologies.<sup>22</sup> Another American MCCer expressed his admiration for Acehese Muslims who faced the future with



hope as a consequence of their “belief in a higher purpose.” This was seen as more valuable than any form of material relief. Islam was thereby located as a definitive resource for recovery in ways that directly paralleled Islamic and developmental discourses at the time (FEENER 2013). However, both the framings of “cousin” and “valuable resource” hardly resolved its status; if anything such framings further accentuated the ambiguity of the interfaith encounter.

The 2004 tsunami disaster “had the effect of tearing open doors long closed” (FEENER, DALY, and REID eds. 2011, viii). Some relief actors used this new opening as an opportunity to engage in proselytizing (NURDIN 2015). For MCC, however, “disaster evangelism” (ENSOR 2003) was not part of its programming in Aceh.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, many MCCers in Indonesia would have opposed it had this been actively pursued within the organization.<sup>24</sup> Evangelism has long held an ambiguous place in MCC policy and practice. This is in large part because of the ways in which “service” is conceived within Mennonite theology. Rather than a means to an end, service is a valued practice in and of itself. An example of this is Mennonite theologian J. R. BURKHOLDER’s (2010) conceptualization of liturgy (deriving from the Greek *leitourgia*) as denoting simultaneously service, work, ministry, and worship. As a consequence of this framing, service is itself a form of worship and is analogous to cultic rituals. Relief work was a rendition of the liturgy of service, enacted as an embodied ritual of worship.<sup>25</sup> This sacralization makes church-planting extraneous to authentic Christian service; it is not necessarily excluded, but neither is it imperative. In the course of MCC’s relief work in Aceh, active church-planting was not a part of its activities.

Due to Islam’s ubiquity and pervasiveness in Aceh, engaging Muslims in the process of relief was not optional for MCC, as was also the case with all other humanitarian actors (GRAYMAN 2012; MCGREGOR 2010; MILLER 2010). The nature of Muslim identity in Aceh has been shaped by the region’s history. Popularly known as the Veranda of Mecca (*Serambi Mekkah*), Aceh has long been regarded as a bastion of Islam in Southeast Asia (FEENER 2011; 2013; REID 2006; TAGLIACCOZZO 2013). For centuries predating Dutch colonialism, Aceh was closely connected with Muslim communities across Asia and the Middle East via trade routes, scholarly exchange, pilgrimage, and migration. Islam had been a galvanizing factor in Acehese resistance to Dutch colonial rule (1873–1940s) and, after Indonesia gained its independence in the late 1940s, in relation to the modern Indonesian state. Acehese involvement in the Darul Islam rebellions of the 1950s and 1960s and simmering civil war in the province since then, one which only formally ended with the signing of the Helsinki peace accords in 2005, meant that at the time of the disaster very few civil society organizations other than Islamic institutions had an active presence in the region. At the time of the tsunami, almost the entire population of Aceh identified as Muslims (MILLER 2010, 30).

Michael FEENER (2012; 2013) has examined the ways in which humanitarian discourses of “total reconstruction” and the desire to “build back better” were redeployed and folded into Islamic projects for remaking Acehese society. The architects who designed the rapid implementation of Shari‘a law following the

2004 tsunami and the 2005 Helsinki peace accords sought to steer society along a particular path of modernizing development. The project was, therefore, eminently modern, utilizing the tools of technocratic social engineering, while also simultaneously motivated by a future-oriented vision of how to practice Islam. Despite being hotly contested within Aceh, the project of implementing Shari‘a had significant social effects through the regulation of public morality. The humanitarian enterprise in Aceh was deeply engaged with this theological project, though this was not always appreciated by the humanitarians themselves and was highly contested.

It is important to note that while “Acehnese are deeply committed to Islamic norms” they are also “embedded in a set of kinship structures and relations (*adat*) of older derivation” (REID 2006, 9). *Adat* remains a vital and pivotal aspect of Acehnese sociality, including furnishing norms that shape gender relations, inheritance, and authority structures. It would be a mistake, however, to see *adat* and Islamic law as necessarily forming an “oppositional dyad” (FEENER 2013, 197) as in practice they frequently overlap and interpenetrate each other (FEENER 2013, 244–46). The ongoing importance of *adat* and other associated local dynamics—including popular memories of the Golden Age of the Acehnese Sultanate, the use of a distinct language, and pride in Aceh’s resolute self-reliance—was such that Islam in Aceh, including after the expansion of state Shari‘a in the wake of the tsunami, continues to exhibit indelibly Acehnese characteristics.

#### INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In an interview soon after the tsunami, theologian Stanley Hauerwas juxtaposed broader American practices of charity which “protect” the giver from the suffering of others to the active engagement of Mennonites: “They don’t send money, they go. They help rebuild the barn” (ACHENBACH 2004, 29).<sup>26</sup> While clearly overstating the case (Mennonites *did* send money), Hauerwas correctly points to the ethical imperative for sending people to enact service. This tradition was cemented during the Second World War when conscientious objectors were seen as embodying the “moral equivalent of warfare” and a “philosophy of the second mile” (BUSH 1998, 78–79; TOEWS 1996, 157). International service through MCC was a direct, positive parallel to participation in warfare. The embodied presence of the server enacted a theology of nonviolence and constructive alternatives. This “ministry of presence” facilitated relationships (CLEMENS 1994). A long-standing and widespread MCC myth posits the ideal MCCer as someone who is “drinking tea with the locals in a mud hut in Africa.” Taking the time to drink tea, having the patience to learn (and preferably master) the local language, and behaving appropriately as a “guest” are all envisioned as good work, even in the context of disaster relief, because this is how meaningful relationships are formed and flourish (FOUNTAIN 2011b). Accordingly, MCC sent volunteers along with financial and material aid to Aceh. These service workers were seen as being, as one MCCer in Indonesia told me, on the “coal face” of MCC’s work. Pandolfi’s “migrant sov-

ereigns,” discussed in the introduction, were the precise opposite of the ideal for MCC service.

The selection of North American volunteers has always been quite flexible in MCC. At the time of my research all expatriate staff were expected to fulfill three “screens” in order to be eligible for international volunteering: (1) exhibit a commitment to “personal Christian faith”; (2) be active members of a Christian church; and (3) be committed to the teaching of nonviolent biblical peacemaking. While this unambiguously located the organization as “Christian,” it is notable that volunteers were not required to affirm any creedal statement of faith. This left room for a wide range of theological and political positions, a possibility that reflected MCC’s broad Mennonite constituency. It also opened possibilities for non-Mennonite Christians to participate in the organization.

Within MCC Indonesia there were concerted attempts to decrease the purchase given to logics of the “expatriate expert” by locating MCCers as learners. Many service workers are seconded to local organizations for the duration of their term of service, during which they work under the leadership of Indonesian supervisors. Being embedded in an Indonesian organization and working closely with Indonesian colleagues furnished MCCers with opportunities to “drink tea with the locals.” But even those MCCers, including the Indonesian staff who worked as field staff and partner advisors, were expected to engage with their Indonesian counterparts in substantive and meaningful ways. Interpersonal relationships were sacralized within MCC Indonesia as laden with transformative potential for both the MCC worker and their partners. Service through MCC was a kind of experiential theological pedagogy (MATHIES 1996). MCCers were not supposed to be aloof humanitarian professionals, but rather they were to immerse themselves into local communities and seek to “live like the locals.” They performed a role very much akin to that of an ethnographer engaged in “deep hanging out” (see, for example, CLIFFORD 1997, 90).<sup>27</sup>

The ideals of MCC service (prioritizing physical presence and relational rapport, adopting a learner stance, displacing expertise) propelled MCCers toward substantive, “thick” encounters with their Muslim colleagues, neighbors, and friends. A prime example of these encounters was Duane’s experiences which he narrated to me over a series of interviews in early 2008.<sup>28</sup> Duane was an American man in his twenties. Along with a fellow American MCCer (see Jed, below) he had been placed in the rural township of Samalanga, North Aceh, for his three-year service term.<sup>29</sup> At first he lived in the same house as Muslim colleagues, which he found challenging because of physical discomfort, especially the secondhand smoke, and the lack of personal space. He nevertheless saw such an arrangement as valuable to establishing “solidarity” with his NGO hosts. When the situation became untenable he moved to a village hamlet where he resided in the house of Acehnese hosts. In Samalanga, Duane immersed himself in local community life. There was no church in the village and so for most of his stay in Indonesia he was unable to attend Christian services. Each Ramadhan he participated in the fast along with neighbors and friends. He attended Muslim festivals, including visiting Acehnese

families during *Idul Fitri* (feast and holiday at the end of the fasting month) and *Maulid Nabi* (celebration of the Prophet's birthday). He worked closely alongside a number of Muslim organisations, including the education institution Yayasan Ummul Ayman (YUA) (discussed below).

This kind of thick encounter had transformative effects, as was illustrated one evening in conversation over dinner with expatriate MCCers in Banda Aceh. Outside was pouring with rain. During the course of our conversation we vaguely heard the Islamic evening call to prayer (*Adzan*) for the evening prayer (*Salat Isya*) being broadcast from the nearby mosque. An MCCer commented: "the great thing about the rain is that it drowns out the sound of the mosque." But this flippant remark stirred up debate. Another MCCer responded by noting that during his visits to Bali for holidays he found himself missing the five daily calls to prayer. Two years into his assignment in rural Aceh he had lived with the call to prayer and it had become an expected feature of his everyday life. Now he found the call "sort of comforting." The conversation moved from here into discussions about how the experience of living in Aceh had instituted other transformations, willingly or otherwise. An MCCer admitted that he now hated it when people waved with their left hand, a practice that with his Acehnese neighbors he came to see as offensive. Another talked about a recent trip back to the U.S. during which he found it physically uncomfortable to wear anything other than trousers, even during the height of summer when his friends lounged around in various states of undress. MCCer encounters in Aceh were certainly not limited to cognitive or ideological considerations. Rather, their presence resulted in interactions that catalyzed affective transformations reflected in MCCers modified expectations of aural aesthetics, comportment, and dress styles.

But, of course, MCCer perceptions were not the only views that mattered in their encounters. MCCers entered into relationships in which differences were marked by their hosts as well. Matius, a Javanese MCCer, told me that he faced frequent questions from Acehnese about what MCC was *really* doing in Indonesia. Many were suspicious that MCC had a "hidden agenda." The phrase "*ada udang di balik batu*" ("beneath the rock there is a shrimp") was often articulated accusatorially. Indeed, concern with Christian evangelism (*kristenisasi*) was widespread in Aceh after the tsunami and all MCCers learned to live under suspicion of concealing covert proselytizing goals. For Matius, his response was always the same: "*Kami orang Kristen. Dana dari orang Kristen. Tidak ada tujuan lain*" ("We [in MCC] are Christian. The money is from Christians. There is no other [hidden] purpose"). As Matius's comment suggests, and as already noted above, MCCers in Aceh actively distanced themselves from evangelization. For months after initiating work in Aceh, MCCers avoided using its logo, a stylized dove with a cross, to avoid any possibility of such an accusation. But, again, this wasn't the only kind of propagation involved. A number of MCCers in Aceh, particularly the expatriate staff, described to me how they were frequently the targets of sustained attempts at Islamic proselytization. Though occasionally experienced as uncomfortable, this was not a significant concern for the MCCers involved.

What did concern MCCers was living under the constraints of Shari‘a law, which was progressively more tightly enforced in the years after the tsunami. Most MCCers stated they found Shari‘a disruptive, annoying, or unpleasant. Of particular frustration for both Javanese and American Mennonites were regulations on gender segregation. While concerns about modesty and gender relations are also deeply rooted in Acehese custom (*adat*), their most obtrusive expression was in Islamic legislation against *khalwat* which forbids improper covert association between unmarried members of the opposite sex (FEENER 2013, 143–44). MCCers in Aceh found such gender restrictions to be especially frustrating.

Heti, a young Javanese woman who worked with MCC for three years in Banda Aceh, told me that among the most difficult aspects of her life in Aceh was living under Shari‘a regulations. Finding relationships with Acehese constrained and awkward, she sought out Indonesian friends from Jakarta and Java who worked in the NGO community.<sup>30</sup> On two occasions Heti was threatened by vigilante gangs of Acehese men who accused her of improper behavior. Vigilante enforcement of Shari‘a morality was, at this time, widespread in Aceh. Such mob violence appears to have been largely spontaneous with gangs of men forming quickly to mete out punishments over “alleged incidents of sexual immorality, alcohol and marijuana consumption, violations of the Ramadan fast, and petty theft” (FEENER 2013, 240). The threat of vigilante violence toward Heti shook her and sent shock waves through the rest the MCC team in Aceh. The association of these vigilante mobs with Islamic discourses of morality significantly influenced discourses about Islam among MCCers.

As is clear, the encounter with Acehese Muslims did not necessarily result in greater appreciation for Islam. Over a series of interviews in Banda Aceh, Jed, an American MCCer in his 20s, narrated to me his evolving sense of Islam after two years of living in Aceh. Much of his time had been spent in rural Samalanga, which was a particularly charged site in the remaking of Acehese Islam after the tsunami. Jed told me that he had departed the U.S. for Indonesia embracing a “liberal” critique of American post-9/11 anti-Islamic discourse. As a college student he had been angry about the Iraq war and was critical “of anyone critiquing Islam.” His service assignment in Aceh was to work alongside a newly established NGO run by Acehese students and academics, all of whom were Muslim. This was not a concern to him prior to arriving in Indonesia. His first experience of Aceh in late 2005 was during *Idul Fitri* for which, straight after his arrival, he was “farmed out” by his NGO colleagues to others to look after him. He ended up spending the *Idul Fitri* holiday in Gayo-speaking Takengon, an experience that he regarded as “awful.” This was a “crash course” in manners and customs. During the first three days he trailed around with his host visiting neighbors and family from early morning until late at night. At that time he had limited Indonesian language skills, but that turned out to be of little use to him because most of the conversations were in Gayonese. He was bored. Then he got sick with a cold. His host also “milked” him for Rp.500,000 (approx. US\$50). For Jed “this was big”: as an introduction to Aceh, and to Acehese Muslims, it left an enduringly “sour” taste.

Jed felt that his experience in Aceh had been “transformative” for his views of Muslims, but in the “opposite direction” from what he thought MCC intended. He frankly admitted, “I have a really bad perception of Islam now.” He continued to associate Islam with his experience in Samalanga, where conditions in the NGO were thoroughly unpleasant. This was as a consequence of living in the NGO’s cramped, smoke-filled office, dealing with incompetence and corruption in the NGO’s leadership, having his passport held by the NGO’s head as a coercive mechanism to ensure MCC’s ongoing support, and being perceived as a spy from MCC and therefore excluded from information flows and decision-making processes. His secondment ended early as a consequence of multiple failures on the part of the NGO. Also important was Jed’s increasing association of Islam with “humiliating people.” Reflecting on Heti’s experience with vigilante gangs, Jed was disturbed by what he saw as Muslim hypocrisy: “I perceive Christianity as being hypocritical; I [now] perceive Islam in the same light.” He cited the case of a Wilayatul Hisbah (Shari‘a Police) policeman who had been reported in the newspapers after being caught in a Banda Aceh public bathroom having sex with his girlfriend. He also pointed to the case of former male colleagues in Samalanga who, because they were obliged to attend the mosque for Friday prayers, would hide in the back of the house to avoid it. For Jed, such examples illustrated how Acehese Islam was “so based on appearances.” A friend who had spent some time in the Middle East had told him he should visit that region in order to interact with very different forms of Islam, “but all I know is Acehese Islam.”

While MCC logics of encounter privileged thick relationships between MCCer Christians and Acehese Muslims, as Jed’s narrative makes clear, proximity—even when it is initiated with sympathetic motivations—does not necessarily result in appreciation. In fact, interfaith interactions can produce the opposite effect; differences imagined as negligible can be accentuated and prior appreciation can dissolve as a consequence of gaining greater familiarity. Empirical engagements are always complex, producing understandings that are never entirely anticipatable in advance.

#### PARTNERSHIPS AND PROJECTS

In the MCC Banda Aceh office one afternoon I browsed the Internet as I waited for my next interview. A section of a report written by the executive director of a regional MCC in North America captured my attention and so I read it aloud for the rest of the open-plan office: “Dignity for all in the name of Christ. Meeting basic needs in the name of Christ. Working for peace in the name of Christ. Wherever MCC workers and partners are working, it is done in the name of Christ.”<sup>31</sup> Knowing “and partners” would garner a reception, I gave it particular emphasis. Sure enough an expatriate MCCer immediately retorted: “I’ll send that one to Teungku Daud!”<sup>32</sup> The whole office chuckled at the absurdity of this imagined exchange. Daud was a leader of one of MCC’s partners, Yayasan Ummul Ayman (YUA), an Islamic Foundation that among other initiatives managed a large Islamic

boarding school (*dayah* or *pondok pesantren*). YUA was affiliated with the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), one of the largest Islamic mass-based organizations in Indonesia, though historically it retained only a limited institutional foothold in Aceh. As an institution for Islamic education, YUA was very much dedicated to the dissemination of a particular understanding of Islam. Indeed, the foundation's stated goal was to be a generation of Muslims that would have the "spirit of the Qu'ran" ("*menjadi generasi Islam yang memiliki jiwa Qur'ani*"). Daud would have been shocked to learn that he was working "in the Name of Christ," just as it would have presumably shocked the author of the MCC report to hear that MCC was helping implement the "spirit of the Qu'ran." One of the MCCers in the office was shocked that such a statement was freely available on the Internet and inquired further as to who wrote the comment. Upon learning that the author worked with a regional MCC rather than the International Program Department, the division which oversees MCC's international work, the MCCer responded that the author should be "forgiven" on account of his "ignorance."

MCC engaged in partnerships with numerous Islamic organizations in their disaster relief work. YUA was not MCC's first or largest partner in Aceh, but it was regarded highly by MCCers as an outstanding partner. Willis, the American Aceh Coordinator, talked with me at length about what made MCC's relationship with YUA such a successful partnership. YUA was considered particularly admirable in being "open ... and up front and say what they thought." YUA was embedded in Samalanga for the long haul, and was in effect a Community Based Organization. Islam was not considered key to the YUA's achievements as some other partnerships with Islamic organizations, including the NGO that Jed had been seconded to discussed above, were considered failures: "Success and failure did not fall along religious lines." Moreover, while both YUA and Jed's NGO were "Muslim organizations," the "same could happen with Christian organizations." The key issue was not "religion," but rather the "personalities" involved.

Nevertheless, "religion" was imagined as a factor influencing the outcomes of some partnerships. I was told by a Javanese MCCer that early on in the relief work MCCers in Aceh began initiating a partnership with an Islamic university. However, before this had been confirmed the partnership was vetoed by senior MCC administrators. The reason for MCC's reluctance was that, as I was told: "We are not supporting the spread of Muslim teaching." This comment could be viewed as ironic, given that MCC could well be considered as having supported the "spread of Muslim teaching" through assistance to YUA, given its affiliation with a prominent *dayah*. In fact, exactly whether MCC was supporting "Muslim teaching" or not was far from clear in a context where Islam, *adat*, and Acehnese communal life were hardly separable into discrete spheres.

The thoroughly integrated relationship between "Islam" and "community" had to be negotiated in various other MCC-supported projects in Aceh, including in the question as to whether MCC would help build Islamic places of worship. The school reconstruction project that MCC financed was slated to have a mosque (*mesjid*) built as part of the Lhoknga Junior High School complex, which in the

Acehnese context was not unusual. While in the end another organization from the Middle East financed the mosque's construction, MCCers held various views on whether they could have built it themselves. One MCCer told me that they were relieved to learn that MCC was not being asked to build the mosque. But another told me that MCC would have happily built the mosque if the community had asked them to.<sup>33</sup> These differences concern whether Christian service, such as that which MCC sought to enact, could legitimately be expressed in the construction of another religion's place of worship.

This concern was not unique to MCC's work in Aceh. CLEMENS and CLEMENS (1994, 154–55) discuss how in the 1990s MCC in Cambodia worked with Buddhist organizations, including assisting in the construction of pagodas, because pagodas often provide “the most logical central gathering place in the community” and the “monks are generally well respected by the community, and provide leadership in community projects.” This led to a commitment to work with Buddhist organizations as long as partners were concerned “for the welfare of Cambodians.” However, the authors also note that “there has continued to be disagreement on the MCC team about how this principle [of working with Buddhist institutions] should or should not be implemented in the MCC Cambodia programs.” FAST (2011) describes how, also in the early 1990s, the MCC Representatives in Vietnam, Earl and Pat Martin, agreed to help a northern village rebuild their “places of worship” including “a Taoist temple, a Buddhist pagoda, and a Catholic church.” The Martins authored an article about this in the *Gospel Herald*, an organ of the Mennonite Church, and subsequently “sparked a heated debate that became known as the ‘pagoda controversy.’” Vigorous correspondence in Mennonite media showed that while “some supported what they saw as progressive interfaith bridge-building, many others questioned MCC's judgment and disliked their money explicitly supporting other faiths.” When MCC sought to work with communities in Asian contexts such as these where religion is frequently not a clearly separable domain distinct from wider community dynamics, it faced tensions over appropriate forms of engagement. The issue was not just the theological imaginations of appropriate Christian practices of engagement, though this was clearly important. Also at issue was how “interfaith” encounters would be communicated to donor constituents and to head offices in North America.

The case of whether MCC in Aceh would construct *meunasah* illustrates these tensions. *Meunasah* are not mosques. Their exact functions differ across Aceh. In his classic anthropological study of Aceh in the 1960s, SIEGEL (1969) describes *meunasah* in a variety of ways. Each village had “at least one *meunasah*” which men used “as a meeting place to discuss village problems and to pray together during the fasting month” and where adolescent boys slept (SIEGEL 1969, 52). Later he describes how boys dwelling at the *meunasah* are trained in chanting the Qu'ran and also points to its pivotal role in the maturation of Acehnese boys (150–54). The first usage of *meunasah* in Siegel's book is glossed as “buildings for religious purposes” (42), but the glossary merely annotates *meunasah* as a “Dormitory and meeting place for men” (287). FEENER's (2013, 61–66) recent study



notes that *meunasah* remain a “ubiquitous feature” of contemporary Acehese villages. He too notes their long and evolving use for Islamic religious education but also regards the “integration of the *meunasah* into local social life” as having strong political dimensions such that it could be “more associated with traditions of local political organization than with the religious authority of the ulama.”<sup>34</sup>

Initially, there was some reluctance among MCCers to fund the construction of *meunasah*. Concerns grew out of a sense of ambiguity as to whether *meunasah* were “prayer rooms” or “community meeting places.” At least one Javanese MCCer opposed their construction with MCC finances, arguing that this was directly supporting and furthering Islam. But others argued that they were key communal sites and that distinguishing between “community” and “Islam” in Aceh was a futile, if not impossible, task. In the end MCC did help construct *meunasah* as part of wider reconstruction projects. It framed these as community meeting places in reports filed with the head office. While explanations noted that they could be used for a range of activities that included Islamic education and prayer, these features were backgrounded.

## CONCLUSION

MCC’s encounter with Acehese Muslims was a material one, just as it was also the meeting of organizations, theologies, and embodied practices. The mode of encounter differed, yet each was layered with similar tensions. Ambiguities surrounding the construction of mosques and *meunasah* ran parallel to encounters with YUA’s “spirit of the Qu’ran,” Jed’s “awful” tutelage on Acehese Islam, and the affective corporality of everyday interactions. The tensions evolved over time, but they were never entirely resolved. Resolution was impossible because while MCCers were spurred by a theological imperative for interfaith engagement, which was conceived as compatible if not coterminous with the liturgy of Christian service, their work with Acehese Muslims was not intended to place MCC in service to Islam. “Interfaith” was not *extra* faith. Though good relations with the other religion were privileged, Islam remained other, differentiated from MCC’s Christianity.

But the distinction between working with Muslims and promoting Islam was more easily drawn in theory than practice. In the first place, locating Islam in Aceh was not a straightforward task. Exactly where Islam was, and where it was not, and how it could be effectively differentiated from the disaster-struck “community,” or *adat* (as merely “culture”), was unavoidably equivocal.<sup>35</sup> Because *meunasah* functioned as both “community meeting places” and “prayer rooms” it proved difficult to clearly separate them. Second, in the process of encounter, ideals of engagement, and conceptions of the other, shift from the abstract/ideational into concrete and specific form. The trajectory of this change is never entirely predictable, nor is it easily guided. This leads into a third point: those engaged in the encounter are rendered susceptible to (unpredictable) affective transformation, but those removed from the immediate context are not. This creates the possibility of a fissure, separating the field of encounters from wider networks that nevertheless

remain implicated in the ways encounters play out. For MCCers in Aceh, the question was not only how they should engage with Acehnese Muslims, but also how they would communicate about these engagements to head offices and donor constituents who had not shared in the actual encounter. Even when MCCers in the field came to an accommodation with Acehnese Islam, these remained potentially controversial and contestable within wider MCC and Mennonite networks.

And yet while MCCers' ideas of Islam changed during the course of encounter, the degree to which Islam remained a primary marker of difference for many of them remains striking. While not all MCCer discourse rendered Islam as *the* definitive identifier for Acehnese (as with Willis's belief that "success and failure did not fall along religious lines"), it was also the case that the prism of interfaith encounter tended to accentuate the Muslimness of Aceh. Under such framings, Islamic identification could subsume, for example, more specific markers of class, sexuality, gender, and nationality. In MCC's interfaith encounters in Aceh, conceptions of religious difference were thus both disrupted and reified.

MCC's work in Aceh after the tsunami illustrates that while the motivations and impulses of humanitarians are clearly important for how relief is conducted, these are not the only factors that matter. Close attention should be given to the histories, identities, and theologies of religious and secular actors, but this too is insufficient for understanding religious disaster relief. Focusing on encounters counteracts tendencies toward reifying and essentializing religious actors by drawing attention instead to the dynamic ways in which religion is put to work in disaster relief, including the possibility of unanticipated transformations in opinions, identities, and dispositions. While in this article I focused on how interfaith encounters were conceptualized and experienced by MCCers, the theme of encounter could be taken up by investigations into the effects of encounters on all parties involved in practices of disaster relief, including "recipients" of relief, as well as the "donors."

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#### NOTES

\*I am grateful to Michael Feener, Till Mostowlansky, Dan Birchok, Patrick Daly, Levi McLaughlin, and Shierly Mondianti for their helpful comments in revising this article. An earlier version was presented at the conference on Salvage and Salvation: Religion, Disaster Relief, and Reconstruction in Asia, hosted by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, in November 2012. Fieldwork was made possible by generous grants from the Australian National University and the Religious Research Association's Constant H. Jacquet Award. Throughout my fieldwork Mennonite Central Committee personnel were remarkable hosts and generous friends. I am thankful for both gifts.

1. See the Introduction to this special issue for further discussion of this literature and also FOUNTAIN (2013) and FOUNTAIN, BUSH, and FEENER (2015).

2. My use here of the concepts of "continuity" and "rupture" intentionally references recent debates within the anthropology of Christianity about the differences that Christianity makes. For insightful interventions into these debates see especially CANNELL (2006), ROBINS (2007), and CHUA (2012).

3. My argument is based on twenty-two months of field research carried out between 2007 and 2008 in Indonesia, Canada, and the United States. Interviews, document analysis,

and archival research on the relief operation in Aceh was conducted throughout this period, although field research in Aceh was limited to a two week visit in early 2008.

4. This framing of Mennonites as a tradition draws on Talal ASAD's (1986, 14–17) approach whereby “tradition” is seen as internally diverse and always contestable, but which nevertheless aspires to “coherence.”

5. In 2006 MCC launched a five-year “key initiative” of interfaith bridge building with a prominent focus on Muslim-Christian relationships. The goal was to construct bridges of understanding and relationships via diaconal practices which crossed religious divides (DULA and EPP WEAVER eds. 2007). The sentiments that spurred this initiative were already operating and widespread when MCC initiated its work in Aceh.

6. MDS was initiated by Mennonites in Kansas in 1951 as the Mennonite Service Organization. It officially came under the leadership of MCC in 1954 in order for the more established MCC to provide central coordination and liaison with government and other relief actors. Soon after, it changed its name to MDS. At MCC's request, and following a legal audit which identified the need for reconfiguring the MCC-MDS relationship, in 1993 MDS became a separately incorporated nonprofit organization (DETWEILER 2000, 143). For a rich and illuminating account of MDS history and identity, and its work in the Gulf Coast states following hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike, see PHILLIPS recent monograph (2014).

7. This is nowhere more apparent than in the ongoing popularity among Mennonites today of the *Martyr's Mirror* (VAN BRAGHT 2002), a tome that records in detail the persecution and deaths of early Mennonite martyrs.

8. David KORTEN's (1990) famous four “generations” of NGOs traces a rather linear evolution from relief and welfare activities, through community development and sustainable systems development, to culminate in “people's movements.” At the point at which it was founded in 1920, however, MCC was both a relief organization *and* a people's movement simultaneously (REIMER and GUENTHER 2011). The framing of MCC as a “peoplehood movement” is widespread in the organization. The term “peoplehood” is used by Mennonites and other commentators to describe the distinctive dynamics of Mennonite identity. For James URRY (2006, 6) the notion of peoplehood indicates

the particular Mennonite sense of identity based on their faith and sense of being and belonging. Core features of what it means to be a people of faith are often expressed in their confessions of faith and include adult baptism, nonresistance, and remaining separated from ‘the world’... Belonging is centred on a strong sense of social community founded on the interconnections of people through descent, both from founding ancestors and the historical experiences of the people of faith and often also through the genealogical descent of the community's members. The popular concept of ‘ethnicity’ does not quite capture this sense of being and belonging, which is informed by a culture of faith rather than faith in culture.

9. Again, the battles fought between the Soviet Union and Germany swept right through Mennonite communities in the Ukraine. As the war came to a close German troops retreated and around 35,000 Mennonites fled with them. Many Mennonites feared that their identifiably Germanic ancestry would make them targets for violence as it had at the close of the First World War. As a result, thousands of Russian Mennonite refugees found themselves homeless and destitute in occupied Germany. MCC's prominent role in the mass Mennonite departure from Berlin has been told repeatedly in Mennonite literature and oral storytelling (DYCK and DYCK 1991; REGEHR 1991; SMUCKER 2006; UNRUH 1952, 24–39 and 175–226).

10. Mennonite farmers benefited greatly from wartime agricultural prices but did not contribute their young men to the war effort in the same way that their neighbors had, leading to what KNISS (1997, 49) calls “philanthropic guilt.”

11. Particularly important was Harold BENDER's (1944) seminal paper on the Anabaptist Vision delivered toward the end of the Second World War. Bender argued that Mennonites

were a separate people who were simultaneously called to an activist engagement in wider society. In doing so he appealed to Mennonite origins in the radical reformation of the sixteenth century, and thereby also to an “ethnic” identity as a distinct “peoplehood,” and to ideals of discipleship and nonviolent service. This normative vision of the past reframed Mennonite identity as being a people of active service.

12. KNISS (1997, 13) notes the “surprisingly conflict-ridden character of Mennonite history” as witnessed in frequent schisms, protracted disputes, and proliferating splinter groups. These divisions include deep doctrinal disagreements which span the full breadth of the liberal-conservative continuum, as well as variances over practices, sacraments, authority, clothing, technology, gender, and sexuality.

13. Mennonite author Paul ERB (1969, 164) has suggested that MCC was “the first foreign agency in Indonesia” after the Second World War. Erb’s sources are uncertain but the claim is certainly plausible.

14. Significant disasters included the 1963 Agung eruption in Bali, the 1976 Papua earthquake, and the 1992 Flores earthquake, all of which resulted in thousands of casualties and substantial damage. MCC did not respond to any of these. MCC also did not respond with any systematic relief effort following the 1965–1966 anti-communist massacres which inaugurated Suharto’s rise to power and the outbreaks of violence in various parts of the country following the collapse of the New Order in 1998. Rather than relief, MCC’s programs in Indonesia have often emphasized “fraternal” (intra-Mennonite) church work, community development, agricultural innovation, peace building, and facilitating cross-cultural relationships.

15. On the history of MCC in Indonesia see FOUNTAIN (2011a; 2012), S. YODER (1998) and L. YODER (2006).

16. Eleven countries were affected by the tsunami, but because of its proximity to the epicenter of the earthquake the situation in Aceh was especially severe. The death toll in Indonesia from this disaster was estimated to be between 130,000 and 170,000, with over 500,000 displaced (KENNY et al. 2010). For an analysis of the impact of the tsunami, see COSGRAVE and Evaluation Team (2009); GRAYMAN (2012); ROFI et al. (2006); TELFORD and COSGRAVE (2007); TELFORD et al. (2006); CLARKE et al. eds. (2010); DA SILVA (2010); and DALY et al. eds. (2012). Since the 2004 tsunami MCC Indonesia has continued to respond to disasters, including after the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, the Solo floods of 2007–2008, and the 2009 Padang, Sumatra earthquake.

17. An article in *The Mennonite*, the official magazine of Mennonite Church USA, stated: “Sometimes it’s difficult to spend money as quickly as the church gives it. That is what the Mennonite Central Committee is discovering” (THOMAS 2006).

18. For Mennonite theologian John Howard YODER (1972) any attempt to get a “handle” on history by controlling outcomes is mistaken. The method and end of Christian theology and ethics is not to produce a “better” world but rather to engage in practices that embody fidelity to the person of Jesus. Partnerships were envisaged as a kind of Yoderian counteracting of imperial coercion and therefore also of Pandolfi’s “migrant sovereignty.” It is also the case that MCC’s adoption of partnership discourse parallels wider trends in the development industry that since the late-1990s has increasingly deployed partnership as a key “buzzword” in development discourse (CORNWALL 2007, 475; CORNWALL and BROCK 2005, 1047).

19. Much of the following information is drawn from J. T. M. YODER (2008). An evaluation of MCC’s tsunami relief activities was also conducted in 2007 (HARDER 2008).

20. In the first three months after the tsunami 26,643 relief kits, including 2,000 shipped from Central Java discussed below, were transported to the disaster-affected area (MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE 2005). Later, school kits were also sent to Aceh, bringing the total number of kits to over 40,000 units. Three containers of canned turkey meat (19,200 cans per container) were also shipped from North America to Indonesia. On the journeys of canned meat “things” to Indonesia after the tsunami, including their encounters with Islamic

practices of halal and Acehnese criticism of covert *kristenisasi* (Christian evangelism), see FOUNTAIN (2014).

21. MCC also engaged in partnerships with the Indonesian Mennonite churches and with other Christian humanitarian actors. Despite a sense of mutual affinity which informed these encounters, they too were permeated by the politics of difference.

22. Similarly, in Java a visiting Canadian Mennonite told me after reading an English translation for the Islamic call to prayer (In. *adzan*) that he agreed with almost all of it.

23. Though see also my critique of proselytisation as purely concerned with “religious” affairs (FOUNTAIN 2015).

24. MCC’s approach therefore differed from that of another Mennonite organization, Christian Aid Ministries (CAM), as reported by YODER (2006, 7). In the preface to Yoder’s book *David Troyer*, CAM’s General Director, writes that “This tragedy yielded new opportunities to be ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in an area almost 100 percent Muslim.” He argues that “God opened a window of opportunity” to change mistaken perceptions of Christianity and to “portray the love of Christ to grieving survivors.” This evangelistic purpose is further enhanced through descriptions of the goals to which CAM aspired: “Hundreds of volunteers from North America left the comfort of hearth and home and traveled to this remote spot to rebuild houses and to witness and testify for Jesus. Doors were also flung open to distribute hundreds of thousands of Bible story books. It is our earnest prayer—and we invite you to pray with us—that souls there could be won for the Kingdom. If even one soul from Banda Aceh will be in heaven as a result of this project, all the efforts will be more than worth it.” For further background on CAM see NOLT (2011).

25. BURKHOLDER (2010, 380) argues that “biblical teaching knows no strict division between daily work and the adoration of God; everything believers do ought to be an act of worship. The service the chosen people owe to God is not limited to ceremony and ritual but encompasses every domain of life.” True worship is “an ethical commitment to live according to God’s will.”

26. The “barn” metaphor alludes to barn raising practices of mutual aid, still actively engaged in by some Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities today. On account of his intellectual debt to Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, Hauerwas has facetiously described himself as a “high-church Mennonite” and a “Mennonite camp follower” (THOMSON 2003, 29).

27. In discussing Clifford’s work, GEERTZ (2001, 110) describes the idealized anthropological practice of fieldwork as involving “long term, close-in, vernacular field research.”

28. All personal names are pseudonyms.

29. Samalanga was not among the worst hit regions of Aceh. It was in part because of this that MCC undertook work in the area, considering that it was nevertheless in need of assistance and that it was being neglected by other humanitarian actors (WILL 2005).

30. Heti thought that her experience in Aceh as a Javanese NGO worker was more difficult than her American colleagues due to the fact that she was viewed as a potential competitor for Indonesian positions in the burgeoning humanitarian sector, a competition that was less marked between locals and expatriate staff, as well as a significant history of Acehnese resentment of Javanese “colonialism.”

31. At the time of my research there were twelve legally distinct MCC entities in the US and Canada: MCC binational (which oversaw most international programs), MCC US, MCC Canada, four regional MCCs in the US, and five provincial MCCs in Canada.

32. *Teungku* is a title of respect given to senior, and often religiously learned, Acehnese men.

33. Tensions over constructing Islamic places of worship was faced by other international NGOs (McGREGOR 2010), including Oxfam (GREEN 2010).

34. See also REID's (2006, 9) description of *meunasah* as both "communal hall and religious school."

35. See KEANE (2007) and MOSSE (2012) for incisive recent analyses of the complexities of distinguishing between "religion" and "culture" in the colonial missionary encounter.

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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the UN, including special economic assistance, United Nations General Assembly, 72nd Session, Agenda item 73 (a). Statement by the ICRC. This year the new United Nations Secretary General has begun sharing his vision for a renewed United Nations. He has made it clear that the United Nations is.Â Thirdly, we will repeat our position on counter-terrorism and humanitarian action. UN reform and the risk of a protection gap. The Secretary General's reform is based on a firm belief in the indivisibility of prevention, development and peace. This indivisibility is embraced in several emerging UN policies. Financial Tracking System Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (Free Aceh Movement) Gross Domestic Product Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery Good Humanitarian Donorship Global Humanitarian Platform Government of Bangladesh Government of Nepal Giving What We Can Harvard Humanitarian Initiative Human Logistics High Priority Hazards Research Center Human Recovery Needs Assessment Humanitarian Response Plans Inter-Agency Standing Committee International Committee of the Red Cross.Â Majelis Mujahideen Indonesia. MoFDM. Ministry of Food and Disaster Management. Mennonite Disaster Relief and the Interfaith Encounter in Aceh, Indonesia. Fountain, Philip. [DOWNLOAD THE PDF](#). This article is not available as text but you can [DOWNLOAD THE PDF](#).