



A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis

A book by David Rieff
Simon & Schuster, 2002, 368 pp.

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The 20th century gave birth to an age of human rights. In recent decades, the world has witnessed a revolution of moral concern personified by an international community sworn to global standards of justice and decency. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and such documents as the Genocide and Geneva Conventions attest, the protection of human rights has formed the basis of the modern international legal order. The story of this moral revolution could not be told without considering the corresponding rise and prominence of humanitarian organizations such as Doctors Without Borders and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Moved by compassion, inspired by idealism, and bound to solidarity with the persecuted and dispossessed of the earth, they have organized campaigns to resettle refugees, feed the starving, and assist the victims of war and violence. Indeed, the international community appears to have taken to heart St. Paul’s vision in Galatians 3:23 that we are one world undivided by race, sex, ethnicity, or political ideology.

In *A Bed for the Night*, David Rieff, a noted journalist who has spent much of his career covering wars and other humanitarian disasters, disputes this benign view of the world. He doubts the existence of any international community or the reality of any global village. “Where are the shared values,” he bluntly asks, “uniting the United States and China, Denmark and Indonesia, Japan and Angola?” (He could have provided other examples, such as the fundamental disagreement between the United States and Russia over the alleged criminality of Slobodan Milosevic.) In Rieff’s account, the reality of our time is a world soaked in blood. Genocide and other massacres plague the earth. Warlords and tyrants torture, maim, and murder at will. Oppressive gunmen raid and rape. Civilians kill civilians in campaigns of ethnic and religious cleansing. Corpses by the tens of thousands rot in killing fields ranging from Central Africa to Kosovo to East Timor to Afghanistan and beyond. In short, the world is a slaughterhouse.

And what, in this age of moral concern, is being done about it? According to the author, not much, and he sees little promise of improvement. This book’s title, taken from a poem of the same name by Bertolt Brecht, holds a somber message. Brecht spoke of the few homeless people who have “a bed for the night,” thanks to the kindness of one or two passers-by; but such acts of generosity, he laments, “won’t change the world” or “improve relations among men.” In Rieff’s view, this truth applies to the humanitarian movement. Aid workers, whether employed by nation-states, the United Nations, or nongovernmental organizations, are good people committed to caring for the victims of poverty, disease, violence, and war. But their caring is selective, their advocacy misleading, their impact negligible, and their independence politically compromised. Worse, they are sometimes unknowing accomplices in the evils they seek to eradicate.

Humanitarianism, Rieff suggests, has taken on the hue of an ideology, one that stresses the needs of “innocent victims” to the exclusion of all other considerations. Knowing that compassion sells, humanitarian organizations, often allied with the media and sympathetic governments, especially the United States, have projected “simplistic images of wicked warlords” versus “suffering and innocent victims.” Graphic television scenes of rotting corpses and helpless refugees dying on the roadside have prompted national governments, and the United Nations, to intervene militarily in particular countries to stop the killing or to feed the hungry, but without any reference to the political conditions or the domestic rivalries that have produced these evils. To show that ignorance of context can do more harm than good, Rieff cites the situation in the refugee camps of eastern Congo following the Rwandan genocide: “[H]umanitarians discovered that solidarity with victims, political impartiality, and aid deployed simply on the basis of need could restore an army of genocidal killers to health and threaten to plunge Rwanda further into a nightmare of blood and fire.”

In separate chapters devoted respectively to Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, Rieff convincingly demonstrates that, in the absence of critical contextual analysis and hard political decisions, there can be “no humanitarian solution to humanitarian problems.” These case studies also show that, whatever they might say, governments intervene in humanitarian crises only when their participation suits their national interests. Similarly, humanitarian organizations fight to defend their institutional prerogatives as much as to dispense aid to the needy, even to the point of surrendering their independence to gain favor with donor governments. The “hazard of charity,” as the author puts it, is that altruism and politics go together, much as Britain’s crusade to abolish slavery in the 19th century went hand-in-hand with its imperialistic designs.

Rieff’s case studies also show that governments will cut and run when humanitarian intervention goes sour, as in Somalia, when the United States pulled out after local gangs threatened its troops. Television images of an American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu cancelled out competing images of starving babies with flies on their faces. U.N. agencies and blue-helmeted peacemakers have been similarly enfeebled by their obstinate neutrality between rival groups and their blind trust in the ability of peoples to heal themselves if only given the chance.

In the author’s view, what makes the humanitarian project so frustrating—and even hopeless—is the timidity of the United Nations in the field and the unwillingness of wealthy nations to commit the resources, both military and financial, needed to heal the world’s wounds. Brecht was right. Humanitarian organizations, both religious and secular, have passed by to help the needy, assist refugees, and to rid certain communities of disease—Rieff acknowledges these success stories—but such heroic acts of selflessness and generosity have neither “changed the world” nor “improved relations among men.”

In the end, however, this book ignores an important reality. Resources alone will not stop the violence or the killing. Nor will an international criminal court, or a dozen such courts, curtail these evils. The ultimate cure, if indeed there is one, is for the world to take seriously the message of Galatians 3:23: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for the people.”

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