

## **Lived Religion and Nonreligion Among Humanitarians in South Sudan**

### **Abstract**

We explore how expatriate humanitarian workers relate their religious, spiritual or nonreligious identities to their life and work in the challenging context of South Sudan. Recent studies have claimed that lived religion and nonreligion must be studied as culturally and contextually contingent phenomena. The empirical basis for this study is data from nine interviews with humanitarian workers in South Sudan who identify as either religious/spiritual or nonreligious. We aim to explore (1) how the humanitarians participating in this research describe their religious/spiritual or nonreligious identities and (2) how they relate their non/religious identities to the choice and experience of working as humanitarians. Both religious/spiritual and nonreligious informants associate their choice to work as humanitarians with values such as equality, dignity, justice and respect for life. Humanitarian work marked by parallel processes of sacralisation and secularisation allows for an understanding of similar values from different perspectives and therefore for the connotation of the same values in religious or nonreligious/secular terms.

**Keywords:** Lived religion; Nonreligion; Values; Humanitarianism; South Sudan.

### **Introduction**

In this study, we address lived religion and nonreligion among humanitarians in South Sudan and how they relate their spiritual, religious or nonreligious life stances to their choice to engage in humanitarian work in a particularly volatile context. In recent years, there have been debates on the significance of religion in people's ordinary lives. Scholars of lived religion have promoted a shift in focus from beliefs and institutional affiliations to the concrete practices that individuals value and experience as spiritual or religious in their daily lives (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014a, 2016). Studies on lived religion have focused on how the workplace can be experienced as a spiritual location (Ammerman 2014a, 20) and work as spiritual practice (McGuire 2008, 109). Recent developments in the field of lived religion further argue for culturally and contextually contingent understandings of religion (Ammerman 2020, 7). The study of lived religion should thus be enriched by insights from a variety of contexts, including those beyond North America and Europe. A similar focus on contextualisation can be observed in the field of nonreligion. Lois Lee, one of

the pioneers in exploring nonreligion as a social phenomenon, emphasises how nonreligion is culturally contingent, meaning that its points of reference vary across time and place (Lee 2015).

Research on nonreligion has pointed to the importance of subjective interpretations and self-definitions of life stances (Manning 2015). Studies on lived religion argue for the portability of spiritual and religious sensibilities across private–public domains (Ammerman 2014a). Based on the empirical material that we have gathered, we argue for the relevance of self-definitions among the spiritual, religious and nonreligious, and for the portability of values from the private to the public.

A study focusing on humanitarian workers in the context of South Sudan can further contribute to the fields of both lived religion and nonreligion for the following reasons. It examines a group of people—humanitarians—who have not yet been substantially included in studies of lived religion or nonreligion and it contributes with perspectives from an African context. It also explores the relationship between religious/nonreligious life stances and work and how religious/nonreligious sensitivities are thereby invested. Finally, it looks at how both spiritual/religious and nonreligious life stances are engaged, often in an interrelated way, in a value-laden activity such as humanitarian work (Barnett and Gross Stein 2012; Redfield 2012).

The research questions guiding this study are: (1) How do the humanitarians participating in this research describe their spiritual/religious or nonreligious identities? (2) How do they relate their religious/nonreligious identities to their choice to engage in humanitarian work? We conducted nine interviews with humanitarians self-identifying as either spiritual, religious or nonreligious. A thematic analytical strategy was applied to the data, particularly looking at indigenous typologies and analogies; similarities and differences; and theory-related material (Ryan and Bernhard 2009).

In the following, we provide a short introduction to the context of South Sudan before we introduce the theoretical lenses applied in this article. After addressing methods, we present an analysis of the empirical material, focusing primarily on two issues: how the interviewees self-identify as religious, spiritual or nonreligious and how they relate their religious/nonreligious life stances to their choice to work as humanitarians. The conclusion discusses the empirical material in relation to the theoretical lenses employed.

## **Humanitarians in South Sudan**

Humanitarians are an exceptionally heterogeneous group of people, varying in geographical origin and cultural and religious background (i.e., Garrido 2017, 359; Heathershaw 2016, 79). Each person not only displays a unique combination of experiences, but the high mobility of this group also leads to a diversity of experiences within the life of one individual.

In July 2011, after over five decades of civil war, South Sudan became an independent country. While the much-awaited independence raised hopes for a future of peace and prosperity, the country found itself entangled in severe problems, among them a crisis of governance (Johnson 2016, 169). In December 2013, violence broke out in the capital, Juba, sparking a new round of civil war. Conflict caused by a power struggle within the ruling party soon acquired ethnic connotations (Rolandsen and Daly 2016, 158; Pinaud 2021) and precipitated massive attacks against civilians. Both government and opposition forces committed abuses that qualify as war crimes (Human Rights Watch, World Report 2019).

The rise of violence in the country has also affected humanitarians, including both national staff and expatriates. South Sudan has registered the highest number of bodily assault (including rape) cases (AWSD 2016) and the highest number of violent deaths among aid workers (AWSD 2017).

In their study on humanitarians, Strohmeier, Scholte and Ager (2018) argue that this group of people experience substantial levels of mental illness (2018, 1), particularly in the forms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, hazardous alcohol consumption and burnout (2018, 11). On the other hand, social support and team cohesion are recognised as important resilience factors among the studied group (2018, 2). Aside from satisfactory social relations, two other factors are related to a better mental state among humanitarians: healthy habits (diet and physical exercise) and what the authors term 'spiritual transcendence' (2018, 3). The study draws, for example, a relation between 'higher levels of spirituality' (2018, 1) and a lower risk of dangerous alcohol consumption. We argue that for both religious/spiritual and nonreligious humanitarian workers, a focus on values that sustain humanitarian work, is a key resilience factor.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

The last two decades have seen two important shifts within the sociology of religion. The first shift was from a focus on individual religious belonging and/or beliefs to a focus on lived, everyday experiences and practices. Focusing on experiences and practices allows researchers to understand and examine contemporary religious diversity (i.e. McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2016). A second important shift concerns the emerging interest in and study of individuals who claim to have no religion or who self-identify as nonreligious (i.e. Lee 2012, 2015). In this chapter, we present theory

regarding nonreligion and lived religion to discuss how different non/religious life stances relate to the choice to engage in humanitarian work. We will also introduce theory concerning the parallel and interrelated processes of secularisation and sacralisation in humanitarian work.

### *Nonreligion and nonreligious identities*

Interest in nonreligion has undergone what Lois Lee describes as a ‘revolution’ within academia (2012, 129), resulting in differing definitions and conceptualisations. As the field research expands, the main differences seem to revolve around whether to embrace the individual, subjective identification/categorization or an analytical categorization based upon criteria set by a researcher, issues that are also discussed in a study of nonreligion in Norway, conducted by Sivert Urstad (2018, 23—33). This underlines a ‘paradoxical’ dimension of nonreligion, regarding how one defines what religion is in opposition to what it is not; and how one can study individuals based upon what they are not—religious.

Lee emphasises that nonreligion is culturally contingent. Points of reference vary across time and place (Lee 2015). Furthermore, nonreligion delimits complexity; it rejects mere binary distinctions, thus encompassing different positions in which distinctions are at best blurred (Lee 2015, 160). Empirical studies show that for some, nonreligion is an active part of their identity constituted in opposition to religious individuals, doctrines and/or institutions, as more relational or dialogue-oriented. For others, religion is distant and removed from their identity, as they are indifferent to the notion of religion in itself (Lee 2017, Urstad 2018).

The contingent and relational aspect of nonreligious identity is developed by Christel Manning in her book *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents Are Raising Their Children* (2015). Manning argues that nonreligion is an intrinsic category that contains various identities. She also underscores that nonreligious identities must be understood in relation to social as well as religious backgrounds. In this understanding, the notion of ‘nonreligion’ is less dependent upon a binary analytical definition as it originates from the individuals’ subjective interpretations and boundary-setting work (Cotter 2020; Woodhead 2017). This accentuates the important distinction between nonreligion as an analytical concept as opposed to nonreligion as a subjective categorisation. The distinction limits or enables different understandings of non/religion and how individuals relate to what they perceive as religion. Moreover, a subjective definition of nonreligion may also encompass individuals who have left, or have no ties with, religious institutions, but still uphold a more privatised form of religion or spirituality (Manning 2015; Woodhead 2017). Nonreligion can therefore be regarded as a relational (part of an) identity. In this

article, we assume an understanding of nonreligion as a subjective category<sup>1</sup> and explore how such an identity relates to humanitarian work in a challenging context.

### *Humanitarianism, secularization and sanctification*

Barnett and Gross Stein (2012) note that debates about the role of religion in secular or post-secular societies also concern humanitarianism. In humanitarianism, there is no easy means to trace the limit between the secular and the sacred, as the religious and the secular blur into each other (2012, 19 and 22). The authors describe how humanitarianism has undergone, and continues to undergo, processes of secularisation and sacralisation or reconfiguration in religious terms.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious organisations and discourses played a key role in establishing humanitarianism. Over the course of the same century, several religious organisations minimised the goal of conversion and focused on improving living conditions (Barnett and Gross Stein 2012, 4). When they refer to the secularisation of humanitarianism, Barnett and Gross Stein are referring to processes by which ‘elements of the everyday and the profane insinuate themselves and become integrated into humanitarianism, thus challenging its sacred standing’ (2012, 8). Secularisation would, for example, be visible in the importance given to fundraising or in the focus on processes of bureaucratisation and professionalisation of humanitarian work.

The process of the secularisation of humanitarianism is accompanied by a process of re-sacralisation. When they use the expression, ‘sanctification of humanitarianism’, the authors mean the ‘establishment and production of a space that is viewed as pure and separate from the profane’ (2012, 8). Sanctification can be observed in prioritising altruism and in emphasising values and ethics over interests. Rather than excluding each other, secularisation and sanctification are regarded by the authors as enduring aspects of humanitarianism, in a constant process of historical evolution and reciprocal influence (2012, 8).

### *Lived or everyday religion*

A study of individuals’ beliefs and practices, writes Meredith McGuire (2008), should begin with an understanding of individuals’ religion-as-practiced, rather than starting from abstractions about religion. In her work, McGuire is not interested in affiliation and organisational participation (2008, 4-5). The material of her study are the concrete practices that individuals consider important and experience as religious in their daily lives. Questioning understandings of religion primarily as adherence to precepts, in religion-as-lived experience—the bodily and emotional practices and

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<sup>1</sup> We asked the informants how they self-identified as non/religious and/or spiritual.

experiences—take precedence over beliefs and values (2008, 15-17). McGuire associates values and beliefs with the cognitive aspect of individual religion, distinct from practices.

In a similar manner, Nancy Ammerman (2014a) invites us to step back from dominant definitions of religion as beliefs and consider those practices, narratives and rituals through which people express their longing for the spiritual dimensions of life. Ammerman, more than McGuire, highlights the ‘strong relationship between participation in religious communities and engaging in spiritual practices in everyday life’ (2014a, 7, 290). She is interested in transcending binary oppositions—such as religious versus secular or individual versus collective—and wishes to observe which insights for the study of religion-as-lived can be gathered from the overlapping areas between the various domains (2016, 87). Religion and spirituality are not located merely in religious institutions or in individual consciousness: people internalise their religious sensibilities in ways that shape their behaviour and relationships (2014b, 196).

Both McGuire and Ammerman examine how the workplace can be experienced as a spiritual site (Ammerman 2014a, 20) and work as spiritual practice (McGuire 2008, 109). Ammerman underlines how discussing life in the workplace in spiritual terms is related to the degree of religious commitment of the individual. She refers to the ‘porousness’ of social domains and the ‘portability’ of spiritual and religious sensitivities across such domains. When searching for religion in the workplace, it emerges how the religious and the secular intersect. The nature of the work performed makes a difference: jobs which involve services to others or which deal with the limits of human existence are perceived as more apt to be interpreted in spiritual terms. Ammerman particularly examines charitable activities and serving professions as some of the everyday life areas in which the boundaries between the sacred and the secular appear to be the most permeable (Ammerman 2014a, 6, 197, 211, 302).

In her recent work (2020), Ammerman highlights how understandings of what is secular and what is religious are culturally and contextually contingent. The study of religion as practice must incorporate the study of the context in which such practices are performed: ‘The failure to take larger structural settings into account has been a major weakness of lived religion research to date’ (Ammerman 2020, 7, 12, 33).

Ammerman further explores the moral dimensions of religious practice (2020, 26). Ethical reflection in times of crisis relates practice to engagement for social transformation. Nevertheless, writes Ammerman, ‘This is not to posit that there are a priori values that cause behaviour’ (2020, 27). There is no moral system behind practices, only moral principles that are mediated by practices, according to this author. Beliefs and values are not to be regarded as ‘the prior determinants of action’ (2020, 30). While Ammerman links beliefs and values and argues for the

priority of practices over values, the empirical material at the basis of this study indicates that among the humanitarians interviewed, values take the precedence over practices and are in fact what determines action.

### **Research questions and methods**

Our two main research questions are as follows: (1) How do the humanitarians participating in this research describe their religious/spiritual or nonreligious identities? (2) How do they relate their non/religious identities to the choice and experience of working as humanitarians?

This study is based on data from nine semi-structured interviews. Among the interviewees, two are North European (Chrystal<sup>2</sup> and Hannah), two West European (Claire and Derek), two South European (Eleonore and Adan), one North American (Melany) and two with a double identity: Asian/African (Joanna) and African/European (Paul). All interviewees were working as humanitarians in South Sudan at the time of the interview or had worked there in the recent past—after independence in 2011—and they had been engaged in humanitarian work in South Sudan for a period longer than six months—a span of time sufficient to accumulate rich experiences and elaborate reflections on their non/religious identity in relation to their situation. The informants are all from—or based in—a northern global context. This allowed us to explore whether and how religion or nonreligion are activated as a resource for individuals, far from home, working in a highly challenging environment.<sup>3</sup> The interviewees were recruited according to two different criteria which evolved through the study. The first group of four interviewees (Paul, Derek, Chrystal and Melany) were selected based on self-identification as spiritual/religious individuals and their affiliation with religious—specifically Christian—organisations. These were recruited through our own network using a snowball sampling technique (i.e., Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, 141). Based on comments from peers, we were encouraged to also recruit informants who self-identified as nonreligious or atheists. Participants (Hannah, Claire, Eleonore, Adan and Joanna) were recruited based on this criterion, through a Facebook community connecting over 25,000 aid workers worldwide. This recruitment technique is called purposive sampling and entails the selection of informants based on a feature or process which interests the researcher (i.e., Elliott, Holland, & Thomson, 2008, 235).

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<sup>2</sup> The names are fictional.

<sup>3</sup> South Sudan is a highly challenging and dangerous context for national humanitarian workers (ASWD, 2018). Given the limits of this article, we have focused on expatriate humanitarians. It will indeed be very interesting in a later research project to explore how national humanitarians describe their non/religious identities and relate them to the choice of engaging in humanitarian work in their own context.

The recruitment of informants as religious/spiritual on the one hand and nonreligious on the other hand might appear overly binary. In the analysis, it emerges how these categories became much more complex once we started talking to the informants (e.g., Manning 2015; Woodhead 2017). The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in the virtual or physical space that was most convenient for the informants. Authors 1 and 2 were both present at three interviews, whereas author 1 conducted six interviews alone. Seven interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Two interviewees replied to our questions in writing.<sup>4</sup>

We used a thematic analytical strategy in this study. This gave space both to the data and the theoretical interests and research questions (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Rafoss, Witsø and Rasmussen 2018, 280). We made specific use of three thematic strategies proposed by Ryan and Bernhard (2009): indigenous typologies and analogies, similarities and differences and theory-related material. Seeking indigenous typologies implied being attentive to what informants said, which might have been beyond our initial interests. For example, we found that the informants, including those self-identifying as spiritual/religious, seem to prioritise values over practices. Our interest in similarities and differences is apparent in how we compare how the two groups of informants, religious and nonreligious, appear to refer to the same values to describe their work. Finally, we applied a theory-related theme in our analysis when we linked statements from the informants to theoretical concepts such as those of nonreligion and lived religion (Ryan and Bernhard 2003, 89-94; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2014a; 2016; 2020).

## **Analysis**

The empirical material that will be presented in this section focuses on the following two issues: (1) the self-identification of our interviewees as religious, spiritual or nonreligious; and (2) the relationship between each of our interviewees' non/religious life stance and the choice to work as a humanitarian.

### *Self-identification as spiritual, religious or nonreligious*

We start by introducing those participants who self-identified as spiritual or religious. Paul, who directs a large faith-based international NGO in Juba, says he is a Catholic; however, he defines himself as a 'not religious but a spiritual person'. When asked about what he means by 'spiritual', he replied as follows: 'As a human being I believe we have a soul in us and this soul has a

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<sup>4</sup> This arrangement which was chosen by the interviewees, might have resulted into more shallow data, as we were not able to probe and ask follow-up questions. On the other hand, these two informants were able to answer all our questions.



connection beyond my inner self, so I try to reach out to this energy. Religion is all about that connection with that energy'. As Paul related Catholic confessional affiliation, spirituality and religion, we asked him to define his spiritual/religious identity further. Paul linked being 'spiritual, but not religious' to being focused more on 'values that go across humanity' than on creeds. The most important values for Paul are mutual respect and upholding human dignity, further described as 'the ultimate goal of humanitarian work'. These values which Paul mentioned are not specifically religious. How does Paul relate them to his spiritual/religious life stance? He answered, 'What differentiates, what does inform my passion, my approach, my thinking, is my faith. On that, I base my being: what I do, what I believe, how I look at people, how I build my relations, how I make opinions.' While Paul recognises that the values he upholds 'go across humanity', he clearly relates them to his faith.

Melany, working for a secular international NGO, is also a Catholic who defines herself as 'more spiritual than religious.' She says: 'I was raised a strong Catholic. It definitely had an impression on me, and I would still say that I am a Catholic, but I would say that I am not a Catholic that is very dogmatic. I go to church because that is what I am familiar with, not necessarily because I believe all the dogmatic practices, and I would say I am more spiritual in terms of you need to be a good person and do something, not just not doing bad things, but in terms of doing something good in this world'. Morality and praxis are closely related. Melany continued, 'So maybe that is what carries me more, the value-base is there from my upbringing'. In the same sense as Paul, by identifying as spiritual, she means that she is more interested in values than in dogmas. Melany attends mass in Juba whenever she has the opportunity. Her spiritual life stance includes participation in organised religion.

Derek works for a large secular donor organisation. He was raised by a family with a strong Catholic identity and retains that identity. The words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' were not mentioned in the course of the interview. Attending mass is such an important element of his belief and his sense of belonging to a specific community of faith that he finds it difficult to keep up with such a practice when he is away from home. Faith is, for Derek, 'the anchor' of his morality. The most important value linked to his faith is equality.

Chrystal works for a small European NGO with activities in South Sudan. She defines herself as 'culturally Christian but not a believer.' The term 'agnostic' suits her best. Chrystal said, 'I have this magic thinking that makes me feel safe. There is not a specific God in that thinking, it feels more like there are forces out there. ... Something out there wishes me well'. Currently, Zen Buddhism appeals to her. While Chrystal defines herself as agnostic, she seems to believe in forces

of the universe with which she is in relation. When asked about her values, Chrystal answered, 'that we have responsibility towards each other'.

Moving to the informants identifying as nonreligious, for Joanna, who works for a large international organisation, being an atheist means that she does not believe in life after death. Meaning must be sought in this life. When asked to define her life stance, she answered, 'I identify with the values and principles of the organization I work for: respect for human rights, equality, respect for diversity, professionalism. I value kindness, commitment, helping the less fortunate, independent thinking and intelligence'. She continued, 'As an atheist I feel like I am more inclined to think for myself and objectively evaluate information from a critical evidence-based standpoint than religious colleagues who do not seem to be as critical'. Joanna links her nonreligious life stance to critical thinking. Her nonreligious life stance is also defined in opposition to how religious colleagues make judgments and act upon such judgments in their daily work.

Hanna also works for a large international organisation. She defines herself as a humanist and an atheist. For her, being an atheist means that 'there is no higher being or God, no grand design. I affirm the value of life and of people, taking care of the planet and responsibility for the planet'. When asked to elaborate on her values, Hanna added, 'All humans are created [sic] equal. Other important values are equality, human rights, humanism, responsibility for others, one humanity in difference, valuing other's experiences, cooperation: everyone's contribution matters'. Hanna's clearly atheistic stance was paired with an effort to transcend the sphere of the individual to ideally connect with all human beings and with the environment.

Adan works for a humanitarian international NGO and has been explicitly atheist since he was young. This means that he does not believe in anything supernatural. His choice to be an atheist is directly related to the choices he has made in his life. The most important values for Adan are 'being a decent human being and treating others as you would like to be treated'.

Claire also works for a large international organisation. When asked to define her life stance, she replied, 'I think that we are connected through energy, this is also humans and inanimate objects. ... I feel very aggrieved when I see inequality and justice. My worldview is fairly idealistic. I want equality for people, for animals, for how we treat the environment. I feel we should be a lot more in harmony. It is this kind of fundamental principle of knowing that we are all connected. And that which harms other things is also harming ourselves'. For Hanna, being an atheist is related to a strong sense of interrelation to other human beings and the environment. During the interview, Claire added that she is currently interested in Buddhism.

Eleonore works for an international NGO. When asked to describe her life stance, she answered, 'I believe strongly in human beings rather than any other spiritual or godly power. My

world has human beings that deserve all equal rights and treatment and happiness and that would all be able to live in peace and provided education. Respect should be available to all.’

The empirical material presented so far illustrates how all our interviewees link their life stance—both religious/spiritual and nonreligious—to moral values. It also emerges that most of our interviewees link their life stance, be it religious/spiritual or nonreligious, to a set of similar values such as equality, respect for life, respect for human rights, justice and dignity.

### *Relation between religious and nonreligious life stances and the choice to work as a humanitarian in the context of South Sudan*

Faith (Christian) is what motivates Paul’s choice to work as a humanitarian: ‘I have a strong faith; I am well grounded.’ Not only is his work a consequence of his faith, but through his work as a humanitarian, Paul confirms his relation to God/energy: ‘What you are doing is faith in action. God, that energy does not come by itself and do things by itself. We are the hands and feet of God in this world. I want to serve. We are connected, we are part of a mutual, bigger [entity]’. As Paul upholds values of dignity and integrity that are not related to a specific faith, we asked whether it would make any difference to work for a secular NGO. He replied, ‘my choice has always been towards faith-based organizations. Subconsciously, it was because of this faith thing’. Faith connotes values and the choice regarding where to work in South Sudan.

When we asked Derek whether faith played any role in his decision to engage in humanitarian work, he answered, ‘Yes, absolutely. Not only strictly humanitarian work, but also the degree that I engage in equality. We all are the hands and feet of Christ. If I were to meet with my maker would I then say I made the right choice?’. Faith is related to the choice to work as a humanitarian and to values that guide engagement.

How does faith relate to Melany’s choice to work as a humanitarian? She answered, ‘the sense that you have to look out for each other, that influenced my decision to go into a helping profession. Of course working there, I have seen and experienced a lot of difficult things, and you also work with people who have gone through a lot, and I think having faith, having spirituality, I don’t think you can do some of that work unless that [faith] was in there’. Faith keeps her motivated to work as a humanitarian in a complex context such as South Sudan.

Chrystal’s work in South Sudan ‘feels so important because in that context it is about life and death. Working in a crisis might open existential rooms inside [oneself] but it can also close [existential rooms] because reality is so rough’. She revealed that the value of feeling responsibility for other human beings is what motivates her to engage in humanitarian work. Working in South Sudan might provide new (spiritual) insights but also be costly in terms of personal wellbeing.

Turning to those among our interviewees identifying as nonreligious, for Hannah, as we observed, to work as a humanitarian is about promoting equality and equal access to resources. The fact that she does not believe in a 'grand design' strengthens her sense of responsibility for fellow human beings and the environment as well as the sense that 'actions have consequences that impact the future of all'. The values she upholds, Hanna says, make her better at her job.

For Adan, who is a medical doctor, the main value leading him to work for a humanitarian organisation was considering his job 'not an end but a means' towards the goal of alleviating human suffering. He talked about redressing, and his intention is to redistribute his privilege, which he further articulated as time, effort, physical ability, technical skills, and mental health.

Claire described her work as performing something every day that contributes to her worldview and that affirms her core values of justice, equality based on gender, race and sexual orientation, and fighting discrimination at all levels. Claire values the interconnectedness of reality, meaning that 'doing harm to others is doing harm to us'. She added, 'Values and convictions help to function in a complex context such as South Sudan. Values help in holding out'. Values link life stances to the choice to work as a humanitarian. Values are also a resource in enacting humanitarian work.

In a similar manner, Eleonore closely related her choice to work as a humanitarian to her core values. She further referred to the importance of 'trust in good human nature. No one is born violent. So the job still makes sense'. Without trust in the fundamental good nature of every human being, it would be exceptionally difficult to engage in such a context.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

We have examined how humanitarian workers in South Sudan express their non/religious identities and relate these identities to their work within a specific volatile context. We recognise that non/religious self-identification as a recruitment strategy in this research project has consequences for the analysis of interview material, emphasising Manning's (2015) argument that boundaries between spiritual, religious and nonreligious beliefs are sometimes blurred and conditioned by the context.

The interviewee defining his identity in exclusively religious terms, linked his life stance to values adopted through his religious upbringing. Other informants described and embraced more than one religious identity, such as the spiritual-religious or the nonreligious-spiritual, drawing upon past and present experiences. Our empirical material also offers an example of how a nonreligious identity is defined in relation or opposition to perceived religious ones. Contingent

social factors are therefore important, not only for the informants' self-identity, but also for how they perceive and interpret the role of non/religion within their work.

Throughout the interviews, we found that most informants share similar values and ideals related to their work but, at the same time, differ quite notably in terms of how and why they uphold and perceive these values. Values such as equality, dignity and respect for life rank the highest in the responses of both the religious and nonreligious interviewees. Moreover, all the informants expressed a direct link between their religious, spiritual and/or nonreligious identities and their choice to work as humanitarians. Humanitarian workers positioned in an extreme context highlighted how humanitarianism is a grey area where religious, nonreligious and spiritual frameworks intersect and appear delimited by permeable boundaries. The finding that the same values are linked to different identities can, in our understanding, be explained by the specific nature of humanitarianism regarded as an arena of parallel and interrelated processes of secularisation and sacralisation (Barnett and Gross Stein 2012; Redfield 2012).

The second reason to which such a similarity of values can be ascribed, is that those of our interviewees who participated in institutionalised religion projected religious significance on the (secular) values that sustain their professional activity (Ammerman 2014a). Ammerman refers to the porousness of social domains (private, public, religious and secular) and the 'portability' of spiritual and religious sensitivities across such domains (2014a, 6, 302). In this sense, these humanitarian workers take their spiritual and religious sensibilities with them, shaping their interpretations of practices, behaviours and relationships. Likewise, the porosity of domains is demonstrated by the nonreligious interviewees, who seem to perceive the dedication to the betterment of the lives of the less privileged through a frame devoid of religion, as interview material indicates. Therefore, the idea of the 'porosity of (religious or nonreligious) life stances seems appropriate to interpret our material, as it encompasses and acknowledges an application of the same logic yet understood through different, contingent nonreligious/religious framing.

The analysis also uncovers obvious links to understanding religion as a lived experience, as informants attributed spiritual or religious meaning/significance to the different aspects of their work, such as when dealing with loss, grief and fear. It is, however, important to note that by adopting a 'lived religion' perspective, one might overlook that for some individuals, lived, experienced everyday practices are without religion or spirituality: in short, lived nonreligion. Without attempting to impose a (lived) religious frame of understanding on nonreligious humanitarians, we claim that, given the nature of humanitarian work, affected as it is by simultaneous processes of sacralisation and secularisation, humanitarian workers—spiritual, religious and nonreligious—project on values and practices connotations that pertain to each one's

life stance. In this respect, we contend that the porousness between domains (private-public) and the portability of values across such domains developed in the field of lived religion can also be applied to nonreligion.

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